



The ICOS Women project – funded by Willan Fund (2023- 2025) focused on making Eastern European and other migrant women in the area safe, empowering them and getting them together.

Executive summary:

The ICOS Women Project (2023–2025), funded by the Willan Fund, empowered Eastern European and other migrant women in Sunderland through tailored support, wellbeing activities, and community engagement. Over 24 months, the project supported 43 women through one-to-one guidance addressing domestic abuse, anti-social behaviour, hate crime, financial hardship, and barriers to accessing housing, benefits, and healthcare.

Through needs-based support, 53% reported improved financial stability and 61% felt their issues were fully resolved. The group delivered 50 sessions and workshops engaging 102 women and over 100 children in cultural, wellbeing, and creative activities. Three collaborations with Sunderland Culture and Cultural Spring enabled migrant women to express heritage and identity through art.

Volunteer involvement was transformative—22 women contributed to event planning and leadership, while a 10-member Steering Group researched cost-of-living impacts on Eastern European families and helped co-design activities. Nearly half of participants improved skills such as communication, teamwork, and leadership.

The project enhanced ICOS’s local profile, built partnerships with organisations including Sunderland Culture and National Trust, and grew its women’s network to over 690 members. Overall, it strengthened safety, wellbeing, confidence, and inclusion for women overcoming multiple disadvantages in Sunderland.

An infographic available below:

IMPACT OF THE ICOS WOMEN'S PROJECT (2024–2025)

SUPPORT WITH ACCESSING SERVICES



79%

of women received support

with accessing services such as standing services and rehousing help:

- local authority, • L.M. and
- legal advice and legal aid
- support with energy providers
- local MP or councillor



62%

of women received support with

accessing benefits

- Including child-benefit, • pension credit.
- council tax support
- Universal Credit
- Personal Independence • Payment



42%

of women needed support with

housing involving for housing with a housing association or council

- reporting repairs or accessing priority housing register
- referral to Froushold support Fund or crisis support

OTHER SUPPORT



42%

of women received support

support with accessing

services such as standing services and rehousing help:

- Individual and family support
- donation to energy providers
- gaining your own services



41%

of women received support with

accessing healthcare services

- Including booking appointments
- GP registrations
- requesting prescriptions
- accessing interpreters
- healthcare records



40%

of women received support

healthcare services

- including booking appointments, GP registrations,
- requesting prescriptions
- accessing interpreters
- healthcare records and support with submitting documents

OUTCOMES FROM ONE-TO-ONE SUPPORT

- 61% of women reported that their issues are fully resolved
- 33% stated that their issues were resolved and they continue getting support from ICOS
- 8 women had a positive benefit outcome as a result of the project
- 7 reported improved access to services
- 6 felt safe from abuse
- 3 felt safe from antisocial behaviour and

- 3 women have gained additional appointments
- 2 positive Trust applications
- 3 gained EUSS Settled Status
- 3 creative projects then place in Sunderland:
 - Sun Cultures delivered by Sunderland Culture (2023) – women took part in 5 creative workshops making pendants and even type inspired by the Sun
 - final exhibition of women's art work " took place in the Winter Gardens

More details:

During the 24 months of the project we have provided needs tailored one-to-one support, advice and guidance to 43 women (including 12 women with domestic abuse and violence, 5 anti-social behaviour and 3 hate crime cases). As a result of our support 53% of women reported an improved financial situation (this was scored on a scale from 1-10 at the beginning of the project and when end of project delivery).

During the project, women who have been supported have faced multiple barriers that they needed support with, including:

-Support with reporting crimes to the police, local authority or housing, as well as support with safety planning, finding safe accommodation or needing further referrals e.g. for legal advice to FLOWS (<https://www.flows.org.uk/>) or Wearside Women in Need for refuge.

-Women moving from other parts of the UK to Sunderland (including single mothers) who had fled domestic abuse or due to relationship breakdown and needing further advice and guidance with

applying for benefits such as council tax support or Universal Credit, as well meeting new people in the area.

-Women who experienced significant barriers with accessing healthcare services (including mental health services), including lack of interpreters being provided to them, or needing support with submitting a formal complaint as their healthcare issues were not being resolved or guidelines were not followed correctly.

-Women who experienced significant financial pressures due to change of circumstances, for example caused by loss of income, house move or health issues. As well as cost of living crisis.

All women who have received one-to-one needs tailored support have accessed more than one area of support:

-79% of women received support with accessing services (this attending the appointments in person and on the phone with the client for support and interpreting), services included social services and early help, local authority, HMRC, legal advice and legal aid, support with energy providers, local MP or councillor.

-62% of women received support with accessing benefits including child benefit, pension credit, council tax support, Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment. Other support with benefits included attending Universal Credit appointments with clients to separate the claim to their abusive partners, support with benefit overpayments and mandatory reconsiderations.

-42% of women needed support with housing including applying for housing with a housing association or local council, reporting repairs or support with accessing priority housing register due to emergency situations such as domestic abuse or hate crime.

-42% of women received support with accessing material support such as furniture or white goods (when they have moved into a new property) through individual grants, food vouchers and energy vouchers for women who have been under extreme financial pressure, referral to Household Support Fund or crisis support, and travel tickets to attend wellbeing activities and self-development activities such as college courses for women who were staying in a local refuge with no recourse to public funding.

-41% of women received support with accessing healthcare services including booking appointments, GP registrations, requesting prescriptions, accessing interpreters, healthcare records and support with submitting official complaints.

-40% of women on the project have also been referred to other services including Foodbanks, baby banks (such as Love Amelia), financial advice (including Step Change and CAB), North East Law Centre (for legal advice), Wearside Women in Need, and Migrant Help (for support with EUSS).

-Outcomes from one-to-one support included 8 women having a positive benefit outcome, 7 reported an improved access to services, 6 feeling safe from abuse and 3 feeling safe from antisocial behaviour and hate crime, 5 women accessed new housing (including with Gentoo and local council), 4 women have had their complaints resolved with a positive outcome, 2 positive trust applications, 3 women have gained employment, and 2 gained EUSS Settled Status. 61% of women reported that their issues are fully resolved, another 33% stated that their issues are ongoing and the women continue getting support from ICOS.

In total we have delivered 50 sessions, workshops and activities, which have been attended by 102 women (and over 100 children also benefitted from activities) during the project. The activities

varied from creative and cultural workshops (e.g. print making workshop, ceramics, theatre outings) wellbeing and development sessions (healthy diet workshop, smoothies and healthy sandwich making) mum's and children's sessions (crafts, Christmas events, Easter Events, Wellbeing trips and outings (such as to Killhope Mining Museum, Beamish, Sunderland Museum and Winter Grden's), sports activities (walks, bowling and Zumba sessions) to larger celebration events (such as the International Women's Day or 5th year celebration event of the ICOS Women project).

Additionally, the women's group took part in three creative projects which took place in Sunderland:

1) Sun Cultures delivered by Sunderland Culture (2023) - women took part in 5 creative workshops making pendants and cyanotypes inspired by the Sun, final exhibition of women's art work took place in the Winter Gardens Museum.

2) SunderLight delivered by Cultural Spring and artist Sarah Blackburn (2023), a community led light event, women created giant flower sculptures to contribute to the art work installation, final exhibition took place in Barnes Park in Sunderland.

3) Exploring Women's Migration Stories Through Art (2024-2025) delivered through Cultural Spring – ICOS Women Project Steering Group have designed their own creative project and have chosen an Eastern European artist Sabina Sallis (<https://sabinasallis.com/>) to deliver regular creative sessions from August 2024 until January 2025 exploring their culture, heritage and migration stories through creative activities such as cooking and sharing food, drawing, embroidery, creative storytelling, journaling and acting.

The project was open and inclusive for all women to attend, create new friendships and integrate. Majority of women who benefited came from Poland (61%), Ukraine (11%) and born in the UK (8%), the other 20% of women came from Romania, Colombia, El Salvador, Slovakia, Turkey, Latvia, Russia, India, Italy, Czech Republic, Ghana, Nigeria, Estonia, Morocco, Syria, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Iran.

As a result of the women's group activities and sessions, 35% of women stated that they feel more connected to their community, and 67.5% stated that they made friendships from different backgrounds and that they feel less isolated. Using the Warwick Edinburgh Wellbeing Scale, 61% of women reported that their project has improved their wellbeing and 62% reported that it has improved their confidence.

Feedback from women who attended group activities:

"I have an incredibly positive experience. They are welcoming and supportive, making it a great place to connect with other mums who understand the joys and challenges of motherhood. They offer a variety of events and meetups, which are perfect for both socialising and finding a bit of much-needed relaxation." - Misbah

"Thanks to the meetings organised by ICOS Women, I feel supported and needed. I met a lot of new wonderful people here, who make my everyday more beautiful." – Malgorzata

Feedback from women who received one-to-one support:

"Thank you for your support, happy to be back in Sunderland, closer to ICOS and the community."

"Outstanding organization. The staff is caring, helpful and professional in their work."

"Thank you for your support, you are a life saver!"

During the project delivery 22 women took part in volunteering activities, women volunteers took on roles which involved event planning, organising, administration, relationship building with other organisations, venue booking, delivering crafts for children during events, organising refreshments for meetings and events, photography, social media engagement, promoting the project, fundraising activities such as raffles or cake sales.

Project Steering Group has been established for the ICOS Women project. In total 10 volunteers have taken part in a project steering group researching how the cost of living crisis impacted Eastern European women and children (<https://arc-nenc.nihr.ac.uk/news/understanding-the-impact-of-the-cost-of-living-crisis-on-eastern-european-families-in-the-north-east/>). The same group of volunteers, met regularly to discuss how ICOS Women project can be developed further to benefit Eastern European women and their children, as well as plan activities and meetings for the project. The Project Steering Group is now a significant aspect of the ICOS Women project as it allows the women to take leadership roles and opportunities within their community and be a part of co-produced projects.

Two project steering group members have taken part in further development and training including a Leadership Development Programme delivered by Social Enterprise Academy, Domestic abuse Training course delivered by Wearside Women in Need, Health Champions Programme delivered by Sunderland City Council Public Health and Level 2 Autism Awareness Training delivered by Sunderland College.

We have asked all women taking part in the project to score their general skills on a scale from 1-10, 49% of women reported that their skills have improved from taking part in the women's group and volunteering activities. On project evaluation forms women have specified which skills they have gained during the project, volunteers specified that they have accomplished: creative, research, event management, organisational, communication, team building and interpersonal skills. Women who attended activities have accomplished: language, speaking and communication skills, family and social skills, creative, art skills and independence.

The grant has had a significant positive impact on our clients, the organisation and the whole community (especially our work with Eastern European women). It has allowed the ICOS Women's group to develop even further, especially through establishing a Project Steering Group, whose members are committed to continue delivering this project to the local community, creating opportunities for leadership for women and giving them a voice. In January 2025 the Project Steering Group has recruited new members, it now has 12 women within the group, which fosters empowerment in individuals, as well as within the wider Eastern European community.

Our ICOS Women social media pages have also grown in members, including our Facebook page which now has 694 female members, we have also created a WhatsApp group which currently has 88 members and its very active with women sharing opportunities, information and supportive messages on daily basis.

The project has allowed us to build relationships with other organisations across the city and build new partnerships, during the first year of the project we have engaged with BlueScapes (<https://exploreseascapes.co.uk/bluescapes/>) who have organised local beach walks and bird watching workshops, Minerva Arts Wellbeing (<https://www.minervaartsandwellbeing.com/>) who have delivered creative wellbeing activities to the women's group, Sunderland AFC (<https://safc.com/matchday/stadium-of-light>) who donated match tickets for raffles and organised free stadium tours for children. During the second phase of the project, we have development

relationships with National Trust, who have donated free tickets to their sites such as Gragside, Cultural Spring who have been providing us with free go and see opportunities including: Dear Evan Hansen, and 13 Storey Treehouse at Sunderland Empire Theatre and Seckou Keita: Homeland (at Sunderland Fire Station). These are great opportunities for women from minority ethnic backgrounds and their children to attend theatre shows and participate in cultural activities in Sunderland. Other partners on the project included Back on The Map, Sunderland Maritime Heritage, Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens, North East Dance, Sunderland Culture, Dance Jam and North East Ambulance Service.

ICOS is also become even more recognised in the city as an organisation which focuses on women's needs and support services, during the project we have accepted many referrals from organisations such as Together for Children and Early Help, Wearside Women in Need, Sunderland GP Alliance and Sunderland Counselling Service (for one-to-one advice as well as participation in the women's group activities).

This funding has also allowed Community Development Officer, delivering the project to develop her skills by taking part in Own My Life Facilitator Training (<https://www.ownmylifecourse.org/>), a course specifically designed to help women understand abuse within relationships, and enabling women who have been subjected to abuse to regain ownership of their lives. The Community Development Officer has already delivered sessions to women on one-to-one basis, and we will be delivering group sessions in 2025.

The delivery of this project has really strengthened opportunities for Eastern European women in terms of volunteering and being involved with their local community, providing a safe space for mothers and children (including very isolated mothers or those who have experienced domestic abuse). It allows women to be able to create new connections, improve their wellbeing, skills and reduce social isolation through regular volunteering and meetings, allowing participants to build connections, foster friendships and a sense of belonging.

We are grateful to Willan Fund at the Community Foundation Tyne and Wear & Northumberland for their funding.