

# ICOS Women Project Evaluation Executive Summary

March 2026

## 1. Introduction

In 2019 the [ICOS Women](#) project was created, aimed at Eastern European women but open to all. It supports women to find friendship, feel confident and empowered, and become more connected to local communities. The project is led by women, including 12 volunteers who make up the Project Steering Group (PSG).

In 2025 ICOS commissioned Claire Baxter of [Richmond Baxter Ltd](#) to undertake an independent evaluation of the ICOS Women project, with the support of the [Lloyds Bank Foundation England & Wales](#).

## 2. Impact

The ICOS Women project has had a transformational impact on many of the women it supports, particularly those experiencing social isolation and lacking their own support networks in the UK.

More than 191 women have engaged with the project, representing 31 countries, speaking 23 languages, and often managing complex, multiple needs. The project has provided flexible, long-term, practical advice on issues including benefits, debt, immigration, and housing. Support has included emergency hardship assistance, help navigating public services, and referrals to counselling and specialist charities.

Alongside the advice service, women had a chance to try creative and therapeutic activities, attend groups and events. Women consistently described ICOS Women as a safe, welcoming and nurturing space where they could rebuild confidence. Many spoke of gaining confidence through skills development, as well as creative activities and volunteering.

*" They empower us. They give us a sense of belonging, harmony, and achievement."*

Loneliness was a common presenting issue and ICOS Women helped participants develop new friendships. 86.5% reported they made new friends, meaning the impact of the project continued beyond its own walls. Overall, women rated the service 9.6 out of 10, and urged others to try it.

*"Don't doubt it — join ICOS! You have nothing to lose and everything to gain"*

### 3. Success factors

The effectiveness of the ICOS Women project can be attributed to the following success factors.

**Holistic, flexible support model.** Support spanned advice, social activities, skills development, volunteering and leadership opportunities. This flexibility meant women could engage in different ways and receive help as new issues arose, contributing to high impact across wellbeing and confidence.

**Accessibility and overcoming barriers to entry.** Women found the service easy to approach due to word-of-mouth referrals, a warm first welcome, and an environment where they could participate at their own pace. Free or low-cost activities, flexible formats, and child-friendly sessions further reduced barriers.

**Compassionate, empathetic staff.** Women repeatedly highlighted the staff's kindness, respect and authenticity. This human approach fostered emotional safety and encouraged engagement.

**Trust-building through shared lived experience.** All staff and PSG members had a shared experience of their own or their families' migration, helping women feel understood and safe. This helped women to open up about complex or painful issues.

*"we cry many times together... afterwards we feel better"*

**Peer support and connection.** Friendships, emotional support and shared problem-solving were a strong theme. Women usually described ICOS Women as a community, not a service.

*"A wonderful community. Wonderful women. Events with them are pure joy."*

**Participant-led design through the PSG.** The PSG ensured activities reflected real needs and interests. Their lived experience and leadership shaped events, encouraged volunteering, and helped maintain relevance and trust.

*"It has created a whole network of volunteers – almost like a new community in Sunderland"*

**Warm, fun and culturally inclusive activities.** Creative, social and cross-cultural events fostered joy, shared learning and cohesion. These events helped women express identity and build bridges across nationalities.

*"The feeling of unity, regardless of the nationalities – it is just a safe environment for everyone, it's just lovely"*

### 4. Areas for development

Enhanced communication, of ICOS Women's offer and those of its partners, will support accessibility and the already strong variety of activities.

Targeted PSG recruitment and extending the popular set of intercultural activities will maintain and strengthen the open-door approach without diluting the benefits for existing participants.

Accessing available support to fundraise will open up possibilities to grow this popular and highly valued community project.