



ICOS Women Project Evaluation

International Community Organisation of Sunderland

March 2026

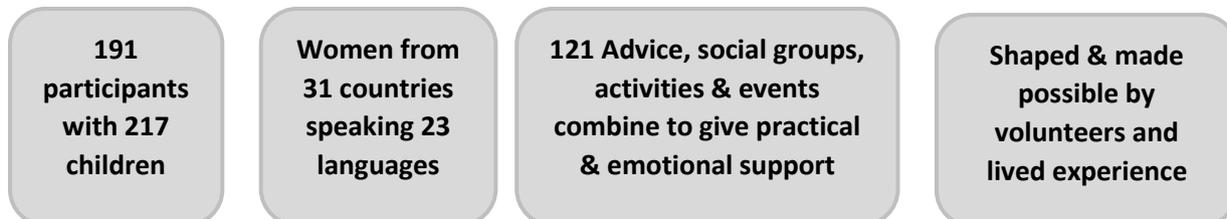


Claire Baxter
Richmond Baxter Ltd

Companies House number: 08907804

ICOS Women in Summary

Delivery



Outcomes



Impact



Contents

Section	Contents	Page
1	Introduction	4
2	Participation	7
3	Support Needs & Motivations	9
4	Delivery – People	11
5	Delivery – Services	13
6	Accessibility	15
7	Outcomes	18
8	Impact	23
9	Areas for Development	26
10	Conclusions	28
11	Recommendations	30
12	Sources & References	32

1. Introduction

1.1 Context

[International Community Organisation of Sunderland](#) (ICOS) formed as a group in 2009, registered as a charity in 2011 and converted to a Charitable Incorporated Organisation in 2020. It seeks to support people living in transition, geographically, and to promote positive intercultural relations. It works primarily with people from Central and Eastern Europe, but also asylum seekers and refugees.

ICOS's advice and guidance service activity revealed that many women were experiencing financial hardship, isolation and domestic abuse. There was no dedicated service for these women in Sunderland so in 2019 [ICOS Women](#) was created, aimed at Eastern European women but open to all.

Volunteer support and funding have helped sustain and grow ICOS Women. A Project Steering Group (PSG) of 12 women has overseen this development since 2022, co-creating an offer which now comprises:

- One to one (121) advice
- Emergency financial support
- A Women's Group and Mum's Club – providing social opportunities, activities and events
- Employability and skills development
- Leadership and volunteering opportunities.

It aims to support women to find friendship, feel confident and empowered, so that they are able to rebuild their lives and feel established in more cohesive and integrated communities.

The ICOS Women project objectives and impact are shown in the Theory of Change (see Figure 1).

1.2 Evaluation aims

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](#) Development Support programme. The evaluation aims were to understand the:

1. Impact on the women
2. Service effectiveness and accessibility
3. Good practice and areas for improvement (including future monitoring).

1.3 Research approach

The research took place between October 2025 and January 2026. Lines of enquiry were based on the evaluation aims and the Theory of Change.

The research comprised:

- Analysis of project data from the monitoring system, Lamplight and prior reports to funders
- A review of research ICOS Women had participated in

- A voluntary questionnaire distributed to all current ICOS Women participants (n=29)
- A focus group with the Project Steering Group (PSG) and staff (n=8)
- Individual interviews with project staff, some PSG members and ICOS Women participants who volunteered to take part in the research, having completed the questionnaire (n=8).

Some women engaged via more than one method. The total number of participants fell within the range of 29 to 35.

Thanks go to all the contributors who generously gave their time and shared their experiences.

1.4 Research considerations & limitations

Many of the research participants had experienced ICOS Women in multiple ways. Service users have become volunteers or staff members. PSG members continue to use the services. The report therefore only attributes quotes to a specific role where this is needed as context.

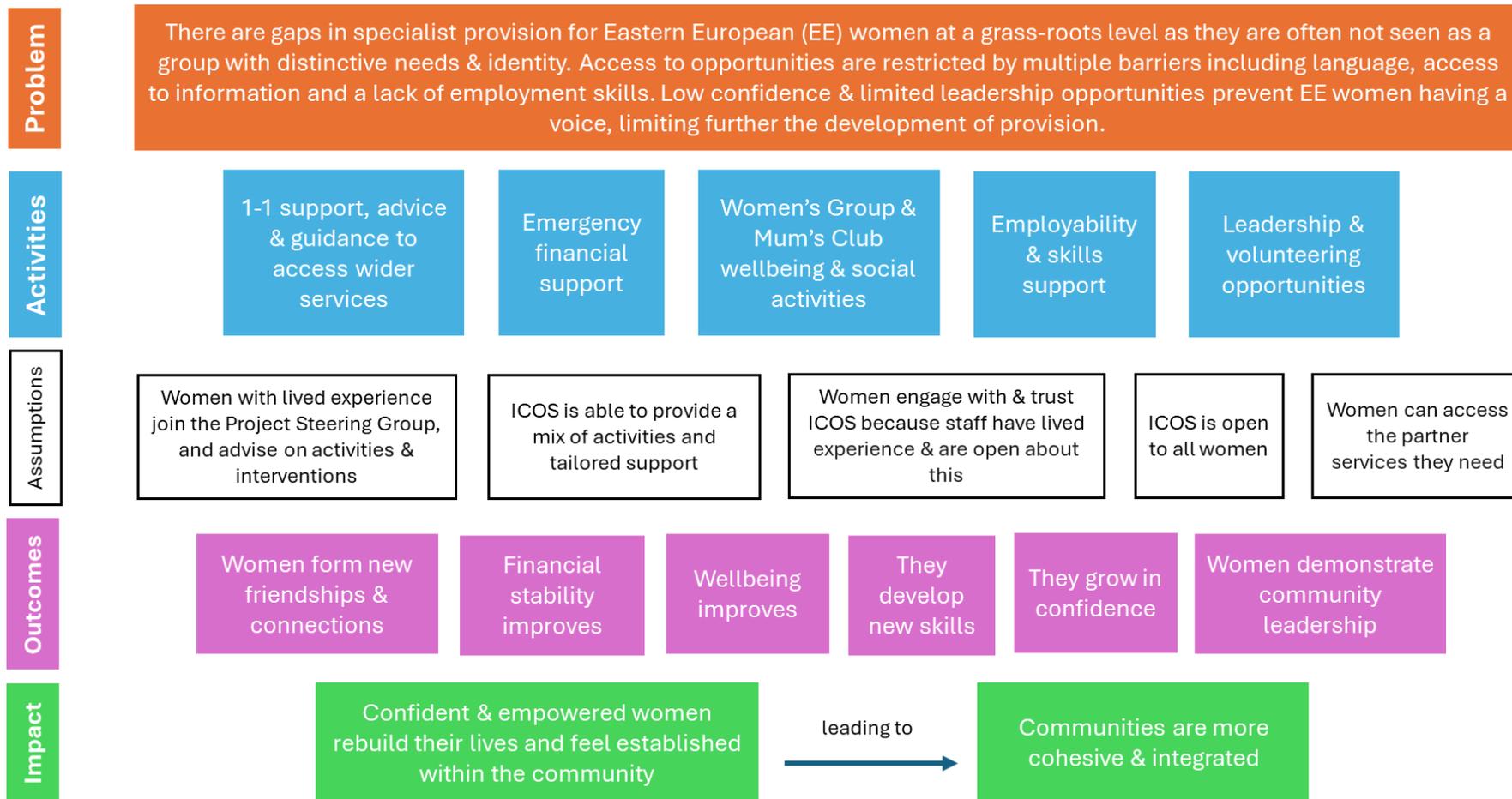
All the interview and focus group participants were Polish or British-Polish. Efforts were made to interview women of other nationalities, but none were available within the research timeframe. The findings on inclusivity are therefore limited to attendance data and survey feedback.

The ICOS Women project has been funded from a range of sources, the two largest being:

- [The Willan Charitable Trust](#) (for delivery from 01/02/2023 to 31/01/2025)
- [The Smallwood Trust](#) (for delivery 01/01/2025 and due to end 31/12/2027).

Wherever possible, the Lamplight extracts spanned 2 years and 8 months from 01/02/2023 to 30/09/2025. Due to slight differences in project focus and reporting requirements, it was not possible to combine all datasets. Notably, outcomes measures are limited to the Willan period.

Figure 1: ICOS Women Theory of Change

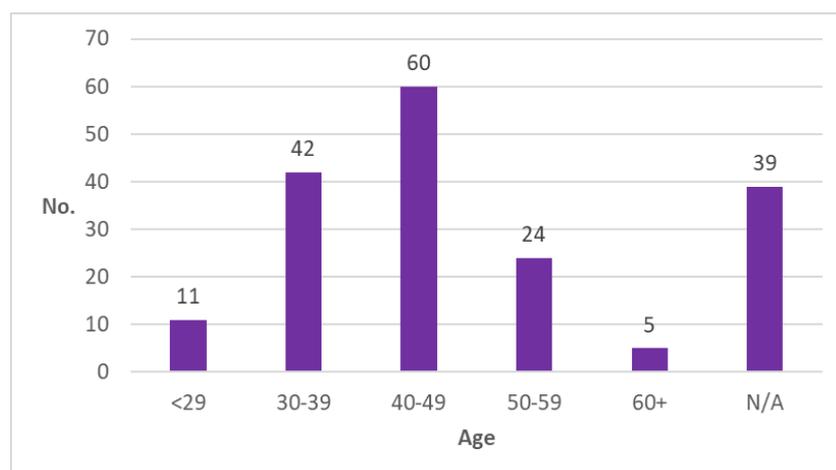


2. Participation

2.1 ICOS Women participants

More than 191 women have participated in ICOS Women projects¹. 65.6% had children, 217 children in total². 13.8% reported a disability³. The average age was 43, with a 53 year gap between the youngest and oldest⁴.

Figure 2: Age of ICOS Women



Source: Combined List of Members, ICOS, Oct 2025

More than 45% were known to be in work (employed or self-employed) upon joining.

Figure 3: Employment status of ICOS Women

Working Status	Number	Percentage
Employed	76	39.8
Self-employed	11	5.8
Unemployed	47	24.6
Economically inactive	12	6.3
No right to work	8	4.2
Other	7	3.6
N/A	30	15.7
Total	191	100.0

Source: Combined List of Members, ICOS, Oct 2025

¹ Willan & Smallwood Combined List of Members, 01/02/2023 to 30/09/2025, excludes some smaller projects with dedicated funding

² Registrations – Combined, ICOS, 2025

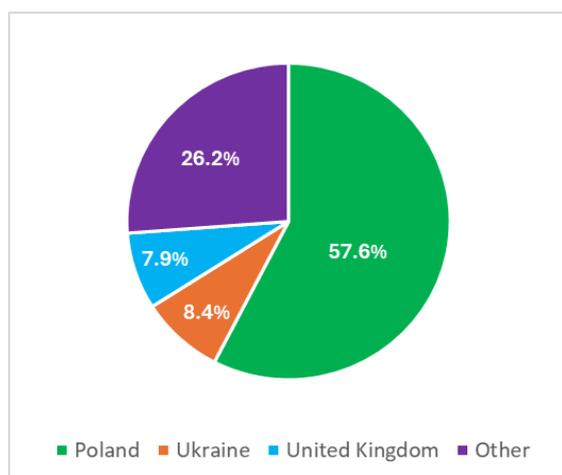
³ Of those whose age was recorded, n=167

⁴ Of those whose age was recorded, n=151

2.2 Nationality & immigration status

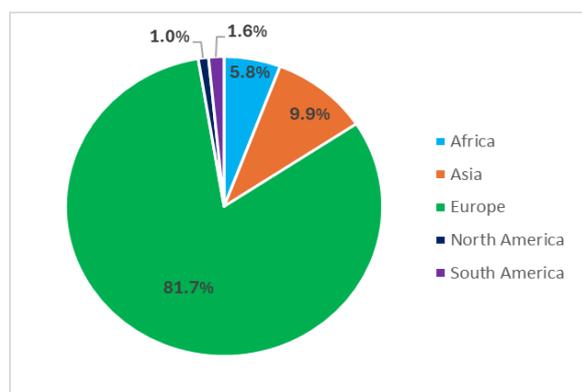
ICOS Women welcomed people from 31 countries. 28 of these countries accounted for four or fewer women each, spanning Africa, Asia and the Americas, and indicating the project’s diversity and reach. The most represented subregion was Eastern Europe (70.7%) and the most represented country was Poland (110 women, 57.6%).

Figure 4: ICOS Women participants by country of origin



Source: Combined List of Members, ICOS, Oct 2025; n=191

Figure 5: ICOS Women participants by continent



Source: Combined List of Members, ICOS, Oct 2025; n=191

23 different languages were spoken by ICOS Women, with only 11.5% speaking English as a first language. Polish was the most prevalent, at 58.1%.

More than half were known to be EU, EEA or Swiss Citizens (so with a right to apply for settlement status or a visa), or had some other citizenship or residency right.

Figure 6: Immigration status of ICOS Women

Immigration Status	Number	Percentage
Asylum Seeker	11	5.8
British Citizen	10	5.2
EU, EEA or Swiss	99	51.8
Exceptional Leave to Remain	12	6.3
Indefinite Leave to Remain	2	1.1
Visa	4	2.1
N/A	53	27.8
Total	191	100.0

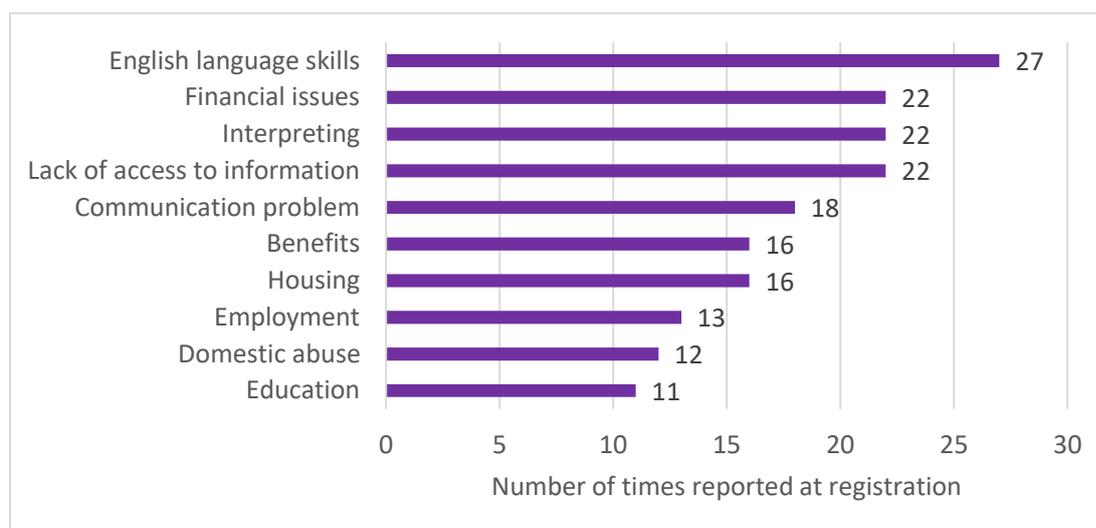
Source: Combined List of Members, ICOS, Oct 2025

3. Support Needs & Motivations

3.1 Presenting problems

Women had an opportunity to discuss their support needs on registering for the project. Of those who chose to do so, by far the most prevalent issues related to communication. Language skills, interpretation and communication problems were reported 67 times (31.9% of problems listed).

Figure 7: 10 most frequently reported presenting problems by ICOS Women participants



Source: Combined List of Members, ICOS, Oct 2025; notes: 210 problems reported by 58 of the 191 participants

In total, 24 different presenting problems were recorded, including issues with finances, benefits and debt, other services (e.g. housing, education, GPs) and personal safety concerns (e.g. domestic abuse, hate crime). One staff member recalled how the level of demand initially surprised her:

“I didn’t realise that people really struggle that much, I felt overwhelm, it is really needed – oh wow” Staff member

Further details were captured by the registration process⁵. Some women were not yet ready to talk about what they were facing. Of those that were, many reported multiple and complex needs.

Women raised concerns for their mental wellbeing and physical health, and the health of other family members – children, spouses and parents. Some women had experienced domestic abuse or anti-social behaviour and felt lonely, isolated, afraid or fearful for their children.

Some were struggling to access public services, immigration agencies and solicitors. One staff member described why advice for female immigrants was so important. Whilst a lot of young women migrate on their own, others are part of a couple in which the man assumes responsibility

⁵ Registrations – Combined, ICOS, 2025

for the bank account, finances, job and even visas. Should that relationship break down, the women can find it hard to prove they were in the UK.

“They are like ghosts.” Staff member

3.2 Discrimination & racism

Prior research conducted by the University of Sunderland with ICOS⁶ and interviews for this evaluation revealed a sense of exclusion. Several PSG members discussed feeling like outsiders in the UK, due to their accents or different backgrounds. Whilst this was not always put down to racism but perhaps a lack of understanding, one PSG member said she was not approached by other mums at nursery and did not want to push herself into social circles. Others had experienced xenophobia, aggression and overt abuse which, for one, led to serious health problems.

“As a foreigner, speaking with an accent – you always feel like an outsider”

3.3 Positive motivations

Not all were motivated by concerns. A significant number joined ICOS Women as an outlet for creativity, or to socialise more. Registration data shows the greatest interest in the Women’s Group which provides an opportunity to socialise, often whilst doing a creative or sporting activity or special event. Mum’s Club (a similar model, but for women and children) was also popular.

Figure 8: Activities of interest to women when registering with ICOS Women

Activity	No	%
Mum's Club	53	15.3
One-to-One Support	90	25.9
Project Steering Group	12	3.5
Volunteering	42	12.1
Women's Group	150	43.2
Total	347	100.0

Source: Registrations - Combined, ICOS, Oct 2025; notes: may include some duplication, excludes some Smallwood only registrations

⁶ Harvey-Golding et al, 2024

4. Delivery - People

4.1 The workforce

The project has prided itself in being led and delivered by a female staff and volunteers since the beginning. The project has run on a modest workforce, hosted by the ICOS charity. The team comprises:

- Community development Officer - 40 hours a week spanning both ICOS Women and ICOS
- Senior Project Worker - 32 hours a week, also across ICOS Women and ICOS
- Project Assistant - 16 hours a week.

The compassion and commitment shown by staff members was a strong theme from the interviews and survey.

“It is a welcoming organisation and staff are kind and respectful. Staff feels genuine and empathetic when supporting clients.”

“Volunteers and the workers are absolutely incredibly at making everybody feel at ease... just a big thank you for everything they do”

4.2 The Project Steering Group

In 2022 this female-led approach was taken a step further, with the creation of the PSG. This was born out of a partnership with the University of Newcastle which used peer researchers to explore the cost of living crisis⁷. The research steering group had worked well, the women involved had built knowledge and skills, and they wanted to continue to contribute.

There are 12 women on the PSG, some of whom have been involved with ICOS from the beginning while others were newly recruited in 2025. PSG members commit to attend one meeting per month, usually in the evening, although the majority volunteer more often, despite juggling jobs and hectic family lives.

⁷ Wysocka et al, 2025

The PSG has had a fundamental impact on ICOS Women, setting the project's direction, generating ideas for activities and events, and anchoring the project in the real interests and needs of women. This understanding comes through lived experience, talking to women at events and activities, and via an annual survey conducted by ICOS.

“being on Steering Group gives me idea on community need, hopes, what they are afraid of” PSG member

“The PSG is a really important aspect – you hear the voices of the women, what they need – they have lived experience...really important to have that community voice” Staff member

4.3 Volunteers

The PSG has also played a pivotal role in designing and delivering events, fundraising, volunteering themselves and motivating others to get involved. The idea for the Mum's Club came directly from the PSG and was set up with the help of volunteers. In total, including the PSG, 24 women volunteered during 2025.

The beach picnic

One PSG member illustrated **the power and extent of volunteering** in their description of the work to organise a summer picnic on the beach.

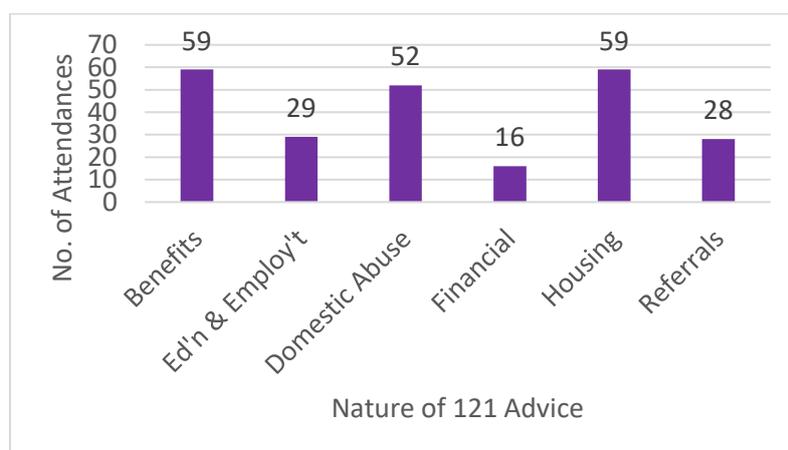
“ICOS Women doesn't have all the money so she explain to the shops. We get donations from a Polish shop – drinks for kids, candy. I get sausage, bread, snacks for picnic. 12 girls helped to bake cake. Women sell cakes to raise money for the activity. Different women organised play for beach, we always try to keep the children busy, to help the mums relax. One person organised teepee. We stayed at the beach 6 hours.” PSG member

5. Delivery - Services

5.1 121 advice

There is no comprehensive dataset for all advice activity. The nature of 121 advice was recorded for some ‘attendances’ (or sessions)⁸ which illustrates the support provided. The long-term nature of the project has meant it can continue to provide advice as and when needed. Some women continue to need support over a longer period, including when new issues arise.

Figure 9: Nature of issues in 121 advice sessions



Source: Willan and Smallwood 121 Advice Session records, ICOS, extracted Oct 2025; notes: may include some duplication of individuals, nature of issue not recorded for all attendances

ICOS Women has worked flexibly, evolving its advice to keep up with societal changes. Examples include meeting an advice need regarding citizenship tests on the back of national media focus on immigration, and becoming a Reporting Centre for hate crime on behalf of the police, making reporting incidents much less intimidating.

5.2 Groups & activities

ICOS Women delivered 34 activities over two years⁹, with 402 attendances¹⁰ by women, 177 by children. The events were supported by 38 volunteers¹¹.

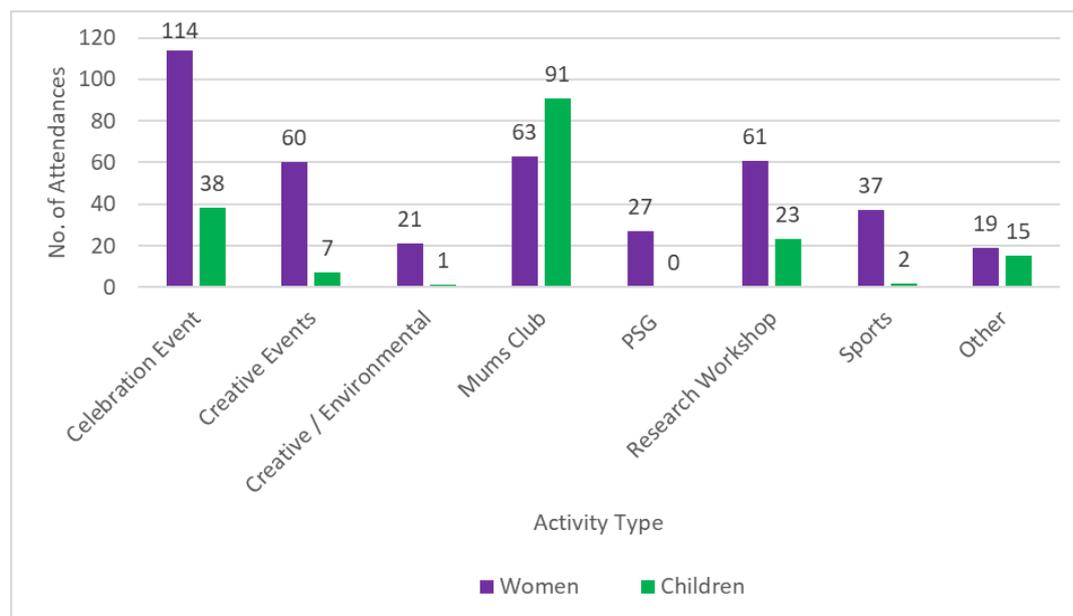
⁸ Many sessions had no record – some will have been spent building trust; further it is not clear how many sessions had multiple issues recorded against them

⁹ Data available for Willan funding period only

¹⁰ Women and children may have attended multiple times

¹¹ Likely to be a significant undercount – excludes PSG and Research attendances, some PSG meetings appear to be missing

Figure 10: Activity type by number of attendances



Source: Willan data, ICOS extracted Oct 2025; notes: women and children may have attended on multiple occasions; PSG appears to be an undercount

Creative activities have included decoupage, printing t-shirts, making lanterns, ceramics, flower arranging, bag making, drawing and painting, crochet. ICOS Women have tried yoga and Zumba. Seasonal events have included a summer picnic, visit from Santa Claus, and more recently an International Women’s Day celebration.

Comprehensive information on how many different types of activities women did was not available, but the participant survey¹² gives a snapshot. Respondents reported engaging between 1 and 6 different ways, with the most common answer being 2 different activities. Women’s Group sessions were the most frequently accessed.

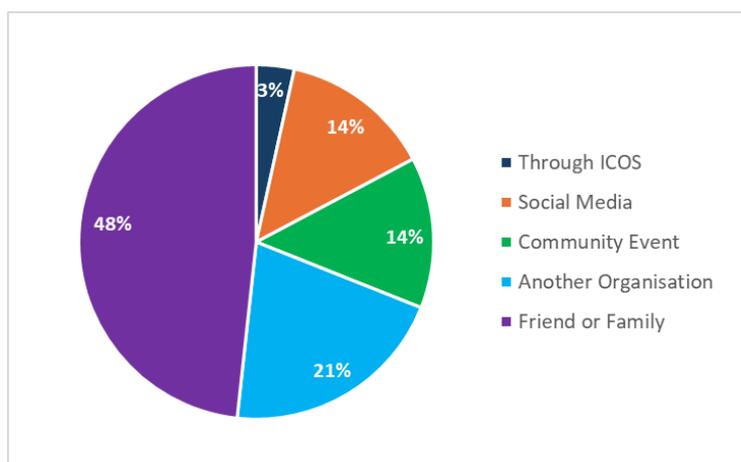
¹² ICOS Women, December 2025; n=29

6. Accessibility

6.1 Pathways

The survey asked how ICOS Women first heard about the project. The results¹³ from this small snapshot show the power of word-of-mouth, with over two thirds having heard via friends, family or another organisation. Most survey participants were satisfied with current access, although some felt there could be more promotion of activities.

Figure 11: How ICOS Women heard about the project



Source: ICOS Women Survey, Dec 2025; n=29

ICOS Women has received referrals and recommendations from local organisations, including charities, the council, GPs, the hospital and a counselling service, demonstrating trust in the project.

6.2 Barriers to participation

Many described how word of mouth or a familiar name encouraged them to make contact, but it was still a big step to put themselves in a new and unfamiliar situation. Some felt out of practice in social situations, having recently moved to the UK or Sunderland, or having had little time to themselves due to family responsibilities. For others, prior difficult life events or experiences of racism made them cautious.

“I knew about ICOS Women when moved, but felt unwelcomed in [my previous town] – did not try to find it in the beginning, petrified due to previous experience”

¹³ N=29 and so may not be representative

6.3 Staff & volunteer approach

The lived experience of staff members and volunteers, and their openness regarding this, has helped women to trust and engage with the project. They were described as kind, respectful, empathetic, and genuinely committed to helping women and their families, creating a safe and nurturing environment. There were examples of strong empathy from the staff.

“Earlier this year, I was really sick, physically sick, when I was reading this [media coverage of racism], when you work with people, you know them, they are not statistics.” Staff member

Staff and PSG members talked of how they tried to make people feel welcome on their first visit, for example by just listening and not pushing somebody to talk. Tea, coffee and cake is often involved! Newcomers are told about groups and advice services, but never pushed to use them.

“Very open, so nice, no stress, so light... I felt like I know these people for years”

“The first appointment, it broke all my walls – I was scared, I wasn’t very convinced but the first appointment broke all of that”

The project was initially set up for the Eastern European community. The majority who attended from the beginning were Polish. The ethnicity of all current staff and PSG members is ‘White – other, Polish’. However, the varied nationalities of participants (see Section 2.2) and of volunteers in the last year (including Italian, Nigerian, Spanish, Sri-Lankan, Thai and White British women) indicates they have been true to their pledge to be open to all. There were examples of staff and volunteers adapting their approach to welcome people from other countries.

6.4 Activity design

Interviewees appreciated that most activities and events were free or low cost and child-friendly; some wanted more events during school holidays or outside school hours so children could attend.

Some events were intentionally designed to promote understanding between nationalities.

The Know My Culture event

Many of those interviewed described an event called 'Know My Culture' created **to celebrate and raise awareness of different cultures**. Women were encouraged to bring a traditional dish from their country of birth. American, Ukrainian, Pakistani, Turkish, Polish and other dishes were shared. Some women also dressed up. There was enthusiasm for repeating this event.

"it's very crack barriers... talking with different countries"

"event where there was food involved from different countries – that was amazing... it would be great to learn to cook their food"

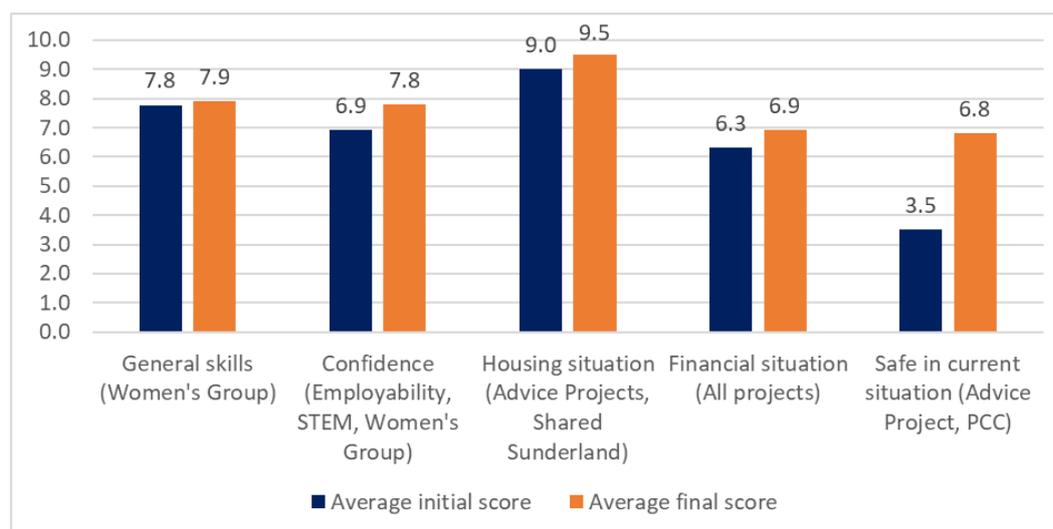
7. Outcomes

7.1 Financial stability

The team helped people manage finances through 121 advice and tailored support, directly with advice on how to access benefits, and for more complex cases through their provision of immigration advice (Level 1). They have made referrals for debt advice (e.g. to Citizens Advice and Step Change) and for help to secure discounts or compensation to increase household income. They also supported individuals in separating finances from abusive partners, provided emergency hardship help like food vouchers and travel costs, and connected people to charities such as Love Amelia and FISCUS offering essentials such as food, clothing, and baby supplies.

Of all the outcomes reported, financial stability featured the least in interviews and survey, and it did not show significant change in self-assessment scores. This was despite it being a common presenting issue.

Figure 12: Change in individual initiative statement scores



Source: Scoring - Willan, ICOS, Oct 2025; Notes: statement scores out of 10, participants ranged from 2 to 57

7.2 New skills

A range of activities were designed to help women build new skills linked to employability. Training opportunities included courses in food safety, digital skills, safeguarding and leadership, with tailored options for women pursuing specific goals such as becoming a teaching assistant. These were complemented by practical employability support, such as help with CVs and job applications.

Some women at ICOS Women were already highly skilled but faced barriers to work, such as childcare pressures or difficulties navigating practical tasks like opening a bank account. Some already had their own business, which ICOS Women ran an event to help publicise.

The ICOS Women Marketplace

Staff and volunteers drew on their experience of creating warm, inclusive events to establish the ICOS Women Marketplace. This community event supported **women who were starting, or considering starting, their own small businesses**. It offered a platform to showcase and sell products, share skills and gain hands-on business experience in a supportive environment.

Feedback was highly positive, with women valuing the opportunity to present their businesses, meet others from different nationalities and raise the profile of women-led enterprise locally.

“Thank you so much... for this opportunity to introduce our business... you guys brilliant.”

ICOS Women also helped with personal development and provided opportunities to practise English language skills. Volunteer roles such as organising events, leading creative sessions and supporting the Mum’s Club developed leadership, communication and teamwork abilities. The supportive ethos and sense of being valued encouraged women to take on new responsibilities.

60.3% of recipients of 121 advice reported learning a new skill¹⁴, as well as helping women to understand their rights and how to access local services.

7.3 Wellbeing

The ICOS Women project used the short version of the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (the **SWEMWBS**), a recognised and copyrighted tool used to encourage people to reflect on their mental wellbeing by rating a series of statements. 63.2% experienced an increase in overall wellbeing, as measured by this method.

Figure 13: Change in wellbeing measured using total SWEMWBS scores

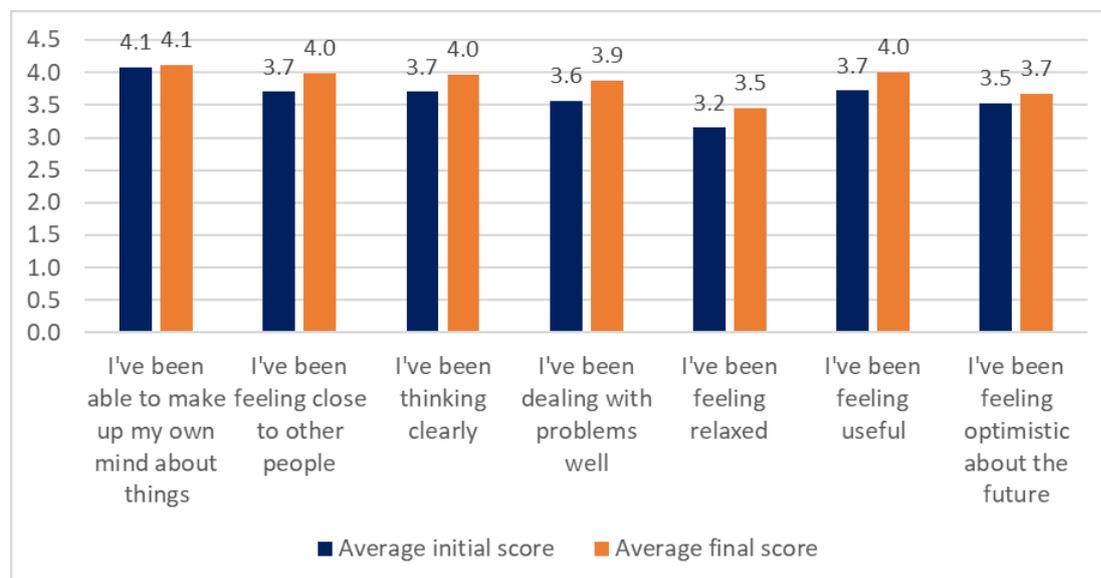
Average initial score	Average final score	Average change	% with increased scores	% with decreased scores
25.5	27.3	1.9	63.2	21.1

Source: Scoring - Willan, ICOS, Oct 2025; Notes: currently only available for participants during the Willan funding period 01/02/2023 to 31/01/2025 – 57 participants completed all statements; figures do not sum due to rounding; those with no increase includes participants with only one set of scores

¹⁴ Exits forms – Willan, ICOS, 2025; of those who responded, n=68

The scores for individual statements¹⁵ showed an average improvement across all dimensions bar one (making up own mind). Positive changes included in feeling relaxed, thinking clearly and feeling optimistic about the future.

Figure 14: Change in individual SWEMWBS statement scores



Source: Scoring - Willan, ICOS, Oct 2025; Notes: statement scores out of 5, currently only available for participants during the Willan funding period 01/02/2023 to 31/01/2025 – 57 participants completed all statements

The movement in scores seem modest in contrast to the emphatic feedback via interviews and the survey. ICOS Women explained the different ways in which the project had benefitted their wellbeing and mental health. They received 121 support with their individual and often distressing problems. Some were referred to other charities, for example Sunderland Counselling Service and Talking Therapies. Women enjoyed the social, therapeutic and physical benefits of the groups, events and activities.

The project had a multiplier effect, creating a platform for women to provide emotional and practical support for each other and ‘give something back’. Time and again, those interviewed described informal chats in and after activities being a chance to air problems, and get tips and recommendations on accessing services ranging from language classes to disability support.

“We are women, have private problem, life problem and we talk together... I feel more comfortable because we trust each other...”

“it gives to me more... women help to me, I help to woman – they can trust me, tell me positive story and problems”

¹⁵ Source: Scoring - Willan, ICOS, Oct 2025; n=57

Staff too appreciated the companionship as a relief from the sometimes distressing advice work.

“You can be really overwhelmed but when you go to things, it is better” Staff member

7.4 Friendships & connections

This was apparent from the data (see Section 8.1), and a strong theme from the interviews and focus groups. Women described experiencing loneliness and isolation before their involvement with ICOS Women. For some it was a rare opportunity to leave the house and enjoy the company of other women, knowing that their children would be safe to play while they socialised.

“We share laughter, tears, our fears, our insecurities, hope.... but most of all - many happy times together.”

“this is her 2 hours, her different world” PSG Member

These friendships provided emotional support and connections. Some also mentioned using their connections to lever in supplies for social activities and fundraising events.

The power of this model should not be understated. Those that had moved from elsewhere within the UK to Sunderland described the absence of similar support in their previous town.

“We are family... it is actually amazing... I didn't have anything like that [where I lived before]”

7.5 Confidence

Confidence was a strong theme, particularly within the survey responses. The opportunities for personal growth and skills development, within a supportive environment, built confidence. The PSG members and volunteers also played an important role in putting people at ease, sometimes by encouraging them to step out of their comfort zone.

“Icos session help us to develop variety of skills which build connection, confidence and self esteem via different arts and crafts and other gatherings and celebrations.”

“asked to sell food, wasn't easy for me, but they were welcoming and I had a great time and we made some money – they [the PSG] trust me”

7.6 Community Leadership

Participants of the PSG demonstrated strong community leadership (see Section 4.1), embedding volunteering within ICOS Women. These in turn encouraged and supported other women to get involved, from helping with events and activities, to supporting with social media. ICOS Women in its current form would not be possible without volunteers.

The International Women's Day event is an example of how the PSG has turned ideas into reality, by working together and mobilising support.

International Women's Day

Some of the ICOS Women had attended a low key 'coffee and cake' meeting for International Women's Day. Later, a proposal was raised at PSG that ICOS Women should organise something larger and more celebratory. The idea quickly snowballed with the women bouncing new ideas off each other.

They were not fazed by the practicalities *"We plan events, venues, how many volunteers we will need, and fund-raising,"* a PSG participant explained, capturing the roll-up-your-sleeves culture behind the day's growth.

The result was an event with a band attended by more than 50 people.

When asked what motivated them, PSG members talked of wanting to help, the satisfaction in giving back and the reward of feeling you are making a positive contribution.

"Feedback it is the best payment for people, people tell to me I have fantastic day today. This give me more power." PSG member

"[the staff] personalities are the type that you just want to give back the thing they gave to you, they are taking the best of people" PSG member

8. Impact

8.1 Rebuilding lives & empowerment

The ICOS Women project aimed to provide the support and create the conditions for 'confident & empowered women [to] rebuild their lives and feel established within the community'. Time and again women spoke of empowerment, enrichment and achievement. Service exit forms¹⁶ illustrate what the project has achieved.

ICOS Women Outcomes

My issue was resolved: **69.0%**

My issue is partially resolved / ongoing: **23.8%**

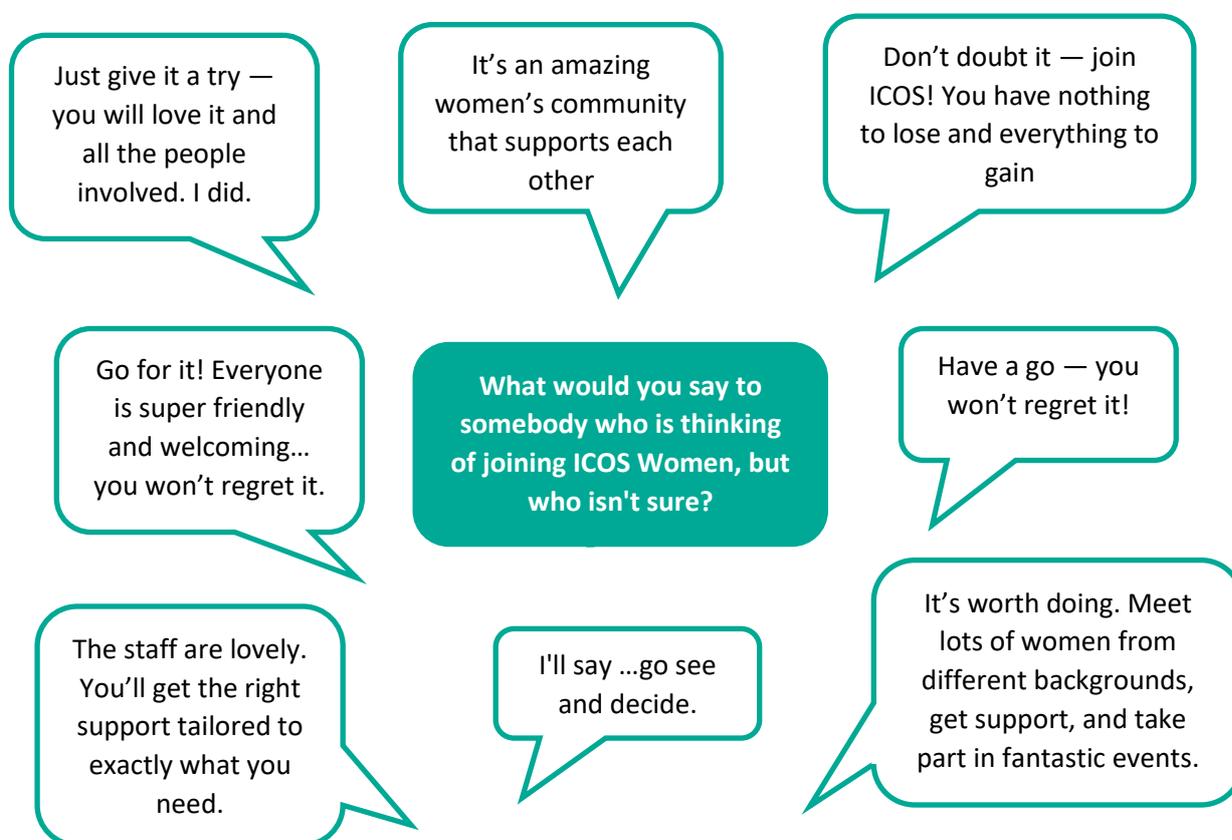
I made new friends: **86.5%**

Rate our support: **9.6 out of 10 average**

Source: Exit Forms – Willan, ICOS, 2025; notes: issues resolved for One to One Support only, n=42, new skill n=74, new friends n=74, rating n=80

¹⁶ 01/02/2023 to 31/01/2025

To understand the strength of feeling about ICOS Women's impact, the survey asked 'What would you say to somebody who is thinking of joining ICOS Women, but isn't sure?'



8.2 Community cohesion

The second impact ICOS Women aimed to achieve was that 'communities are more cohesive and integrated'. Whilst the project describes itself as addressing gaps in specialist provision for Eastern European women, it makes clear that it is open to all.

The project has provided strong cohesion benefits for the Polish community. Participants spoke of feeling unconnected to the Polish community before they joined, because they were new to the area or not a member of social groups or a church. Polish women appreciated that their children - many of whom were raised as English speakers - had the chance to hear and use the Polish language during activities. One woman reflected that learning more about Poland was an unexpected benefit.

"Surprising me to me, the community aspect, I am learning more about Polish community... I'm feeling more Polish than I ever did in Poland" S

"Made friends – it wasn't just the activity, it was social and connection to my community"

To begin with, the project was attended by mainly Polish women, but it has become much more diverse (see Section 2.2). When asked about any additional milestones they had achieved¹⁷ more than half of responses (55.3%) reported feeling more connected to the community.

Events to foster understanding between communities have been key. Amongst the strongest indications that the project has fostered community integration are the intercultural friendships that have formed, borne out of a shared experience of isolation or 'not fitting in'. This has included friendships with British women.

"...some [from other countries] found friendship with Eastern European women and it is taken outside of the group..." Staff member

"We have a really good group of British people – it is so lovely, despite the hatred on TV, they are genuinely interested in you and we will discover that we are all the same" Staff member

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

The growing diversity has presented some operational challenges. The team were overly reliant on Google Translate, and felt more translation would be helpful. Word of mouth has been effective at reaching Eastern European communities, but reaching others would require more targeted awareness raising amongst other community groups. There has been success in securing volunteers from many nationalities, but none has yet joined the PSG (another attempt to recruit beyond the Polish community is imminent).

¹⁷ Exit Forms – Willan, ICOS, 2025; 74 respondents reporting 235 additional milestones

9. Areas for Development

9.1 Measuring impact

Data measurement was complicated by the differing reporting requirements of the two main funders. This is common to many charities and cannot always be avoided. Areas to strengthen within ICOS's control include the following:

- The count of activities and attendances helped demonstrate reach, but records appear to have undercounted the PSG contribution.
- The membership list, combined across projects, provided helpful data about demographics and presenting problems. Drop down options would prevent misspellings and improve data consistency, making monitoring and analysis easier.
- The exit forms were a useful source of outcomes and satisfaction data, demonstrating impact. Being able to combine these would provide more comprehensive information - again, drop down options would ease analysis.
- An occasional repeat of the survey used for this evaluation would give a wider pool of women the opportunity to shape the service and provide powerful testimonial data.

9.2 Service development

When asked what ICOS Women could do to improve, the most common survey response was 'nothing'. More than 50% said it could not be improved or did not make a suggestion. The next most frequent suggestion was 'more of the same'. Some expanded by saying it would be good to have more choice to fit around work or families.

"More activities during school half terms as with children being at school chances are less to join activities during school time."

"More events at times/days suitable for women in full time employment."

It was important that activities remained free or low cost, to ensure all could participate. One person felt that more central locations should be used, and one asked for more explanation of how to do activities at the beginning of sessions.

Women felt there was scope for increased advertising, both of ICOS Women's activities and those of other relevant local charities. Wider advertising would need to be managed carefully as some activities already appear oversubscribed and to favour those with regular access to WhatsApp. A floristry activity with 20 places reportedly received 50 registrations within 20 minutes.

A small number wanted a dedicated space for activities, as it was expensive and time consuming to source venues. This would enable activities to be run more consistently and frequently but would be dependent on fundraising.

Some suggested additional staff, which would also require additional funding. Suggestions included a volunteer co-ordinator and an extra staff member to give 121 advice and build on the existing domestic abuse service. Up-to-date training on immigration and domestic abuse was felt to be a gap.

9.3 Diversity

There was a wish to continue intercultural activities. A small number questioned whether ICOS Women should offer dedicated activities for other nationalities, as they had initially done for the Eastern European community.

This presents a dilemma. On the one hand, culturally specific charities, particularly small ones, have been shown to play a vital role supporting and advocating for their community¹⁸. This has been the case for ICOS Women. It has had a positive impact on the local Eastern European and particularly Polish community, forging strong bonds of friendship and support. These communities are where ICOS Women's roots lie - and these communities have driven the project to achieve what it has.

On the other hand, the women have benefited from socialising with a diverse group, while women from other countries have felt welcomed and some have been motivated to 'give back' by volunteering.

On balance, if the ICOS Women project moves too far from its original purpose and tries to be all things to all people, it risks diluting its impact and duplicating other organisations' work.

Instead, ICOS Women should ensure that being 'open to all' is, as one survey respondent said, "intentional", building on successful elements of its existing approach. This could, for example, involve committing to and expanding the calendar of events to bring nationalities together and celebrate different cultures. Finding ways to reflect voices from other communities at the PSG and beyond will help keep this on the agenda.

9.4 Growth

Staff and some PSG members had ambitions beyond 'more of the same'. A question was raised as to whether the project would benefit from becoming a standalone charity. Whilst the current arrangement, being hosted by ICOS, was working, some staff felt that being women-led would be empowering and could open up funding opportunities. For example, some domestic abuse funding was only open to women-only organisations. At the focus group, the women discussed the power of being truly women-led.

A decision as to become a standalone charity, and in what legal form, would require a full business case that considered the benefits of current arrangements - such as shared space, equipment and technical advice from ICOS - as well as missed opportunities. An alternative solution could be for ICOS to strengthen women's voice in its governance, management and service user forums. If the Board wished to explore these issues, the Lloyd's Bank Foundation could provide development support.

¹⁸ Dayson et al, 2018

10. Conclusions

10.1 The impact on women

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 provided flexible, long-term, practical 121 advice on issues including benefits, debt, immigration, and housing. Support 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.

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.

10.2 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.

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.

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.

Warm, fun and culturally inclusive activities. Creative, social and cross-cultural events (e.g. Know My Culture, seasonal celebrations, Women's Marketplace) fostered joy, shared learning and cohesion. These events helped women express identity and build bridges across nationalities.

10.3 Areas for improvement

Combined and simplified data collection. Monitoring systems would benefit from consistency across projects and more standardised options to reduce duplication and errors. The data on nationality and language (collected for both main funders) is comprehensive, but the frequency of attendance for these groups is unknown. Understanding who comes back would help refine the offer.

Diversity and inclusive engagement. The project remains primarily for and shaped by Eastern European and Polish women. However, the project is 'open to all' and has been attended by women of many nationalities. Maintaining this open-door approach will require avenues for other women to share their experiences and ideas for activities. Repeating the evaluation survey, targeting PSG recruitment to another nationality, and extending intercultural activities should achieve this.

Enhanced promotion and communication. Communication has relied heavily on word of mouth and WhatsApp. This has been effective – participation has grown – but also risks creating barriers. Promotion via other community groups could help maintain the "open to all" ethos. Women spoke of activities filling up quickly and being over-subscribed. Promoting activities first to those who missed out previously would help reach women who are currently under-represented or slower on social media.

There is also an opportunity to signpost more external services alongside ICOS Women's own activities, broadening the range of support available.

Demand has outgrown current staffing levels and venue access. Women and staff suggested adding roles (e.g. a volunteer coordinator, an additional advice worker) and securing more consistent, affordable space for activities. Oversubscribed sessions highlight the need for greater capacity, particularly during school holidays and outside school hours. Growth in these areas is, of course, dependent on additional funding.

In conclusion, the ICOS Women project has been greater than the sum of its parts because the women who have benefitted have had the compassion and motivation to help others. However it chooses to grow, it will remain a cherished part of many women's lives.

11. Recommendations

11.1 Actions achievable within current or limited resources

- Continue delivering the core model of 121 advice, Women's Group, Mum's Club, creative and social activities, as these are proven to be impactful and well-attended.
- Sustain participant-led design by maintaining regular PSG meetings. Their lived experience and insight should continue to guide activity planning and service improvements.
- Increase feedback opportunities by repeating the participant survey annually, to gain ongoing insight into changing needs and testimonials to encourage new women to join.
- Improve data consistency by using clearer drop-down categories on forms (e.g. nationality, presenting problems, activity type), and by ensuring volunteer and PSG contributions are consistently recorded.
- Strengthen inclusive engagement by rotating activity themes to reflect different cultures and encouraging women of other nationalities to co-design or lead selected sessions.
- For larger scale events, send invites to other community organisations, to grow the successful International Women's Day celebration and seasonal social events.
- Provide clearer instructions at the start of creative or skills-based sessions to help participants feel confident and included.
- Address oversubscription fairly through simple approaches such as a waiting list and offering activities first to those who missed out previously.
- Ask whether a volunteer could create a simple monthly "What's On" across WhatsApp groups, including relevant local services and partner activities.

11.2 Priorities if additional funding can be secured

Recruitment priorities to improve staff capacity:

- a Volunteer Coordinator to manage recruitment, training and support – this would unlock further capacity to support an increase in activities and events;
- an additional worker to support 121 specialist advice not available elsewhere (immigration, domestic abuse, and complex case navigation).

More consistent, affordable community space to host group activities would reduce the time currently spent sourcing venues.

Expand activity provision during school holidays and outside school hours.

Explore options for organisational development, starting with lower cost, less complex options:

- with support from Lloyds Bank Foundation, explore fundraising potential within current structures;
- if ICOS is supportive, and with support from Lloyds Bank Foundation, explore the potential to develop the role of women within ICOS governance and decision-making structures;
- if these do not overcome perceived barriers to growth, develop a business case setting out the benefits and costs of setting up a standalone women-led charity.

12. Sources & References

12.1 Sources

ICOS (2026). *Women's Urgent Support Fund Round 2, July – December 2025. Draft*. Report to the National Lottery Community Fund & Smallwood Trust.

ICOS (2025). *Women's Urgent Support Fund Round 2, January – June 2025*. Report to the National Lottery Community Fund & Smallwood Trust.

ICOS (2025, October). *Willan & Smallwood Combined 121 Advice Session Records, 01/02/2023 to 30/09/2025*.

ICOS (2025, October). *Willan & Smallwood Combined List of Members, 01/02/2023 to 30/09/2025*.

ICOS (2025, October). *Willan & Smallwood Combined List of Registrations, 01/02/2023 to 30/09/2025*.

ICOS (2025, October). *Willan Exit Forms, 01/02/2023 to 31/01/2025*.

ICOS (2025, October). *Willan Self-reported Statement Score (SWEMWBS & Internal Monitoring Statements), 01/02/2023 to 31/01/2025*.

ICOS (2024, February). *Year One Report, February 2023 – January 2024*. Report to the Willan Charitable Trust.

12.2 References

Dayson, C., Baker, L. & Rees, J. (2018). *The value of small. In-depth research into the distinctive contribution, value and experiences of small and medium-sized charities in England and Wales*. Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University, IVAR & the Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership at the Open University. Available at <https://www.ivar.org.uk/publication/value-of-small/>

Harvey-Golding, L., Phillips, C., Simpson, D., Smiles, J., Wysocka, J. & Chantkowski, M. (2024). 'They see us as an easy target': discrimination and hate crime against Eastern European women living in the UK. *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*. pp. 1-17. ISSN 2398-6808

Wysocka, J., Alderson, H., Scott, S., Kaner, E., & Shenton, F. (2025). *Together Through Crisis: an exploration of challenges and responses to the cost of living crisis affecting the wellbeing of Eastern European women and children in the North East*. Newcastle University, NIHR, ICOS & ICOS Women. Available at <https://arc-nenc.nihr.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/together-through-crisis-report-final-report-icos-003.pdf>