

ROXANA TODERASCU



How did the RISE project come about and how did you get involved?

RISE was originally put forward by Camille Rouse, an immigration solicitor at the law centre, during the 2022/23 academic year. Back then, it was called the *Community Rights Project* and had first started at QMUL, recruiting law students from the university.

I first got involved in my second year of law school at QMUL, when I realised there weren't many opportunities to gain *real* practical legal experience. When I came across the project, it immediately caught my attention because not only did it offer training, but it also meant working directly with the law centre and actually getting out there to help people in the community. At the time, I was already very involved in community volunteering, so I signed up straight away.

Fast forward two years, and I'm now doing my Master's in Human Rights Law and co-leading the project. RISE has evolved so much in that time, and it's been amazing to share my passion for community work and the practical side of law with other students and members of the wider community.

What sort of work do you do on the project?

As co-leader, I work closely with the law centre and my fellow co-leader, Pyrah, to keep RISE running smoothly. This includes creating volunteer and community handbooks that give clear, accessible overviews of the key areas of law the law centre specialises in - welfare benefits, immigration, housing, employment. We also offer support and information in cases of domestic violence. Because the law changes often, we make sure to consult with the legal professionals at the centre to keep everything accurate and up-to-date.

I'm also involved in recruiting and training new volunteers, as well as building partnerships with local organisations. We work with groups like St Hilda's and the Blossom Project to run regular weekly sessions, whether that's one-to-one form-filling support or general advice, and also one-off workshops and presentations.

Although the law centre supervises and trains us, day-to-day RISE is really a community-led project. Our aim is to bridge the gap between legal services and the people who need them most by helping create an informed community; one that knows its legal rights, feels confident enforcing them, and trusts that law centres can provide the support needed to exercise those rights.

Coming from a migrant, working-class background myself, I know how intimidating the legal system can seem, and I've learned through this project that it doesn't have to be that way.

What do you think has been RISE's most important achievement so far?

Honestly, the fact that we've built such a committed team of volunteers who can run weekly sessions and that we've earned the trust of the local community so quickly. People now come to us not just for one-off help, but because they know we'll listen, support them, and connect them with the law centre when needed. That trust is priceless to us.

Why is the RISE project important for Tower Hamlets?

While RISE is rooted in Tower Hamlets, I think projects like this are important *everywhere*. The law is complex (even I don't fully get it sometimes) and with constant changes, especially post-Brexit, it's vital that people know their rights, what options they have, and where to turn for help.

One of the best things I've seen is how our drop-in sessions have become spaces where community members support one another and spread the word about RISE. In a time when that sense of community can feel lost, we're helping to bring it back by showing people they're not alone when facing difficult situations.

It's also an incredible opportunity for volunteers. They receive real training and then use it in a practical, often unpredictable setting where legal issues overlap - just like in real life. We encourage community members who have previously accessed our services to join us as volunteers as well. Their support is incredibly meaningful.

Ultimately, RISE is a win-win: the more informed a community is, the fewer problems escalate down the line, and the more harm is prevented. I'd love to see it expand beyond Tower Hamlets one day.

How can people support RISE?

We're always looking for committed volunteers from all walks of life, so no legal background is required. Lived experience is just as valuable as professional experience when it comes to supporting someone through a tough time.

We also encourage community members to spread the word and direct anyone who might need legal help to the law centre. The more people know they have somewhere to turn, the more we can help. Likewise, we'd love to hear from organisations who think their service users could benefit from RISE. Partnerships like these are a big part of how we reach the people who need us most.

And for anyone who'd like to contribute financially, donations to the law centre are appreciated during the annual London Legal Walk, where our staff and volunteers walk 10km to raise vital funds for legal aid.

PYREH SYEDA RAHMAN



How did the RISE project come about and how did you get involved?

The project began as the *Community Rights Project* at Queen Mary University, led by a trainee solicitor from the THLC. As a first-year Law student at the time, I eager for hands-on experience and determined to use law to help vulnerable people, I signed up straight away. After a year, when the project needed new leadership, Roxana and I stepped forward. We rebranded it as the *RISE Project*, broadening its focus to include domestic violence and opening volunteer recruitment to *anyone* passionate about social justice - not just QM students. This shift allowed us to reach deeper into the community and create a more inclusive, powerful platform for change.

What sort of work do you do on the project?

As co-lead, I recruit and train volunteers, build partnerships with organisations that can benefit from our support, and coordinate outreach efforts. Most importantly, we assist vulnerable individuals in navigating the practical steps before they can access legal advice. This might mean setting up email accounts so clients can apply for Universal Credit, sending messages in their UC journals, or signposting them to Tower Hamlets Law Centre for further advice. Soon, we'll also be helping a new partner organisation with complex form-filling, including PIP and DLA applications. It's about breaking down everyday barriers that can otherwise leave people without the help they need.

What has been RISE's most important achievement so far?

Our biggest success is the sheer number of people we've been able to help - and the visible difference it's made. Seeing someone's face light up when we resolve a technical hurdle or empower them to take the next step is incredibly rewarding. It's not just about solving a problem in the moment; it's about restoring the community's confidence and hope. That's what fuels our drive for social justice every single day.

Why is the RISE project important for Tower Hamlets?

Tower Hamlets is one of the most diverse and culturally rich boroughs in London, but it also faces significant social and economic challenges. RISE bridges the gap between residents and their access to justice - from making a simple phone call to the DWP, to helping someone secure legal aid. In a place where the need is high and resources are stretched; our work ensures that no one is left to navigate complex systems alone.

How can people support RISE?

Join us! Volunteer your time, skills, and energy to help us reach more people in Tower Hamlets and beyond. It's more than just giving back; it's experiencing first-hand the realities people face and knowing you've made a tangible difference. Whether it's completing a form, sending a message on behalf of someone, or just being there to guide them, your support can change lives in small but powerful ways.