



plateful
cafe

annual report

MAY 2025 / APRIL 2026



A man with a friendly smile, wearing a black baseball cap and a blue apron over a dark shirt, stands in a lush vineyard. He is holding a blue plate with several golden-brown, breaded items, possibly falafel or vegetable patties, garnished with fresh green herbs. The background is filled with vibrant green grape leaves and vines, with a stone wall visible in the distance.

At Plateful Café, we believe food has the power to transform lives. By empowering refugees with training, employment and opportunities to share their culinary heritage, we create brighter futures while bringing communities together.

Throughout 2025, we reached new milestones – expanding paid employment opportunities, celebrating cultures through food, growing our community programmes, and taking the exciting step towards establishing our first permanent home.

This report reflects a year of ambition, resilience, partnership and impact, made possible by the generosity of our supporters, volunteers, partners and the remarkable people at the heart of Plateful Café.

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Our founder

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The last twelve months, from May 2025 to April 2026, have been a year of significant growth and development for Plateful Café. As we entered our third year, we strengthened the foundations of the charity while continuing to support refugees and people seeking asylum to build skills, confidence, connections and pathways towards employment.

This growth can be seen across the organisation. Our annual income more than doubled, from £28,400 to £73,500, giving us greater capacity to develop our work. We employed our first paid member of staff, established an important new operational partnership with Blackfriars Settlement, relaunched our structured eight-week Introduction to Working in Hospitality training programme, and celebrated the launch of Nubian Delights, our first refugee-led spin-off business.

At the same time, we maintained the level and quality of our charitable activity and supported a similar number of people to the previous year. Achieving this while developing the organisation, and with only one paid member of staff supported by a dedicated volunteer team, is something of which we are extremely proud.

Throughout the year, we continued to bring people together through food. We held a summer residency at Hill Station Café, organised community dinners at Pistachios in the Park, took part in events at Sydenham Garden and Spitalfields City Farm, and ran pop-ups at SET Social in Peckham, alongside other community activities and catering opportunities.





Our founder

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In January 2026, we began our collaboration with Blackfriars Settlement, initially cooking and serving soups for its Warm Space programme. This developed into a much wider partnership and, from April, provided a base from which we could once again deliver our eight-week hospitality training programme. This was an important milestone after a period in which the lack of access to a suitable commercial kitchen had significantly restricted our ability to provide structured training.

We have continued to be inspired by the extraordinary commitment of our volunteers, staff and supporters. Their contribution has enabled Plateful Café not simply to maintain its services, but to begin building the organisational capacity needed for the next stage of our development.

The wider environment remains extremely challenging. Refugees and people seeking asylum continue to experience poverty, homelessness, discrimination and uncertainty, and we increasingly meet people with complex needs. Where we can, we respond directly; where specialist support is required, we connect people with organisations able to help.

There is still much more to do. The progress made this year has laid important foundations, but our resources remain very limited and demand continues to exceed what we can currently provide. Our ambition is now to build on this growth: to train and support more refugees, create stronger pathways into sustainable employment, expand our catering and enterprise activities, and ultimately create more opportunities for refugees to earn, learn, develop and lead.

Most importantly, behind every figure in this report is a person rebuilding their life in the UK. We are immensely proud of the people we have supported and of the determination, skills and contribution they bring to their communities.

Finally, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to our staff and volunteers, our donors and funders, our corporate and community partners, and everyone who has supported Plateful Café during this important year of growth.

As we look towards 2026/27, we do so with ambition as well as hope. We have demonstrated what Plateful Café can achieve with very limited resources. Our challenge now is to secure the investment, partnerships and capacity that will enable us to build on these foundations and reach many more people in the years ahead.

Iolanda Chirico
Founder



Why supporting refugees matters

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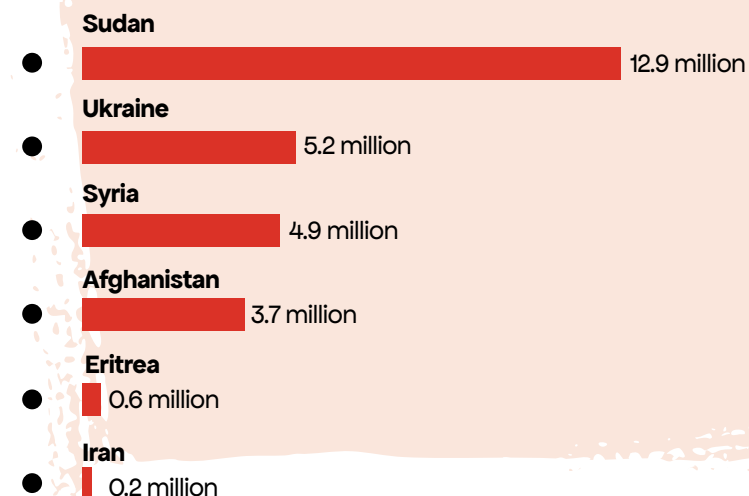
The year 2025–26 has been another period of profound uncertainty for people seeking safety in the UK. While conflict, persecution and instability continue to force millions from their homes across countries including Sudan, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Syria, Iran and Eritrea, the journey to rebuilding a life in the UK remains long and challenging.

During the year ending March 2026, around 94,000 people claimed asylum in the UK. Although this represented a decrease from the previous year, the asylum system continued to support almost 98,000 people, many of whom had spent months or even years waiting for decisions about their future. Encouragingly, the backlog of initial asylum decisions fell significantly as the Home Office increased decision-making, but thousands of people remain in prolonged uncertainty while they await the outcome of their claims.

For those living in asylum accommodation, life remains extremely restrictive. Most people seeking asylum are not permitted to work, despite many having valuable qualifications, professional experience and a strong desire to contribute to society. Instead, they rely on limited government support while living in temporary accommodation, often unable to plan for their future or provide opportunities for their families. This enforced inactivity can have a devastating impact on confidence, wellbeing and mental health.

Receiving refugee status should represent the beginning of a new chapter. Yet for many, it marks the start of another difficult transition. Newly recognised refugees must quickly secure housing, open bank accounts, apply for Universal Credit, register with employers and rebuild every aspect of daily life. From March 2026, asylum-seekers once granted refugee status must leave their Home Office accommodation and find their own in 42 days. Independent evaluation has shown this extension has reduced the immediate risk of homelessness and allowed organisations to provide more effective, trauma-informed support. However, the shortage of affordable housing means many refugees still face significant challenges during this transition.

Key refugee and global displacement (2025-2026)





Why supporting refugees matters

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Employment remains one of the greatest barriers to successful integration. Refugees bring resilience, determination and a wealth of professional skills, yet many struggle to enter the UK labour market because of language barriers, unfamiliar recruitment systems, lack of UK work experience, interrupted careers, trauma, and the non-recognition of overseas qualifications. Without targeted support, these barriers can prevent talented individuals from rebuilding independent lives and contributing fully to their communities.

This is where Plateful Café makes a difference.

Our eight-week hospitality training programme provides far more than practical catering skills. We offer a safe, welcoming environment where refugees gain confidence, develop professional skills and begin rebuilding their futures. Participants receive accredited Level 2 Food Hygiene training, barista and front-of-house experience, practical catering skills, CV and interview support, personalised employment guidance and valuable UK work experience. Equally important, they have the opportunity to share their own cultures through food, creating genuine connections that bring communities together.

Everything we do is shaped alongside refugees themselves. Rather than imposing solutions, we listen, respond and adapt our programmes to reflect the real challenges our participants face. This person-centred approach is central to our work and ensures our support remains practical, relevant and empowering.

Graduation from our programme is not the end of the journey.





Why supporting refugees matters

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Many participants continue working with Plateful Café through paid catering events, community dinners, cookery workshops and mentoring opportunities, enabling them to build experience, confidence and professional networks while earning the London Living Wage.

Yet demand continues to outstrip our capacity.

Without a permanent, fully operational café open throughout the week, we cannot yet provide the consistent employment opportunities our graduates deserve. Too many talented chefs remain dependent on occasional catering events and community dinners when they are ready for regular employment.

A permanent home for Plateful Café would transform what is possible. It would enable us to expand our training programme, create sustainable employment, increase our community impact and provide a stable environment where refugees can rebuild their confidence, develop careers and become active contributors to London's vibrant hospitality sector.

Every meal served represents far more than food. It is an opportunity to restore confidence, create belonging, celebrate culture and help someone rebuild a future through dignity, purpose and meaningful work.





About Plateful

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Plateful Café exists to help refugees on their journey to employment and independence and to progress their integration. In setting objectives and planning activities, the trustees confirm that they have complied with their duty under Section 17 of the Charities Act 2011 to have due regard to the Charity Commission guidance on public benefit.

Our objectives

1

To relieve the poverty of those granted refugee status and granted asylum and their dependents in South East London and neighbouring boroughs by the provision of vocational skills training, advice and support to enable such people to obtain employment;

2

To advance the education and training of those granted refugee status, those who have been granted asylum and those who are seeking asylum in South East London and neighbouring boroughs so as to advance them in life and help them to adapt within a new community;

3

To educate the general public of the rights and needs of refugees and asylum seekers; and

4

The promotion of social inclusion for the public benefit among people who are refugees, their dependents or seeking asylum in South East London and neighbouring boroughs, and who are socially excluded on the grounds of their social and economic position by offering activities, training and support directed to enabling them to integrate into society.





Our theory of change

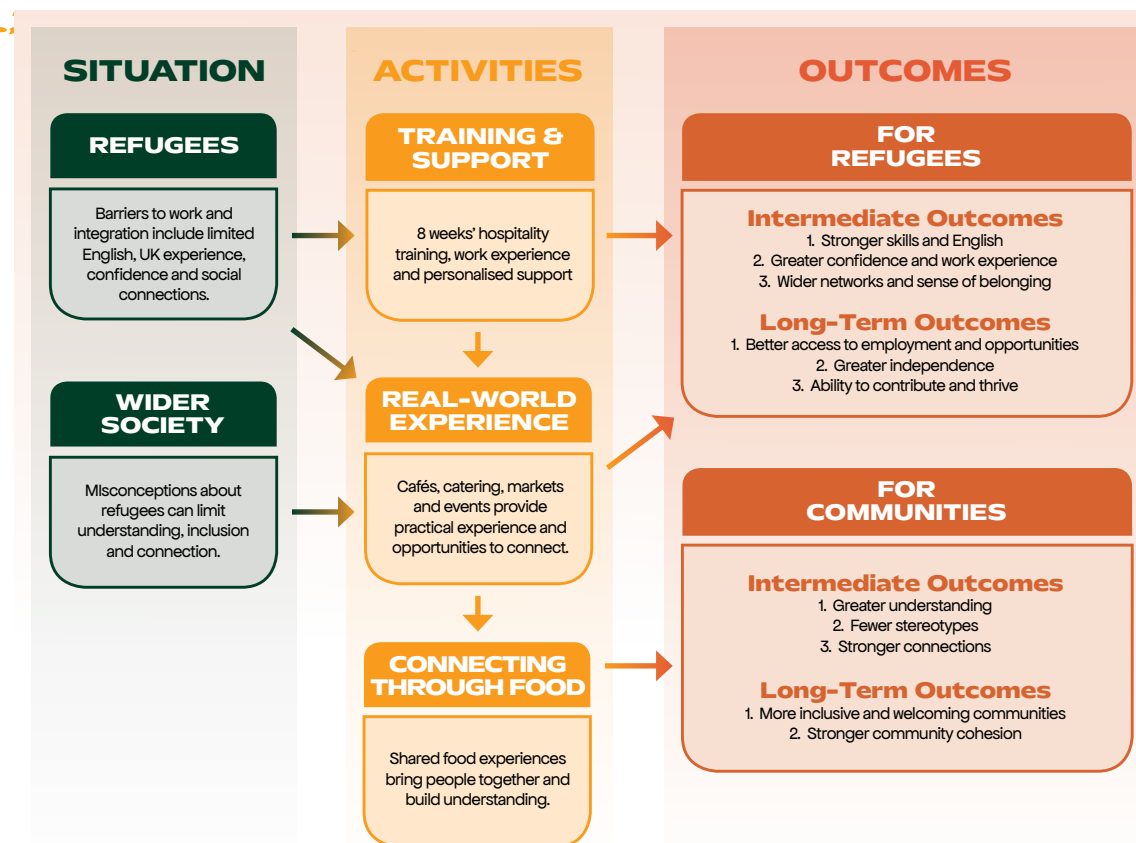
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Plateful Café runs an 8-week Introduction to Working in Hospitality course, caters for the public, makes and sell products, hot and cold food at markets, pop-ups and festivals, and runs regular community dinners. Through our activities, chefs gain valuable skills and work experience, build confidence, improve their English and become part of a nurturing community.

At the same time, members of the local community attend our events where they can learn, connect and engage with refugees as individuals, rather than through abstract or politicised narratives.

In this way our model operates on two levels at once: Supporting refugees who face barriers to integration and addressing the wider public narratives that shape how migration is understood.

Our theory of change is illustrated opposite.





Refugee status in England

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WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

When someone is granted refugee status in England, they stop being an asylum seeker and gain many of the same rights as other residents in the UK.



WHAT REFUGEES BECOME ENTITLED TO



Right to work
(no restrictions)



Access to social housing and homelessness assistance



A Refugee Travel Document
(if they cannot use their national passport)



Universal Credit and other benefits (if eligible):

- Universal Credit
- Disability support
- Child Benefit
- Pension Credit



A National Insurance number
(usually issued automatically)



Access to further education, training and employment support

ASYLUM SEEKERS STATUS



Payments are loaded onto an ASPEN card and are intended to cover essentials such as toiletries, clothing, local travel, phone credit and other personal items.

THE CHALLENGE

- Open bank accounts
- Receive Universal Credit payments
- Find affordable accommodation
- Secure employment

That's why many charities are campaigning for a longer move-on period.

REAL-LIFE IMPACT

Long stays in hotel accommodation can be very difficult.

People in hotels on just £9.95 per week can struggle to afford everyday essentials such as:



Self-catered accommodation
(you buy and cook your own food)

£49.18

per person per week



Full-board (meals provided)
Hotels, hostels etc.

£9.95

per person per week



EXTRA SUPPORT

Pregnant women	+£5.25 per week
Babies under 1	+£9.50 per week
Children aged 1-3	+£5.25 per week
Maternity grant	£300 one-off payment

WHY LESS IN HOTELS?



Meals are provided, so the allowance drops from £49.18 to £9.95.

Many hotels and hostels have limited or no cooking facilities. In full-board accommodation, meals must be provided by the accommodation provider.



REFUGEE STATUS



IN ENGLAND

THE "MOVE-ON" PERIOD

Newly recognised refugees generally have 42 days (6 weeks) from the date refugee status is granted before Home Office support ends and they must leave asylum accommodation.



The Home Office should issue:



A letter confirming support will end



A Notice to Quit before they must leave the accommodation

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

If living in a Home Office hotel, hostel or other asylum accommodation, they normally must leave within the 42 days.

They must find:

- Private rented housing
- Stay with family or friends
- Or seek help from the local council if homeless



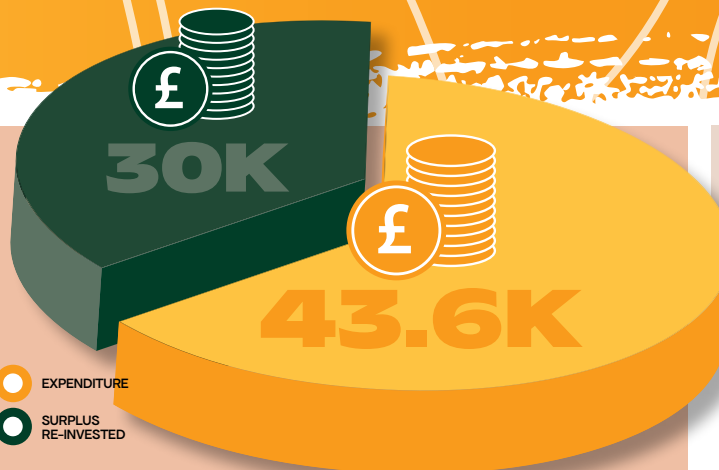




Our impact

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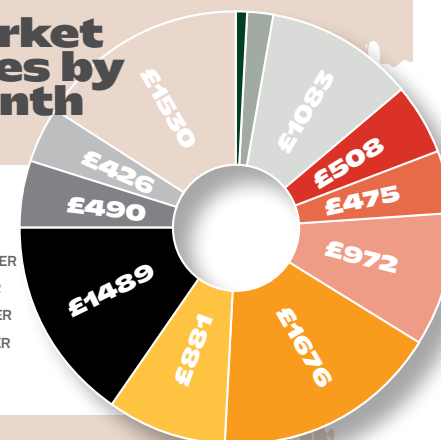
£73.6K
total INCOME



market sales by month

JANUARY* ● JULY
FEBRUARY** ● AUGUST
MARCH ● SEPTEMBER
APRIL ● OCTOBER
MAY ● NOVEMBER
JUNE ● DECEMBER

* £103 ** £195



20 top products

1	Falafel wrap	190 sold
2	Chicken shawarma wrap	155
3	Spiced potato	97
4	Apple jam	54
5	Syrian chilli paste	51
6	Fatayer x 2	49
7	Mini pizza x 1	49
8	Falafel x 5	47
9	Lentil salad	45
10	Basbousa cake	44
11	Stuffed vine leaves x 5	41
12	Pumpkin jam	39
13	Carrot jam	37
14	Tea cup	37
15	Cheese fatayer	36
16	Mini pizza x 2	34
17	Falafel x 3	32
18	Mini pizza	31
19	Potato fingers	31
20	Carrot cake slice	30



traded income



£21,216
external catering



£8,514
market sales



£4,197
community dinners



£206
online sales



£136
stockists



£36,890
grants



£2,384
donations

our growing reach



Our café closed in April 2024 but we continued to operate through external catering, pop-ups and markets to continue our mission.



Languages spoken across our team: Arabic, Farsi, Amharic, French, Spanish, Tigrinya and Italian.



Local partners we've collaborated with: Set Social, Pistachio in the Park, Hill Station Café, Facework, Refugee Council, Lewisham Refugee and Migrant Network, Netflix, Team Lewis, Linklaters and Katten.

Our new partners include: Spitalfields Farm, Backfriars Settlement and Lewisham Art House.



Our amazing founder and incredible team of volunteers dedicate their time and energy completely for free!

Every penny we raise goes directly to supporting refugees and making a difference.





Our volunteers

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Our volunteers offer their time for many different reasons, including wanting to support our mission, to meet new people from different backgrounds or to learn about different cultures and cuisines.

We continue to engage with 11 teams of volunteers from social media to finance fundraising events and an average of 55 active volunteers (at any point in time) who each give at least 2 hours of their time every week.

Our volunteers are from all walks of life, of all ages and backgrounds and also several are asylum-seekers living in hostels. Giving them an opportunity to get out and have something to do is making a big difference to their lives and we continue to witness great improvements in their confidence, English language and skills. Making a contribution is improving their lives in so many different ways.

"I knew nobody and now I have some friends."

Abdul

"I live in a room with no windows in hotel and when I come out I see the light and meet new people."

Tariq

"I can't cook in the hotel and the food they give me is very bad. When I help at the stall I can eat delicious falafel and other food from my country."

Mohammed

"I eat Iranian lentils and rice for the first time in 5 years and it tasted like home."

Kavi

"I like talking to people at the stall and for the first time I meet other people who speak English."

Taher

"I am so happy I met you (Plateful Cafe) and I am now part of a family."

Amira



Our volunteers

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Katryn

Coordinates volunteers and creates the monthly newsletter, bringing care, creativity and inclusion to the team.



Enxhi

Manages financial systems, accounts and financial support, helping Plateful stay organised and sustainable.



Jo

Provides vital driving and logistics support for events, markets, catering and food deliveries.



Ella

Shares Plateful's events and impact through social media, helping more people connect with the charity.



Asrar

Supports fundraising and helps strengthen a volunteer community committed to empowering refugees.



Tamara

Helps at events, dinners and market stalls with patience, warmth and longstanding commitment.



Our volunteers

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Polly

Gives her time to support Plateful's mission of food, community, care and belonging.



Zayn

Leads volunteer recruitment, onboarding and management, while also supporting grant applications.



Shaefali

Supports fundraising, project work and community-building through her charity-sector experience.



Alex

Creates social media videos and interviews, helping cooks and volunteers feel seen and appreciated.



Lucy

Builds corporate partnerships to support donations, collaboration and long-term growth.



Christian

Develops and modernises Plateful's website to better communicate its work and impact.





Our highlights of the year

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The 2025–26 year was amazing for Plateful Café. We expanded our catering services, strengthened community partnerships and launched new training opportunities. Despite the initial challenge of operating on the move, we were able to build stronger foundations for long-term growth.

Securing our first home

One of our most significant milestones was securing an operational base, allowing us to get more catering business.

In February 2026 we hit an incredible milestone by securing a commercial kitchen at Blackfriars Settlement, available from Mondays to Wednesdays. This vibrant new home has truly transformed our capacity, allowing us to launch structured training programmes for our refugees, introduce our Warm Space soup initiative, and significantly expand our catering operations.

We teamed up with Blackfriars because we share a deep-rooted belief that food, learning, and community have the power to change lives.

By having access to their state-of-the-art kitchen, we are proud to deliver high-quality catering to the wider community while providing meaningful, hands-on pathways into the hospitality industry.

Hiring our first full time employee

We are absolutely thrilled to announce a huge moment in the Plateful Café story: the appointment of our very first full-time Operations Manager and Chef Trainer, Ismail Almatheab!

Ismail's journey is the absolute definition of courage. After fleeing Syria and facing the daunting challenge of rebuilding his life and culinary career in the UK from scratch, he persevered to earn advanced culinary and artisan baking diplomas, working in top kitchens across the country. Now, his path has come beautifully full circle. Ismail is bringing his extraordinary talent, resilience, and lived experience straight to our kitchen leading our training programmes, mentoring our participants, and helping fellow refugees build the confidence they need to thrive.





Our highlights of the year

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Empowering refugees through training & employment

This Spring 2026, we launched our Introduction to Working in Hospitality programme! Running from April through June in the beautiful new kitchen at Blackfriars Settlement, this intensive 8-week course was led by our fantastic Chef Trainer, Ismail. Five brilliant participants from Sudan, Albania, and Iran dove headfirst into the training with enthusiasm.

Our trainees completely immersed themselves in professional kitchen operations. The hands-on curriculum covered:

- **Preparation:** Mastering knife safety, vegetable preparation, and the classic five mother sauces.
- **Technique:** Flavour development, soup preparation, and the science of artisan baking and pastry-making.
- **Industry standards:** Food hygiene, allergen awareness, temperature control, and COSHH safety regulations.

Every week, our volunteer tutors, Dorota and Julia, led dedicated English conversation sessions. These classes quickly blossomed into a vibrant hub of cross-cultural exchange. Over plates of traditional dishes, participants shared food traditions from Iran, Sudan, and Albania, building their workplace vocabulary and confidence simultaneously.

The impact speaks for itself. Trainee Kevin Lami described the programme as an "unforgettable experience", while Jafar Mohammed shared that the community and skills he gained gave him "a new chance in life."

Maysoon and Jafar have now secured part-time employment as a Baking Tutor and Kitchen porter respectively.

Our ultimate goal at Plateful Café is to empower our participants to build independent futures, and nothing embodies this quite like Nubian Delights, our very first refugee-led food business!

Maysoon learned to bake at the age of ten in her grandmother's kitchen in Sudan, where she was taught that cooking is fundamentally about sharing love. After making the difficult journey to the UK to secure a stable future for her children, she faced the daunting hurdles of language barriers and unfamiliar systems.

"What stood out to me about Plateful Cafe was that they don't focus on the barriers people face, they recognise the skills and experiences we already have."

Maysoon Mohammed
Founder of Nubian Delights

Through Plateful's hospitality training, cake-decorating workshops, and business promotion opportunities, Maysoon transformed her lifelong passion into a thriving reality. Today, Nubian Delights is flourishing in London, blending authentic Sudanese treats like Kahak, Basbousa, and Kunafa with gorgeous, bespoke modern celebration cakes.



Our hospitality training programme impact report May 2025 - April 2026

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Building Skills, Confidence and Community Through Food

First cohort: April - June 2026

Programme overview

Following our move to Blackfriars Settlement, Plateful Café successfully relaunched its hospitality training programme. Five participants from Sudan, Albania and Iran completed our eight-week Introduction to Working in Hospitality course, combining practical kitchen skills, food safety, teamwork and English conversation.

At a glance



5

participants completed the programme



8

week training course



2

training days per week



English conversation support included



Practical hospitality and food safety training



3

nationalities participating

Skills developed

Food hygiene and safety, knife skills, food preparation, soups and sauces, baking, menu planning, allergen awareness, COSHH, teamwork, workplace communication and professional kitchen standards.





Our hospitality training programme impact report May 2025 - April 2026

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Participant voices

"They don't focus on the barriers people face, they recognise the skills and experiences we already have."

Maysoon Mohammed

"I learned everything that is essential to know about working in a professional kitchen."

Mojdeh Gholami

"An unforgettable experience." Kevin Lami

"Thank you for giving me a new chance in life."

Jafar Mohammed

Impact

Participants increased their practical hospitality skills, improved confidence using English, developed workplace knowledge and strengthened social connections. The programme also supported enterprise development and celebrated the cultural heritage participants bring to the hospitality sector.

Post-year development

Two alumni have secured paid employment in a bakery and teaching cooking classes at a youth centre.

Looking ahead

Plateful Café will continue delivering hospitality training that supports refugees and people seeking asylum into employment, enterprise and community participation.





Our online shop and pop-up events

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At Plateful Café, a key chain of our income and marketing is bringing our mission to life through our products. These are sold on our online shop at platefulcafe.co.uk and at local markets.

Each product we sell, whether a hand-knitted product, or a unique piece of artwork, is lovingly crafted by our community of refugees. It shows their skills, traditions and often through their artwork, their stories.

Our preserved foods are a customer favourite, especially our range of imaginative, flavour-packed jams that always have repeat customers.

Markets are an especially joyful time for us, allowing us to meet new people, share our story, and invite customers to connect. And, when the holidays come around, we offer bespoke, seasonal products that make perfect gifts and add a meaningful touch to the festivities.





Our catering and supper club

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At Plateful we have been busy throughout the year.

We continued to cater for birthdays and other special occasions as well as for organisations, councils, charities and many corporates.

Our customers included: London Borough of Lewisham, Katherine Low Settlement, Plan International, Spitalfields and Sydenham Fairs, a series of events at Goldsmiths College (Migration on Film), St Patrick's Day, London Violence Reduction Unit and Lewisham Art House. For the past three years our ongoing partners have been Set Social Peckham, Spitalfields Farm, Hilly Fields Café (Community Dinners), Sydenham Garden and Hill Trader.

We continue to develop new partnerships with organisations, charities and corporates in the Blackfriars area and we are pleased to report we have started to cater for local schools such as Grange Primary School, Community Southwark and local corporates such as HSBC.

We are working on a plan to start a supper club at Blackfriars Settlement.





Our catering reviews

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"Having Plateful Cafe as our catering partners for our week-long Refugee Festival was a delight. With all of our events, whether spoken word, exhibition private view or an intimate dining experience, as the food flowed the conversation followed - shared food works very similarly to creativity, it breaks down barriers and brings joy and connection. It helped that it was delicious too!"

Joanna Green
Pan Arts International

"Plateful provided a delicious spread of hearty canapes for my guests. Everyone loved the food, with the cheese fatayer and basbousa cake going down especially well. I would highly recommend them for any occasion."

Ben Peers





Our partnerships

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Dr Natalie Katsou Lecturer in Theatre and Performance, Associate Lecturer in Law



Plateful Café is a ground-breaking charity that paves the way to sanctuary through food. It is built through the vision of a strong woman, Iolanda Chirico and the work of talented people on the move.

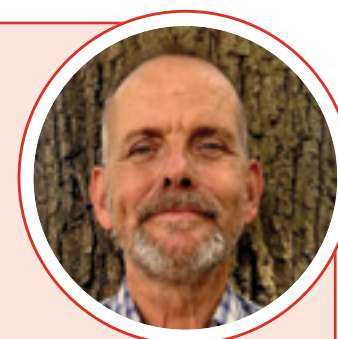
Working with Plateful Café is wonderful. Our collaboration brought warmth and flavour, literally, on the 'Migration on Film' series at Goldsmiths (co-curated by Shereener Browne and myself)! The screenings and panel discussions would end by tasting the lovely food that Plateful prepared for our audiences.

Their station became a point of gathering, where the events would drop the more formal aspect and everyone had a moment to nourish themselves with delicious treats and chats.

Our further collaboration in the research project 'Rights Through', co-led by Yaprak Yildiz and myself, (supported by the PIIF Award 2026) allowed us to explore the connection between food and culture, and also to investigate how refuge is built through training and learning new skills associated with new recipes and international cuisine.

Looking forward to what we do next with Plateful!

Fred Harding



Just a few words to say it has been a privilege and a pleasure to be able to contribute in a small way to the excellent efforts of everyone at Plateful Café.

The meals that have been served in our park café in Lewisham and prepared by the refugees you support have been fantastically received and delicious.





Our partnerships

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Lowell Black Co-Director Sydenham Garden

Plateful Café has been a valued partner at our seasonal fairs at Sydenham Garden, and their involvement genuinely enhances the experience for everyone who attends. For many of the people who come to our events, including our programme participants, carers, and local residents, a fair is as much about feeling welcomed and cared for as it is about what's on offer. Plateful understands that instinctively.

As a project rooted in Lewisham, the UK's first Borough of Sanctuary, they also embody something we think matters deeply right now: that refugees and asylum seekers bring creativity, skills, and joy to our communities. At a time when that contribution is too often overlooked or undermined, partnerships like this one feel important. They're a reminder of what's possible when we build community together. We're proud to work alongside them.

I am truly thankful to Plateful Café for believing in me and helping me build the confidence and skills to turn my passion into a growing business.



Philip Nichols Director Spitalfields City Farm

Plateful Café has become a valued partner in our work at Spitalfields City Farm, adding something genuinely special to the events and activities we host for our community. Their presence brings warmth, generosity and a real sense of welcome that resonates with our visitors – from local families to volunteers and programme participants.

As an organisation rooted in inclusion and opportunity, their work reflects values we share deeply. They demonstrate, through their food and their approach, the creativity, skills and richness that refugees and asylum seekers contribute to our city. At a time when those contributions are often overlooked, this partnership feels particularly meaningful. It shows what can be achieved when organisations come together with a shared commitment to community, dignity and belonging. We're proud to work alongside them.







Our team

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Our trustee board of all refugees

Esmat Keshavarz

Esmat brings 29 years of experience in education, having served as a teacher, principal, and high school education counsellor in Iran. At Plateful Café, she shares not only her deep educational expertise but also her passion for arts and crafts, enriching our community with creativity.

Maysoon Mohammed

Maysoon is the proud founder of Nubian Delights, a vibrant bakery business offering cakes, mini-cakes, cupcakes, and biscuits with a unique Sudanese twist. Backed by a degree in Business Management, she combines her entrepreneurial skills with a passion for baking to bring bold flavours and beautifully crafted treats to the community.

Lateef Yunusa (Co-treasurer)

Lateef has 9 years' experience in Finance and Management Accounting in Nigeria and the United Kingdom and is a member of the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (ICMA) and the Chartered Institute of Bankers of Nigeria (CIBN). Lateef has an MSc in Finance from Aston University, Birmingham and Olabisi Onabanjo University, Nigeria, in 2023 and 2018, respectively.

Thomas Varghese

Thomas is a part-qualified accountant with over 15 years experience in financial services and manufacturing.

Andy Rowland

Andy brings extensive leadership experience and a strong track record in both strategic and operational management. With a deep commitment to social impact, he has led enterprises through times of growth and crisis, always with a focus on community engagement. His dedication to an empowerment ethos makes him a valued member at Plateful Café.

Iolanda Chirico (Founder)

Iolanda has over 30 years of experience in the charity sector, dedicated to supporting refugees and creating pathways to inclusion. She is the founder of three impactful initiatives - Action for Refugees in Lewisham, Refugee Café, and Plateful Café - all rooted in her unwavering commitment to supporting refugees. Through her leadership, countless refugees have found opportunities, support, and a sense of belonging.



Our team

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Our creators

At Plateful Café, we're proud to support not only refugee chefs but also talented artists from displaced communities. Many of the artworks we showcase and sell are deeply personal expressions and portray stories of loss, resilience, identity, and hope. For the artists, creating this work can be an emotional journey, often rooted in difficult experiences and memories.

Supporting these artists is about providing a platform for creativity as a form of healing and empowerment.

Javad Karimi

I'm 24 years old and was born in Afghanistan, but when I was young my family took us from our home to seek refuge in Iran.

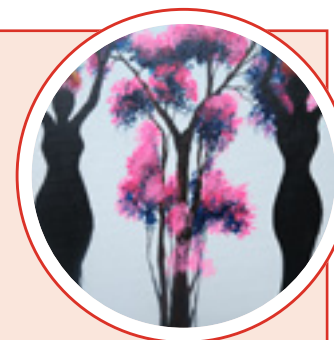
My family's living conditions were very difficult in Iran because we were living there as refugees. Therefore, we were not supported like the local people. Many resources were not available to us and I was prohibited from studying.

I've loved painting since I was a child and for as long as I can remember I've always painted. I've always dreamed of being an artist, but also an art professor so I can give many people the education and opportunities I never had growing up. I took the idea of this painting from the bottom of my heart.



Nazgol Golmuradi

I am a 20 year old artist from Iran. I came to Greece when I was 17 with my father, but he was deported back to Iran not long after we arrived. I endured many hardships in Greece, both in the refugee camps and in Athens, alone without my father. Until I started painting again.



I have been interested in painting since I was a child. As long as I can remember, I always painted and even though I did not have the support from my family, for a while I even took classes and learned basic techniques. Where I am from, women do not get to choose their paths, which is one of the reasons why we came to Europe – my family wanted me to have freedoms.

I always try to express my feelings when I paint, or create more conceptual pieces about my own life or the lives of others. It is very important to me that my painting be based on reality. However, sometimes I also create fantasy paintings, which allow me to live in my imagination, and find an escape from reality sometimes. In Greece, we immigrants are deprived of our rights, and life can be hell sometimes. So, in fact, the only thing that matters to me now is to live a quiet and trouble-free life in a corner of the world. It doesn't matter to me which country I go to, the only thing that matters to me is peace. I seek peace.

My wish for every artist is to have the opportunity to express their talents and leave a positive legacy for others in the future. May your souls be brightened with our talent.



Our team

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Our volunteers

Without volunteers, Plateful Café wouldn't exist. Every meal we serve, every event we run, and every opportunity we create has volunteers involved at every step of the process. They all bring their skills and time, making a huge difference!

Finance	Enxhi, Adeleke, Geri, Thomas and Lateef
Events	Brenna, Gabby, Isabel, Jo, Lydia, Polly, Sasha, Shaefali and Tamara
Website	Christian and Cui
Graphic Designers	Steve, Adela, Mustafa, Sarim and Po
Fundraising	Chloe, Vivian, Shaefali, Steven, Preeti and Jomo
Admin	Aref
Volunteer Coordinators	Katryn, Sara and Eleanor
Filmmaker	Lawrence
Social Media	Shubham, Sara, Vicky, Amal and Alex

Corporates	Asrar and Lucy
Ad Grants	Hamza and Mahfuzul
Newsletter	Lydia and India
English Conversation at Training	Dorota and Julia
Drivers	Julia, Gabriele and Jo

We also continue to have asylum seekers volunteering as kitchen assistants and at events. Throughout the year we welcomed: Taher, Abdul, Tin, Khin, Kevin, Michael, Mahful, Ahmadzia and many more.

Iolanda Chirico (Founder) continues to volunteer full-time over 7 days per week and for a minimum of 40 hours per week.

Gabriele Chirico and India Rhoden, continue to play an essential role in the running of the activities, writing up funding applications, researching, creating decks, admin, helping run events and so much more including the delivery of food to so many locations. Truly they are an essential, crucial part of the team and without them most of the catering could not be delivered. They donate at least 10 hours per week! A truly remarkable contribution!



Our team

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A word from our volunteer - Christian

I joined Plateful Café as a volunteer in December 2025.

I was inspired by the amazing work that Plateful Café does in bringing communities together and bridging cultural divides. With increasingly negative attitudes towards migrants and refugees being spread online and across the media, the work that Plateful Café does is more important than ever – and I'm excited to even be just one small part of it.

My background is in web and design and it's been a great experience working with Iolanda and the other web volunteers to find the best ways of communicating the work that Plateful Café does. I've enjoyed the opportunity to flex my skills and to work with great, enthusiastic people.



A word from our volunteer - Shaefali

I've been a volunteer with Plateful since September 2025.

It's been such a wonderful time working with Iolanda, the other volunteers and of course the brilliant chefs! I started off volunteering at the community events and dinners, but since my professional background is in fundraising, I also decided to lend a hand with this aspect, and have been supporting with grants research, writing and admin since November.

There are so many incredible things about volunteering at Plateful Café. Above all, getting to play a small part in the organisation's mission is the most fulfilling – Plateful is doing amazing work to support refugees and asylum seekers access the upskilling and employment opportunities they need, as well as encouraging a sense of understanding, empathy and integration within the local community. On top of that, the chefs are so talented and make absolutely delicious food.

From a personal point of view, volunteering with Plateful has also helped develop my fundraising skills even further, giving me more exposure to all sorts of trust/foundation application processes – this helped hugely to keep me in touch with fundraising during my recent career break and transition between jobs.





From refugee to Chef Trainer: Ismail's journey

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When Ismail Almatheab joined Plateful Café in April 2026 as our first full-time Chef Trainer, it marked far more than the appointment of a new member of staff.



It represented the very outcome our organisation exists to achieve – creating opportunities for refugees to rebuild their lives, realise their potential and, in turn, inspire others.

Growing up in Syria, Ismail discovered his love of food while working in his family's bakery as a teenager. Producing traditional Syrian breads, pastries and sweets, he learned that food is about much more than nourishment. It brings people together, preserves culture and creates a sense of belonging.

Alongside his work in the bakery, Ismail studied English Literature at Damascus University while gaining valuable experience in professional hotels and restaurants across Syria. His future appeared promising.

Everything changed in 2011 with the outbreak of war.

Forced to flee his home, Ismail left Syria for Turkey in 2014 before arriving in the United Kingdom in March 2015, carrying little more than his skills, determination and hope for a safer future.

"At Plateful Café I found hope, encouragement and a sincere and honest willingness to help refugees resettle and rebuild their lives."

Like many refugees, rebuilding his life was far from straightforward.

Learning a new language, navigating unfamiliar systems and searching for employment without UK experience or references presented significant challenges. Despite years of professional hospitality experience, opportunities were limited, and finding stable work often felt impossible.

Undeterred, Ismail accepted whatever work he could find, often carrying out physically demanding kitchen tasks while continuing to improve his English and searching for opportunities to develop his career. His determination took him from Stoke-on-Trent to Birmingham, then Cambridge, before finally settling in London.

Over the following years he built an impressive career across a range of professional kitchens, continually developing his skills and experience. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when much of the hospitality industry came to a standstill, he remained committed to using food to support communities, working with refugee organisations to produce baked goods for those in need.

Recognising the importance of lifelong learning, Ismail invested in his professional development by completing Level 2 and Level 3 Diplomas in Culinary Skills at Lewisham College before undertaking an Advanced Diploma in Artisan Baking at the renowned School of Artisan Food.

His journey demonstrates remarkable resilience, perseverance and an unwavering commitment to excellence.



From refugee to Chef Trainer: Ismail's journey

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Today, Ismail brings that wealth of experience to Plateful Café.

As our Chef Trainer, he leads our eight-week Hospitality Training Programme, equipping refugees and people seeking asylum with the practical skills, confidence and industry knowledge needed to begin careers in hospitality. Learners receive hands-on training in professional cookery, food safety, café service, teamwork and workplace expectations while benefiting from the encouragement of someone who truly understands the challenges they face.

For Ismail, teaching extends well beyond cooking.

Having experienced displacement, uncertainty and the barriers to employment first-hand, he understands the importance of creating an environment where people feel welcomed, valued and capable of succeeding. His lived experience enables him to inspire learners with authenticity and hope, demonstrating that rebuilding a career is possible.

Looking ahead, Ismail aims to strengthen Plateful Café's training programme by expanding opportunities for learners, introducing artisan baking techniques, building partnerships with local employers and supporting more refugees into employment, further education and volunteering.

His story is a powerful reminder that refugees bring with them extraordinary talent, determination and experience. With the right support and opportunities, they not only rebuild their own lives but also strengthen the communities around them.

For Plateful Café, Ismail's appointment represents more than a new role. It reflects our belief that those who have overcome the greatest barriers are often best placed to guide others on the same journey. His story embodies our mission: transforming potential into opportunity through food, training and community.

Ismail's journey at a glance







Our chefs

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Faten Farouk

Working with you helped me a lot. I feel very comfortable and happy working with you.

Recently I have been cooking at various events in different locations across London. Each time I would arrive at a new venue for the first time and prepare dishes for groups ranging from about twenty to forty people or even more. This presented a unique challenge adapting to an unfamiliar kitchen, mastering its equipment and ensuring that everything was ready on time.

Although it was stressful at first I was able to rise to the occasion and deliver delicious dishes that delighted the guests. The most rewarding part was seeing their positive reactions and hearing their appreciation which made all the effort worthwhile.

These experiences not only enhanced my adaptability but also deepened my connection with people from diverse backgrounds and cultures. Overall It has been a rewarding journey that has made me more flexible, more capable and even more passionate about what I do.

I have become more prepared to work in any environment and learned how to collaborate effectively with new team members. I have also learned the importance of punctuality and timely preparation which are crucial in this field.

Ultimately I have discovered how to present and serve dishes in the best possible way, bringing joy not only to the guests but also to myself when I see their positive reactions and feedback.



Maysoon Mohammed, Nubian Delights

Building Nubian Delights has been an exciting journey, and I am incredibly grateful for the support and training I received from Plateful Café.

Plateful Café offered me a cake decorating course, cooking classes, cooking with children sessions, and hospitality training, all of which helped me develop valuable skills for my baking business.

The cake decorating course improved my decorating techniques, while the cooking classes inspired new ideas and creativity. The cooking with children sessions strengthened my confidence in teaching, and the hospitality training gave me valuable skills in customer service, professionalism, and food hygiene.

Thanks to these opportunities, Nubian Delights has continued to grow. I am now taking regular orders for cakes, cupcakes, and cookies for birthdays, weddings, baby showers, and other special occasions. I have also secured a monthly cupcake decorating workshop with Hibiscus Studio, allowing me to share my passion for baking with the local community.

I am truly thankful to Plateful Café for believing in me and helping me build the confidence and skills to turn my passion into a growing business.







A new home: Our partnership with Blackfriars Settlement

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One of the most significant milestones for Plateful Café during 2025/26 was finding a permanent home at Blackfriars Settlement. After many months searching for a suitable base from which to grow our work, we were delighted to begin this exciting partnership in January 2026.

This move represents far more than a change of location. It has created new opportunities to expand our training programme, strengthen community connections and build a sustainable social enterprise that empowers refugees through food, employment and belonging.

From the outset, our partnership has been founded on a shared belief that food has the power to bring people together, build confidence and transform lives. Blackfriars Settlement has a long history of supporting local communities through wellbeing, learning and inclusion, while Plateful Café brings lived experience, culinary expertise and a commitment to creating opportunities for refugees through hospitality. Together, our complementary strengths enable us to achieve far more than either organisation could alone.

Blackfriars Settlement has already welcomed more than 200 refugees through its programmes, creating a trusted environment where people feel safe, valued and able to rebuild their lives. Their commitment to dignity, inclusion and cultural celebration closely reflects Plateful Café's own values and mission.





A new home: Our partnership with Blackfriars Settlement

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The timing of our partnership could not have been better. During 2025/26, Blackfriars Settlement invested in refurbishing its community kitchen and secured seed funding to develop hospitality training. At the same time, Plateful Café secured its first funding to recruit a Community Food Trainer, enabling us to deliver structured training and employment support for refugees and people seeking sanctuary.

Recognising our shared vision, we chose to pool our resources, skills and networks to create a vibrant community food hub where learning, enterprise and community engagement come together. Rather than simply providing hospitality training, we are creating real pathways into employment through practical experience, mentoring and opportunities to serve the local community.

Already, our partnership has delivered a number of successful pilot projects, including the Warm Hub Soup Programme, the Community Southwark Christmas Dinner and a corporate volunteer Christmas event. These initiatives demonstrated the potential of the partnership while creating welcoming spaces where people from different cultures could meet, share meals and build lasting relationships.

Looking ahead, we will continue developing opportunities that combine learning with real-world experience. Plans include expanding accredited hospitality training, increasing community catering opportunities, serving breakfasts and lunches on selected days, and launching regular community supper clubs that celebrate the diverse cultures and cuisines represented within our community.

Above all, this partnership is about creating a place where everyone has a seat at the table. It is a space where refugees can develop skills, gain confidence, build friendships and take meaningful steps towards employment, while local residents come together to celebrate the richness that diversity brings to our communities.

Warm Hub: More than soup

Between January and April 2026, we delivered thirteen weeks of homemade soups as part of the Blackfriars Settlement Warm Hub programme, funded by Southwark Council.

Each week our kitchen came alive with the aromas and flavours of cuisines from around the world. From comforting potato and leek soup to vibrant lentil and roasted butternut squash, every meal reflected the cultures, skills and generosity of the refugee chefs preparing it.

The Warm Hub became much more than a place to enjoy a hot meal. It offered warmth, companionship and a welcoming environment where local residents could connect, reduce social isolation and build new friendships. Every bowl served represented an opportunity for conversation, understanding and community.

Over thirteen weeks we witnessed first-hand how sharing food creates belonging. What began as a simple soup service became a powerful example of how hospitality can strengthen communities and bring people together across cultures and generations.



A new home: Our partnership with Blackfriars Settlement

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What we've achieved together

- **We** established Plateful Café's first permanent operational home
- **We** delivered thirteen weeks of the Warm Hub Soup Programme
- **We** hosted the Community Southwark Christmas Dinner
- **We** delivered a successful corporate volunteer Christmas event
- **We** recruited our first Community Food Trainer
- **We** created new opportunities for refugees to gain practical hospitality experience
- **We** began developing a sustainable community café, catering service and hospitality training programme
- **We** laid the foundations for regular community breakfasts, lunches and supper clubs

What our partners say

"Everyone had such a lovely time. Seriously, the best Christmas party ever. The food was exceptional, the room looked beautiful and the creativity worked perfectly. We've shared Plateful Cafe with our networks and will definitely continue spreading the word about how brilliant both organisations are. Thank you for giving us such a special evening."

Anood Al-Samerai – Chief Executive, Community Southwark

"The best food ever. We had a lovely time."

HSBC Corporate Volunteers





A new home: Our partnership with Blackfriars Settlement

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HSBC corporate volunteers

As we look ahead, we are excited to continue growing this partnership. Together with Blackfriars Settlement, we are creating far more than a kitchen or café. We are building a welcoming community where refugees can rebuild their futures, local residents can connect across cultures, and food continues to inspire opportunity, hope and belonging.



Secured our first
permanent home



13
weeks of warm
hub



Corporate volunteering
launched



Community Southwark

**Xmas
Dinner**



Laid the foundations
for regular community
breakfasts, lunches and
supper clubs



Began developing a
sustainable community café,
catering service and hospitality
training programme

200+

refugees engaged at
Blackfriars Settlement



First

paid Community Food Trainer







Our next chapter: Building for the future

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We enter the next stage of Plateful Café's development with both ambition and a clear understanding of what is needed to make our growth sustainable.

Our immediate priorities are to secure a permanent commercial kitchen that gives us the flexibility to expand our catering activity, and to strengthen the organisation's leadership capacity. While we remain largely volunteer-led, the demands of a growing charity can no longer be sustained through voluntary leadership alone.

For this reason, the Trustees have made the strategic decision to allocate **£15,000 of our reserves towards the appointment of an Executive Director**, demonstrating our commitment to investing our own resources in the charity's future. The full annual cost of the post is **£45,000**, and we are therefore seeking a further **£30,000** from funders and supporters to enable us to make this crucial appointment.

An Executive Director would provide the leadership capacity we now need to develop our traded income, strengthen fundraising and partnerships, support staff and volunteers, and turn the opportunities now coming to Plateful Café into sustainable growth.





Our next chapter: Building for the future

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At the same time, our search for a permanent commercial kitchen continues. Securing the right kitchen would allow us to accept more external catering work, particularly at weekends, expand our menus and products, and create more paid opportunities for refugees who have completed our training.

These are significant challenges, but they are also signs of how far Plateful Café has come. After almost two years without a suitable operational base, our move to Blackfriars Settlement has enabled us to restart training, strengthen our presence in central London and build new relationships with supporters, partners and customers.

We now have an opportunity to build on that progress. With investment in leadership and the right permanent kitchen, Plateful Café can move from operating with limited capacity to becoming a stronger and more sustainable refugee-led hospitality charity and social enterprise – creating training, employment and opportunities for many more refugees in the years ahead.





A call for support

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We have already demonstrated what can be achieved with very limited resources.

Imagine what we could achieve with the resources to grow.

Can you help us build the next chapter?



Fund an Executive Director?



Support a permanent kitchen?



Commission catering?



Provide strategic/business expertise?





A heartfelt thank you to all our funders.

Thanks to the ongoing support of our funders, we can empower refugees,
celebrate diverse cultures, and strengthen our community.



The Maingot
Charitable Trust



platefulcafe.co.uk

Registered charity number: 1202710