

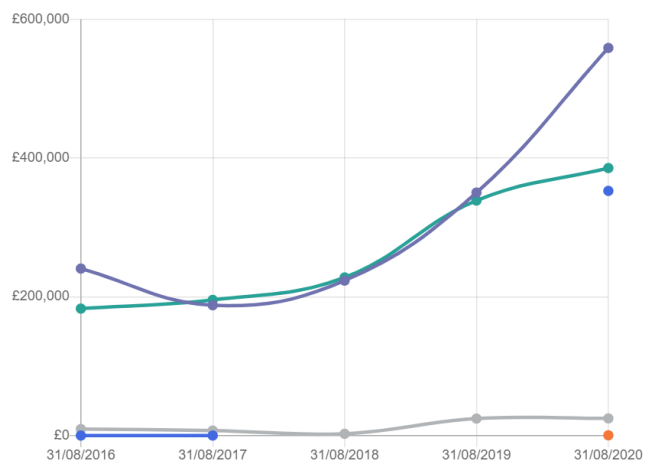


Strategic Plan 2021- 2026

Executive summary

CARAS grew a great deal during the course of its previous 2018-2021 strategy. We are very proud of our achievements, and especially that we adapted so swiftly and effectively to the covid-19 pandemic. Our key successes include:

- creating a holistic offer which responds to the pillars of wellbeing, and seeing significant impacts of this
- expanding the quality of our offer and gaining accreditation eg London Youth Gold Award; Festival of Learning Presidents Award
- doubling the hours of provision on offer
- deepening the quality of our offer, through strategic leadership, of all programme areas
- working in depth with our previously identified 'harder to reach' groups
- increasing the mental health knowledge of all staff, ensuring that beneficiaries are swiftly supported into accessing the specialist care they need
- deepening the role of beneficiaries in the leadership and development of CARAS
- increasing our funding by nearly threefold
- more than doubling our staff team



Who we are.

CARAS was founded in 2008 to work in support of people seeking asylum and people of refugee background. We are based in Tooting, Wandsworth with most of our activities taking place there. We support people from across South London. We are able to support anyone who is in the asylum system, anyone who has been granted refugee status, people who are joining their family through family reunion rules, and people who have a refused asylum claim or are Appeal Rights Exhausted.

The CARAS Community includes group members who are refugees and asylum seekers; volunteers; trustees; staff; supporters and funders. All of our work is co-created with group members and is trauma informed, ensuring that we are always responsive to the needs, interests and aspirations of refugees and people seeking asylum.

Our staff team, board of trustees and volunteers are all highly skilled and bring a wide range of expertise to our work. We are united in our commitment to work together for a society in which every single person is valued fully and equally.

What we believe.

CARAS is a values-led organisation. Our values are:

Kindness CARAS will nurture all who are part of our community, helping everyone develop their skills, talents and interests.

Justice CARAS will strive for social justice following a rights-based approach and challenging instances when rights are not upheld in wider society.

Empowerment CARAS works alongside people, recognising and respecting their skills and strengths and striving together for better outcomes.

'With' not 'for' CARAS will put the voices, opinions, experiences and needs of its beneficiaries at the heart of all that we do.

Our plan for the years ahead will embed these values in all that we do.

Mission

To work together with young people, families and adults of refugee background to provide practical, educational and social help. We create supportive relationships, networks and well-informed services that enable people to access what they need in order to increase their wellbeing and safety.

Vision

People who have sought refuge in the UK are welcomed, valued and supported within a community in which they can flourish.

How we work.

CARAS recognises the transformative power of building supportive relationships and has embedded clear methods of relational working in all of our practice. We believe that creating an environment in which people are valued, respected and encouraged to participate at whatever level they are able is the basis of a strong community. The CARAS community is broad, consisting of staff and trustees, volunteers, funders and supporters, and placing the people who use our services, our Group Members, at the heart of all that we do.

CARAS offers a range of support that allows people the time they need to settle and build friendships which in turn facilitates a growth in confidence, contribution of ideas, sharing of worries and asking for support when necessary. We also offer one-to-one intensive support for people in times of crisis or transition, during which we will work together to build confidence and skills.

It is the strength of these supportive relationships which allows us to work intensively and successfully with so many people who are otherwise isolated. We recognise that friends, family, teachers, social workers, groups and other significant, stable relationships all have a positive contribution to make in working with someone through an identified difficulty. We operate within a culture of belief and trust, aiming to support people to achieve their goals.

Throughout the covid-19 crisis, all of our work was hosted online. We will be running a blend of online groups and face-to-face provision in order to remain resilient to any further crises and to offer sustainable support to our group members.

We are committed to relational work, no matter how we are delivering our work. We offer support to people from the moment they arrive in London until the point at which they are ready to move on to the next stage in their life.

We pride ourselves on always striving to work alongside people, adopting a strengths-based approach. Strengths based approaches value the capacity, skills, knowledge, connections and potential in individuals and communities. Strength based approaches understand challenges faced by individuals, and instead of spinning them into problems focuses on identifying the strengths and capacities of those supported to resolve problems and deliver their own solutions. However, we also recognised that some solutions are out of the hands of individuals: the UK operates an extremely hostile environment, actively discouraging the arrival of asylum seekers and currently introducing new laws that will further exclude people in need of sanctuary and support. We also recognise that structural racism and other forms of prejudice have strong and long-lasting impacts within our society as a whole, excluding people from mainstream society by maintaining barriers for people of colour, people experiencing poverty, people living with disabilities, those experiencing mental ill health, and LGBTQ+ people.

We will therefore be actively adopting two further key methods in our work for the years ahead. These are listed above as 'Generous Collaboration' and 'Inclusion'.

We will always share our learning and expertise with other organisations who could benefit from it, recognising that we too are learning from these experiences. We believe that everyone's work is enriched from this method, and that as a consequence all of CARAS' community will benefit from a better informed, more open society around them, whilst staff will have access to a wide range of expertise offered in a spirit of friendship from across the sector.

Our work towards greater inclusion will take place across the whole organisation. Our aim is to be an organisation that pro-actively tackles inequality and welcomes everyone. However, we know that we have work to do, starting with an internal review of our own recruitment, how we seek out and promote diversity in our staff team, leadership and governance.

The covid-19 crisis and post-covid recovery

We closed our doors on the 18th of March 2020 as the pandemic became a crisis. On 23rd March 2020, the UK entered the first of a series of local and national lockdowns which prioritised public health. The CARAS team of staff and volunteers pivoted very quickly into delivering high quality services in a world where we were unable to meet face to face. All of CARAS' services moved online and coupled with extensive support to help people become confident with using digital technology, we have achieved a remarkable feat of maintaining a thriving community and welcoming new people into it.

Our core offer consists of access to ESOL classes (English for Speakers of Other Languages) and other learning, social groups, one-to-one advice and support, and an evolving offer of activities to promote wellbeing which include sports, leisure, creative arts, and time together outside. All of these ran online to some extent, and many will have the possibility of remaining as digital provision.

Since the summer of 2020, we were able to start some small groups who meet outdoors and from May 2021 we have been able to trial the return of small groups to indoor settings.

We were very fortunate in our fundraising efforts during the crisis, benefitting from both the flexibility given by our existing grant-makers, and from additional emergency funds that were released to offer short-term financial support. At the same time, the needs within our community grew as other support dropped away- less contact with schools, college and social care in addition to significant changes to how newly arrived asylum seekers were accommodated put pressure on the sector as a whole. We are proud to have stepped up to meet these challenges, and hope that there are lessons taken forward.

As we move beyond the covid-19 pandemic, we need time to consolidate and stabilise. Policies continue to change, both in regard to covid and to immigration and asylum in the UK. There is significant change afoot, in the form of the New Plan for Immigration, much of it extremely hostile to refugees and people seeking asylum.

In light of this, we will be aiming to maintain our current provision for the first 18 months with no plans for significant growth. Our ambition is that we will emerge from this period with the resources we need to pursue new and exciting lines of work, and our growth and evolution can continue from 2023.

Strategy creation process.

This strategy is the result of consultations with a wide range of stakeholders, with input sought from October 2020 to February 2021. Feedback was given by group members about their experiences with CARAS, the things they needed support with, and the other places they went to help with these. **82 beneficiaries** gave their views in discussion groups that were hosted within the regular timetable of activities. **16 volunteers** responded to a questionnaire that explored how they felt about their roles and the support they received from CARAS, what group members told them they needed, and what else could be offered to improve the quality of people's volunteer experiences. All **16** staff have had input. Further insight has come from an external evaluation that was researched and written in the same timeframe and includes quantitative and qualitative evidence of CARAS' impact, as well as a range of feedback from partner organisations and referral partners.

Assumptions.

The assumptions that underpin this strategy are:

- 1. CARAS needs to stabilise in order to achieve sustainability.** There are two planned roles that have not yet been created, offering project support and boosting the capacity of our Adult Inclusion team. Following this, CARAS will not be pursuing further growth in the staff team. Feedback from staff included a desire to deliver current work well, with no significant changes. Following rapid growth from 2020-21, this is essential to our success. Changes in service delivery will be accommodated within existing staff teams.
- 2. CARAS will operate from one base.** Group members felt that being able to access support in their neighbourhood would be very helpful to them (about 80% would like this); however, in recognition of the funding challenges we are likely to encounter in the years following covid-recovery, staff have spoken out strongly against this. They referenced the importance of ensuring one strong offer, rather than diluting services which would be the necessary impact. They also pointed to the precarity that could come with the additional costs, and the

challenges of funding more venues. Instead, we will develop strong links in under-resourced localities, aiming to be able to signpost people into good services where they live.

3. **CARAS needs more and better space.** We are hindered in our ability to offer a varied face to face programme by the venues currently available to us; we also do not have space that is accessible to people with disabilities. Securing larger scale, more versatile permanent space is a priority.
4. **CARAS holds valuable expertise which should be shared as widely as possible.** Several staff shared their desire to embed this work within their current practice, and it came across very strongly from partner organisations commenting in our independent evaluation.
5. **CARAS' group members and volunteers are very happy with the experiences they have with us.** No significant problems were raised, and no major gaps in our offer of services. People consistently spoke of their sense of friendship, family, community and belonging that characterises time with CARAS.
6. **There is strength in partnership.** CARAS does not need to offer every possible service that people need and would be doing group members a disservice in trying to do this. CARAS will strive to work closely with expert partners to deliver specialist areas of work.
7. **There are lessons and opportunities that can be taken from our year of working remotely throughout the covid-19 pandemic.** We will be continuing an online offer in the areas that have worked best- notably ESOL and study groups. We will also prioritise digital skills and access.
8. **Demographics will change during the period of this strategy.** Accommodation for asylum seekers throughout the pandemic led to a far higher concentration of newly arrived asylum seekers accommodated in London. A change of policy will mean that most of this group are dispersed throughout the UK by June 2021. Our offer for adults will need to adjust in line with numbers and needs.
9. **Holistic offer will remain.** CARAS' approach of focusing on several interlinked areas of support is highly valued. We will continue to offer a range of learning opportunities, social groups, case work support, volunteering and leadership, and activities which support physical and mental health.
10. **The hostile environment remains.** The UK government has held an extremely hostile position towards asylum seekers, beginning in 2012 and with no end in sight. The new Nationality and Borders Bill and the New Plan for Immigration will entrench deeply damaging and dangerous practices that will create ever greater difficulties for people seeking asylum. We will need to adapt our offer to respond, and will play an active role in campaigns and coalitions to stand against these changes.

Strategic plan for September 2021- August 2026

Holistic offer

We will maintain our **core holistic offer** of **ESOL and learning provision; casework; social groups;** and routes to **volunteering and leadership**. We have achieved excellence in each of these areas and know that these core activities continue to be what group members need and want- on entry to CARAS, people invariably say that what they need is English classes, friends, advice and help, and activities which give them purpose. We know that our core holistic offer satisfies those needs, and that these are essential building blocks for people to create a strong foundation from which they can build healthy, happy, fulfilling lives.

We also know that choice, flexibility and the ability to adapt services are an important feature of how we work. Our holistic offer currently includes a wide range of activities within these core groups: creative arts, sports and physical activity, being outdoors, exploring the local area and London, and stepping into leadership experiences and roles are all built into our current offer. Many of these activities are run in partnership with expert providers; this approach helps both partners enrich their work, learning from each other and ensuring maximum benefit to all who take part.

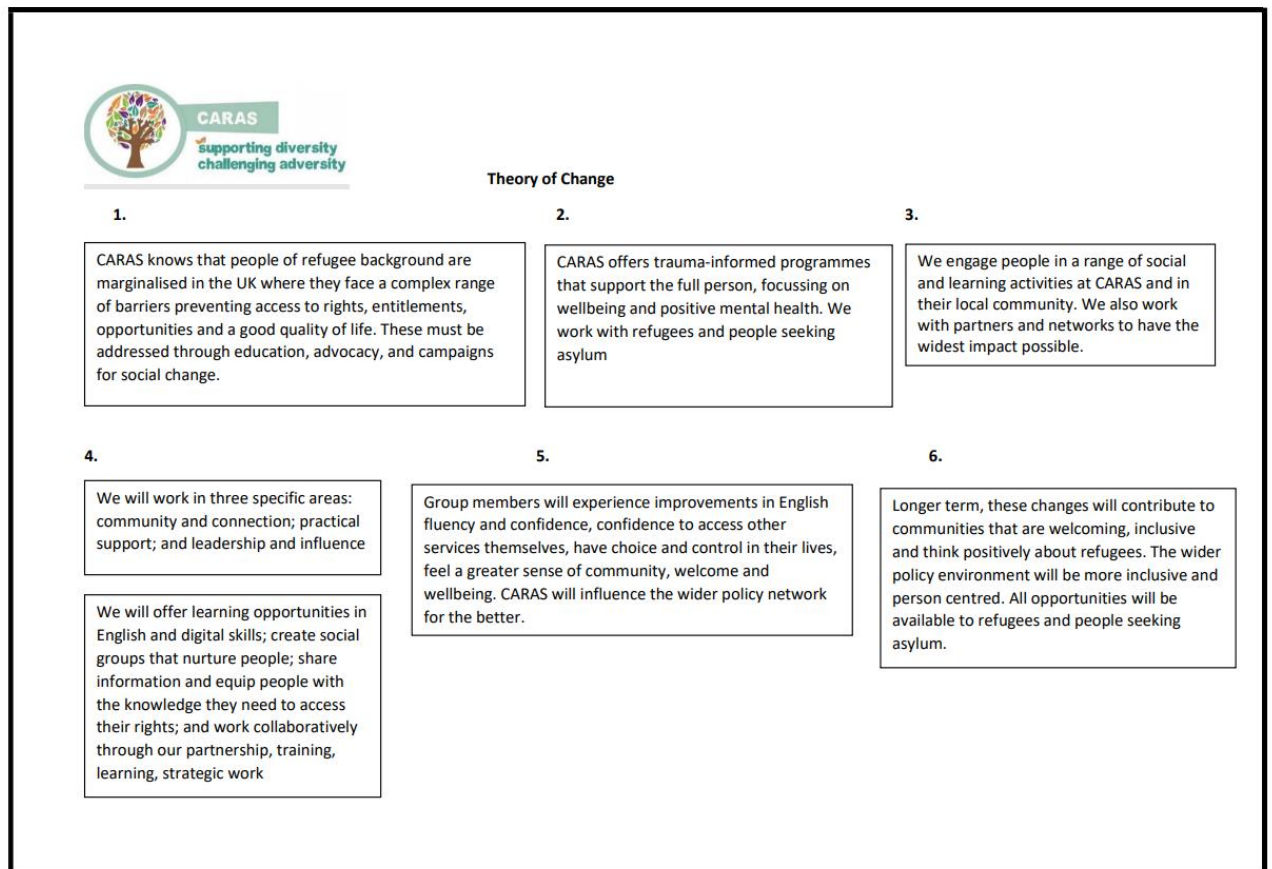
New areas

Following our consultation for this strategy, we also learned that there are new areas to explore that will enrich this core offer. We will embed these themes and activities into our core offer:

- a. **Employability and volunteering.** Pathways through CARAS and into the next stages of someone's life are valued. There is currently a borough wide initiative in Wandsworth on employability, and the GLA is considering making employment a covid-recovery priority. CARAS will develop new work in employability, including volunteering pathways for those who as yet do not have the right to work.
- b. **Campaigns and leadership.** Making the experiences and voices of group members the central point of all campaigns work and external communications. We will further develop opportunities for leadership.
- c. **Generous collaboration.** Sharing of expertise/ honing of CARAS models is a way to influence wider change and there is appetite for this from partners/ referrers. We will create sharable models of all CARAS' work, making these publicly available and achieving wide reaching positive outcomes for people regardless of their location.
- d. **Digital.** Digital skills and digital access are essential to a full life in the UK. We will develop digital skills classes for all of our group members and will campaign for digital access to become a right for all.
- e. **Education.** Education is the priority of our group members. We will bridge the significant gaps that exist at key times in people's lives, most notably for young people who may wait up to 8 months to be offered formal education, and in supporting adults to achieve a level of English that allows them to enrol in mainstream classes.
- f. **Inclusion.** We need to make pro-active plans re greater/ better inclusion, especially for LGBTQ+ individuals and people with disabilities. This will allow safe access to a group of people who are currently unsupported in our work. Additionally, this will strengthen our staff team and create a better and more equal environment for all. We will also strive for greater diversity and representation within our staff team and board of trustees, developing leadership pathways for people of RAS background.

Monitoring and Evaluation

CARAS has developed a Theory of Change that helps to guide our work.



Our monitoring helps us to demonstrate that we are achieving this change.

In particular, we will collect:

-attendance and demographic data

-self-reported outcomes, with a baseline taken on entry to CARAS and repeated at approximately quarterly intervals. We aim to capture the impact of early, intense intervention that takes place within the first three months, and the medium term and longer term impacts experienced by those who remain with CARAS for between a year and 5 years+.

-ESOL progress as measured by standard levels

-Casework outcomes

-Impact of campaigns and networks

Enablers.

To deliver excellent work we need an organisation that has adequate resources, stable funding, strong governance, and an exceptional staff team who have the support they need to drive our work forwards. We will therefore maintain our commitment to having strong support in place for the hidden functions of an organisation. The enablers we are particularly focusing on are:

- Long term funding from diverse sources
- Financial expertise
- Strong leadership, governance and compliance
- Investing in volunteers
- More appropriate space to deliver services from- larger, more flexible, and ground floor accessible
- A commitment to embed anti-racist practice in all of our work, including staffing, leadership and governance
- Accreditation of the organisation and independent evaluation