



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

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Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Background | 3 |
| Research overview | 4 |
| Research co-designed with ICOS Women’s group | 4 |
| Research Methods | 5 |
| Findings from Semi-structured interviews | 7 |
| Family Circumstances | 7 |
| Effects of the Cost of Living Crisis on wellbeing | 8 |
| Creative workshops with children and young people | 12 |
| Finding’s Creative Workshops with children and young people | 13 |
| The support ICOS provided to women who took part in interviews | 16 |
| Final workshop and live artwork | 17 |
| What is needed/recommendations for action | 18 |
| Conclusion | 18 |

Background:

Since 2019 International Community Organisation of Sunderland (ICOS) has been delivering the first ever Eastern European women's group in the North East (<https://icos.org.uk/icos-women/>), in response to the issues Eastern European (EE) communities face. From our work we know there are clear gaps in specialist provision for EE women at grass-roots level cultural participation, as they are often not seen as a group with distinctive needs and identity. EE women often have their access to opportunities restricted by language barriers, lack of employment skills, access to information, low confidence or leadership opportunities which has contributed to lack of further development within the community.

EE women living in Sunderland face numerous obstacles to achieving and progressing with their lives. Between May 2021 and December 2021, ICOS worked on a research project with University of Sunderland researching the experiences of EE women living in Tyne and Wear. This research uncovered widespread discrimination, racism and misogyny directed at EE communities. A survey of 127 EE women showed that they experience discrimination in all areas of public life, including in employment, education, health care, housing, transport and by public bodies.



Findings highlighted several barriers and challenges for EE women, in terms of their access to health care and support services, including difficulties accessing GP, health care, support and other public services. These barriers and challenges were predominantly related to language and communication (Harvey-Golding, Simpson, Phillips, and Smiles (2021)).

Our second research project with ICOS women highlighted that EE women face significant barriers accessing healthcare due to a number of issues, including access to interpreting and fear of not being taken seriously by healthcare staff due to limited English language skills, limited access to information and difficulties with accessing and registering with GP services, immigration status and lack of knowledge and resources for those with pre-settled status (Community Buddies Report, 2023)

Research overview:

Our current third research project was a collaboration between ICOS, Newcastle University and the NIHR North East and North Cumbria Applied Research Collaboration (NENC ARC).

The research focuses on issues facing EE women and their children living in Sunderland (and surrounding areas), and particularly explored the extent to which the cost of living crisis impacts their wellbeing. Additionally, it explored the acceptability and role of ICOS's interventions in supporting the families to deal with the crisis.



Research co-designed with ICOS Women's group:

We established a Project Steering Group in 2023 involving 9 EE women, who regularly volunteer for the ICOS Women project. The women involved have knowledge and lived experience of needs and issues facing EE women and families living in the North East. The project steering group has met on regular basis to shape this project including:

- **Consultations on recruitment**
- **Consultations and designing research project questions**
- **Delivery of creative workshops for children (including the venue, accessibility, activity that the children will take part in)**
- **Wellbeing support for women and children for those who took part in the project, for example what wellbeing activities or support the women and children might need during the project**
- **Involvement in dissemination workshop**



Research Methods:

This was a mixed methods study which included qualitative interviews with EE women and creative workshops with EE women and their children, as well as a final workshop bringing together professionals and lived experience individuals to sense check the findings and co-produce a piece of visual artwork representing key findings and areas of consideration regarding the cost-of-living crisis. The mixed methods approach, captured participants' views through the spoken word and by using creative approaches, therefore increasing levels of inclusivity.

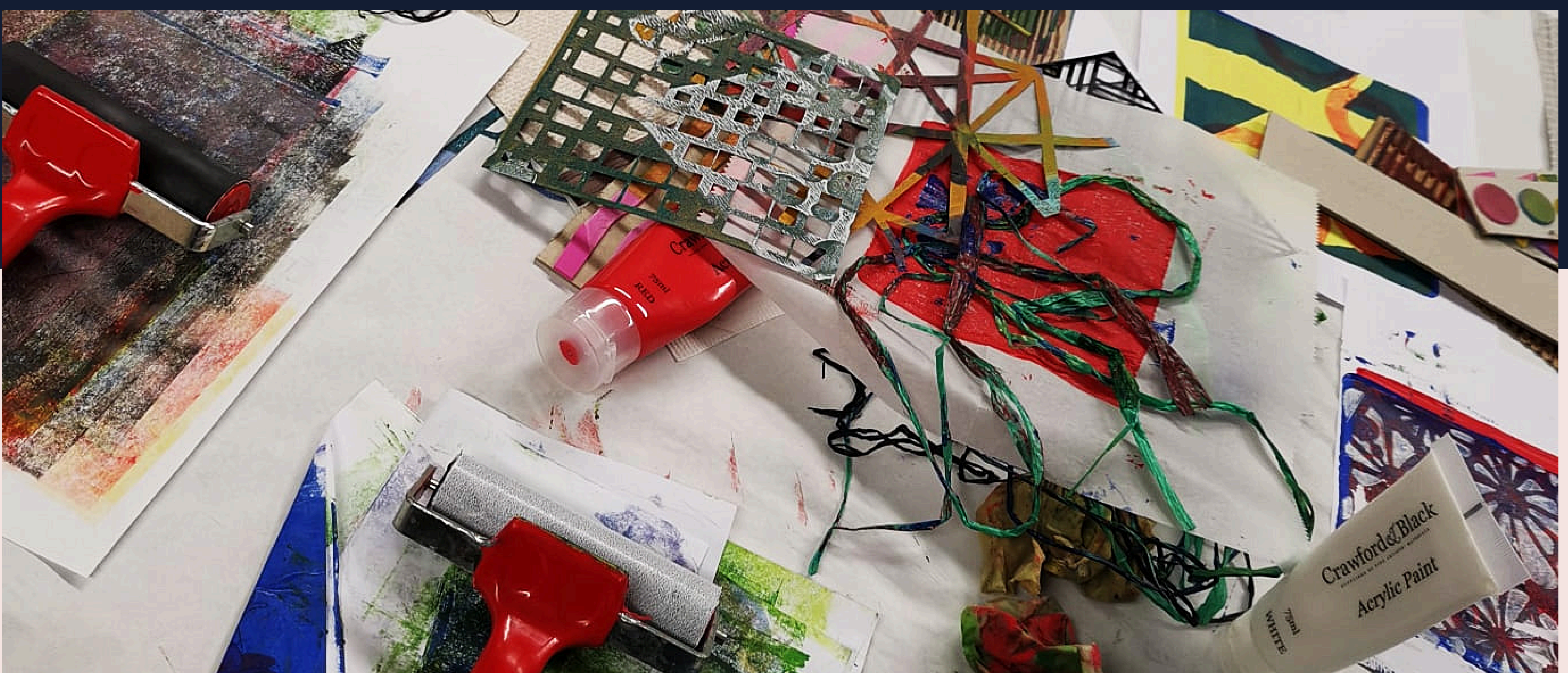
Ethical approval was granted by Newcastle University (Reference number 2622/35255/2022)

Participants were recruited through using ICOS social media channels such as Facebook, leaflets and existing projects delivered by ICOS.

Participants were provided with a participant information sheet outlining the purpose of the study, what involvement would include and how the findings would be used. Additionally, each individual was given a consent form to sign in advance of the interview.

Interviews took place at ICOS office or online, at the request of participants. Each participant was provided the opportunity to take part in the interview in English or Polish. The lead author conducted all interviews.

Interview were audio recorded with the participants consent and transcribed verbatim, with interviews being conducted in Polish being translated to English for analysis purposes. Participant numbers were allocated to ensure anonymity of participants.



Findings from semi-structured interviews:

Semi-structured interviews took place between October 2023 and January 2024 with 10 EE women. Findings are presented below:

Family Circumstances:

The majority of the women interviewed stated that they live in a property managed by a local social housing provider in Sunderland, women also expressed finding it difficult to pay for rent and other utility bills.

P1: "I live with my husband, disabled mother and two children, our house is rented from Gentoo... I have problems with paying for energy, sometimes for the rent for my house"

Three women stated they have owned their houses but the cost of living crisis also had a negative effect on their lives, especially when their mortgage has risen.

P6: "We have a mortgage on the house... We just found out that our mortgage is going up so it's terrifying...most of the wages is going on...the bills so these days we can't afford many luxuries."

Women talked about barriers to finding employment due to caring responsibilities, not only relating to child care but also caring for disabled family members therefore they are unable to take up full time employment.

Women talked about finding it difficult to find employment which is flexible, taking into consideration care responsibilities single mothers could not take up part-time employment due to the lack of a support network.

P2: "I am not working, I am looking for work during school hours of my son and I find it very difficult to find..."

P1: "I am a person currently unemployed as I am a carer for my disabled mother"

Majority of the women interviewed who did state that they were in full-time employment, usually had a position in manufacturing. Often, they were unable to change their career or found it difficult to go back to education due to the costs involved. One woman also talked about being unable to change their career to become a teaching assistant because she could not afford it,

P10: "When Covid started, I remember that in our factory there wasn't that much work ..."

P6: "I was thinking about changing career, as a teacher assistant... I was thinking that will be great opportunity for me to do something different, but I couldn't afford..."

Effects of the Cost of Living Crisis on wellbeing:

Families experienced distress due to the rising prices of energy bills, in some circumstances they are unable to afford to pay their bills, putting their household in debt. All women mentioned feeling worried and anxious about energy prices going up. Women said the impact of the raising energy has affected their mental wellbeing in a negative way.

P4: "I had about 2 months ago outstanding debt on my gas and electric"

P3: "...I'm also worried about the increase of ermm... electricity and gas prices. So of course it impacts on the temperature that I have at home because I have to lower it down"

P1: "this is more mental wellbeing related problems. Because it mostly related to the fact there was never enough money due to the fast rising costs for example, 100% gas and electric energy went up and this for me was, when I previously paid a bill of £110 went up to £220, £110 I pay extra"

Women expressed that due to the rising cost of groceries and food, they had to change their shopping habits, this included shopping at discount stores, yellow stickers, buying products which are not healthy, unable to buy their children's favourite food or buying cheap own brand products.



P1: "Meaning I will buy standard products for consumption. If I have a choice between buying an organic banana or buy a normal banana, I will buy the normal banana."

P7: "...we swapped Asda and Morrison's to Lidl and Aldi."

P8: "...we had to switch to shops that are discount shops, or made it our routine to shop yellow stickers..."

One participant talked about having anaemia because she could not afford nutritious food or public transport, she lost weight and it impacted her physical health.

P5: "The doctor made me some tests... he told me ...You are an anaemia?... You must to eat more green something... I lost 20 pounds of my weight. Probably because I walk a lot, I walk... and reduce my quantities."



Effects of the Cost of Living Crisis on children:

Families are unable to participate in family activities with their children as they used to be able to e.g. after school activities, going out on trips, meals out or even go swimming. Families also expressed being unable to go visit their families in their home countries during school holidays.

P1: "...when there is a crisis I can't enjoy or afford additional things like extra activities for my child such as dancing class or football..."

P7: "It used to be easier to go have a meal in town once in a while, now I have stopped that altogether because getting to town you know? The bus fares, this and that... it all adds up and my benefits, well Universal Credit... emm, isn't so great, if I'm honest."

P10: "...We don't travel that often like we used to do."

There was also concern around transport costs, including when taking their children to school, this was specifically a problem for single mothers who were on Universal Credit.

P2: "...my sons transport to school, my weekly ticket is around £20 per week."

P6: "Yeah, the fuel is going up. The prices of the tickets, train tickets are expensive"

P9: "...we go swimming from time to time... but then we have to pay for the bus which also costs"

Women expressed worries about not being able to afford necessities for children such as hygiene items, healthy food, clothing and additional items such as Christmas presents. This was in particular a difficulty for the women in the winter or colder months.

P2: "I am very stressed... that this Christmas will be difficult"

P1: "...can't afford a holiday and, or to buy clothes. I don't know... winter shoes or jackets which are a lot more expensive than summer clothes..."

P4: "...my child is also stressed because I will say, even a year ago...I was able to afford to go to the shop and...I could go to JD and buy him an Adidas hoody because it's nice and he likes...During the crisis... it's been crumbling... I can't afford this so we have felt it... Me and my child has felt it...A child... and 8-year-old... an autistic child... it's a difficult for the child to understand. He used to have it and now all of a sudden, he doesn't have it..."

Support:

Families stated that they are not getting enough support from the local authority or the government, women who were in full-time employment reported that the support they were receiving was greater in previous years e.g. some families are not eligible for the £900 cost of living payments but have been eligible for the energy bills support scheme in 2022-2023.

P6: "... not much help from the government! Emm councils don't bother much as well... I think, these days..."

P4: "Well I think last year... kind of support with the energy ...it was £66 a month? ..it was more than we have been granted this year.."

P10: "...last year I had the 66 pounds then even for people who both work was quite a lot.. in my opinion that was okay because it was even for everyone"

P2: 'I get a payment... emm... child benefit and I have Universal Credit... and this simply for me in total I have 700 for living with paying electric and gas.'

Participants were very open about receiving support from charities, some participants have accessed many different charities for various support including hygiene items, clothes, food vouchers or energy vouchers.

P1: '...I picked up a grab bag... I have received for example hygiene items for my children like nappies, wipes or cleaning items... and clothing for children. I also received... vouchers for shopping for Aldi...'

One participant stated that even though she was in a very poor financial situation, she knew there was enough support from charities in her local area,

P5: "not so concerning because I have food banks. And ...I met a lot of people. That is good for with me...For example, council they helped me sometimes. A give me... give me vouchers for food."

Others were not sure where to access the support in their local area, some participants stated that they only access ICOS for support, and the support provided by ICOS has been very valuable, due to flexibility of support provided,

P2: "I only get help from ICOS with things and advice like benefits or support with housing. I have not been anywhere else."

P4: "You helped me out financially because I received food vouchers which have helped me...you helped me with filling out documents, variety, for things I need them for. If I had to do it alone, obviously I wouldn't be able to do it alone. If I had to go somewhere else, I would have to pay colossal costs... Let's be honest, that's the truth. So I thank you very very much, you do very much for me."

However, the women who were in full time employment stated that they did not access any help from charities, often because they felt like others may need support more.

P10: "No, I didn't use any, because really there are people who need it more"

Who needs support most?

Participants identified groups which have been affected most by the cost of living crisis this included the elderly, single mothers, minoritised communities and those with disabilities.

P4: "Elderly people, more because not only they are poorly and lying down, medication, use wheelchairs."

P6: "...single mothers, they struggle because they have small kids, they can go to work, or they want to go to work, but they can't afford for the childcare..."

P7: "ahh...thinking about minorities, you know? There is still a lot of people who... who's English is not communicative..."
Some participants thought charities do more than enough for people and they have limited capacity with what they can help with and that most support should come from the authorities.

P4: "...they already do enough. I will tell you this... it's never been like this before in our life where services was giving people everything..."

P2: "I think they should not give money but should give for example vouchers... for example for food or to buy like electricity or gas"

P6: 'I think they are doing already enough... I think it should go through the government'

Participant 5 talked about what other support should be provided to families during the Cost of Living Crisis and gaps identified included support that local authority should provide with school uniforms or council tax support to those in employment, especially single mothers in employment.

P9: "Mainly the older schools then the uniforms are actually really expensive... Especially when you have 3-4 kids."

P1: "...another problem is children who, emm are going to school where they need a full uniform, for example here in our Sunderland people on low income can't get any financial support for school uniform, which unfortunately is, in September, costs are extremely expensive..."

P3: "Council tax support should be... available to more people... because if you start working and your income increases, for myself... the council tax support decreased to such an extent that it was withdrawn... so I think they should look at the amount of council tax we pay. Single mothers, people on low income, people on benefits..."



We asked participants about what support should be provided to families, if any and what would this support look like?

Participants stated:

- There should be financial support towards school uniforms from the local authority
- The support provided should be long term (at the moment it is short term e.g. one off payment, voucher, or top up)
- Signpost people to services they don't know about and to spread awareness of those support services
- Sharing more information on saving money, and other support people can apply for
- More support in regards to council tax e.g. for full time employed people and single parents
- More opportunities for employment, especially for mothers with care responsibilities and flexible employment opportunities
- More places within the community that provide free meals (including for the elderly or single parents) such as soup kitchens, community cafe spaces, which are also child friendly
- Continue providing vouchers for gas, electricity and shopping through charities and local authorities
- Free activities for children and families - parties, sports such as swimming, mum's and toddler groups, wellbeing trips
- More information needs to be provided to the healthcare sector on who to refer to (in regards to charities and community organisations) for wellbeing support and the services need to be mapped out and well-coordinated -e.g. foodbanks open at different times and days
- More access to mental health support services for adults, as well as children
- Regional cooperation of charities and support services, working in partnership
- More flexible support from the local authority with less strict criteria for support
- More support for those in full time employment who are not eligible for benefits
- Council should provide bins for free, and more regular bin collection
- Better support with childcare for mothers / single mothers who would like to go into employment or training

Creative workshops with children and young people:

We delivered two creative art-based workshops with young people and children, one workshop included young people aged 7-10 years and one workshop included young people aged 10-16 years. The workshops lasted 2 hours.

Our Project Steering Group advised that it would be great to do a print making session (using foam and lino ink) with the children to explore their understanding of the Cost of Living Crisis and allow the young people to then say a few words about what they have created to best understand their views. Volunteer artists helped to deliver the creative sessions with children / young people.

Across the two creative workshops we had 17 mothers and 23 children take part and workshops were delivered in two languages.

Group 1 (7-10 years old) created work with their mothers. Most children within that group never heard of the Cost of Living Crisis so the workshop was educational to them. Some children mentioned going to the shop with their mum and not being able to get what they wanted or what they asked for. Group 2 (10-16 years old) created their own art work. Most children knew what the Cost of Living crisis is and learned about it in Geography at school. Children discussed how it will impact their future including going to University or further education.



Finding from Creative Workshops with children and young people:

During an ice breaker activity children were asked if they could visit any country in the world, where would it be and why? Many children answered their country of origin to be able to go see their families including grandparents.

Within children's art work many of the prints have represented holidays becoming more expensive and children talking about being unable to go see their grandparents during school holidays, meaning spending their holidays at home.



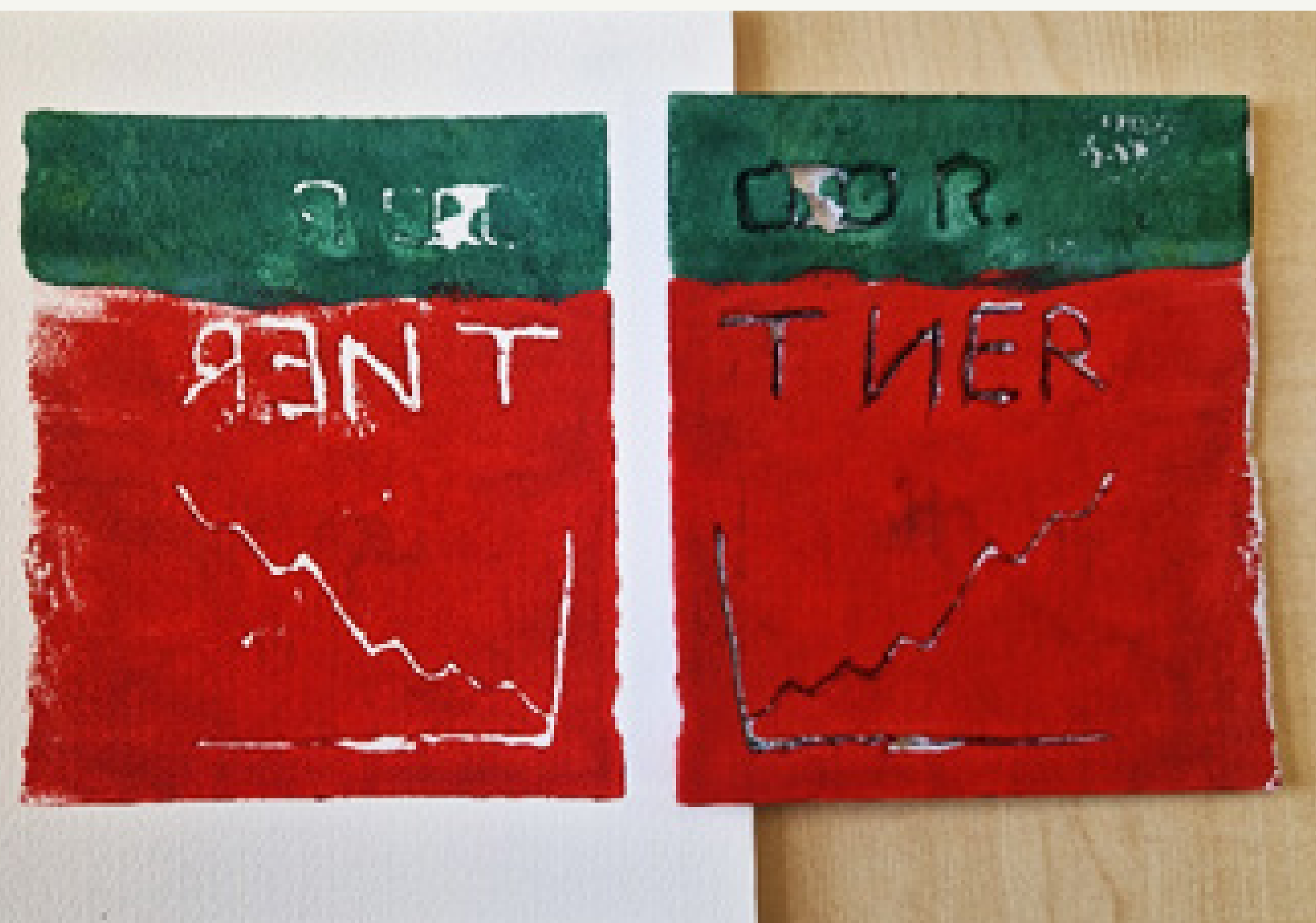
Participant (age 13):

"The rent is going up.. The cost of everyday items go up, wages don't.. We don't go on vacation as much as we used to"

Participant (age 16):

"Most money is spent on household essentials so we have much less money to spend on luxuries like holidays and clothes for example."

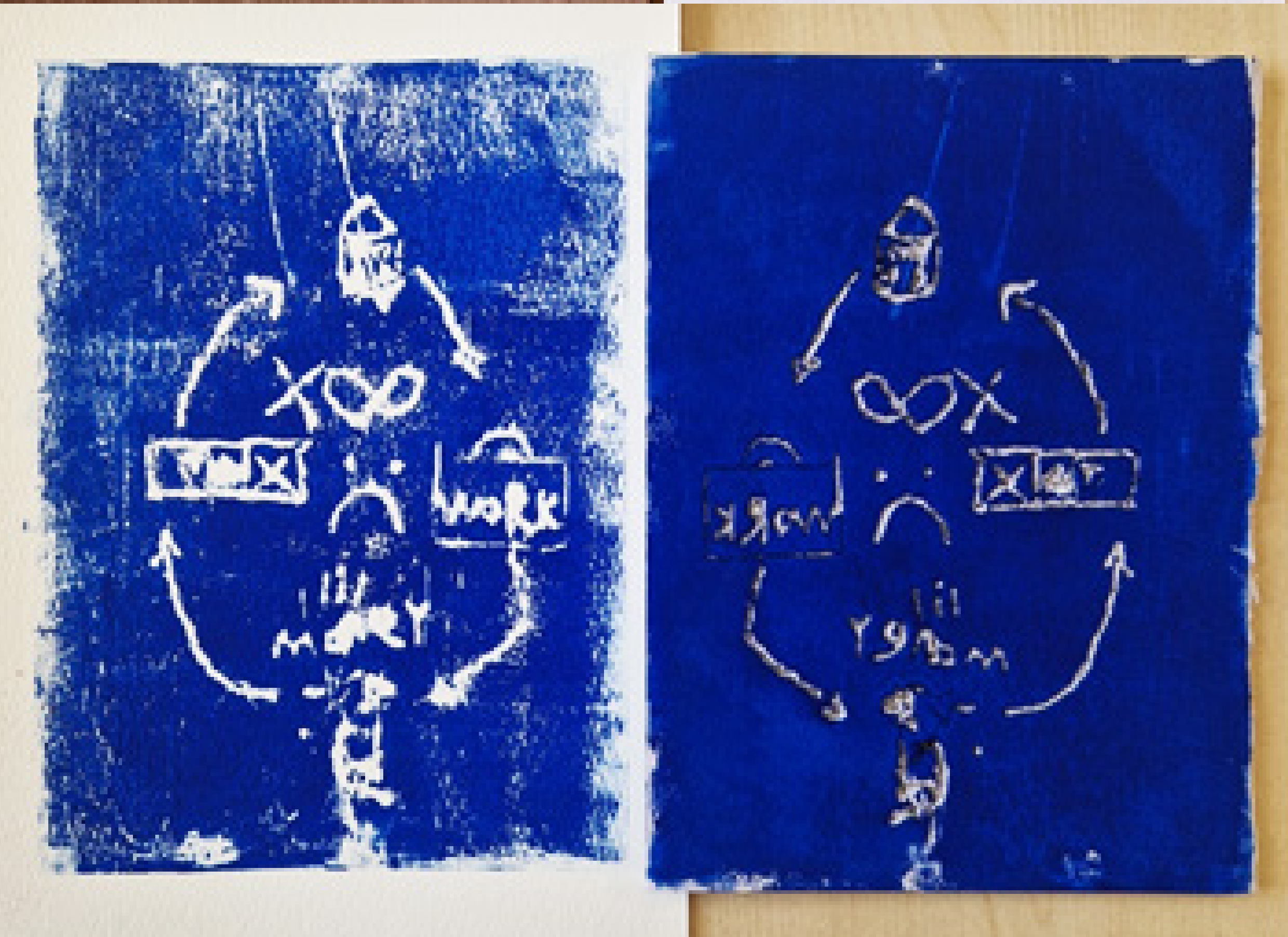
Similar to the issues discussed in the interviews, children were worried about the raising prices of groceries, housing and energy prices but wages and earnings not going up, children were worried of how this would impact their future e.g. getting their first car or attending university.



Participant (age 12):
"No food, no house and no money"



Participant (age 12):
"It will affect my and others futures because the prices will increase more and we wouldn't have enough money for them"



Participant (age 13):
"This is a cycle that resets with no change. Prices are going up wages are not going up."

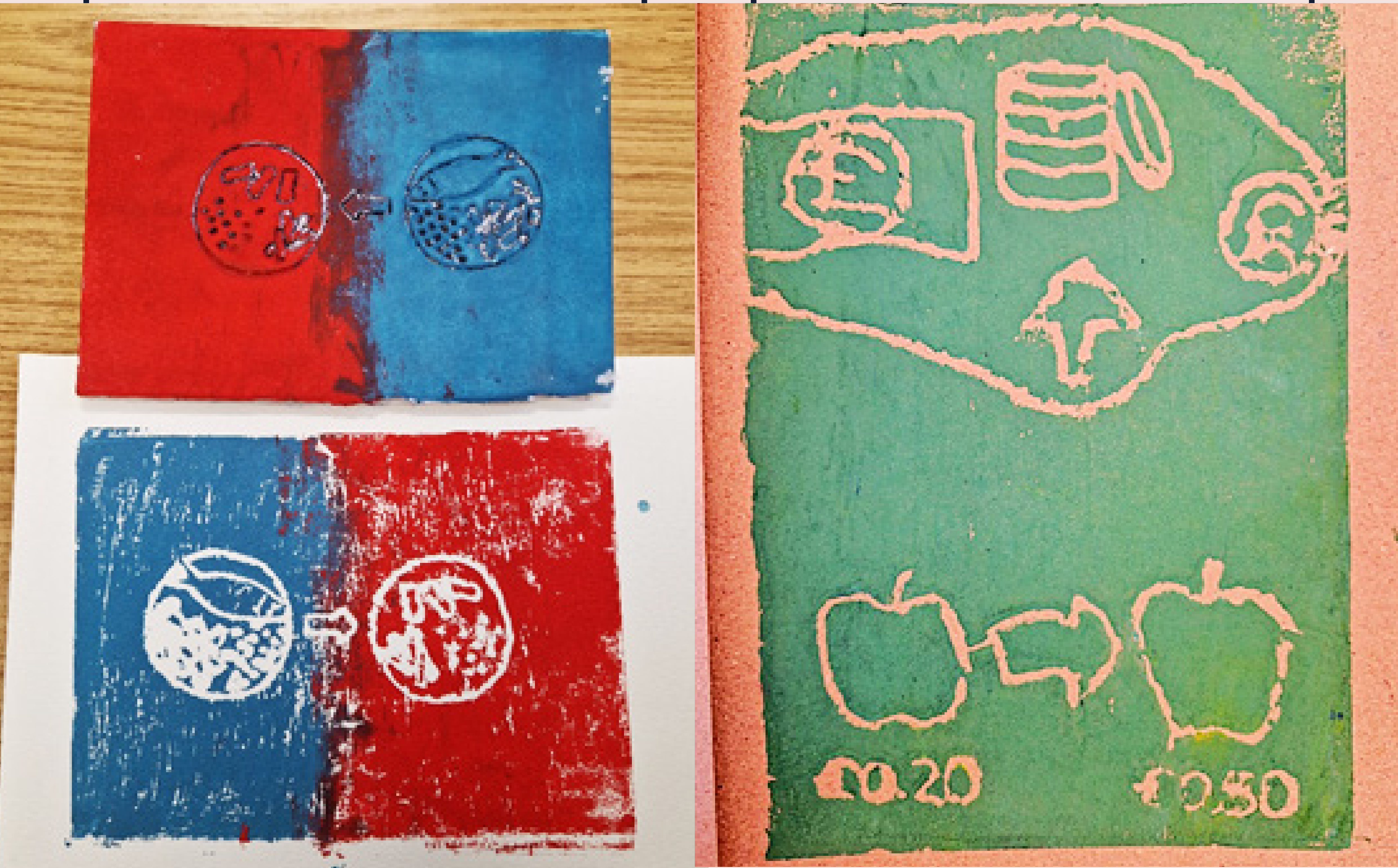
Children also illustrated how the cost of living crisis has impacted their family shopping habits, for example through buying cheaper food which is not specifically healthy and how the prices of healthy foods have risen. Again, young people put emphasis on how it will affect them in the future e.g. when attending university and having to relying on maintenance loans.

Participant (age 16):

“Food is getting more expensive so people are buying cheaper, poorer quality and less food leading to malnourishment.”

Participant (age 16):

“When going to university, I will hugely rely on student maintenance loans which will barely cover basic essentials, but won’t be enough for good quality food for example.”



The support ICOS provided to women who took part in interviews:

We are aware that the Cost of Living Crisis had an effect on the families we work with, including their physical and mental wellbeing. Post interviews the women who needed further support met with a designated member of staff on a one-to-one basis to receive the support and advice needed.

The support included:

- Women expressed worries about being able to afford Christmas presents for their children. The project support worker has referred two women (single mothers) to Love Amelia's Christmas Gift Appeal. Another woman received support with getting a new stroller from Love Amelia, a children's charity offering support to families experiencing poverty and hardship across Tyne & Wear and County Durham (<https://loveamelia.org.uk/>).
- Gas and electricity bills have been a big concern among the women interviewed. Three women received further support in relation to gas and electricity. Two women got support with top up vouchers for gas and electric through the Household Support Fund, one received support with an application for British Gas Energy Trust to help with outstanding debt, the debt has been cleared.



- Women also received support with maximising their income, including 4 women getting support with applying for benefits such as Carers Allowance, Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment, two women got support with employability (including support with job applications and CV) and one received support with applying for Child Maintenance Service.
- All women who have been interviewed have been invited to ICOS Women and ICOS Women mum's club wellbeing activities which are free for everyone to attend. 7 women have attended free wellbeing sessions with their children.
- All children and mothers who took part in the creative workshops regularly attend our wellbeing activities, and have benefitted from taking part in wellbeing sessions during school summer holidays such as arts activities, theatre, family picnics and wellbeing trips including Washington Wetlands Centre and Craggside.

Final workshop and live artwork:

A final workshop was held to present the findings from the research, sense check the findings and work collaboratively to co-produce a piece of live artwork. The final workshop was attended by 14 participants, inclusive of women involved in the project, ICOS staff and volunteers and a live artist. The workshop lasted two hours.

Following a presentation delivered by the lead author, a group discussion took place with all group participants discussing key challenges and areas of consideration regarding the cost-of-living crisis and the impact on EE Women.

The final image can be used within ICOS and other organisations with potential to support EE Families. Additionally, the artwork can be utilised within report and documents produced within ICOS to showcase the work being conducted.



What is needed/recommendations for action:

- **Look at further funding opportunities to continue co-produced research to better understand the issues experienced by EE Women, their support needs and how agencies can best support them.**
- **Share the research across our networks including with the NHS, local authorities, Universities and policy makers to raise the profile of challenges faced by EE families.**
- **Provide opportunities for EE Women:**
 1. To be part of research and have their voices heard.
 2. Provide development opportunities e.g. becoming research champions, Project Steering Group members and allow women to share their lived experience.
 3. Providing women with new skills, experiences and opportunities.

Conclusion:

The research findings highlighted that the cost of living crisis is impacting EE women's and their children's physical and mental wellbeing in a negative way through increased stress due to rising costs of bills and groceries, being unable to participate in various activities (including sports and hobbies) due to the costs involved, and having to rely on short-term emergency support provided by local charities such as foodbanks, energy vouchers and clothing banks. The research proved that EE women have a limited access to opportunities due to limited language skills and caring responsibilities which are often linked to a lack of support network due to families living outside of the UK.

In relation to children and young people's workshops, the research has shown that young people are worried about how the cost of living crisis will affect their future

including opportunities such as further education or university, as well as how it will impact their future in relation to jobs, food and their homes. Additionally, the findings show that children are feeling isolated from their families (living back in their home countries) due to being unable to visit them.

These results will allow ICOS, as well as other organisations to better understand how we can support EE women and their families who are facing such challenges through the delivery of support services including wellbeing and cultural activities for mothers and children which aim at improving their health and creating a support network, and one-to-one needs tailored support and advice services, including employability support, access to welfare benefits, financial advice and support with skills, leadership and training.

TOGETHER THROUGH CHRISIS

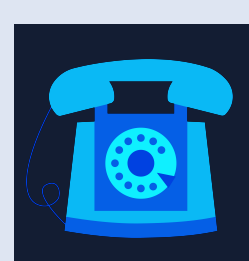


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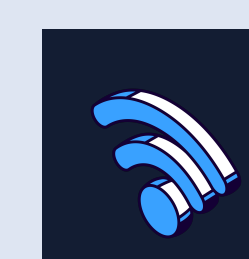
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