



ASYLUM SEEKER FAMILY DROP-IN ANNUAL REPORT 2022

The Liberal Jewish Synagogue

asylumproject@ljs.org
[https://www.ljs.org/asylum-
drop-in.html](https://www.ljs.org/asylum-drop-in.html)

Tel: +44 (0)20 7286 5181
28 St. John's Wood Road,
London, NW8 7HA



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THIS YEAR AT THE DROP-IN

Pandemic Hiatus

During the Covid-19 lockdowns, we were able to continue supporting our guests virtually. This primarily involved distributing £40 Tesco food vouchers via text once a month. With limited financial support available, our guests were especially grateful for these vouchers during an arduous and challenging time for all.

April 2022

We initially opened a walk-through Drop-in in September 2021 with very few guests choosing to return. In April of 2022, we resumed an in-person service for all our guests. Although many of our guests were still enthusiastic about receiving vouchers, our numbers have returned in full since September 2022.

Highlights

During the Covid period, we were delighted to find that some of our guests had received Leave to Remain. Moreover, many had been rehoused away from the London area. We were therefore able to invite many new families from our waiting list - some of whom have been waiting for over two years. Many of the guests remembered the volunteers and it was heart-warming to see people reunited - although it is frustrating to note that many of our guests are still awaiting decisions from the Home Office. Since reopening, we have also managed to gather key information on many of our guests and their families which has all been digitised by the new Project Co-ordinator.

“A programme that makes a profound and personal impact in the lives of asylum seekers drowning in an overloaded and underfunded system.” 27 year-old Volunteer discussing the Drop-in

Looking Ahead

We are looking forward to a full year of in-person events and expanding the services that the Drop-in provides. Looking to 2023, we would like to see a return to offering people expert advice and helping them complete vital documentation. Given the amazing volunteer turnout, it would be wonderful to open up to even more families as long as we can keep the Drop-in a safe and comforting environment.

WHAT WE DO

The LJS Drop-in for Asylum Seeker Families has been successfully operating for over 8 years and has helped families from all over the world. We offer a monthly Drop-in afternoon where our guests and their families are welcomed into the synagogue for a couple of hours. We currently invite 85-90 families every other month, many of whom bring all their children to enjoy the atmosphere!

Our Drop-in afternoons involve:

- Providing our guests with a hot vegetarian meal which they eat communally in the Montefiore Hall;
- Giving our guests essential toiletries i.e. sanitary products and nappies;
- Offering a selection of targeted clothing, including brand new underwear;
- Supplying our guests with a nominal sum of cash for groceries and travel;
- Allowing parents to have some respite as we arrange children's play and craft activities;
- Offering baby bank referrals and recommending other avenues of support.

Ultimately, the Drop-in is comprised of: the clothing team, a toiletries section, a children's area, the finance team, the registration team, the kitchen staff and servers, and the general welcome staff. Each section of the Drop-in affords our guests much-needed help to bolster the support they receive through the Home Office.



OUR GUESTS

Eligibility

There are only two prerequisites for registering with the LJS Asylum Seeker Family Drop-in:

1. They must be registered with the Home Office and currently waiting on an asylum application decision - we accept any evidence that suggests this but the primary document is an Application Registration Card (ARC). We also do not discriminate on the basis of where the guest is in the process i.e. making further submissions.
2. They must have at least one child under the age of 18. Although we appreciate that there are many asylum-seekers who are here alone, sadly, due to limited funding and resources, the LJS Drop-in has elected to focus solely on families.

Many of our guests have been through extremely traumatic journeys to reach us here in the UK, and we approach registration with all the appropriate sensitivity.

Invitations

In terms of the information we gather on our guests, our primary mode of contacting them is via mobile telephone number. To make sure that we have all the necessary information (for example: ARC expiry dates and the ages of their children) we also try to liaise with them via email if they have access to an internet connection.

Waiting list

In spite of the efforts we have made to remove those who are no longer eligible for our services, we still have an ever-growing waiting list of desperate families. Although we are not the only Drop-in offering essential services like this, many of our guests do rely on us for the month that they are invited. It is for this reason that we would love to increase our invited guests slightly - this would prevent people staying on our list for months on end.

Leave to Remain

Once our guests secure the Right to Remain, we offer them a grace period where they may still attend the Drop-in. This is because we acknowledge that a change in visa status does not equate to a drastic change in our guests' financial or domestic situation. We are very wary of pulling the rug out from beneath their feet and, as with those who do not fall within our remit, we endeavour to signpost to other resources.

Life as an Asylum Seeker

All of our guests are hoping to be granted the Right to Remain in order to legally remain here, and have the opportunity to work. Whilst they await that decision, our guests are in limbo and are reliant upon limited government support and charities such as ourselves in order to get by.

As of November 2022, asylum seekers are currently being given £40.85 weekly per person in each household to pay for essentials. This amounts to as little as £5.84 per day. Although the government provide them with housing, this is often overcrowded and lacks fundamental facilities. Many of our guests are currently being housed in overcrowded hotels without any access to a working kitchen.

Crucially, wait times for asylum seekers are also at a record high meaning that charitable support is vital. The Refugee Council assessed that the average waiting time for a decision is between one and three years - that is three years living on little over £2100 per year. The pandemic proved especially challenging for many of our guests as they were isolated from many of their usual support services.

"The whole team was there for me and my daughters when it was so tough for us. How can I forget your assistance over the years, especially during the pandemic and after....I will forever be in the debt of gratitude to you for your support through these years." Former Guest

Guest Feedback

We have had an overwhelmingly positive response from our guests, a number of whom are now volunteering with us. One such guest emailed us the following: *"Firstly, I want to thank you all for your support and the love you've shown towards me and my daughters. The whole team was there for me and my daughters when it was so tough for us. How can I forget your assistance over the years, especially during the pandemic and after. My first daughter will never forget the pack of crayons she got from LJS as mum can't afford one for her back then. I will forever be in the debt of gratitude to you for your support through these years. Our leave to remain has been granted, I'm working now and back to school to study. I thought it will be nice if that opportunity is given to another family. If there is opportunity opened for volunteering I will be willing to do it to help the team and other families. Thank you for all you've done. I am sincerely grateful to you all."*

FINANCES

Statement of Financial Position

- We are entirely reliant upon the financial help of grants and specifically targeted Drop-in donations from the LJS community.
- Although we are currently financially solvent, without help from external sources, we will no longer be able to provide the vital help that the Drop-in offers throughout 2023.

Approximate Breakdown

As we are distributing cash, in addition to clothes, toiletries, and hot food, our average monthly expenditure for the Drop-in is large and will increase as we try to expand our offerings. Please see below for an approximation of our predicted monthly, and then annual, spend.

DESCRIPTION	Monthly Average Spend	Average Spend per Annum
Hot Food	£350.00	£4200.00
Security Guard	£108.00	£1296.00
Caretaker Salary	£179.00	£2148.00
Grocery/Travel Money (£47/family - 85)	£3995.00	£47940.00
Knickers/specific clothing funds	£300.00	£3600.00
Nappies	£200.00	£2400.00
Children's art supplies	£20.00	£240.00
Miscellaneous i.e. bags for clothing	£60.00	£720.00
TOTAL	£5212.00	£62544.00

Please note this is only a rough approximation and does not factor in the Project Co-ordinator salary. Please see full accounts for a complete breakdown.

We remain enormously grateful to those organisations who have offered the LJS Drop-in financial support, particularly as the cost-of-living crisis is severely affecting different sections of society. We are especially appreciative of the support offered by the Pears Foundation as, without their grant, we would have been forced to close.

VOLUNTEERS

Recruitment

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, we have been trying to consolidate our volunteer base and make sure that we have all the necessary information on each one of our fantastic volunteers. All volunteers are required to sign a confidentiality form. In addition, for safeguarding reasons, we ask for emergency contact information. We currently have 110 volunteers in our new Drop-in specific database, all of whom are extremely committed.

Structure

The Drop-in is almost entirely reliant on the hard work of our volunteers. There is one paid employee, the Project Co-ordinator, who handles the guest details and administrative tasks. They work with the three lead volunteers who, in turn, answer to the Drop-in Steering Committee.

Role within the LJS

Compared to other projects within the LJS, the Asylum Seeker Family Drop-in is unique. Not only does it include volunteers from the synagogue membership, but it also includes people from the wider community. Ultimately, it is a multi-faith project which helps drive unity within the London area.

Department Heads

The different sections of the Drop-in have different lead volunteers who all report back to the managing committee and Project Co-ordinator. In this way, we know that individuals are keeping an eye on the functioning of each specific section.



***“A lovely atmosphere and I was able to feel part of a community. I feel the LJS is doing a good and lovely thing.”
22 year-old Volunteer***

TRAINING

Safeguarding

As with other areas of the synagogue, we have undertaken a review of our safeguarding policy at the LJS. We are extremely conscious of the various vulnerabilities of both our adult and child guests.

In light of this, with the help of our colleagues in Liberal Judaism, we have built a safeguarding training programme to be conducted over Zoom either in December or in the New Year. This incorporates scenario-based training so that our volunteers are mindful of the unique challenges and problems that our Drop-in can present.

Volunteer Relations

In addition to our guests' wellbeing, we also want to ensure that our volunteers enjoy their time with us. The Drop-in days are exhausting, and tensions can run high, so we have dedicated volunteers committed to looking after our team's wellbeing.

We also prioritise debriefing with all our volunteers at the end of each Drop-in session so that, if people are feeling overwhelmed, they have a safe space in which to collect their thoughts and touch base on any major causes of concern.

After 8 years of this project, we are very aware that this is an iterative process and are constantly looking for ways to refine and improve the Drop-in experience for both guests and volunteers alike.



DONATIONS AND SPONSORS

Toiletries

- In order to provide our guests with crucial sanitary products, we work with *Bloody Good Period*.
- Additionally, so that we may offer our guests essential toiletry items such as soap and toothpaste, we also work with *Goods for Good*.
- Given the enormous demand for nappies, as many of our guests have very young children, we must often replenish our nappy supply using our Drop-in funds.
- Our final method of securing toiletries for our guests is to circulate Amazon wishlists among the synagogue membership. We recently had a fantastic response to our appeal for male toiletries this way: asking for deodorant, shaving cream, and razors.

Clothing

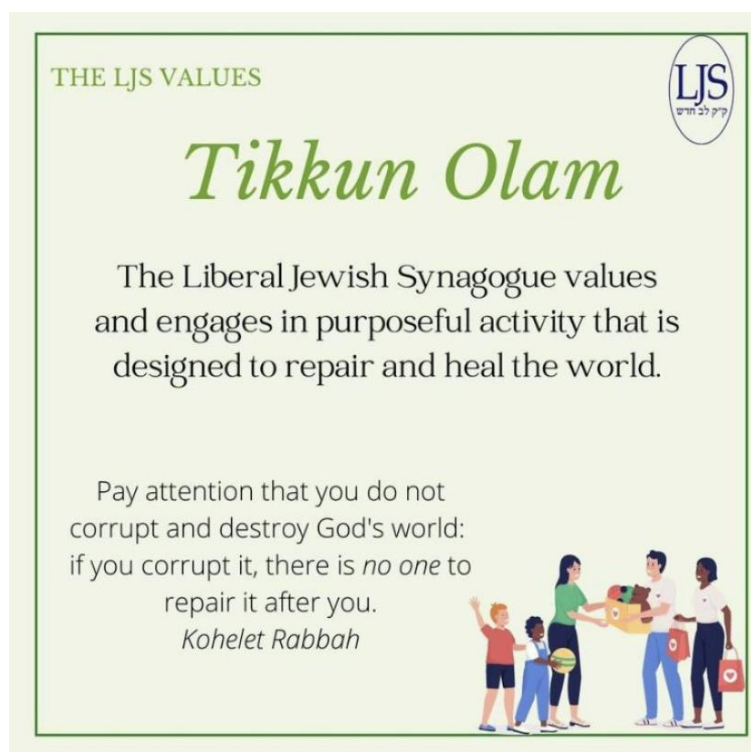
- Given the limited financial resources made available to our guests, we prioritise different clothing every two months.
- Our guests are split into Group A and Group B - each group being invited every other month in order to ensure fairness and safety. We do therefore offer the same clothing on both months.
- Despite the size of the LJS, we do have to be mindful of our limited space for storing clothing items. Looking to 2023, we are going to publish a list of all the clothes we are targeting on a monthly basis. This will make it clearer to both membership and staff what we are and are not accepting.
- In August and September of 2022, we ran a successful 'School Uniform Shabbat' where we encouraged our membership to purchase new or donate nearly-new school uniforms. The children of our guests were absolutely thrilled.



WHY THE JEWISH COMMUNITY SHOULD BE INVOLVED

תיקון עולם Tikkun Olam

One of the foundational principles of Judaism, and indeed the LJS, is Tikkun Olam. However our membership choose to conceptualise the doctrine of Tikkun Olam, the Asylum Seeker Family Drop-in doubtlessly encapsulates both the ethical and ritual mitzvot involved. Many of the synagogue's Community Care projects clearly fulfil this obligation, but the Drop-in is clearly attempting to repair the world by filling the gap left by existing support for asylum-seekers.



Trauma and Diaspora

Historically, the Jewish community has been forced to migrate due to fear of racial or religious violence in their home countries. Whether we are discussing Moses leading the Jews out of Egypt, the Russian pogroms, or the Shoah, the Jewish population is not unfamiliar with the trauma of forced migration. Furthermore, the cultural diaspora experienced by minority populations in their new homes is something that British Jews can especially empathise with - given that the Jewish population in the UK is currently an estimated 292,000 out of a total population of 67.33 million.

NOTE FROM RABBI ALEX

Rabbi Alexandra Wright, the Senior Rabbi at the LJS, is one of the founding members of the LJS Asylum Drop-in. She has remained involved throughout its 8 year existence, and remains a guiding influence in the expansion of the project.

The Liberal Jewish Synagogue Drop-in was founded just over eight years ago by a group of committed members who wanted to see the community as a whole embody the values and teachings that lie at the heart of our Judaism. ‘You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger...you shall not oppress any widow or orphan’ (Exodus 22:20-21) is one of many verses in the Torah that instruct us so clearly to treat those who come to this country as strangers with dignity, compassion and kindness.

Since its inception in the Ancient Near East, even before the destruction of the Temple, the synagogue was not only a place of prayer and ritual, but a place of hospitality for wayfarers, a place of communal activity and sanctuary. Perhaps it was because the foundational narrative of the Jewish people – the Exodus from Egypt – was so firmly embedded in Jewish consciousness, that we were slaves in Egypt and know the heart of the stranger, that the obligation to help those who have fled their homeland, who have suffered from trafficking, slavery, persecution or torture, who have made treacherous journeys across land and sea, weighs heavily on our sense of social responsibility for others.

And of course, our own community, the LJS, is deeply conscious of more recent history. As the years progress, the remnant of those who came to this country as child refugees, or who were deported to concentration camps and miraculously survived, arriving in this country after the end of the Second World War, diminishes year by year. Their commitment to tell their story is stronger than ever, and soon it will fall to the next generation to ensure that their narratives are not forgotten, precisely so that we understand that our covenant with God is to create a world based on justice, compassion, and peace.

CONTACT DETAILS

Primary Contact:

Principal Contact: Rabbi Alexandra Wright

Address: The Liberal Jewish Synagogue,
28 St. Johns Wood Road, London, NW8 7HA

Email: asylumproject@ljs.org

Telephone: 020 7286 5181

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