

the co-operative party



Policy 2025 –

Equalities

Introduction

The last Labour Government made great strides in enhancing equalities legislation, through the landmark Equalities Act 2010. The Act unified existing legislation, established nine protected characteristics and strengthened public sector duties and reasonable adjustment rules. Now, under a new Labour Government, is the time to continue the process of building a fairer, more equal society – with modern and inclusive legislation.

Across society significant inequalities remain entrenched – harming the opportunities, living standards and wellbeing of people and communities. Large employment and pay gaps persist for many groups – with disabled people having an employment rate of 53% vs. 82% for non-disabled individualsⁱ. Health and housing are deeply unequal, with a life expectancy gap of almost a decade between the most and least deprived areas. In education and criminal justice, many groups are failed by the system – leading to lifelong impediments. The co-operative movement was founded to prevent injustices and unfairness and will continue to champion creating a fairer society across Britain.

The Co-operative Party's member-led policy consultation has engaged with our diverse membership, learning from the lived experience and expertise of members. The process has engaged closely with our five Equalities Networks – + Co-operators, BAME Co-operators, the (dis)Ability Network, Co-operative Party Women, and Co-operative Party Youth. Each have made submissions to the consultation which has helped to shape the policies developed, incorporating direct lived experience from members.

The policies contained in this paper aim to continue the evolution of the UK's equality legislation, recognising new

and greater rights, freedoms and protections. The policy proposals seek to empower people of diverse communities, building trust and ensuring they can access, take part and live happy, productive lives. They aim to ensure people do not face discrimination or barriers in society, the workplace and in public spaces. Achieving this will be a prerequisite to creating a fairer society and economy, where all can thrive.

Existing Policy:

- Create a more inclusive society, ensuring all communities have equal representation, voice and visibility in parliament and politics.
- Greater action to end discrimination in society – ensuring people are not discriminated against due to their religion, sexuality, race, gender or any other characteristic.
- Implement the social definition of disability and a commitment to increasing co-production with disabled people on the design and delivery of public services.
- Tackle violence against women and girls (VAWG), with Police & Crime Commissioners playing a central role in accountable delivery of action against VAWG.

New Policy

General

Achieving a more equitable society and economy relies on tackling intersectional inequalities. Action should be taken to address inequalities and barriers to access for different groups across society – whether that's older generations, ethnic minorities, religious groups, asylum seekers or any other group.

Many people face multiple intersectional disadvantages – which impacts their career prospects and living standards. Intersectional inequalities are often the most entrenched and require the most targeted policies to reduce their impact on lives. Below are a range of policy interventions which could reduce intersectional inequalities, while increasing accessibility to employment, improving civic engagement and increasing social cohesion.

- **Introduce pay gap reporting for LGBTQ+, disabled people and BAME – creating parity with gender pay gap reporting**
 - Pay gap reporting would apply to large companies of 250+ staff.
- **Commit to introduce a new strategy to improve the recognition of foreign professional qualifications**
 - Reduce existing bureaucracy and barriers to entry which harm international workers. These issues significantly impact highly qualified refugees and asylum seekers – often preventing them from filling high-skill labour shortages.
 - Reform recognition processes by simplifying professional requalification pathways, streamlining UK ENIC services and expanding Mutual Recognition Agreements.

- **Ensure the full delivery of the Digital Inclusion Action Plan**
 - The Government has announced a new Digital Inclusion Action Plan – which aims to promote digital inclusion and skills development.
 - The necessary steps should be taken to ensure it meets the needs of the most marginalised groups – including the elderly, disabled, low-income families, and others with protected characteristics – in every region of the UK.
 - The Plan should aim to prepare people for the wider adoption of new technologies – and prioritise online safety and protections against crime and fraud.
- **Ensure the Community Right to Buy delivers for communities with protected characteristics:**
 - Fund early-stage community ownership development support (financial, legal and technical advice) for disadvantaged groups and those with protected characteristics.
 - Community ownership funding should be accessible and targeted at disadvantaged areas – which have less access to capital raising options such as community share offers.
- **Establish a community cohesion strategy and funding**
 - Develop a cohesion strategy across Government departments – learning from best practice of previous Labour Government's community cohesion work.
 - The strategy should aim to reduce prejudice faced by religious communities, including tackling antisemitism and islamophobia.
 - Ensure local councils build on national strategy by having local community cohesion plans – with adequate ringfenced resources for delivery.
- **Support the UK's mission to end HIV transmissions by 2030 – including expanding funding for research and development into HIV vaccine and cure.**

Tackling homophobia & promoting LGBTQ+ rights

Everyone deserves to live in dignity and equality, however homophobia and transphobia are still prevalent in society – both domestically and internationally. The UK Government and the co-operative movement have an important role to play in advocating for LGBTQ+ equality – in every section of society and the economy. Stigma and discrimination still remain – starting in schools, where half of LGBTQ+ students experience bullying, and in the workplace, where 20% experience discriminationⁱⁱ.

Trans people often experience significant discrimination, with a 186% rise in hate crimes against trans people over a five year periodⁱⁱⁱ. Ongoing and persistent discrimination contributes to a higher than average incidence of mental illness – including depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation. Healthcare waiting lists are often extremely long for the LGBTQ+ community, with some waits being multiple years rather than the statutory waiting time of 18 weeks. This must urgently be improved upon by public healthcare services. Poor access to healthcare and mental health services puts young LGBTQ+ people at risk of homelessness – with young LGBTQ+ people twice as likely to experience homelessness^{iv}.

Improving housing options for LGBTQ+ people is an important part of addressing these issues and the co-operative movement can deliver long-term safe and secure housing. The Government should seek to adequately support LGBTQ+ housing options, delivered through co-operative and community-led initiatives. LGBTQ+ spaces and venues can further be protected and developed through community ownership – helping to ensure their sustainability.

The UK must use its global leadership to advocate for

rights and protections internationally. 64 states still criminalise same sex relations – with LGBTQ+ communities facing significant stigma and even violence. The UK's trade and development work should seek to promote the rights and interests of marginalised communities across the globe.

- **Increase investment in specialist support for LGBTQ+ youth at risk of homelessness**
 - Provide funding and work in partnership with leading anti-homelessness organisations (AKT, Centrepoin, etc.) to provide targeted services and early-intervention for those at risk of homelessness.
- **Improve support for LGBTQ+ venues and housing**
 - Establish automatic listing as Asset of Community Value (ACVs) for LGBTQ+ venues.
 - LGBTQ+ venues should receive automatic listing as an ACV – adopting the same model proposed by the Sporting Asset of Community Value (SACV) to be introduced in the English Devolution & Community Empowerment Bill.
 - Support the development of LGBTQ + retirement housing – particularly CLTs & housing co-ops.
- **Champion LGBTQ+ rights across Government**
 - Ensure the UK's foreign affairs, international development and trade missions supports and protects LGBTQ+ rights abroad.
 - Appoint a standalone LGBTQ+ Minister – responsible for promoting the rights and protections of LGBTQ+ community domestically and internationally.
 - Enhance support system and asylum pathways for LGBTQ+ asylum seekers & refugees.
- **Introduce mandatory training on LGBTQ+ issues in residential care and children's homes**

- New statutory training for staff would ensure they are better equipped to support young LGBTQ+ people in care. Training should be developed and supported by LGBTQ+ charities and organisations and include information on signposting young people to support services.
- **Ensure the passage of legislation for a full ban on conversion therapy – including trans and non-binary people**
- Delivering a trans inclusive ban on conversion therapy would end a practice which evidence indicates leads to increased depression, suicidal ideation and self-harm amongst survivors. Galop found that 35% of trans people who underwent conversion therapy experienced physical assault^v.

Championing disabled rights & access

Society regularly fails to break down the barriers to inclusion and access for disabled people – which would enable them to lead happy, healthy and productive lives. Social barriers – such as structures, attitudes, and environments – have a profound impact on disabled people's life chances. The Office of National Statistics (ONS) has found disabled people experience significant inequalities across employment, income, education, housing and health^{vi}. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has found that approximately a third of disabled people live in poverty^{vii}. This significantly harms disabled people's wellbeing and civic participation – reducing their life opportunities and often trapping them in a cycle of exclusion.

Action should be taken to address these challenges to ensure disabled people – who make up a quarter of the population – can enjoy the same rights and living standards as non-disabled people. Action should be taken to ensure disabled people can take on work, education and civic participation opportunities without obstruction from socially-created barriers.

- **Establish commitment to develop 'Access to Work' programmes in co-production with disabled people**
 - The Department of Work & Pensions should commit to delivering meaningful and formal co-production at every stage of the develop of new programmes – including design, delivery and evaluation.
- **Encourage regional planning authorities to make co-production with disabled people on street architecture a default**
 - Several local authorities have begun establishing best practice in co-production with disabled people – including Trafford Council and Hammersmith & Fulham. Support should be given for wider roll out of this practice to regional and local authorities nationwide.
- **Introduce new public sector policy to support flexible work initiatives, including job sharing, for disabled employees**
 - Evidence from The Work Foundation strongly demonstrates disabled workers value flexible work arrangements. 80% of disabled workers agree remote working would either be essential or very important when job searching, and 66% ideally want to work remotely 80 – 100%^{viii} of the time. The Centre for Economics & Business Research found flexible working arrangements could enable employment opportunities for 600,000 people with disabilities^{ix}.
 - A public sector policy to promote flexible arrangements for workers with disabilities could help to substantially reduce labour market inactivity and increase incomes for disabled people.
- **Establish a standalone Disability Minister**
 - Appoint a standalone ministerial role, responsible for disability rights, work, and welfare provision.
 - Promote the social model of disability – with the objective of breaking down barriers to disabled people in work, public life

and society.

- **Introduce free prescriptions for people with long-term severe mental illnesses**
 - Introduce automatic free prescriptions for severe mental health conditions, such as schizophrenia, bipolar, PTSD, etc. in England. Free prescriptions are already in place in Labour-run Wales and Northern Ireland.
 - Evidence indicates this would improve medical adherence, reduce NHS pressure and promote parity of esteem between physical and mental health issues
- **Increase support for the delivery of ‘lifetime houses’ which are adaptable and accessible for disabled people**
 - While the Government has supported the delivery of adaptable and accessible lifetime houses through the introduction of Part M building regulations, many new developments still fail to meet these standards.
 - The Government should review how it can incentivise and facilitate an increased delivery of fully compliant lifetime housing – meeting the needs of a growing population with accessibility requirements.
 - The Government should work with the co-operative and community-led housing sector to help deliver long-term affordable housing which meets these accessibility requirements.

Supporting women’s rights

The co-operative movement has a proud history of advocating for women’s equality and there is more that can be done to advance this cause. Continuing to improve women’s rights, pay and experiences in the workplace is essential – with pay gaps, inadequate leave policies and a lack of childcare holding back working women. The co-operative movement have an important role to play in delivering the best work

environment for women – ensuring wellbeing, pay equality and policies which suit working mothers.

Women experience significantly higher levels of domestic abuse, sexual violence and harassment than men, with 1 in 8 women being victims of these crimes in the past year alone*. At a regional level, Co-operative Party Police & Crime Commissioners have led the way in taking action on violence against women and girls (VAWG), but there is much more that can be done nationally. Improving protections, victim support and prosecutions of perpetrators will be important to a sustained reduction in VAWG – with the core ambition to reduce incidence of VAWG by half.

- **Introduce statutory menopause leave in all workplaces**
 - Legislating for menopause leave would bring the UK in line with international peers such as Japan, South Korea & Italy.
- **Greater mental health provision for women going through the menopause**
 - Menopausal women experience higher rates of anxiety, depression and other mental health challenges, which can impact them at work.
 - Enhanced targeted support would reduce the challenges menopausal women face – both privately and in work.
- **Establish Integrated One-Stop Domestic Abuse Support Centres**
 - Pilot new centres in major cities, with provision including police support, healthcare, legal advice, social services and counselling.
 - The model of integrated domestic abuse hubs with a range of services is present in Canadian provinces, New Zealand, Norway and Sweden. UK authorities can learn from the model and delivery of these services when designing integrated hubs.
 - Establish a new statutory duty to advertise flexible working

arrangements when they are available

- The requirement should include remote work, part-time work, job shares, and flexible hours.
- The new legal requirement would increase transparency and reduce stigma around requesting flexible working arrangements.
- Flexible working arrangements would achieve the ambition of reduce economic inactivity – particularly for female workers.

Improving young people's lives

Across society, young people face numerous challenges which can put their wellbeing and life prospects at a disadvantage. The last decade has seen a rise in rates of mental ill health in young people, with the NHS reporting around 1 in 5 young people having mental health issues^{xi}.

Young people are also entering a challenging labour market – where youth unemployment is double the average for adults. Many young people face precarious work and temporary contracts, putting them in a difficult financial situation which often traps them in private rental accommodation.

It is important to ensure young people have the education and knowledge they need to make the most of their life opportunities – regardless of background. Improving the Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) curriculum will provide children with the knowledge they need to take part in civic and public life, while creating the conditions for greater social cohesion. Delivering improved early years and youth services – which could incorporate co-operative models – would be an effective way of ensuring early inequalities do not become entrenched and determine life outcomes.

Every child deserves a good start in life. Improving outcomes

for young people in care is essential – so that they can live healthy, happy and productive lives. Care leavers experience significant disadvantage and attainment gaps in both education and employment compared to their peers, while nearly 50% of under-21s in the criminal justice system had been in care^{xii}. Taking action to improve the care system at every level would ensure sustainable, long-term reductions in these inequalities.

- **Promote micro-qualifications & increased work experience for young people**

- Micro-qualifications are short, focused certifications which help to quickly upskill workers in each area. They are commonly found in digital, IT and tech sectors – but are present across a diverse range of industries.
- Evidence demonstrates these micro-qualifications are particularly effective in supporting those of NEET status and with low existing formal qualifications
- Consider creating a National Framework for micro-qualifications, providing greater recognition, awareness and quality standards.
- Establish option for longer or more frequent work experience opportunities.

- **Increase Entry Level Apprenticeship starts**

- Reforming the Apprenticeship Levy creates the opportunity to reverse the decline of entry level (Level 2) apprenticeship starts. This would be a key aspect in increasing social mobility for disadvantaged young people.

- **Reduce custodial sentences for children – supporting greater community-led approaches**

- Aim to significantly increase use of secure children's homes and remand services instead of Youth Offender Institutions (YOIs) and Secure Training Centres (STCs).

- **Invest in the development of a new generation of youth hubs & services – with statutory duty for co-production**
 - Develop long-term plan to restore youth hubs and services which have diminished since 2010 and which delivered empirical benefits to young people's outcomes.
 - Establish statutory duty on local authorities and youth service providers for co-production on services and hubs with young people – supporting design, delivery and evaluation.
- **Target cost-of-living reductions in transport for young people in England**
 - Young respondents to the consultation highlighted the cost of travel prevented them from accessing opportunities for personal development – education, sports, social and cultural activities.
 - Consideration should be given for how the Government can support the reduction of costs of public transport for young people, including bus services. Evidence from Scotland indicates free bus passes increased access to opportunities, increases use of sustainable travel and improves affordability.
- **Improve the lives and experiences of children in care and young carers**
 - Launch Government Review on standards and outcomes of children's experiences in care – with committed to co-production with children on delivering better experiences.
 - Promote carer co-operatives – providing additional help and mutual support to young carers through a mutual aid co-operative model.
- **Ensure equality of access to voting for young people related to ID cards – i.e. young person's bus passes**
 - The Electoral Reform Society has found that young people

are disadvantaged in voting accessibility due to acceptable forms of ID being predominantly held by older people.

- An amendment could be made to the Elections Act to ensure the most common forms of ID held by younger people are acceptable for voting purposes.
- **Review and improve the PSHE curriculum**
 - Introduce mandatory education on politics, voting & parliamentary democracy
 - Enhance education on LGBTQ+ communities and women's rights, in partnership with charities and representative groups.
- **Review the case of enabling Best Start Family Hubs to adopt co-operative ownership or governance – either from the outset or through conversion.**
 - The option of co-operative ownership would improve long term sustainability of new hubs and provide greater resilience to changing political circumstances.

Equalities Legislation

The Government should look to restore the UK's world leading status on equality legislation – ensuring all members and communities receive dignity – free from discrimination. The Equality Act has not been updated since the last Labour Government and could be modernised to ensure it meets the challenges faced by people in contemporary society. In particular, certain clauses of the Equality Act have not been fully enacted, and the existing protected characteristic categories does not adequately cover all cases of discrimination.

Reforming the Gender Recognition Act would help to ensure trans people can live in dignity and with respect. The current certification process has been highlighted as not meeting the needs of the trans community. The low uptake of Gender

Recognition Certificates compared to reported numbers of trans people is indicative of a system which fails to meet the expectations and requirements of its users.

- **Update and modernise the Equality Act, including the following changes:**
 - Amendment to Section 14 of the Equality Act 2010, to enable discrimination claims for combined discrimination, on the basis of multiple protected characteristics.
 - Enact Section 1 of the Equality Act, enshrining protections against socio-economic discrimination.
 - Introduce protections for non-binary, gender fluid and inter-sex people.
- **Reform the Gender Recognition Act:**
 - Legislate for self-ID for trans people – removing invasive medical tests, administrative burden and preserving dignity
 - This would bring the UK in line with international peers Germany, Switzerland, Norway, New Zealand, Ireland, and 17 more countries.
 - Remove existing spousal consent restrictions for people transitioning.

Stopping racism & empowering communities

Ethnic minorities continue to experience significant inequalities across society and the economy in Britain. Inequalities are evident in employment, education, housing, healthcare and the criminal justice system – contributing to worse living standards and life outcomes.

Ethnic minority owned enterprises often face greater structural barriers and challenges. Ethnic minority entrepreneurs face higher barriers in access to finance, with less availability of business support and development

services. The co-operative movement should look to support the development of minority-led co-operative start-ups – to help create a more equitable economy across communities.

The experiences of ethnic minorities in the justice system are particularly stark. People from ethnic minorities face higher

- London Co-operative Party
- Sutton
- Kettering & Wellingborough
- Chesterfield, Bolsover & NE Derbyshire
- Norfolk
- Ealing
- West East Anglia
- Rochdale
- Broxbourne & East Hertfordshire
- Sunderland
- Scotland Co-operative Party
- Ashford, Canterbury & Swale
- South West Peninsula Party Council
- Somerset
- Swindon & Gloucester
- Youth Network
- BAME Co-operators
- Women's Network
- Dis(Ability) Network
- LGBTQ+ Co-operators
- Leeds
- Islington
- Northern Ireland Co-operative Party
- Midcounties Co-op
- Bolton & Bury
- Greater Manchester
- Bristol Party Council
- Bath & West Party Council
- Exeter & Devon

rates of stop & search, arrests, use of force and custodial sentences. Ongoing reform will help to create a fairer justice and policing system across the UK.

- **Establish support and funding is available for co-operative development initiatives for ethnic minority communities**

- **Incorporate the target of supporting ethnic minority led co-operatives in the Government's Co-operative Growth plan to achieve a doubling of the size of the co-operative sector.**
- **Support & invest in non-policing approaches to harm prevention**
 - Early intervention – including multi-agency Violence Reduction Units – have seen empirical improvement on the incidence of crime.
 - Increase restorative justice programmes
 - Promote greater mental health provision and early intervention for at risk youth and young adults
- **Mandate name blind recruitment across public sector employers**
 - Legal requirement for name blind recruitment across the public sector – which has already been implemented by the Civil Service Fast Stream and several NHS Trusts.
 - Evidence from civil service and private sector initiatives shows name blind recruitment can significantly improve shortlisting and interview opportunities for ethnic minority candidates.

Acknowledgements

Contributing groups to the Equalities Policy Process 2025

Thank you to the following parties, networks, and branches for submissions to this year's policy consultation:

Individual Co-operative Party members have made important submissions to the Policy Process 2025, helping to develop proposals on a range of housing policy challenges. We would like to thank everyone who took part and engaged in this year's consultation.

Endnotes

¹ <https://www.scope.org.uk/media/disability-facts-figures#?~:text=Some%205%20million%20disabled%20people,likely%20to%20be%20economically%20inactive>

² <https://www.tup.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/bullying-harassment-and-discrimination-lgbt-people-workplace>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2022-to-2023/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2022-to-2023>

⁴ <https://www.akt.org.uk/news/lgbtq-people-twice-as-likely-to-be-hidden-homeless/>

⁵ <https://www.galop.org.uk/resources/the-use-of-sexual-violence-as-an-attempt-to-convert-or-punish-lgbt-people-in-the-uk>

⁶ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/articles/>

⁷ Co-operative Party Limited is a registered Society under the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act 2014. Registered no. 30027R.

⁸ <https://www.party.coop/what-we-do/our-essential-guide-to>