

the co-operative party



Policy 2025 –

Future Co-op Economy

Introduction

The world economy is rapidly changing around us. Major shifts are taking place due to the emergence of the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution' – including new technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), advanced robotics, platforms, and biotechnology. These technologies will likely transform many sectors across the economy – changing the nature of jobs and impacting creative and intellectual property. The Co-operative Party believe the co-operative model can play a pivotal role in harnessing these technologies in an equitable and democratic way – delivering outcomes which benefit workers, producers, consumers and wider society.

New technological developments, driven by the global tech sector, has seen the rise of the gig economy throughout the UK and other advanced economies. Approximately 1.7 million workers are now engaged in the gig economy – with average hourly wage rates typically being lower than the national minimum wage. While many supplement additional jobs with gig economy work, the vast majority of these workers suffer from insecure income, a lack of guaranteed hours, and an absence of workers' rights and benefits. Co-operative models have begun to demonstrate their efficacy in delivering better outcomes – through the emergence of platform co-operatives. While platform co-operatives remain a small part of the global tech sector, many workers and consumers are already using them to deliver better wages, services and work environments. Examples include taxi drivers using co-operatively owned ride hailing services, music platforms owned by artists and social care services organised through care worker-owned digital platforms.

Delivering co-operative growth in these new technology-driven industries should be an important part of the Labour Government's commitment to double the size of the

co-operative sector. By supporting new co-operatives in emerging industries, the Government can help to shape a future economy which has co-operative principles at its core. This would support the Government's wider commitment to create good, secure employment which can raise living standards and productivity, while ensuring the UK does not miss out on the opportunities presented by technological development.

This policy paper provides an outline of policy enablers which can incentivise and support co-operative growth in the economy and jobs of tomorrow. Developed through a member-led policy consultation and with engagement with experts in their field, the recommendations cover changes which would enable new and existing co-operatives to grow and develop. The paper reviews how to increase access to capital, how to create a growth friendly legislative environment and how to provide targeted business support in strategic sectors, drawing on case studies from international peer countries.

Existing Policy:

- Central Government should provide support for new and existing platform co-operatives – including business, technical, legal, financial and innovation support.
- Create a regulatory framework which supports the start-up and scale-up of platform co-operatives and democratically-owned businesses in the technology sector.
- Encourage local business support services to signpost individuals to freelance co-operatives
- Reform public procurement rules to prioritise agency worker co-operatives.

New Policy

General

Creating a world-leading environment for co-operative growth is essential to achieving a doubling of the size of the co-operative sector. Co-operatives require an adequate support system which has a legislative and regulatory environment which incentivise co-operatives to develop and diversify into new technologies and sectors. Co-operatives have traditionally been underserved by innovation support programmes – such as incubators, Knowledge Transfer Partnerships, and innovation centres – changing this would create a level playing field with other forms of business ownership. Establishing co-operative development at the heart of UK research and development would ensure the sector is well placed to expand into the industries and technologies of the future. All Government funding pots for business development and innovation should be accessible and open to co-operative and mutual business models. Introducing Mutual Guarantee Societies would facilitate higher levels of lending to SMEs and co-operatives, supporting new and existing businesses to start-up, grow and diversify.

- **Legislate for the creation of Mutual Guarantee Societies (MGS)**
 - Operating as member-owned societies, MGS would derisk lending to co-ops and SMEs, supporting greater business scale-up and filling a market gap for SME lending.
- **Establish co-operative development as part of UKRI's Strategy & Missions**
 - Innovate UK, the delivery body of UKRI, could establish a Co-operative Innovation Fund for co-ops in high growth sectors and support a co-operative accelerator. Innovate UK should ensure all its grant and funding pots are accessible to and inclusive of co-operative and mutual business models.
 - Innovate UK could develop closer partnerships between research centres, universities and co-ops on R&D and commercialisation.
- **Streamline co-operative start-up process to incentivise uptake**
 - Ensure costs and administrative burden of starting up a co-operative society are equal to or less than establishing a private limited company.
- **Establish pilot national incubator / accelerator for co-operative development and innovation in high growth & underserved sectors**
 - Accelerator programme open to co-operatives and democratically-owned businesses (employee-owned, community owned) to target high growth sectors (technology, clean energy, creative industries, platforms) and underserved sectors (social care, dentistry, etc.).
 - Provide full-suite of business support services – including expert advice on capital raising, the co-operative model, etc.

Platform & Tech Co-operatives

Platform co-operatives enable the reimagining of digital platforms – such as websites and apps – which millions rely on day-to-day for services and employment. As member-owned enterprises, they enable workers and consumers to have greater control and reward for their use of digital platforms – helping to democratise the digital economy. Platform and tech co-operatives provide a fairer more equitable alternative to the gig economy – providing more secure employment and working conditions.

The UK should aim to become a world-leader in platform co-operatives – aligning with the commitment to improve workers' rights and deliver a doubling of the size of the co-operative sector. With hundreds of platform co-operatives now operating across the world, the UK could be a leader in the development of an equitable tech industry which delivers for workers and service users. To achieve this, platform co-operatives will require access to capital to start-up and scale – including new funding streams and capital raising mechanisms. Regional government and public procurement have an important role in scaling new platform co-operatives – providing business support and opportunities for growth.

- **Support the establishment of a Platform Co-op Fund**
 - Seeded initially from institutional social investors, with scaling coming from member and worker mutual shares.
 - This new Platform Co-op Fund should be targeted at developing shared digital infrastructure – which multiple platform co-ops can use and diversify as members of co-op federation. The case study on CoopCycle below provides detail on this model.
- **Reform co-operative capital and shares legislation and regulation**
 - Update the Co-operative & Community Benefit Society Act to

better-enable external equity investment into co-operative enterprises.

- Supporting innovation in member capital contributions, such as non-investment capital contributions wherein finance is provided in exchange for user-value.
- **Support market creation for private investment into co-operative start-ups and diversification into technology**
 - Instruct the British Business Bank with developing a market for private capital investment – including transitions to employee ownership for existing firms.
 - Target patient external equity investments, to go alongside member and community stake.
 - Specialist institutional investment – for co-operatives in high growth sectors, such as tech.
- **Enhance incentives for co-operatives looking to expand or start-up in new technologies**
 - Introduce a new tax relief for co-operative enterprises engaged in technology development, R&D and innovation.
- **Enhance social value criteria in public procurement contracts related to digital services – providing greater opportunities for platform and tech co-ops.**
 - Recognise the social value creation of the platform co-operative model – providing greater equity, better working conditions and democratic decision making.
 - Public sector institutions should increase the social value metrics in their contract scoring criteria to incorporate and reward the model for all digital services contract opportunities.
- **Metro Mayors could incorporate development of platform co-ops in their regional economic development plans to meet local challenges**
 - Metro Mayors could ensure there is adequate co-operative development capacity at a regional level to support new

co-operative start-ups, particularly in emerging sectors. This could include bespoke business, legal, financial and governance support services.

- Case Study: Barcelona City Council has supported tech co-operatives through its plans for Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) development. Initiatives have included providing co-working office space and match-funding for new ventures.

Case Study: CoopCycle

CoopCycle demonstrates the benefits of the co-operative federation model to developing and sharing digital infrastructure. The model enables the development and diffusion of digital infrastructure to co-operative organisations, reducing individual costs and enabling scaling which would be difficult for individual platform co-operatives.

Established in 2016, CoopCycle brings together member organisations including worker co-ops, multi-stakeholder co-ops, other social economy organisations and individual couriers in delivering bicycle courier services. As members, these organisations receive access to CoopCycle's open-source digital platform and app, which enables them to engage in e-commerce with customers.

CoopCycle Federation, supported by member contributions, works to further develop software, supports the development of new co-ops and provides training to members. CoopCycle now has member co-operatives on three continents and 10 countries, with multiple co-op operators in the UK and Europe. This model enables couriers to receive far more of the value they create from fulfilling jobs, with evidence from CoopCycle France showing workers earn on average 25% more than the minimum wageⁱ.

AI & Data Co-operatives

Artificial intelligence (AI) has already begun to have an impact on society, the economy and labour markets. The UK cannot be a passive actor as technological change impacts our economy – it must actively seek to lead and manage the change. Developing domestic capabilities in this field is vital to ensure the UK remains competitive, increases growth and raises living standards. Ensuring that new AI and data capabilities work in the public interest and deliver positive outcomes for workers and living standards will be essential to seizing the opportunities from the ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution’ in an equitable and sustainable way.

The Government could ensure new technologies serve the public interest by guaranteeing democratic governance and ownership plays an important role in new AI developments. People should be empowered to control and receive greater reward for the use of their data – with data co-operatives becoming an emerging model which can utilise data for public good and challenge tech monopolies. Supporting co-operative governance and ownership models in AI will help to ensure its potential benefits are more widely distributed. Co-operative models could also serve to reduce the negative impact of AI on intellectual property – enhancing the rights of creative worker members of the co-operative. The following policies provide a blueprint for how the Government could support democratic, accountable data and AI development.

- **Incorporate the development and investment into co-operatively owned AI systems and data centres as a central part of the Government's AI action plans & strategies**
- Recognise the value of democratically-owned AI initiatives – both systems and data centres – to deliver public benefit outcomes by directly investing in the development of public AI resources – including multi-stakeholder co-operatives.

- The Platform Co-operativism Consortium recommends developing co-operative-owned data centres – with membership drawn from local users of data centre services – which would reduce market power of major tech companies, while distributing profits fairly to local usersⁱⁱ. The model could help to support new AI start-ups, creating a more pluralised market. The model could be similar to community owned energy groups in funding, governance and delivery.
- **Incentivise and support the development of co-operatively-owned cloud infrastructure**
 - Recognising the importance of cloud services as strategic infrastructure – which would promote accountable digital sovereignty and capability.
 - Public funding could support the development of a multi-stakeholder co-operative-owned cloud service – similar to how READ-Co-op was established through publicly funded projects.
 - Public procurement and public sector institutions (councils, universities, etc.) use of the co-operative cloud service would enable development and scaling.
- **Support the establishment of data co-operatives & data unions**
 - Incentivise people to contribute their data to democratically governed co-ops – enhancing democratisation of data, ethical data use, and public good innovation (in health, research, etc.).
 - Data co-operatives could help to reduce market control and monopolisation of 'Big Tech' sector.
- **Encourage democratic governance and ownership structures in AI organisations and start-ups receiving public funding**
 - The concerns around potential concentration of economic power and labour market disruption by AI development have been widely recognised domestically and internationally. Major AI firms have incorporated public benefit and non-profit structures – including market leaders OpenAI and Anthropic.

- The UK Government could recognise concerns by encouraging new and existing AI firms to innovate in corporate governance – to expand democratic accountability, implement public benefit missions and deliver ethical outcomes.
- **Promote worker co-operative models for data workers (data engineers, data annotators and data curators)**
- Data workers are an expanding workforce but are often freelance or self-employed. To prevent precarious work becoming commonplace, the Government should aim to support new worker co-ops and employee owned trusts (EOTs) in this sector.
- The Government should roll-out the tax reliefs targeted at EOTs to worker co-operatives – so the model is no longer disadvantaged versus other forms of employee ownership.

Case Study: READ-Coop

READ-Coop is a multi-stakeholder co-operative composed of workers, users and institutional members, primarily high education institutions. READ-Coop delivers an AI tool, Transkribus, which provides historical document transcription.

In 2015, Transkribus emerged out of EU funding of two projects, led by universities in Spain and Austriaⁱⁱⁱ. When the public funding ended in 2019, the decision was taken to establish a multi-stakeholder ownership and governance model for the tool – which saw the creation of READ-Coop. The new co-operative organisation has ensured the sustainability and further development of Transkribus – expanding its user base, developing its membership and enhancing its AI capabilities. READ-Coop's not-for-profit, democratic structure ensure the AI tool continues to deliver for public benefit – supporting university research at a rapidly increasing scale.

READ-Coop now has close to a quarter of a million individual users, with 227 institutional members, and has successfully transcribed 90 million historical texts and documents. An academic study by Open Research Europe found *“READ-COOP exemplifies that a co-operative business model can effectively sustain artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) infrastructures while promoting democratic participation and equitable ownership”*^{iv}.

Media & Press

The UK's newspapers and media environment has changed markedly since the turn of the millennium, strongly influenced by changing technologies, the rise of social media and diverging readership trends. Significant challenges have emerged, putting the survival of newspapers and media outlets at risk – with many historic titles already disappearing. Local news outlets have been most affected, with hundreds of regional and local newspapers closing – leading to increasing concentration of ownership.

These trends have led to a loss of content diversity and a rise of misinformation, as consumers increasingly get their news from social media. The impact on the journalism industry has led to job losses and a rise in precarious work. Collectively, these trends have begun to undermine the media's sustainability, its vital role in holding power to account and consequently supporting healthy democratic norms.

Co-operative and worker owned models in media have an impressive track record in ensuring their survival and reinvigoration – in both Britain and abroad. The UK Government should aim to increase the co-operative model's presence in the media sector, helping to improve business viability, improve worker equity and reduce ownership concentration.

- **Introduce a legal ‘right of first refusal’ for workers and readers when a media publication is being sold or liquidated.**
 - The employer (seller) would legally be required to inform workers and reader groups of its intention to close, divest or sell a publication.
 - Workers or reader groups would then have a time-limited period to raise the capital required to complete the purchase of some or all the businesses’ assets – enabling continuity under a new ownership model.
- **Expand Asset of Community Value (ACV) listing definition to include local and regional news publications and media outlets – including digital-only publications.**
 - Expanding the definition of ACVs would allow local community groups to purchase media outlets and assets – operating in a community-owned model.
 - This would protect historic regional and local press outlets from closure – maintaining vital local and regional media coverage.
- **Establish a funding pot open to Metro Mayors & Combined Authorities to support local news and media**
 - A fund could be available for Metro Mayors across England to support the creation and maintenance of media and news outlets. This would include those at risk of closure and those seeking to transition to a new ownership model.
 - The fund should prioritise the development of co-operative, worker or community ownership in regional and local media.
 - A new fund could operate in a similar model to the ‘Mayoral Renewables Fund’ – which supports the development of community-owned renewable energy.

Case Study: Taz (German newspaper)

Die Tageszeitung (Taz) is one of Germany’s leading daily newspapers – in the top 7 in national circulation. A popular

publication amongst Germany's left leaning voters, Taz was founded in 1978 as an alternative to mainstream newspapers. After a financial crisis in 1992, Taz transitioned to become a multi-stakeholder co-operative, owned by its staff and its readers. The co-operative now has over 23,000 members, governing the newspaper in a democratic model of 'one member, one vote'.

The transition to co-operative ownership ensured Taz's survival, while increasing the independence of its editorial line – no longer as reliant on advertisers or shareholder investment. Its investigative journalism has been commended, while the newspaper has successfully developed its online profile and presence under co-operative ownership – with an online readership in the tens of millions.

Freelance & Self-Employed

Self-employment has been a growing trend since the Global Financial Crisis, with approximately 4.4 million self-employed workers in early 2025¹. The rise has been sustained in part by the rise of the gig economy and 'false self-employment', which provides work without the legal protections of being an employee.

While self-employment can provide benefits to workers, it can also create a situation which is more insecure and with high administrative burden. The co-operative model can provide an alternative which helps to maintain self-employed workers' autonomy while providing greater security and administrative support. The freelance co-operative model provides a balance which retains the benefits of self-employment while reducing the negatives – which has led to peer European governments supporting the model. In France, Belgium, Spain and Italy, the freelance co-op model has been legally recognised, helping to facilitate awareness and growth. Belgium's Smart Co-op now operates in 9 countries, with tens of thousands of members,

from over 30 professions. Smart Co-op provides members administrative and legal support, insurance, employment protection and business development support. Supporting the development of freelance co-operatives would align with the Government's ambitions to deliver good, secure jobs for all workers. The below recommendations aim to support legal recognition and scaling of the model in regions across the country.

- **Legally recognise the freelance co-operative model**
 - Legal recognition would provide greater incentive for adoption of the model by freelancers.
 - France, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Denmark and Finland have all legally recognised the freelance co-op model. Belgium was the pioneer of legal recognition and has one of the largest freelance co-operative sectors
- **Support pilot programmes developing freelance co-operatives in major cities – London, Manchester, Birmingham. Funding can be delivered by Metro Mayors and Combined Authorities.**
- **Recognise the freelance co-operative model in social value frameworks for procurement**
 - Recognising the empirical benefits freelance co-ops produce for workers as social value creation would enable national, regional and local authorities to target their development.
 - Social value recognition would incentivise workers to form or join freelance co-ops.

Case Study: Signalise Co-op

Established in 2019, Signalise Co-op is a multi-stakeholder freelance co-operative, based in Merseyside. Its member owners are self-employed British sign language professionals and deaf people – helping to bridge the gap between service providers and users.

While differing from other forms of freelance co-operatives, such as Smart Co-op, Signalise Co-op provides its freelance interpreter members with a range of services. Members receive administrative support, including booking management, payment processing and contract handling – reducing the individual burden on self-employed interpreters. Signalise Co-op also delivers professional development opportunities to members, including access to training and workshops to boost skills and job growth. It's multi-stakeholder model means workers can more easily find clients within its membership – supporting sustainable work and income.

Creative Industries

The UK is a global leader in the arts and creative industries, with the sector worth approximately £124 billion per annum and employing 2.4 million people^{vi}. Growth in the creative industries has significantly outpaced the wider economy, with the sector accounting for a 35% increase since 2010 compared to 22% for the rest of the economy^{vii}.

Despite its clear successes, many people in the sector are self-employed – approximately 28% of the total creative industries workforce^{viii}. Creative UK has found that half of these self-employed workers live on or below median income – demonstrating considerable economic vulnerability.

The Government could support co-operative sector growth in the creative industries to increase equity and economic security – spreading the benefits of co-operation to a rapidly growing sector. With several hundred co-operatives and worker owned firms already operating in the creative industries, the Government should support ongoing development – including backing the roll-out of initiatives such as the West Midlands Ownership Hub – which specifically targets growth in the sector.

A Community Right to Buy provides the opportunity to support community-owned music and creative venues. These community owned spaces will ensure the creative industries can flourish across the country – supporting existing arts and culture projects and enterprises.

- **Establish support for the development of creative industry co-operatives at both a national and regional level**
 - Ensure the availability of co-operative development support for the arts and culture sector – learning from the West Midlands Ownership Hub – which focused on expanding co-operatives in the creative sector and amongst freelancers.
 - Work in partnership with arts and culture trade unions (Equity, Musicians Union, BECTU) to encourage creative industry workers to consider co-operative models.
 - Ensure publicly funded co-operative development support is accessible and targeted at creative sector entrepreneurs and workers.
 - Raise awareness of examples of arts and culture co-operatives and their benefits to members (orchestra co-ops, etc.) through DCMS and non-departmental bodies (Arts Council England, etc.)
- **Ensure funding is available to support the development of community-owned creative and music venues**
 - Funding streams should be made available to support community-owned music venues and creative spaces following the introduction of the Community Right to Buy. This could include public funding pots specifically focused on economic development or community-led regeneration.
 - Combined and local authorities could support community share offers, which raise capital from the community to support the purchase of venues. Support could include raising awareness, business support services, or match-funding initiatives.

Wales

The Welsh Government has achieved success in increasing its co-operative growth rate during the Senedd term. In particular, Wales has achieved a higher employee ownership transition rate, with a 157% increase in employee owned businesses during this parliamentary term. The Welsh Government should work with higher education institutions to target expanded co-operative and employee owned growth in emerging industries and technologies.

- **Enhance effective co-operative development capacity in Wales by investing in greater business development services through Cwmpas, including regional co-operative development capacity.**
 - Review the case for supporting regional co-operative development hubs – managed through Cwmpas.
 - Cwmpas and new regional co-op development hubs should partner with local authorities in the delivery of local economic development plans – particularly in areas with market failure or shortage (social care, housing, etc.).
- **Encourage greater partnerships between Welsh universities and the co-operative sector on innovation, knowledge transfer and technology uptake.**
- **Pilot development support for freelance co-operatives in Swansea and Cardiff City Region**
- **Establish a new ambitious target for employee-owned business growth for the next Senedd term**
 - Continue to build on the success of doubling the size of the employee-owned sector during the recent Senedd term. A commitment to increasing the rate and pace of growth, including a numerical target, with effective resources to match would maintain business transitions to EOTs and worker co-operatives.

Scotland

Scotland is experiencing solid growth in both employee-owned businesses and community energy groups. Scotland has achieved this growth despite a lack of independent co-operative development services – which can be found in Wales. This demonstrates Scotland's co-operative, community-owned and employee-owned sectors could almost certainly grow at a faster rate if the appropriate support mechanisms and resources were in place to deliver growth. Scotland is home to one of the UK's largest creative and tech sectors – including globally renowned video game developer Rockstar North. The Scottish Government should look to expand co-operative and employee-owned models in these successful, growing sectors.

- **Grant independent status to Co-operative Development Scotland (CDS) with adequate resources to deliver growth**
 - Establish operational and budgetary autonomy for CDS from Scottish Enterprise, with the mission of delivering at least a doubling of the size of the co-operative and democratic business sector.
- **Specialist support for creative industries incorporating co-operative, employee owned and community owned models**
 - Ensure co-operative development resources are available and targeted at the creative and tech industries in Scotland. This could include providing similar resources and services to the West Midlands Ownership Hub in creative and tech clusters in Edinburgh and Glasgow.
 - Promote secondary co-operatives to help scale-up creative industry SMEs and co-ops. These secondary co-operatives could provide shared infrastructure which would reduce overheads and increase competitiveness.

- **Ensure business accelerators, incubation hubs and university research centres support and develop co-operative and mutual business models**
- Scotland has an elite university sector, with research and innovation centres that have developed innovative spin-out companies. Scotland accounts for nearly one fifth of university spin-out deals – with the University of Edinburgh and the University of Strathclyde producing the most.
- The Scottish Government should work with universities to ensure their business support and research centres can support the development of new spin-out companies in co-operative and democratic business models. This should include providing training opportunities on these business models for advisers working in or with universities to establish new spin-outs.

Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland has recently seen the expansion of co-operative development support services, creating an improved environment for co-op growth. The Northern Ireland Executive should continue to develop these services across its regions, with a focus enabling co-operative diversification into new sectors. A new target for growth would reaffirm these ambitions as key to economic development in Northern Ireland.

- **Expand co-operative development support services throughout Northern Ireland**
- Belfast City Council has established a co-operative development support service, Go Social, and will be introducing a Social Economy Incentive Fund by the end of 2025.
- Similar co-operative development support services should be introduced in other large council areas, including Derry City Council.

- **Establish the target of doubling the size of the co-operative sector in Northern Ireland and expanding employee ownership transitions**
 - The Northern Ireland Executive should establish targets and financing mechanisms, adopting a similar model to the Welsh Government, to deliver a targeted boost to co-operative and employee ownership growth.
 - The Regional Economy Fund announced by the Northern Ireland Executive should be available to mutuals, co-operatives and employee-owned businesses to facilitate regional inclusive growth.

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- Ashford, Canterbury & Swale
- Scottish Co-operative Party
- South West Peninsula
- Somerset
- Derby, Burton & South Derbyshire
- Midcounties
- Gloucestershire & Swindon Party Council
- Leeds
- Norfolk
- Islington
- Surrey
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Endnotes

ⁱ <https://apps.eurofound.europa.eu/platformeconomydb/coopcycle-103057>

ⁱⁱ <https://platform.coop/blog/the-promise-and-perils-of-cooperative-data-centers/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://open-research-europe.ec.europa.eu/articles/5-16>

^{iv} <https://open-research-europe.ec.europa.eu/articles/5-16>

^v <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn02796/>

^{vi} <https://www.business.gov.uk/invest-in-uk/investment/sectors/creative-industries/>

^{vii} <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CDP-2025-0017/CDP-2025-0017.pdf>

^{viii} <https://www.wearecreative.uk/champion/statistics/>

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