

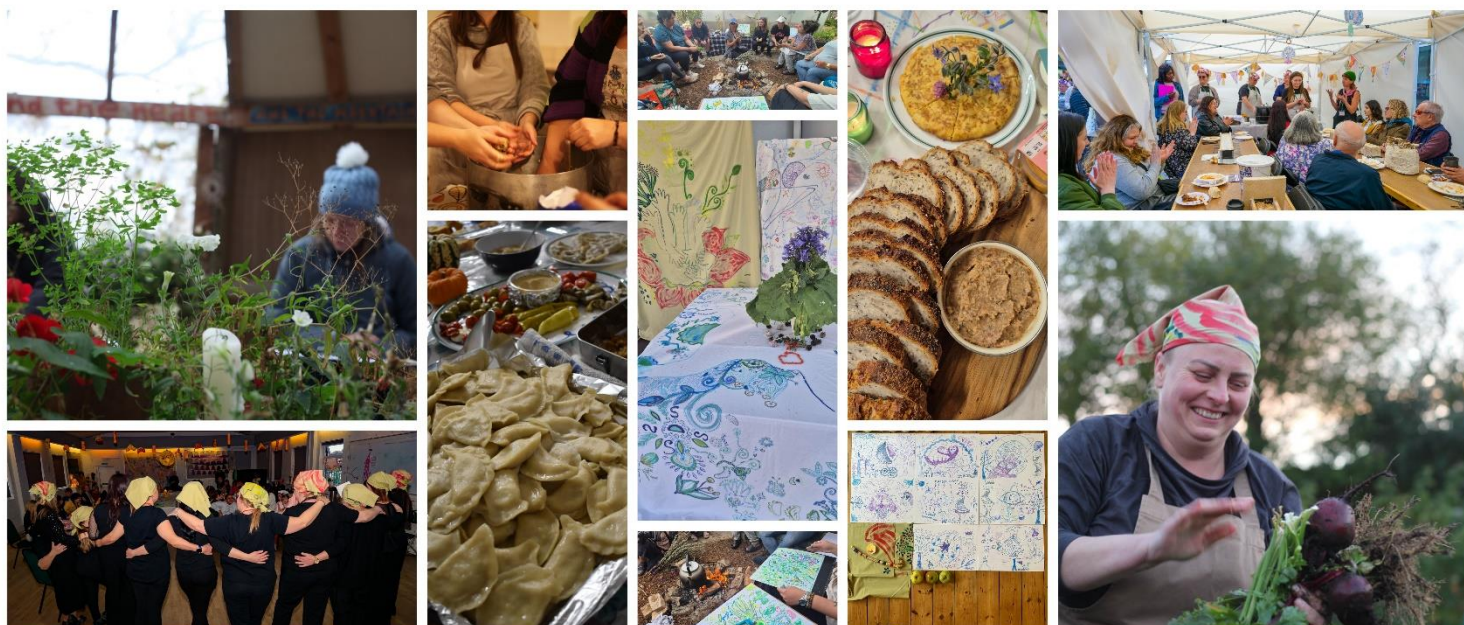
Pieroginie Collective – ICOS Women Community Cohesion Commission Report

Reflecting back on your original proposal, how did the project develop and what was delivered through this commission?

ICOS Women will deliver an Eastern European festival in Sunderland. The group was involved in a co-created research project looking at women's migration stories to Sunderland and barriers they have experienced along the way through art work.

The project has focused on creating a collaborative, arts-based exploration of Eastern European women's migration experiences in Sunderland, showcased through delivery of an event celebrating culture, creativity, and diversity. As the project developed, it evolved into a participatory and community-led process shaped directly by the women involved.

ICOS Women worked closely with an artist Sabina Sallis on co-creating this project aimed at improving Community Cohesion in Sunderland through creativity. Working together with Sabina we have delivered bi-weekly sessions which took place on Friday evenings at St Michaels Community Centre (the sessions were open to all women to attend). During the sessions the women participated in a variety of activities, the creative delivery brought the project to life through a series of workshops and artistic activities inspired by participants lived experiences.



Activities included:



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- Storytelling
- Cooking and sharing traditional recipes
- Painting
- Balm making
- Performing arts
- Exhibition installations
- Dancing and meditation
- Herbal knowledge exchange
- Creating artwork using natural materials such as plants, wood, mushrooms, and cotton

Key events within our project included:

Sunderland Food Festival – June 2025

In partnership with Threads in the Ground, the group hosted a Community Feast as part of the Sunderland Food Festival. Using donated oyster mushrooms grown from living sculptures, group volunteers prepared traditional Polish dishes that celebrated both cultural heritage and sustainability. The event welcomed 41 local residents and created opportunities for cultural exchange and community connection.

EXPO Pavilion Exhibition – August 2025

The Pieroginie Collective presented a live exhibition at EXPO Pavilion in Keel Square. The exhibition showcased artwork exploring themes of friendship, migration, culture, and community, giving participants a platform to share their voices and lived experiences publicly.

Community Feast– March 2026

A major outcome of the project was the decision to centre the final phase around a “Community Feast.” Enabling participants to express identity, memory, and belonging through food and community conversations.

The event showcased artwork created throughout the project, shared migration stories through creative interpretation, and celebrated the diverse cultural heritage of participants by sharing traditional food with the wider Sunderland community.

The event was delivered in collaboration with the FODI’s Women’s Group, whose members contributed artwork and prepared dishes from a range of countries and cultures. In preparation, the ICOS Women’s Group



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participated in collective cooking sessions where they learned to make pierogi together and experimented with different recipes. The day before the event, volunteers prepared over 200 pierogis, alongside soup, bread, garnishes, and other dishes served during the feast.

Participants also designed the atmosphere of the event by creating handmade table decorations, lanterns, tablecloths, and water jugs, ensuring the space reflected the collective's creativity and cultural identity.

The feast included interactive workshops and “conversational menus,” which encouraged attendees to engage in meaningful discussions while sharing food. This approach created an inclusive environment that fostered deeper connections, cultural exchange, and dialogue around the challenges faced by migrant women.

The final celebration event was attended by a very diverse audience, participants from all ages including children and elderly (with eldest participant being 77 years old), and participants of all backgrounds, including: Poland (52%), White British (28%), Iran (8%), Afghanistan (6%). And Smaller numbers from: Pakistan, Romania, Lithuania and Africa.



Feedback from our event:

From our feedback forms which we have gathered from the event, 100% of participants stated that they have met people



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from different backgrounds, which strongly suggests the event successfully created an inclusive, diverse environment where people interacted beyond their usual social circles. 95% stated that the event helped them to build trust in their local community. 95% stated that the event has had an impact on their awareness of cultural understanding and 82% have rated the event as a 10 (on a scale from 1-10) for achieving a strong sense of belonging.

Feedback from participants:

When asked what they have enjoyed the most about the event, participants stated that food and social connection played a big role during the event, participants comments included:

“Meeting people I would not usually meet and delicious food!”

“Meet new people and try new food, world food and people amazing.”

“Meeting people from different backgrounds and sharing food.”

Many responses have emphasised interaction and relationship-building, but the event has also achieved the aim of intercultural understanding.

“The food, the conversations and the art work, community spirit, beautiful event.”

“I really enjoyed meeting new people and talking about our lives”

“Just being a part of community”

What learning would you like to share with The Cultural Spring and the steering group? What have been the areas that have been successful and should be carried forward into future projects? What have been the challenges during this project and how can these be overcome for future projects? *Please include learning for Cultural Spring in this project as this will help us to ensure we continue to improve how we support artists and organisations during commissions.*

One of the key learnings from this project was the importance of allowing projects to evolve organically through genuine co-creation with participants. While the original proposal focused on creating an Eastern European Festival, the project developed into a much broader, community-led programme shaped directly by the women involved, showcasing their art work and connection through food. Allowing participants to guide the direction of the work created a stronger sense of ownership, trust, and authenticity throughout the process.

A major success of the project was the creation of safe and welcoming spaces where women felt comfortable sharing personal stories, cultural traditions, and creative ideas. The combination of food, art, storytelling, and hands-on creative activities proved particularly effective in building relationships and



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encouraging participation from individuals who may not normally engage with arts projects. The Community Feast model became an especially powerful tool for connection, creating opportunities for meaningful conversations and cultural exchange in an accessible and inclusive environment.

One challenge during the project was balancing the evolving nature of co-created work with project timelines and organisational planning. As participants became more involved in shaping the direction of the project, activities and outcomes developed in ways that were not originally anticipated. While this ultimately strengthened the project, it required flexibility.

Another challenge was sustaining engagement during every session (some women only attended few sessions due to their commitments while others were able to participate in most activities) while recognising the personal responsibilities and barriers faced by the women, including childcare, work commitments, language barriers, and confidence levels. Flexible and informal engagement methods, shared meals, and practical creative activities helped to overcome these barriers.

In terms of the aims for the Community Cohesion commissions:

- ***Support the rebuilding of social trust and promote cohesion between communities which will reduce the risk of further disorder in the future.***
- ***High quality, ambitious engagement with participants, creating work with strong artistic integrity.***
- ***A strong connection to our communities; responding to stories, everyday realities, places, people, histories, hopes and ambitions.***
- ***An opportunity for local individuals to express their voices, become decision-makers, and collaboratively develop a project that truly represents their community/ communities.***
- ***Innovative approaches to building relationships and engaging local people.***
- ***The potential to create inspiring connections/artwork/events in a community driven and safe environment.***

To what extent have these been achieved through your commission?

The project successfully supported community cohesion by bringing together people from different cultural backgrounds, generations, and communities through shared experiences. Events such as the Sunderland Food Festival feast and the final Community Feast created opportunities for local residents to connect, learn from one another, and challenge misconceptions in a positive setting. The use of “conversational menus” and collaborative creative activities encouraged deeper dialogue and strengthened social trust between participants and audiences.

Another successful outcome was the emergence of the Pieroginie Collective, which demonstrated how creative community projects can lead to long-



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term engagement, confidence-building, and leadership development. Participants became decision-makers within the project, contributing not only ideas but also leading activities, preparing food, creating artwork, and shaping the atmosphere and delivery of events. This level of ownership should be carried forward into future projects.

Overall, the project strongly achieved the aims of the Community Cohesion programme. The project supported the rebuilding of social trust and cohesion by bringing communities together through shared creative experiences. Participants became active decision-makers and collaborators, shaping work that authentically represented their communities. The project used innovative and accessible approaches to engagement through food, storytelling, sustainability, and participatory art, while creating inspiring and safe environments for connection and creativity.

There were some specific targets set by the steering group and funders for this commission:

- **Engage a minimum of 30 participants and a minimum of 150 people as audiences at events/exhibitions during the duration of this agreement, of which the majority will be Sunderland postcodes.**
- **A minimum of 3 artistically led activities such as a workshop programme, festival and/or creative books.**

To what extent have these been met or exceeded? For any targets not met, what plans are in place to reach more people through this work?

In total, 31 women and 6 children actively participated in the planning, co-creation, and delivery of the Community Feast activities and sessions, exceeding the target of engaging a minimum of 30 participants. Participants were involved throughout the creative process, including storytelling sessions, cooking workshops, artistic activities, exhibition preparation, and event delivery. The majority of participants were from Sunderland postcodes and represented a diverse range of cultural backgrounds.

The audience engagement target was also exceeded across the duration of the project. The June 2025 Sunderland Food Festival Community Feast engaged 41 local residents,

while the March 2026 Community Feast and Eastern European Festival attracted 59 attendees. In addition, the EXPO Pavilion exhibition and wider project activities engaged further members of the public, bringing the total audience reach to well over 150 people throughout the commission period.



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The project also exceeded the target of delivering a minimum of three artistically led activities. These included:

- A programme of creative workshops involving storytelling, visual art, cooking, herbal knowledge exchange, dance, and creative making using natural materials.
- The Sunderland Food Festival Community Feast delivered in partnership with Threads in the Ground.
- The live exhibition at the EXPO Pavilion in Keel Square.
- The final Eastern European Festival and “Pieroginie Community Feast” in March 2026.

The project created multiple opportunities for artistic participation, community collaboration, and public engagement, while ensuring that participants were directly involved in shaping and delivering the work.

One important achievement beyond the original targets was the development of the Pieroginie Collective, an emerging artist group formed through the project, which now includes 25 members. This demonstrates the longer-term impact of the commission in supporting confidence, leadership, creativity, and ongoing community



participation.

Feedback - Are there specific stories or "behind-the-scenes" moments we should highlight in our final report to stakeholders? What has



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been the most surprising feedback you've received from the public so far?

Jola, originally from Poland, has been attending the ICOS Women's Group, where she's taken part in creative workshops and helped plan our recent Community Feast. At first, Jola found it difficult to be social due to anxiety and ongoing health challenges. Being around new people wasn't always easy. However, through the group, she found a safe and welcoming space where she could connect with other women, take part in activities, and focus on her wellbeing. Over time, something changed Jola began to feel more confident, more comfortable, and more empowered. She played an active role in designing a conversation workshop for the Community Feast, an experience she felt truly proud of. During the event, she was able to sit with people she had never met before, share her personal story of moving to the UK, how she ended up in Sunderland, and talk about the food she had prepared. She even tried new foods from Afghanistan and Iran, something she hadn't experienced before! Jola shared that being part of this project gave her a real sense of belonging, improved her confidence, and had a positive impact on her mental wellbeing.

What do you think the legacy could be for this work, where would you like to see it go next? Are there any groups / communities you'd like to explore this work with?

We believe the legacy of this work is the creation of long-term relationships, confidence, and community-led creative practice that will continue beyond the commission itself. One of the most significant outcomes has been the formation of the Pieroginie Collective, an emerging group of women who have developed confidence in sharing their stories, leading activities, and using creativity as a way to connect with others. We would like to continue supporting the collective to grow through future exhibitions, workshops, community feasts, and collaborative arts projects across Sunderland.

We would also like to further develop the "Community Feast" model as an ongoing creative and community engagement approach. The combination of food, storytelling, art, and conversation proved highly effective in building trust and encouraging participation from people who may not usually engage with arts or cultural programmes. We see strong potential for this model to continue bringing communities together and strengthening community cohesion in Sunderland.

In the future, we would like to collaborate with a wider range of community groups within Sunderland. We are particularly interested in exploring how shared cultural practices, creative activities, and food can create spaces for dialogue, belonging, and mutual understanding between different communities.

We would also like to continue working with artists, including Sabina Sallis and organisations such as Threads in the Ground, FODI and building on the successful partnerships developed through this commission. There



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is potential for the work to expand into larger festivals, touring community events, creative publications and exhibitions.

