

# IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR DESTITUTE MIGRANT FAMILIES IN LAMBETH: LEARNING FROM LIVED EXPERIENCE

➔ Briefing and recommendations on access to support and specialised immigration advice for families with 'No recourse to public funds' (NRPF)

**With the support of:**  
Citizens Lambeth, Project 17,  
Southwark Law Centre



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |          |
|---|----------|
| <b>Foreward</b> .....   | <b>4</b> |
| <b>Credits and glossary</b> .....   | <b>5</b> |
| <b>Introduction: rationale and aims</b> .....   | <b>6</b> |
| <b>Methodological approach and sampling</b> .....   | <b>8</b> |
| <b>Key findings</b> .....   | <b>8</b> |
| There is a lack of free, specialised immigration advice<br>in Lambeth.....  | 9        |
| Change of Condition applications are a route out of hardship and<br>destitution – but there is a lack of advice capacity in the borough.....                                | 10       |
| Lambeth’s NRPF team lacks an understanding of the multiple barriers<br>clients face in accessing immigration advice and so is unable to<br>provide appropriate support..... | 11       |
| Section 17 claimants are not referred appropriately – both take over<br>and outside Lambeth Council.....  | 12       |
| Poor communication and a lack of transparency prevent<br>NRPF clients from accessing their rights under the 1989<br>Children Act.....                                       | 13       |
| Poor communication and a lack of transparency throughout<br>the Child-in-Need assessment process are harmful and<br>often cause significant levels of distress.....         | 13       |



## **Recommendations.....15**

Increase overall immigration advice capacity in the borough.....15

Establish effective referral procedures and stronger working relationships with local immigration advice services.....16

Improve communications with clients eligible for Section 17 support.....16

Ensure more transparency and better communication throughout the Child-in-Need assessment process and a commitment to Project 17's 'children's charter' .....17

Publish the council's NRPF policy and key procedures on the council website.....18

Organise training for social workers working with NRPF residents.....18

## **Conclusion.....19**

## **SLRA individual case studies.....20**

Helen.....20

Isioma.....22

Abigail.....24

Esther.....28

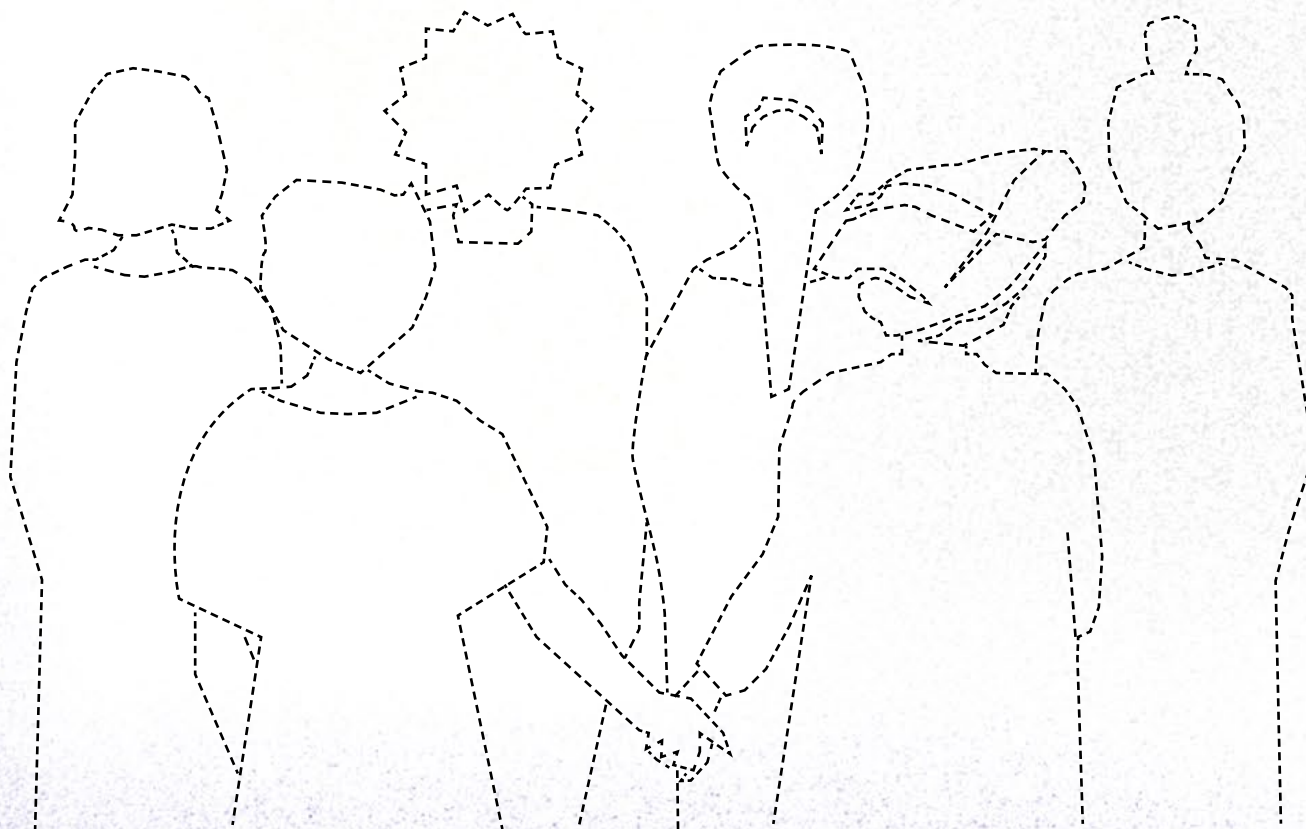
# FOREWORD

"This report showcases the damaging and discriminatory impact that No Recourse to Public Funds is having on people in our area. It is absolutely vital that the lived experiences of those who struggle with the condition are taken into account if we're going to put justice and compassion at the heart of our local policy response. I'm proud to support SLRA in their ongoing efforts to make Lambeth a more welcoming borough for everyone".

**BELL RIBEIRO-ADDY [MP FOR STREATHAM]**

"We have a proud history of welcoming and supporting families to settle in Lambeth, and over the past seven years alone the council's team have supported over 1,000 families with Section 17 support, subsequently discharging them so that they can access mainstream housing and benefits support. We are proud of our partnerships with organisations like South London Refugee Association and welcome this important report, ensuring we work together to improve our services ensuring positive outcomes to those families struggling under the No Recourse to Public Funds condition."

**COUNCILLOR SONIA WINIFRED [LAMBETH CABINET MEMBER FOR EQUALITIES AND CULTURE]**





# CREDITS

First, a big thank you to the amazing women who shared their difficult and painful experiences with us and whose stories are at the heart of this report. This act of solidarity, sharing their valuable experiences and knowledge with others in the hope of making a positive change, takes a lot of courage.

Thank you to Project 17 and the Southwark Law Centre for their invaluable contributions to this report and to Lambeth Citizens for their huge support with our local organising.

We would also like to thank Lambeth Council for their positive response to our work. We very much hope that the report will mark the beginning of a positive and productive working relationship between Lambeth Council (particularly Lambeth's NRPF team), SLRA and others in the migrant support and local voluntary sector. We hope this will reflect the council's determination to improve outcomes for some of the most vulnerable children in the borough.

# GLOSSARY

## CiN

Child-in-Need

## CoC

Change of  
Condition

## NRPF

No Recourse to  
Public Funds

## OISC

Office of the  
Immigration  
Services  
Commissioner



# INTRODUCTION:

## RATIONALE AND AIMS

South London Refuge Association (SLRA) is a frontline, Lambeth-based voluntary organisation providing specialist advice and support to more than 1,000 refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants in crisis or at risk each year. Established in 1991, SLRA is one of very few sources of free, high-quality immigration advice in South London. Many of those supported by SLRA are Lambeth families who have fallen into destitution as a result of a 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) condition placed on their leave to remain in the UK or because their immigration status is irregular. This means that they are unable to access mainstream support, such as housing and child benefit or free school meals. Too often the hardship experienced by these families is compounded by the barriers they experience in trying to access the advice and support they need.

SLRA believes that the NRPF condition is discriminatory and racist, causes harm to families and should be ended. However, while it continues, we believe that statutory and voluntary sector services working together can provide the specialist and accessible advice and support that is required to move vulnerable families out of destitution and allow parents and children to become active members of our community.

SLRA is a member of the nationwide community-organising network Citizens UK. Between August and November 2020, SLRA and other members of the local Lambeth Citizens alliance met with the leader of Lambeth Council Jack Hopkins, Cllr Sonia Winifred, Cllr Donatus Anyanwu and members of the Lambeth NRPF team to discuss some of the current issues and gaps in support and advice services available for families experiencing destitution because of NRPF restrictions in the borough.

We heard poignant stories from Lambeth residents and their families who have been affected by destitution as a result of NRPF. We also heard about the difficulties they have experienced in accessing support under Section 17 of the 1989 Children Act from Lambeth Council, and the need for accessible and reliable immigration advice in order to move them out of hardship.

---

**“HAVING NO RECOURSE TO PUBLIC FUNDS FEELS LIKE YOU ARE IN THE DARK, YOU FEEL HUMILIATED, AND HAVE NO SENSE OF BELONGING, NO HUMANITY. YOU ARE STAGNANT, IT IS DIFFICULT FOR YOUR MENTAL HEALTH.” – GRACE, SLRA COMMUNITY LEADER**

Council representatives and members of Lambeth's NRPF team acknowledged with empathy these women's experiences and pledged to collaborate with SLRA and Lambeth Citizens to improve the lives of Lambeth residents who suffer destitution as a result of their immigration status.

SLRA and Lambeth Citizens have raised the need for clear and accessible information about the council's NRPF services. Currently, there is no publicly available information on the support offered to those who have fallen into destitution as a result of NRPF restrictions in Lambeth. Council leader Jack Hopkins has agreed that this is an issue that the council is seeking to address.

In the past, Lambeth Council has shown its commitment to providing sanctuary to refugees as well as tackling racism and discrimination. Lambeth Council has resettled vulnerable Syrian refugee families and advocated for the human rights of refugees generally. There is a real opportunity for Lambeth to extend this commitment to all vulnerable migrants in need of support.



Destitute families with NRPF are one of the most vulnerable groups in our society, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the discrimination and marginalisation they experience.

In August 2020, SLRA started regular sessions with a group of women with lived experience of falling into destitution as a result of having an NRPF condition on their leave to remain in the UK. The women come together regularly to share their experiences. The women are organising to improve access to justice, not only for themselves but for others facing similar forms of discrimination. The experiences they have described are at the heart of this report.

The women involved, and SLRA, hope that this report will form the basis of an effective collaboration to ensure accessible, non-discriminatory and effective support for families who find themselves destitute as a result of NRPF conditions or of difficulties in regularising their immigration status.

---

**“WHEN YOU HAVE NRPF YOU HAVE NO ACCESS TO THE NECESSITIES OF LIFE FOR YOU AND YOUR FAMILY. IT MAKES IT HARD TO GET ON IN LIFE, TO EDUCATE YOURSELF AND TO CARRY ON IN LIFE. YOU CANNOT PLAN FOR THE FUTURE.” – FATMATA, SLRA COMMUNITY LEADER**

---

**Let's work together to improve the access to support and specialised immigration advice for people facing destitution as a result of NRPF in Lambeth. Let's make Lambeth a truly welcoming borough for everyone!**



# METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND SAMPLING

The findings in this report are based on casework carried out by specialist immigration advisers at the South London Refugee Association (SLRA). We also reviewed Lambeth-based cases from Project 17.<sup>1</sup> SLRA and Project 17 are both well-established service providers supporting people to remove the NRPF condition from their leave to remain, and to access local authority help. We looked at 15 SLRA cases and 16 Project 17 cases from the last two years (between 2018 and 2020).

As our first step towards creating change, we compiled a list of issues and their occurrence across the individual cases. If issues came up only once and seemed to be the result of an unrepresentative combination of circumstances, we have not included them in the findings. We then sorted the issues thematically (see 'Key findings') in order to identify clear and practical recommendations.

Out of the total of 31 cases, this report presents four individual case studies in more detail. These case studies are based on in-depth interviews with four women, cross-referenced and fact-checked with the casework records in our SLRA database. The studies were then read back to the women and edited with their consent. All four women preferred to remain anonymous, so their names have been changed.

Although these individual cases cannot be seen as representative of all those supported by Lambeth Council's NRPF team, they demonstrate a range of issues identified in our broader case review. The format of the case studies allows for a more nuanced understanding of how different factors play out together and impact the lives of these women and their children. It is also important to acknowledge, that all the cases included in this report had the support of professional advice services, such as SLRA or Project 17.

Indeed, these women's experiences have led us to assume that individuals and families approaching the council for support *without* the advocacy and help of professionals might find it even more difficult to access support.

i

## OVERVIEW OF KEY FINDINGS

1. There is a lack of free, specialised immigration advice in Lambeth.
2. Change of Condition applications are a route out of hardship and destitution – but there is a lack of advice capacity in the borough.
3. Lambeth's NRPF team lacks an understanding of the multiple barriers clients face in accessing immigration advice and so is unable to provide appropriate support.
4. Section 17 claimants are not referred appropriately – both within and outside Lambeth Council.
5. Poor communication and a lack of transparency prevent NRPF clients from accessing their rights under the 1989 Children Act.
6. Poor communication and a lack of transparency throughout the Child-in-Need assessment process are harmful and often cause significant levels of distress for parents and children ■

1. Project 17 is an organisation working to end destitution among migrant children. It works with families experiencing exceptional poverty to improve their access to local authority support.



# THERE IS A LACK OF FREE, SPECIALISED IMMIGRATION ADVICE IN LAMBETH.

A common theme across the cases we reviewed is that there is a lack of free, high-quality immigration advice in the borough of Lambeth. Migrant families with NRPF are too often trapped in a cycle of destitution because they are unable to access the specialised advice they need.

**“I FOUND IT HARD TO GET IMMIGRATION ADVICE OR TO FIND A SOLICITOR BECAUSE IF YOU DON’T KNOW ABOUT THEM YOU ARE STUCK. SOME PEOPLE ARE SCARED TO GET IMMIGRATION ADVICE BECAUSE THEY DON’T KNOW WHAT THE RESULT WILL BE, SO THEY DON’T WANT TO GO.” – ENIOLA, SLRA COMMUNITY LEADER**

It is crucial that *free*, specialised immigration advice is available, because families with NRPF who approach the council because they are destitute are unable to pay for legal advice. Specialised immigration advice allows families to move out of destitution, so that local authority support is no longer needed. Yet, access to free and high-quality immigration advice in Lambeth is extremely limited following cuts to legal aid for immigration work<sup>2</sup> and the closure of the Lambeth Law Centre (2019). Charities such as SLRA offer OISC-regulated specialised immigration advice, but have very limited capacity to do this work.

2. In 2019, a [government review](#) of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO) evidenced an 85% reduction in legal help for non-asylum immigration matters, and a 62% reduction in full representation since LASPO ( see '[Immigration legal aid cuts to remain in place following major government review](#)' by CJ McKinney in [Free Movement](#), 07/02/2019).

i

## WHY SPECIALISED IMMIGRATION ADVICE IS VITAL

*Why do migrants who face destitution and approach the council for support under Section 17 need specialised immigration advice?*

1. If they have an NRPF condition attached to their immigration status, they need help to make a Change of Condition (CoC) application to the Home Office to have the NRPF condition lifted. These applications are lengthy and time-consuming and require a lot of evidence gathering. Most families need help with their CoC application, but specialised immigration advice can only legally be provided by OISC-regulated immigration advisers.
2. If people are undocumented, they need specialised immigration advice to regularise their stay. Our case studies show that this often affects parents of children born in the UK, who could potentially have the legal right to remain based on being the parent of a British-born child, but do not have the means to access legal advice or pay the application fees needed to regularise their stay as a parent. Specialised immigration advice for people with irregular status often involves applying for a fee-waiver as well as finding good legal representation; this takes time but ultimately enables the person to build a stable and independent life in the UK.



# CHANGE OF CONDITION APPLICATIONS ARE A ROUTE OUT OF HARDSHIP AND DESTITUTION – BUT THERE IS A LACK OF ADVICE CAPACITY IN THE BOROUGH.

When facing destitution, people with NRPF attached to their leave can apply to have this lifted by completing a Change of Condition (CoC) application to the Home Office. Since the start of 2019, more than 80% of CoC applications have been successful – with the Home Office taking an average of one month to reach a decision.<sup>3</sup> However, CoC applications are often complicated and many applicants require help and specialised advice from an immigration adviser if their application is to be successful.

Lambeth Council's NRPF team is not regulated to provide this advice and so they signpost clients to regulated organisations, including SLRA. Unfortunately, SLRA and other organisations providing free, specialised immigration advice experience huge demand for their services and currently lack the capacity to support many of these applications. This can cause distressing delays for families desperate to make a CoC application.

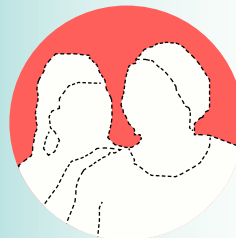
**“HAVING NO RECOURSE TO PUBLIC FUNDS FEELS LIKE YOU ARE IN THE DARK, YOU FEEL HUMILIATED, AND HAVE NO SENSE OF BELONGING, NO HUMANITY. YOU ARE STAGNANT, IT IS DIFFICULT FOR YOUR MENTAL HEALTH.” – GRACE, SLRA COMMUNITY LEADER**

3. See: [Home Office information release on 'Data on No Recourse to Public Funds \(NRPF\): Applications to change conditions of leave' \(30/07/2020\)](#).



## CASE STUDY

Helen was signposted to SLRA by the Lambeth NRPF team at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, when we faced an unprecedented demand for specialised immigration advice. We were unable to take on her complex immigration case immediately, which was communicated to the Lambeth NRPF team. Nonetheless, Helen's social worker continued to put pressure on her to complete a CoC application or lose her temporary accommodation. Helen was provided with an SLRA immigration adviser within one month, but she experienced severe and unnecessary additional anxiety and stress during this period caused by the pressure from her social worker. As a result, Helen had to access individual counselling at SLRA throughout the process.





# LAMBETH'S NRPF TEAM LACKS AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE MULTIPLE BARRIERS CLIENTS FACE IN ACCESSING IMMIGRATION ADVICE AND SO IS UNABLE TO PROVIDE APPROPRIATE SUPPORT.

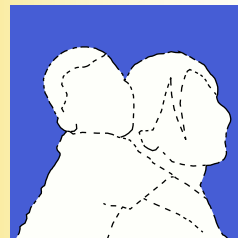
**“I FELT LIKE THEY DIDN'T BELIEVE MY EXPERIENCE OF DOMESTIC ABUSE. I WANTED TO ASK THE SOCIAL WORKER – IS IT MY PARTNER OR ME WHO YOU ARE ASSESSING AND SUPPORTING?”**  
**– HELEN, SLRA COMMUNITY LEADER**

Supporting immigration casework is a win-win for the council because Lambeth residents who have regularised their status can access welfare benefits from central government. This removes their reliance on council funds.

Yet it appears that social workers within the NRPF team are currently not provided with the information and training they need in order to provide appropriate support when cases are complex. This can result in families feeling confused, intimidated and pressurised as they move through complex immigration processes. Many of the parents we spoke to had experienced this.

## CASE STUDY

Esther had recently given birth, had NRPF status and was homeless having fled an abusive partner. She faced difficulties in obtaining the documents needed for her CoC application from her abusive ex-partner. Her social worker from the Lambeth NRPF team asked her on a number of occasions to meet her abusive ex-partner to try to arrange child maintenance, despite the risk this posed to Esther. With a better-informed approach to the risk of domestic abuse, alongside practical support to acquire the necessary documents, Esther's immigration application could have been completed much faster – to the benefit of everyone involved. SLRA and Project 17 provided support, and after taking legal advice from Coram Children's Legal Centre, were able to support Esther to submit an application for leave to remain that was not dependent on her ex-partner's immigration status. Esther was eventually granted limited leave to remain with access to public funds, and has now moved on from council support.





## SECTION 17 CLAIMANTS ARE NOT REFERRED APPROPRIATELY – BOTH WITHIN AND OUTSIDE LAMBETH COUNCIL.

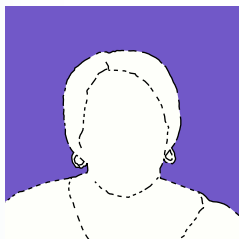
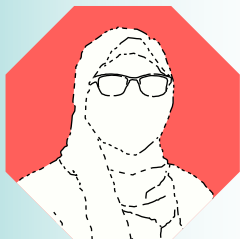
**“I LEARNED ABOUT SECTION 17 SUPPORT WHEN I WAS INTRODUCED TO SLRA, AND THE SOLUTION WAS MET. I'D HEARD ABOUT IT BEFORE, BUT I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT IT MEANT OR HOW TO APPROACH THE COUNCIL ABOUT THIS.” – FATMATA, SLRA COMMUNITY LEADER**

Our case studies show that destitute families with NRPF who approach Lambeth social services for support are not consistently referred to the NRPF team, despite being unable to meet their children's basic needs. In cases like these, children are denied their rights, suffer severe hardship and are often at significant risk of harm as a result.

The cases we have reviewed also show a lack of consistency by the NRPF team in effective referrals to external organisations that offer professional advice on immigration and related issues, including domestic abuse, mental health and children's education. This means that Lambeth families, often in desperate situations, do not know where to turn and are not signposted to services that offer specialised immigration advice. Many SLRA clients have reported fear, stress and feeling overwhelmed due to their precarious circumstances, which further hinders their search for solutions.

### CASE STUDY

SLRA clients Isioma and Abigail were both single mothers living in severe poverty with their British-born children. Both made contact with Lambeth social services because NRPF conditions on their leave meant that they were unable to meet their own or their children's basic needs. Neither was referred internally to the NRPF team or advised by social services that they could request a CiN assessment to claim support under Section 17 of the 1989 Children Act. Abigail was told to complete her CoC application by herself or find someone else who could help.



### CASE STUDY

Isioma has been a Lambeth resident for 17 years and is a mother of two British-born children who never had access to public funds. For some years she was able to support her family by working, but she fell into difficulties due to her irregular immigration status and health issues. She has approached the council for support several times in the last seven years and even received some help with her housing. However, the NRPF team has never taken on her case and failed to assist her with accessing any services, such as support for her children or immigration advice, so that she could stabilise her life. As a result, Isioma's children have spent most of their lives in severe poverty when their situation could have been quickly resolved with appropriate immigration advice.



## **POOR COMMUNICATION AND A LACK OF TRANSPARENCY PREVENT NRPF CLIENTS FROM ACCESSING THEIR RIGHTS UNDER THE 1989 CHILDREN ACT.**

Too often, destitute migrant families in Lambeth do not know what support they are entitled to, how to access it or what to expect – because this information is simply not available. The council's website contains no information on services and support available to families or individuals affected by NRPF. This results in families being trapped in destitution for long periods, often years, while children are growing up, without knowing that they could make a CoC application and approach the council for support under Section 17 of the 1989 Children Act.

Poor communication about services is compounded by a more general lack of transparency. There is no

information online (or elsewhere) clearly setting out Lambeth Council's NRPF policy and protocols, or guidance on how to register a complaint if needs or safeguarding duties have not been met.

There is also a general concern among clients and migrants' rights organisations that NRPF teams are sharing information with the Home Office. The lack of a clear policy with protocols means there is no clarity on whether the Lambeth NRPF team shares information with the Home Office. This is a cause of uncertainty and anxiety for clients and another huge barrier to their accessing the support they need.

## **POOR COMMUNICATION AND A LACK OF TRANSPARENCY THROUGHOUT THE CHILD-IN-NEED ASSESSMENT PROCESS ARE HARMFUL AND OFTEN CAUSE SIGNIFICANT LEVELS OF DISTRESS.**

---

**“THE ASSESSMENT WAS A VERY STRESSFUL TIME FOR ME AND FOR MY CHILDREN.” – ABIGAIL, SLRA COMMUNITY LEADER**

The NRPF team carries out a Child-in-Need (CiN) assessment to decide whether the family is eligible for support under Section 17. Key findings from our case reviews reveal a lack of transparency and poor communication from the team about the assessment procedure, which results in significant levels of distress for parents and children.

None of the families whose experiences are included in this report were given clear instructions regarding what kind of information is gathered during the CiN assessment process, what the information would be used for, who it would be shared with and which other parties would be involved and spoken to. Our case studies have found instances where social workers spoke to ex-partners or relatives without notifying the family being assessed, causing understandable frustration and distress.

Families were not given a clear timeframe for the CiN assessment process and there seems to be no mechanism in place to provide clients with regular written updates, resulting in uncertainty and anxiety.



Our review also found that the results of the assessment and decision-making are often not communicated to families in a comprehensible and transparent way. For instance, completed CiN plans were not shared with any of the families we have worked with.

Families also reported that they were not told what the role of the social worker is and who their allocated social worker is. This is particularly problematic and confusing when more than one team or social worker is involved.

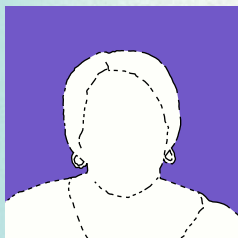
Our review also highlights the harmful effect that such a lack of clarity and transparency during the CiN assessment process can have on the children

involved. This confirms previous studies by Project 17,<sup>4</sup> which found that Section 17 assessments too often focus on the parents' credibility while sidelining the children's needs, views, wishes and feelings.

Once individuals or families are receiving Section 17 support, there is a lack of transparency from the council about support levels and accommodation standards, and supported families report being given no explanation about the level and duration of support. This makes it difficult to build a stable life for themselves and their families, because they don't know if or when they will be moved to other accommodation.

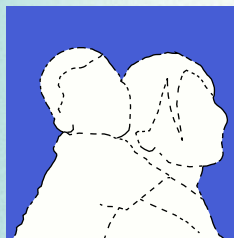
## CASE STUDY

Abigail remembers that the CiN assessment following her referral to the Lambeth NRPF team lacked clarity and was a very stressful time for both her and her children. The family was facing destitution and was at risk of homelessness. Her social worker interviewed Abigail, her children and the uncle who was giving her family a temporary place to sleep. The social worker also went to the children's school to interview them on their own without informing Abigail, which she felt was intrusive. After the assessment was completed, the social worker told Abigail they could not help her and that she had to do a CoC application and look for accommodation on her own. She was not given a written decision or summary of her assessment, or a CiN plan. Abigail felt very let down and confused about why, after all this intrusive questioning, her request had been refused. She did not understand the reasoning behind the decision as she was given no information about this, nor about her rights to challenge the decision.



## CASE STUDY

Esther found the CiN assessment process difficult to navigate and it was not clear to her how long the assessment process would take, or when and how much money she would receive. When she was initially transferred to the Lambeth NRPF team, she was issued with a £100 pre-paid card to buy essentials for her family, but was not told when she would receive another payment. She ran out of money and SLRA supported her with food parcels and three hardship grant payments. SLRA attempted to call the NRPF team on several occasions – with no response – before finally sending an email explaining that Esther had not received a payment for over two months since the initial pre-paid card and was in dire financial straits. SLRA found it difficult to reach the social workers and our emails were transferred between different teams before reaching the relevant person.



4. [Project 17 'Not Seen Not Heard' Report](#)



# RECOMMENDATIONS

i

## OVERVIEW OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Lambeth Council, local voluntary sector migrant support organisations and Lambeth residents with lived experience of NRPF conditions should work together to:

1. Increase overall immigration advice capacity in the borough.
2. Establish effective referral procedures and stronger working relationships between the council and local immigration advice services.
3. Improve communications with clients eligible for Section 17 support.
4. Ensure more transparency and better communication throughout the Child-in-Need assessment process and a commitment to Project 17's 'Children's Charter'.
5. Publish the council's NRPF policy and key procedures on the council website.
6. Organise training for social workers working with NRPF residents.

SLRA encourages Lambeth Council to invest in increasing immigration advice capacity in the borough. Providers of free specialised immigration advice within the borough, including SLRA, have the necessary expertise and regulation but lack the capacity to take on all Lambeth cases. The council should also develop clear referral procedures with SLRA and other immigration advice providers across London, so that Lambeth families can be referred effectively.

i

## A POSITIVE EXAMPLE FROM LEWISHAM<sup>5</sup>

Following increasing pressure to improve the services of their NRPF team, Lewisham Council has introduced a range of measures as part of their commitment to be a 'Borough of Sanctuary'. This includes commissioning specialist immigration advice for their Section 17 claimants and clients from Lewisham Law Centre (a new branch office of Southwark Law Centre). This agreement allows an existing immigration solicitor from Southwark Law Centre, supported by a part-time paralegal, to work full time on NRPF cases in Lewisham.

The aims of the agreement with Lewisham Council are:

- to assist destitute migrants to regularise their immigration status, giving them access to employment, welfare benefits and housing and improving their socio-economic well-being
- to assist migrants with insecure immigration status whose cases are the most complex to make an application for leave to remain.

From May 2019 to July 2020, the Lewisham Law Centre took on 68 referrals from the Lewisham NRPF team, which (according to figures provided by the NRPF team) has saved Lewisham Council an estimated £384,000.

## INCREASE OVERALL IMMIGRATION ADVICE CAPACITY IN THE BOROUGH.

Much of the hardship and destitution caused by NRPF restrictions in Lambeth could be alleviated relatively quickly if clients had timely access to free and high-quality specialised immigration advice. In most cases, this would save the council substantial costs because clients who have their NRPF restriction lifted or who regularise their immigration status become eligible for mainstream welfare benefits.

**The faster residents with NRPF conditions access specialised immigration advice, the faster they can improve their living conditions in a sustainable way. It enables them to build stable, independent and safe lives for themselves and their families. It also removes their reliance on limited council funds and can save the council significant costs.**

5. Southwark Law Centre kindly shared this case study from Lewisham with us.



## **ESTABLISH EFFECTIVE REFERRAL PROCEDURES** **AND STRONGER WORKING RELATIONSHIPS WITH** **LOCAL IMMIGRATION ADVICE SERVICES.**

For families to be able to access specialised immigration advice when they need it, it is essential that the Lambeth NRPF team and advice providers work together effectively. Establishing clear lines of communication and referral routes is at the heart of an effective collaboration.

At present, families are given a list of local organisations that provide immigration advice, but not given a professional referral.

This form of unsupported signposting is often ineffective as these organisations may lack the necessary capacity or have long waiting lists.

A clear referral procedure in which NRPF team social workers complete referral forms – or are required to discuss cases with an immigration adviser before referral – is needed to ensure that referrals are promptly taken up, urgent deadlines are identified and families' wider needs are met while immigration applications are underway.

## **IMPROVE COMMUNICATIONS WITH CLIENTS** **ELIGIBLE FOR SECTION 17 SUPPORT.**

Section 17 support is a lifeline for families facing destitution due to NRPF, and an essential right for children whose life chances are compromised because their parents are unable to meet their most basic needs due to poverty. However, many families are not made aware of their entitlements. Clear signposting of destitute families to the NRPF team for assessment is vital if they are to be helped out of destitution and not spend years, sometimes entire childhoods, struggling. More needs to be done to ensure that all eligible claimants know how to access the support they are entitled to by law.

Improved communication within Lambeth Council is the key to this – ensuring that every family with an NRPF condition that approaches the council for help is immediately referred to the NRPF team. This is vitally important if families are to access appropriate support. Both Isioma and Abigail were initially turned away when they asked the council for help; they were not advised of their right to request a CiN assessment or referred to the NRPF team. They were unaware of their rights or the procedures that should be followed, and action was taken only when SLRA stepped in to advocate for them.



## ENSURE MORE TRANSPARENCY AND BETTER COMMUNICATION THROUGHOUT THE CHILD-IN-NEED ASSESSMENT PROCESS AND A COMMITMENT TO PROJECT 17'S CHILDREN'S 'CHARTER'.

Improved communication with clients throughout the Section 17 assessment process avoids harmful pressure and distress for families. The provision of clear written details to those requesting Section 17 support is essential. This should include what to expect from the CiN assessment process.

The Section 17 assessment process should focus on the children's needs and avoid any distress for the children involved. In order to uphold children's rights, we recommend that Lambeth Council adapts the 'Project 17 Charter for children living in families with NRPF'.

| i  | CLEAR GUIDELINES ON SECTION 17 ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES SHOULD INCLUDE  |
|----|--|
| 1. | Information on the duration of the Child-in-Need assessment and the stages it includes.  |
| 2. | Information on evidence gathering (who, what, how, when, why).   |
| 3. | Information about the different roles, responsibilities and contact details of all involved parties, including for the designated social worker. |
|    | <b>Clients to receive in written form:</b>   |
| 1. | Child-in-Need plan   |
| 2. | Assessment results, including level and duration of support and how the individual decision has been reached.                                    |
| 3. | Details of the relevant complaints process if needs or safeguarding duties have not been met.  |

| i  | PROJECT 17 CHARTER FOR CHILDREN LIVING IN FAMILIES WITH NRPF <sup>6</sup> |
|----|---|
|    | <b>The charter asks local authorities to commit to:</b>                   |
| 1. | Listen to children.   |
| 2. | Ensure accommodation is suitable and meets children's needs.              |
| 3. | Treat all children fairly and equally.                                    |
| 4. | Treat all children sensitively and supportively.                          |
| 5. | Support children to live with their families where possible.              |
| 6. | Ensure children have what they need for healthy survival and development. |
| 7. | Place children's best interests at the heart of decision-making.          |
| 8. | Ensure disabled children are provided with the support they need.         |

6. [Project 17: 'Charter for children living in families with NRPF' \(2019\)](#)

## **PUBLISH THE COUNCIL'S NRPF POLICY AND KEY PROCEDURES ON THE COUNCIL WEBSITE.**

Publishing basic information about the council's NRPF policy and key procedures for families is an action that would greatly reduce the uncertainty, misunderstanding and operational inefficiency that currently characterise relations between families, Lambeth Council and advice providers such as SLRA.

We recommend that information on the structure, services and responsibilities of the NRPF team within Lambeth Council is made widely available, to encourage transparency and to allow for better contact between local organisations and the NRPF team. Public information should also include details of the Section 17 assessment process, when and how it is reviewed, accommodation standards under the NRPF provision and general rates of financial support for clients being supported by NRPF teams.

It should also include a copy of the NRPF complaints policy with instructions on how to submit a complaint and information on what to expect from the process. It should also outline – in line with GDPR principles – how personal data is used and shared with external organisations including the Home Office.

The council should publish documents in plain English because many service users are not native English speakers. Project 17 and SLRA are currently collaborating to produce user-led information guides on NRPF and Section 17 support, which the council could adapt for use.

There is real interest and willingness among the Lambeth-resident women involved in SLRA's NRPF-focused community sessions and activities to contribute their lived experience to the development of a fair and effective NRPF policy for Lambeth.

## **ORGANISE TRAINING FOR SOCIAL WORKERS WORKING WITH NRPF RESIDENTS.**

It is vital that social workers understand the multiple barriers people face in regularising their immigration status, and in making Section 17 and Change of Condition applications.

Although it is required by law that a regulated immigration adviser completes these applications, the social worker's role in providing casework support throughout the process is one that can make a huge positive difference for families. This can involve help with gathering evidence, sourcing letters and witness statements in support of an immigration application, and helping to find reliable legal representation. These are essential steps toward lifting NRPF restrictions or regularising immigration status and moving out of destitution.

SLRA's specialised immigration advice team has developed 'Immigration for non-Immigration Advisers' training, which addresses these issues. It covers the different types of immigration statuses, the impact of NRPF and examines the barriers families may face in regularising their status or applying to have NRPF conditions lifted. Our training develops a critical engagement with the effects of multiple layers of discrimination and advocates a more holistic approach to support. This includes, for example, a sensitive approach to the effects of domestic violence as an additional barrier to regularising immigration status. Again, the Lambeth-resident women involved in SLRA's NRPF-focused community sessions and activities are keen to use their lived experience in developing and facilitating training for social workers and other professionals.



# CONCLUSION

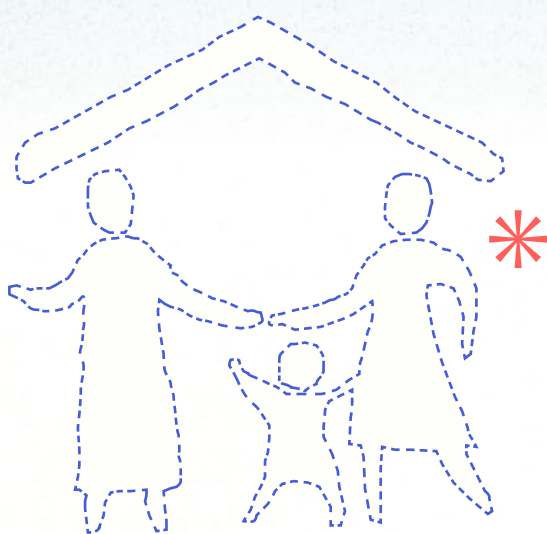
**“WHAT I WANT FOR THE FUTURE IS TO MAKE A CHANGE WHERE I CAN AND TRY AND BE A SUPPORT FOR OTHERS WHO ARE GOING THROUGH DIFFICULT TIMES.” – SAKINA, SLRA COMMUNITY LEADER**

In this report, we have highlighted the harm that an NRPF restriction can cause to families, and how it can lead to destitution and poverty. We have illustrated the barriers that such families face in trying to access support and advice – whether dealing with issues of poverty, accommodation or immigration. Through our case studies, we have shown how a lack of information or specialised immigration advice or support can further compound destitution and impact the physical and mental well-being of migrant’s families.

We have demonstrated how access to reliable and professional information and immigration advice can resolve destitution and allow families to move on and thrive. By developing stronger working relationships between the local authority’s NRPF team and advice-giving organisations, clients can be better supported to resolve destitution and immigration-related issues. Ultimately, this is beneficial for local authorities, as it allows families to be independent from social services support.

In order to improve access to justice for destitute NRPF families in the borough of Lambeth, there is an urgent need for increased capacity for immigration advice and for effective working relationships between the local authority, local voluntary sector advice-giving organisations and Lambeth residents with lived experience of NRPF.

At SLRA, we believe that those with lived experience should play a key role in contributing to policy development in order to improve the services and procedures they are most affected by. SLRA’s community engagement work with NRPF families in creating a community organising structure is vital to making a positive change within the community, for some of Lambeth’s most marginalised individuals and families.





# SLRA INDIVIDUAL CASE STUDIES ➤ HELEN

## SUMMARY

SLRA has supported Helen with immigration advice and food donations between March 2020 and the time of writing, while she was in temporary accommodation with her child under Section 17 support from Lambeth Council. Helen recalls being told by her social worker she might lose her support if she did not complete a CoC application. But she had complexities in her case – she was a victim of domestic violence and lacked relevant paperwork (because it was with her ex-partner) to provide as evidence for the CoC. Her case required a high level of detailed casework and could not be done quickly. The NRPF team displayed a lack of understanding of these sensitive circumstances and Helen felt under constant pressure from the NRPF team. SLRA contacted the NRPF team about this on several occasions and have still not received a response.

Helen entered the UK in 2006 and is the mother of a British-born child. She was granted discretionary leave to remain based on her relationship with her partner, the father's child, and the best interests of their child. She became destitute in January 2020 after fleeing an abusive relationship with her partner.

When Helen approached SLRA in March 2020, she and her child were living in temporary accommodation provided by Lambeth Council under Section 17 while the CiN assessment was ongoing. Helen told us that her social worker from the Lambeth NRPF team was putting pressure on her to complete a CoC application, and had told her she would be at risk of losing her temporary accommodation if she failed to do so immediately.

Helen had complexities in her immigration case – she was a victim of domestic violence and lacked some relevant paperwork to provide as evidence for the CoC application, because the documents were with her ex-partner. As a result, the case required a high level of detailed casework and could not be done quickly. CoC applications are lengthy, complex and require a regulated immigration adviser (OISC level 1) to complete.

Helen said the Lambeth NRPF team told her that she had to complete the CoC application herself or find an immigration adviser to assist her. Her social worker signposted her to SLRA, but no formal referral was made. Helen felt overwhelmed and arrived at our advice drop-in in a very distressed state.

This was at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, when SLRA was receiving an unprecedented amount of urgent destitution and homelessness work. As a result, we were unable to start Helen's complex immigration casework immediately. We took on her casework one month after she first contacted us; this was clearly communicated to Helen's social worker.

Helen's immigration case was not a straightforward CoC application. Her discretionary leave had been granted on the basis of her relationship with her ex-partner and having a British-born child. The CoC requires substantial evidence of financial means, and much of this paperwork was with her ex-partner who she no longer had any contact with due to the domestic violence.



In the months following her self-referral, our immigration adviser liaised with Helen's former solicitor to obtain copies of the original paperwork; this required the solicitor making contact with Helen's ex-partner, who was very uncooperative. Helen also needed additional specialised immigration advice, so that she could apply for an extension of her leave, independent of her partner, when the time for renewal came up.

This is an issue that occurs frequently with our clients with NRPF – domestic violence and abuse form additional barriers to accessing support. In Helen's case, we witnessed a lack of professional understanding and support from the Lambeth NRPF team in dealing with this sensitive issue. Between April and May 2020, SLRA received a series of distressed phone calls from Helen because she felt under pressure to complete her CoC. SLRA wrote to the NRPF team on two occasions, expressing our concerns about the pressure being put on Helen, but did not receive a response. Due to her anxiety, Helen began to attend counselling with SLRA while we worked on her CoC application.

Helen recalls further instances that were distressing for her, during the CiN assessment process. According to Helen, the CiN procedure was not communicated to her in a clear and transparent way. This included a lack of transparency about who else the NRPF team involved in the assessment process; for instance, the social worker called her abusive ex-partner without Helen's consent. She also recalls being repeatedly questioned throughout the assessment on her relationship with her abusive ex-partner. She said this made her feel as if her experiences of domestic violence were not being listened to and that her story wasn't believed.

Helen's NRPF restriction was successfully lifted three and a half months after she approached SLRA for support. With the support of SLRA's immigration adviser, she is currently applying for an extension of her leave to remain, as an independent parent and sole carer of her British-born child.



**“I FELT LIKE THEY DIDN'T BELIEVE MY EXPERIENCE OF DOMESTIC ABUSE. I WANTED TO ASK THE SOCIAL WORKER – IS IT MY PARTNER OR ME WHO YOU ARE ASSESSING AND SUPPORTING?”**

Following her successful CoC application, the NRPF team have referred Helen to temporary accommodation in Lewisham, but she is uncertain how long they can stay and whether she will be moved again.

This lack of clarity about her support causes ongoing insecurity and distress for Helen. It has meant that she is unable to plan even for the near future – for instance, look for local schools for her child or invest in her space. A lack of transparency around the level and duration of support is a common source of distress for our NRPF clients in receipt of Section 17 support from the council.

Even though, Helen is not happy with the support she received by the NRPF team, complaint procedures remained unclear to her. Helen also told SLRA that she was worried that it would affect her support if she complained to the social workers herself.



**“HAVING NRPF FEELS LIKE YOU HAVE NO ENERGY, YOU’RE LEFT TO SORT THINGS OUT FOR YOURSELF. WHERE I COME FROM YOU HAVE A HUGE FAMILY TO SUPPORT YOU, BUT HERE YOU ARE ON YOUR OWN WITH YOUR CHILDREN, THAT MAKES IT VERY HARD.”**

## SUMMARY

Isioma has been a Lambeth resident for 17 years and is a mother of two British-born children who have never had access to public funds. She has approached the council for support several times in the last seven years, and even received some support with her housing. However, the NRPF team has never taken on her case and failed to assist her with accessing any services, such as support for her children or immigration advice, in order for Isioma to stabilise her life and access mainstream support. As a result, Isioma and her children have lived in extreme poverty.

Isioma strongly considers Lambeth to be her home: it is where she has lived since 2003, and where her two British children were born and raised. She had irregular immigration status for some years, due to not knowing how or where to access affordable specialised immigration advice. She paid an expensive private solicitor for an immigration application in 2009, which was refused due to incorrect advice and poor legal representation. Private law firm sharks, who take clients' money, give wrong advice and deliver poor and ill-prepared legal representation, are a huge issue for many of the migrants we support at SLRA. Without having a legal background, it is difficult to judge what reliable legal representation is, which is why free, specialised immigration advice is so important – so that people can know their options and access support to find a trustworthy, well-established immigration solicitor.

When Isioma's immigration application was refused in 2009, she separated from her partner, and struggled as a single mother to a young child. They often didn't have enough food and were in arrears with her privately rented accommodation.

The child's father did not support her at the time and she only got by thanks to donations from Brixton foodbank and support from the charity Kids Company. Isioma said she wouldn't have survived without Kids Company's support – it provided food, hardship money and also childcare while she was working, trying to make ends meet.

In 2011, Isioma was picked up by immigration control while working at a supermarket. She lost her job and began signing at the immigration reporting centre in Croydon, which is a Home Office requirement to 'keep track' of people with irregular immigration status. In 2013, she had her second child. She was still the sole carer and the rent arrears were increasing; she was very stressed and feared they would be evicted.

In 2013, Isioma approached Lambeth Council for the first time to ask for accommodation and support for her children. She had heard from a friend that the council could help with vouchers for baby food, but the council told her she could not access any accommodation or support because she did not have access to public funds.



The council did not refer her to the NRPF team, nor to an external immigration advice service. She also did not get any support from her children's schools. Isioma was not aware of any other form of support and was facing destitution.

When Kids Company closed, Isioma became desperate because she had relied greatly on their support. She started approaching other charities including SLRA. With the support of a SLRA caseworker, she approached her local foodbank, and for the first time applied for free medical prescriptions (which she was unaware she could access). With the help of a SLRA immigration adviser, she regularised her status in October 2015 and was granted 2.5 years leave to remain with an NRPF restriction, which was valid until March 2018. She applied to have the NRPF restriction removed, but it was refused. She started to work for a care agency, paying for a babysitter while working all day. The children's father was now supporting them with the rent, but the family was still struggling immensely.

In 2018, she renewed her limited leave to remain for another 2.5 years, but it was issued with another NRPF restriction.

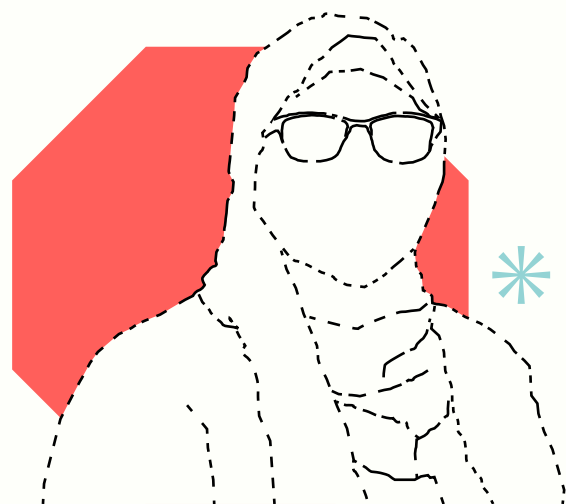
Around this time, she was due to be evicted from her flat of 13 years because the owner wanted to redevelop and the apartments became too expensive for many of the existing renters. She remembers being told by the council that they could not help because the family was in privately rented accommodation and had NRPF. Together with her local MP Chuka Ammuna, a group of residents campaigned on the issue and she was finally provided with affordable accommodation from the temporary accommodation team within the council.

Isioma was still living in poverty when she moved to the new accommodation in 2019 and her housing caseworker referred her to the NRPF team for subsistence support. But Isioma recalls approaching the NRPF team and being told that "she was not on their list" and did not fall under their responsibility. She recalls being told that she should ask the children's father for more support because he was a British citizen. Isioma says the children's father is supporting his children as much as he can but it is not sufficient, and the NRPF condition on Isioma's leave means the family faces constant instability.

Isioma's situation continues to be unstable. In the past two years, she was forced to take a break from work and lost her income, due to health reasons. She developed serious arthritis, which meant she could not manage the heavy physical work of a carer. Isioma would like to work more regularly but struggles with her health. Working in the care sector is impossible with her condition and she lacks the means to train in another area.

The COVID-19 pandemic further impacted her family as she became completely independent on donations from the church for food essentials. Isioma's two children, aged seven and 14, missed out on school during lockdown in 2020 because of not having laptops for remote learning – until they were given donated laptops by Lambeth Citizens and SLRA's joint Digital Divide Campaign. To date, Isioma has still not been assessed by the NRPF team. She said she did not fully understand that there was a specialised NRPF team at the council, what their services and responsibilities were or how to access support from them.

**"I WORK AND LIVE IN LAMBETH FOR 16 YEARS, THIS IS WHERE MY CHILDREN ARE BORN AND RAISED. I PAY TAXES AND CONTRIBUTE TO SOCIETY, BUT I FEEL LIKE I GET NOTHING BACK FROM THE SYSTEM. I ALWAYS DREAMT OF TRAINING AS A NURSE, BUT BECAUSE OF NRPF I HAVE LIVED IN POVERTY AND HAVE BEEN UNABLE TO AFFORD AN EDUCATION. WE NEED MORE INFORMATION ABOUT WHAT SERVICES ARE AVAILABLE TO US AND WHERE WE CAN ACCESS GOOD AND AFFORDABLE IMMIGRATION ADVICE TO BUILD STABLE AND SAFE LIVES."**





## SUMMARY

Abigail faced destitution and requested Section 17 support from Lambeth Council in October 2019. She was repeatedly turned away by the NRPF team within the council when she tried to access support by herself. Her initial request was refused and it was only with the support and advocacy of SLRA that she and her children were given emergency accommodation. Abigail said the council never advised her on Section 17 support or gave her immigration advice for a CoC application. She was unaware of how to access Section 17 support or where she could find any information about it. It was only through SLRA that she was made aware of her right to this provision.

Abigail came to the UK in 2011 and has been a Lambeth resident ever since, dependent on her uncle. She has two British-born children and the family slept in the living room of her uncle's flat for many years.

Her uncle had serious health problems and made it clear that he would no longer be able to support her family and house them in his small flat. He handed her a formal eviction letter, active from 15 October 2019.

**“NRPF MAKES YOU DEPENDENT ON HELP FROM FAMILY. YOU CAN'T DO ANYTHING, CAN'T MAKE PLANS, OR LOOK FORWARD. IT DOESN'T GIVE YOU ANY SELF-WORTH BECAUSE YOU CAN'T CONTRIBUTE.”**

Abigail could not afford solicitor's fees to regularise her immigration status. In 2019, her uncle finally paid for a private solicitor and she was granted limited leave to remain with an NRPF restriction. She began working as a cleaner, earning less than the living wage. Her income was £500-£600 a month, which was not sufficient – without access to child and housing benefits – to afford a deposit and pay for privately rented accommodation. As a result, Abigail and her two children continued to live in unsuitable circumstances, sleeping on the floor of her uncle's overcrowded house.

When Abigail first approached Lambeth Council with the eviction letter stating they had to leave by 15 October, she was turned away. She initially approached the housing team who told her that they could not assist due to her NRPF condition, but she was not referred to the NRPF team for a CiN assessment for Section 17 support.

Abigail heard about SLRA from the Children's Society. Abigail came to our drop-in in September 2019 and we contacted the NRPF team on her behalf to request a CiN assessment for Section 17 support, and started to work on her CoC application.

Abigail went back to Lambeth Council and was referred to children's social services, who advised they could not assist her because of the NRPF restriction on her immigration status. It was only after insisting, and with confirmation and encouragement from SLRA, that Abigail was referred to the NRPF team.



Abigail was not given clear information about which council department or team were responsible for helping her, how to contact the NRPF team directly or what services they offered. This unnecessarily delayed her referral to the NRPF team at a time when she was on the brink of becoming homeless.

Abigail was not given clear information about the procedure that would follow her referral to the NRPF team or told who her social worker was. After not hearing anything for three weeks, she went back to the council; the receptionist told her that the relevant social worker had been on leave and referred her to another social worker.

After the NRPF team interviewed Abigail and her children, she was told she needed to seek legal advice regarding her immigration status to ensure that she could secure further leave to remain. She was told about a small advice-giving charity called Waterloo Action, but was told nothing about them or how they operated, and a formal referral for immigration advice was not made. The lack of a referral or appropriate information meant that accessing advice was delayed further.

The CiN assessment that followed her referral to the NRPF team was a distressing experience for Abigail and the process lacked clarity and transparency. Abigail's social worker came to her uncle's house and interviewed her, her children and her uncle. He also went to the children's school to interview them by themselves, without informing Abigail, which she perceived as intrusive. Abigail remembers that this was a very stressful time for her and her children.

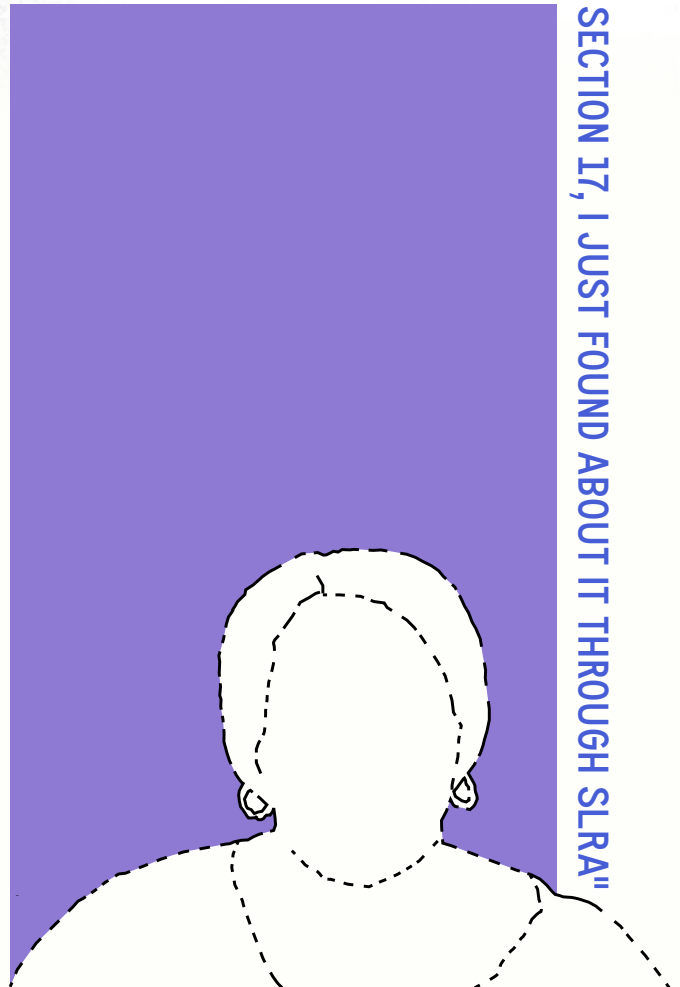
After the assessment was completed, her social worker told Abigail the council could not help her and she needed to make a CoC application and look for a flat on her own. She was not given a written decision or summary of her assessment, or a CiN plan. Abigail felt very let down and confused as to why, after all this intrusive questioning, they refused her request. She did not understand the reasoning behind the decision, nor her rights to challenge

it. She was very anxious, knowing that her uncle wanted them out of the house. She mentioned feeling threatened by the uncle and not entirely safe in the house to her social worker, who said she should call the police if anything happened. A safeguarding concern for the children was not picked up and, as far as we are aware, no safeguarding referrals were made.

Abigail returned to SLRA, who contacted the NRPF team again to remind them of their duty to care for Abigail's children under Section 17 of the Children Act. Abigail said she was unaware of this duty until SLRA told her about it.

**"WE DON'T OFTEN KNOW ABOUT** ✱

**SECTION 17, I JUST FOUND ABOUT IT THROUGH SLRA"**



On 15 October – as announced in the eviction letter – Abigail's uncle kicked them out on to the street. Abigail took her older child to school and then she and her youngest child went to the council. She recalls being desperate because she had nowhere to go; crying, she called her social worker, who told her that because her NRPF condition was not yet lifted, there was nothing the council could do for her and her children. Instead, Abigail's social worker called her uncle to ask if Abigail and the children could stay for another week.

Her uncle wasn't feeling well and Abigail said her social worker put a lot of pressure on him. That same day, her uncle collapsed and had to go to hospital. Abigail said she did not want to be responsible for the deterioration in her uncle's health and when he was discharged, one week later, she went to the council again to ask for emergency accommodation.

In October 2019, not long after her eviction, Abigail received a positive decision on the CoC application submitted by SLRA and her NRPF restriction was lifted. Abigail asked her social worker for help in applying for benefits and housing, but she received no advice and was not referred to the external or internal council services that were now available to her. SLRA supported her to apply for benefits and to access free school meals for her children.

To date, Abigail is still in the emergency accommodation provided by the council in October 2019. The accommodation is overcrowded and not suitable for the children. She and her two children (aged three and five) share one room; they don't have a living room and have to share a bathroom and kitchen with other families. Abigail said this was especially hard during the COVID-19 lockdown when the three of them were spending a lot of time together in one small room.

---

**“YOU GO TO THE COUNCIL BECAUSE YOU NEED HELP AND THEY JUST DON'T HELP YOU. THEY TOLD ME TO GO TO A FRIEND, BUT IF I HAD A FRIEND WHERE I COULD STAY I WOULDN'T BE HERE BEGGING YOU. FRIENDS CANNOT HELP YOU FOREVER! THEY SAID, YOU HAVE TO GO TO LOOK FOR A PLACE BY YOURSELF; THE COUNCIL DOESN'T HAVE A PLACE FOR YOU. BUT I DIDN'T HAVE A FULL-TIME JOB, I DIDN'T HAVE ENOUGH MONEY. I HAVE BEEN ASKING AROUND AND TRYING TO LOOK FOR A PLACE BUT DIDN'T FIND ANYTHING THAT I COULD AFFORD AND WHO WOULD TAKE ME.”**

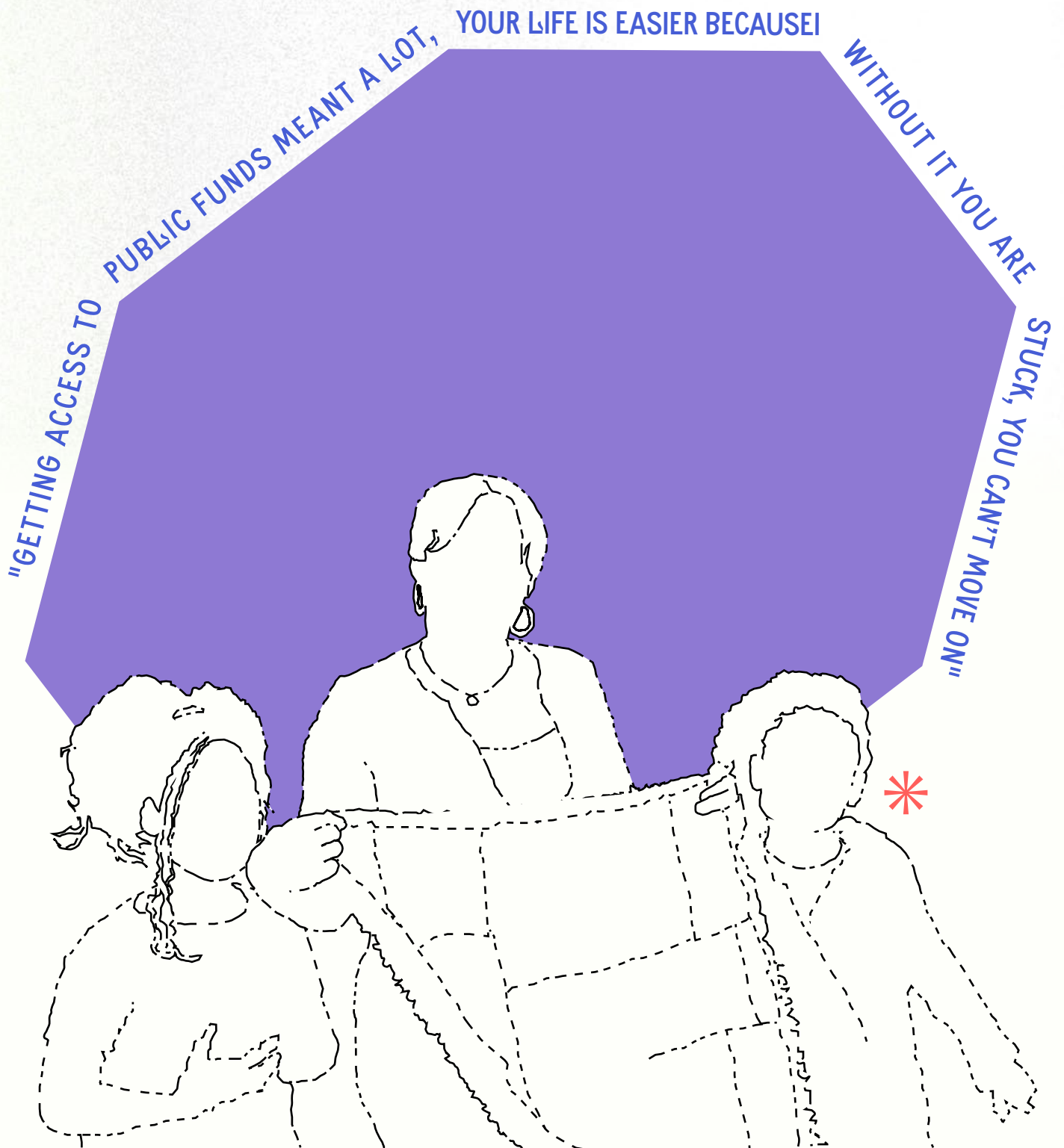
She waited all day at the council to confirm her place in emergency accommodation. It was getting very late and Abigail felt distressed because no one told her what was going on. It was only at 5pm, when the council was closing, that the receptionist made a call on Abigail's behalf, saying “this lady has been waiting here all day and she still doesn't have a place”, that Abigail and her children were given an emergency place for three days in a hostel.

With the help of a SLRA caseworker, she asked the council to have her accommodation changed, but they said that unless she had underlying health conditions there wouldn't be a place for her. She has not been given clear information by the council about how long they will stay in the temporary accommodation.

Abigail has not received the support she was entitled to from the Lambeth NRPF team. She feels that the NRPF team did not help her when she was about to be made homeless, and that she would have been unable to access Section 17 support or apply for a CoC

without the advocacy and free, specialised immigration advice of a professional organisation such as SLRA. Furthermore, no one at the council told her she had a right to complain about the initial refusal of support, or how to make a complaint. She has also disclosed to SLRA several times that she was extremely worried that complaining would negatively affect her support and, in any case, she wanted to remain anonymous.







## SUMMARY

Esther has lived in the UK since 2012 and is a single mother of two British children. She was referred to the Lambeth NRPF team in May 2018 following a safeguarding referral from her midwife at St Thomas Hospital. The hospital stated that Esther could not go back to her partner's address as she was fleeing domestic violence and was at risk of homelessness. There were several instances of miscommunication and lack of clarity and transparency in her CiN assessment process with the NRPF team. This resulted in SLRA making multiple safeguarding referrals. There was also a lack of communication with Esther about her financial support, and SLRA had to step in on several occasions to provide hardship payments and food parcels.

Esther came to the UK in 2012 on a visitor visa, which was paid for and organised by her boyfriend at the time. On her arrival in the UK, he took her passport and documents and forced her to sleep with men for money. She left and became street-homeless before finding a friend to live with in Lambeth; she stayed with the friend until 2016. In 2016, she fell pregnant and moved in with the child's father in Lewisham. Her partner was physically abusive and threatened to have her deported if she went to the police. While heavily pregnant, she disclosed her abuse to her midwife, who made a safeguarding referral and Esther was transferred to the Lewisham NRPF team. As it was unsafe for Esther and her children to stay in Lewisham, she was housed in Lambeth and her case was transferred to the Lambeth NRPF team in May 2018.

Esther's CiN assessment was ongoing between May 2018 and September 2019. During this time, SLRA raised several concerns: about how long the assessment was taking; safeguarding concerns about instructions Esther had been given by her social worker; and issues with her temporary accommodation. In August 2018, SLRA emailed the Lambeth NRPF team because Esther had been asked to meet with her abusive ex-partner to ask him to make child maintenance payments. We sent an email expressing our concerns to the NRPF team, but it was then forwarded between various social work teams

within the council, who all stated that it should be with a different team. Three days after the initial email, a social worker from the 'help and protection' referral team contacted us to say the email had reached them, but that it should be dealt with by the NRPF social workers. We were given a phone number for the social workers and we left a number of voicemails, but did not receive a response. This reflects our concerns regarding the lack of information given to clients about their social worker's name and contact details. It also highlights the need for supported referrals from the NRPF team to SLRA, to ensure there is a clear line of communication, and that safeguarding concerns can be dealt with in a timely and transparent manner.

Having not received a response to our safeguarding referrals, we contacted Lambeth Council's children's social care team in August 2018 and were put through to the NRPF manager, who said that the reason Esther had been asked to make contact with her ex-partner was to arrange child maintenance payments. We advised how unsafe this was considering he was abusive; the response was that the NRPF team had been in contact with Esther's ex-partner, who had provided "information that did not corroborate this". This compounded our concerns that Esther was not being believed and her safeguarding was not being taken seriously.



Esther found the CiN assessment process difficult to navigate and it was not clear to her how long the assessment would take, or when and how much subsistence she would receive. When she was initially transferred to the Lambeth NRPF team in May 2018, she was issued with a £100 pre-paid card to buy essentials for her family, but was not told when she would receive another payment. She ran out of money and SLRA supported her with food parcels and three hardship grant payments. We attempted to call the NRPF team on three occasions with no response, before finally sending an email explaining that Esther had not received a payment for over two months (since the initial pre-paid card) and was living off food parcels/hardship grants from SLRA. SLRA found it difficult to reach the social workers and our emails were transferred between different teams before reaching the relevant person.

Esther told us that she had tried to access support from both Lewisham and Lambeth councils when the abuse was ongoing (before the midwife's safeguarding referral), but felt that she was treated with hostility and disbelief. This reflects our general concerns from these case studies – that clients find it difficult to access support from the NRPF team on their own, and often are only assessed when a professional makes a referral or requests a Section 17 assessment.

Esther told us that when she tried to access support on her own, she felt that they treated her disrespectfully. She told us that when she tried to access support, she was told she could not be helped because her children did not have passports (their father had refused to apply for them), and she was turned away without being given advice or a referral about where she could access immigration advice to apply for passports.

Between May and September 2018, SLRA and Project 17 supported Esther with her Section 17 assessment process, liaising with social workers, raising safeguarding concerns and supporting her with hardship grants and food parcels when the Section 17 subsistence payments fell short. SLRA supported Esther to apply for her children's passports, and to help her to make an immigration application on the basis of her being a parent to British children. In January 2019, she was granted 2.5 years leave to remain with access to public funds. SLRA also supported Esther to apply for benefits.

She was discharged from the NRPF team and into the council's mainstream housing service. The homelessness prevention team placed her in shared temporary accommodation, where Esther felt unsafe. She said it was dirty, there were pest issues and holes in the walls, drug abuse in the building and it was not suitable for the children. Esther felt that when she complained about this to the council, she was ignored and nothing was done to support her. With the assistance of SLRA, she lodged a formal complaint about the temporary accommodation and as a result was moved elsewhere.

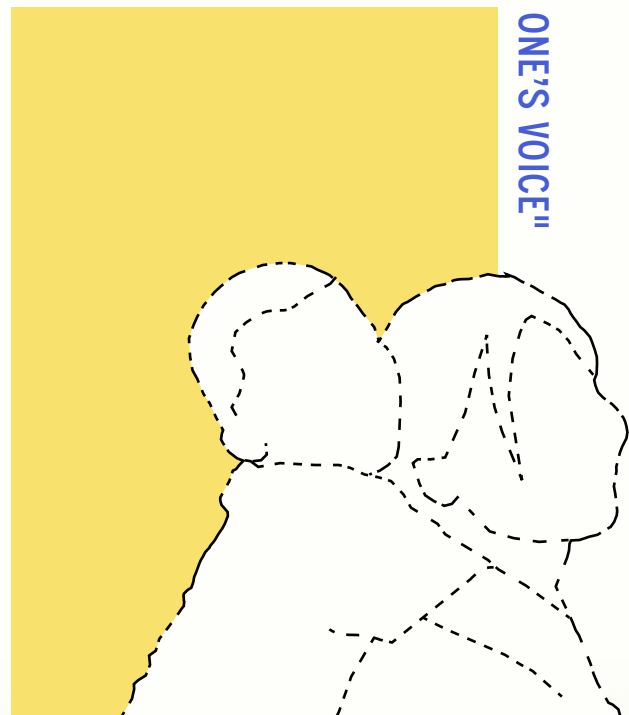
**“EVERYTHING I ASKED FOR WAS A STRUGGLE, THE COUNCIL ALWAYS SAID ‘NO’ WHEN I ASKED MYSELF. IT WAS ONLY AFTER A LOT OF EMAILS FROM PROJECT 17 AND SLRA TO THE COUNCIL THAT THEY DID THEIR JOB.”**

Esther and her children have been in temporary hostel accommodation for over a year and there is a lack of clarity and transparency about the duration of the accommodation, which makes it difficult for her to invest in the place and build a life. Esther is still waiting to settle down into stable accommodation with her children at the time of writing this report.

**"THERE IS A POWER IN EVERY**



**ONE'S VOICE"**





## AUTHORS

### REBEKKA HÖLZLE

(SLRA Community  
Engagement  
Coordinator)

### SOPHIE BEECH

(SLRA Advice  
& Casework  
Manager)

## EDITORIAL SUPPORT

### CELIA SANDS

(SLRA Director)

### LUCAS AMIN

(Independent  
Journalist)

## DESIGN

### LAIME

### LUKOSIUNAITE

(Graphic Designer)

## CONTACT

### SOUTH LONDON REFUGEE ASSOCIATION

The Woodlawns Centre  
16 Leigham Court Road  
London, SW16 2PJ

**Email:** [admin@slr-a.org.uk](mailto:admin@slr-a.org.uk) (for general enquiries) or  
[rebekka@slr-a.org.uk](mailto:rebekka@slr-a.org.uk) (for questions and feedback  
related to this report)

**Tel:** 020 3490 3443

**Website:** [www.slr-a.org.uk](http://www.slr-a.org.uk)

---

### SOUTH LONDON REFUGEE ASSOCIATION

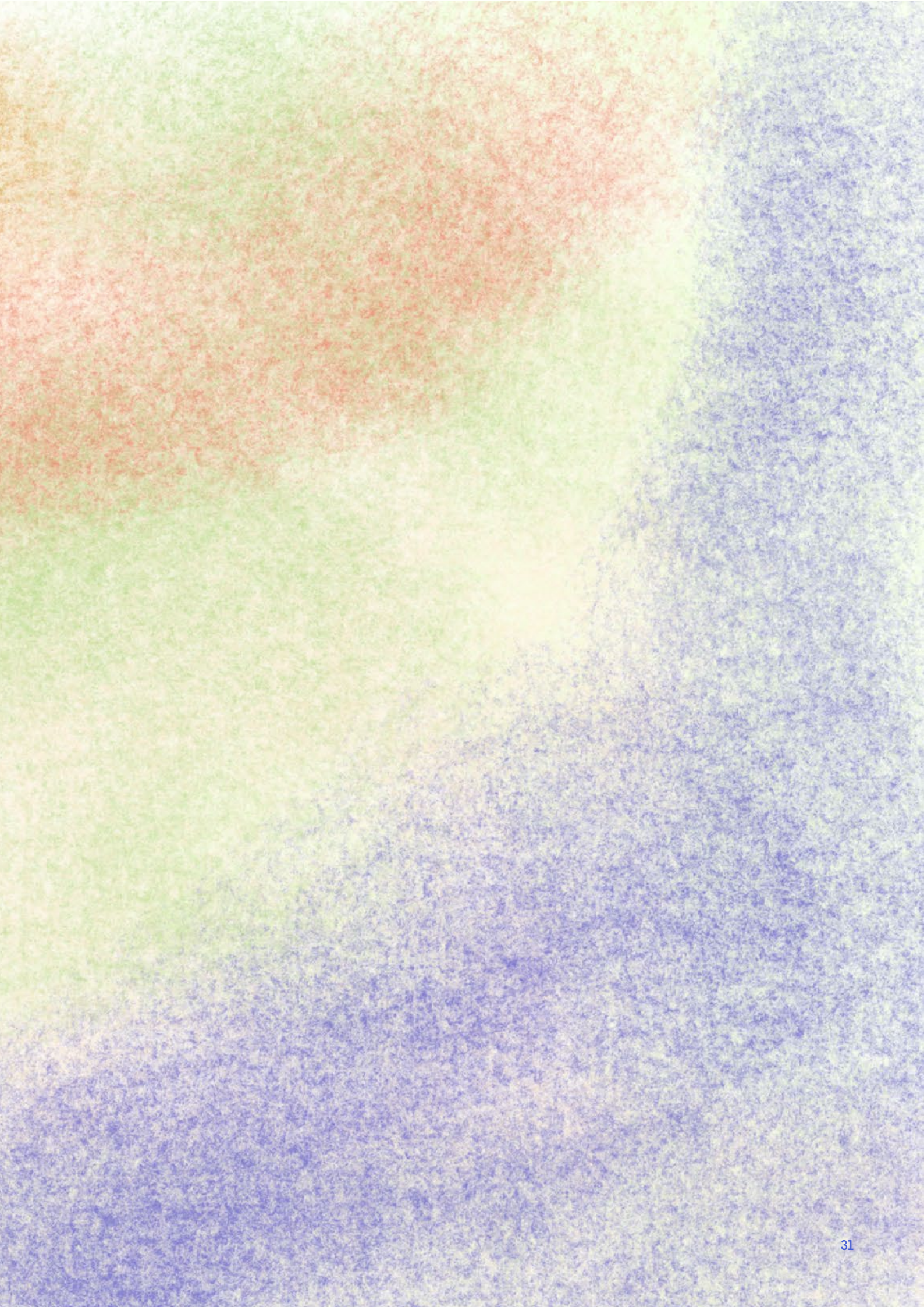
Registered Charity No. 1102814  
Company Registered by Guarantee in  
England and Wales No. 5001950  
OISC Number N201400066

---

### DATE

15 February  
2021







"WHAT I WANT FOR THE FUTURE IS TO MAKE A CHANGE WHERE I CAN AND TRY AND BE A SUPPORT FOR OTHERS WHO ARE GOING THROUGH DIFFICULT TIMES."  
"I FELT LIKE THEY DIDN'T BELIEVE MY EXPERIENCE OF DOMESTIC ABUSE. I WANTED TO ASK THE SOCIAL WORKER IS IT MY PARTNER OR ME WHO YOU ARE ASSESSING AND SUPPORTING?"  
"HAVING NRPF FEELS LIKE YOU HAVE NO ENERGY, YOU'RE LEFT TO SORT THINGS OUT FOR YOURSELF. WHERE I COME FROM YOU HAVE A HUGE FAMILY TO SUPPORT  
"NRPF MAKES YOU ON HELP FROM FAMILY. YOU CAN'T DO ANYTHING, CAN'T MAKE PLANS, LOOK  
"EVERYTHING I ASKED FOR WAS A STRUGGLE, THE COUNCIL ALWAYS SAID 'NO' WHEN I ASKED  
"THERE IS A POWER IN EVERYONE'S VOICE"  
"THERE IS A POWER IN EVERYONE'S VOICE"

"WHAT I WANT FOR THE FUTURE IS TO MAKE A CHANGE WHERE I CAN AND TRY AND BE A SUPPORT FOR OTHERS WHO ARE GOING THROUGH DIFFICULT TIMES."  
"I FELT LIKE THEY DIDN'T BELIEVE MY EXPERIENCE OF DOMESTIC ABUSE. I WANTED TO ASK THE SOCIAL WORKER IS IT MY PARTNER OR ME WHO YOU ARE ASSESSING AND SUPPORTING?"  
"HAVING NRPF FEELS LIKE YOU HAVE NO ENERGY, YOU'RE LEFT TO SORT THINGS OUT FOR YOURSELF. WHERE I COME FROM YOU HAVE A HUGE FAMILY TO SUPPORT  
"NRPF MAKES YOU ON HELP FROM FAMILY. YOU CAN'T DO ANYTHING, CAN'T MAKE PLANS, LOOK  
"EVERYTHING I ASKED FOR WAS A STRUGGLE, THE COUNCIL ALWAYS SAID 'NO' WHEN I ASKED  
"THERE IS A POWER IN EVERYONE'S VOICE"  
"THERE IS A POWER IN EVERYONE'S VOICE"

"WHAT I WANT FOR THE FUTURE IS TO MAKE A CHANGE WHERE I CAN AND TRY AND BE A SUPPORT FOR OTHERS WHO ARE GOING THROUGH DIFFICULT TIMES."  
"I FELT LIKE THEY DIDN'T BELIEVE MY EXPERIENCE OF DOMESTIC ABUSE. I WANTED TO ASK THE SOCIAL WORKER IS IT MY PARTNER OR ME WHO YOU ARE ASSESSING AND SUPPORTING?"  
"HAVING NRPF FEELS LIKE YOU HAVE NO ENERGY, YOU'RE LEFT TO SORT THINGS OUT FOR YOURSELF. WHERE I COME FROM YOU HAVE A HUGE FAMILY TO SUPPORT  
"NRPF MAKES YOU ON HELP FROM FAMILY. YOU CAN'T DO ANYTHING, CAN'T MAKE PLANS, LOOK  
"EVERYTHING I ASKED FOR WAS A STRUGGLE, THE COUNCIL ALWAYS SAID 'NO' WHEN I ASKED  
"THERE IS A POWER IN EVERYONE'S VOICE"  
"THERE IS A POWER IN EVERYONE'S VOICE"