



- **How did the Notre Dame (ND) Centre begin its work with refugees, and when was that?**

The Centre was set up in 1996 by a priest and parishioners at Notre Dame de France Church, Leicester Square, in response to changes in immigration and asylum law that year. It became an independent charity in 2007.

- **What was the identity of the first asylum seekers and refugees to come to the Centre? Has the identity of your visitors changed since then?**

The first asylum seekers and refugees were predominantly from French speaking countries, in particular Rwanda and Congo Brazzaville. After 1997, increasingly more came from the Democratic Republic of Congo. We now see increasing numbers from elsewhere e.g. Algeria, Iran, Angola, Zimbabwe, Eritrea and various countries in eastern Europe. In 2011-12, we had 886 visits by clients from non French-speaking countries, a sharp rise on 228 in the previous year. Our numbers are increasing generally.

- **What have been the main needs of the visitors to ND over the past year? What are the services that ND offers to meet these needs?**

Our visitors report that our specialised advice service is extremely useful to them – and unique in London in the support it provides in community languages. Our advice team provides expert advice on asylum and immigration matters as well as housing, benefits and debt.

- **The London Churches Refugee Fund is particularly concerned with refugees and asylum seekers who are destitute. What does the experience of your visitors tell you are the main causes of destitution?**

We see asylum seekers and failed asylum seekers who are destitute as a result of the long delays in their cases being processed. They do not have permission to work; they are not eligible for any form of housing or accommodation. They are not eligible to apply for any benefits.

- **Which changes in society do you think have impacted most on your visitors? Do you think any changes have created more destitution over the past year, or maybe reduced it?**

A clear hardening in successive governments' attitudes to migrants generally, and in particular to asylum seekers, have deeply affected our visitors. Changes in legislation and legal aid cuts have added to the hardship of many destitute asylum seekers.

- **What policy or practical measure or change do you think would do most to reduce the level of destitution among people seeking sanctuary?**

Asylum seekers who are awaiting a decision on their status should be allowed to work. They should also be allowed to claim benefits.

- **Is or has ND been in a position to do any public advocacy for the people who come to the Centre? If so, what do you think has been effective?**

We are part of BAN (Black and Minority Ethnic Advice Network), a partnership of specialist agencies across London providing advice to some of the city's most disadvantaged communities. Together we aim to improve access to advice for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and refugee and migrant communities, in the fields of welfare rights, housing, immigration and asylum, health, education and employment.

- **The LCR Fund can offer only modest amounts: if an imaginary windfall to the Fund could double its grant to ND for your destitute visitors, how do you think you would use it?**

We would strengthen our advice service by employing more advisers, in particular offering more legal advice following the recent legal aid cuts.

- **Can you sum up the vision of the ND Centre? Can you foresee any changes you might make to develop the Centre's services to people seeking sanctuary?**

Our vision remains the same as that of the Centre's founders in 1996: to welcome and shelter, to care for people living on the margins of society and to espouse the cause of the oppressed.

Central to all our work is the emergency and long term support that we provide through our advice service. This will remain at the core of everything that we do.