

CO-OPERATIVES



# Ownership matters: a co-operative manifesto for the West Midlands

Produced by Co-operatives West Midlands

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## ABOUT CO-OPERATIVES WEST MIDLANDS

Co-operatives West Midlands is the representative body for the co-operative sector, standing up for hundreds of member-owned businesses and organisations operating in the West Midlands.

Last year, we helped to launch the [Save Birmingham campaign](#) to protect community places and provide positive solutions in response to the financial challenges facing Birmingham City Council.

This year, we're putting forward an ambitious co-operative manifesto ahead of key local elections taking place on 2 May 2024 – including the West Midlands Mayor and Police and Crime Commissioner. We're non-party political, and encourage all candidates to adopt policies that will support and strengthen the co-operative sector in the West Midlands.

**Find out more about us at: [westmidlands.coop](https://westmidlands.coop)**

# Summary

We are putting forward a set of principles and policy proposals aimed at all candidates for West Midlands Mayor and West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner, with both roles being elected in May 2024.

We encourage all candidates to support our policy proposals, and to work with us to implement them if elected.

Co-operatives are democratic businesses that create economic and social value for their members and local communities by acting ethically and responsibly.

But they face a number of challenges – including an uneven playing field with other forms of business, a lack of awareness and limited access to key institutions and finance. With the right support and an enabling environment, they can meet community needs, provide inclusive employment opportunities, boost the region's economy, empower residents, improve community cohesion and ultimately unlock substantial economic and social value for communities.

This document is produced by Co-operatives West Midlands. We are the non-party political representative body for hundreds of co-operatives in the West Midlands.

## Proposed principles

We call on all candidates for West Midlands Mayor and West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner to support policies and actions that:

- Empower people and communities
- Enable a level playing field for co-operatives
- Raise awareness of co-operative business models
- Provide co-operative leadership

We also call on the West Midlands Combined Authority and Office of the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner to adopt co-operative values and ways of working.

## Proposed policies

We call on all candidates to back the following policies, based on the responsibilities of the Mayor, Combined Authority and Police and Crime Commissioner, but working in collaboration and partnership:

**1** Establish a Co-operative Development Network and Co-operative Growth Fund to champion and accelerate the growth of co-operatives, including helping to create a new generation of co-operative business advisors and apprentices.

**2** Create a West Midlands Community Development Corporation to protect community assets and enable social investment that supports community ownership.

**3** Explore mutual solutions for transport services through mutual operators for local buses and trains, and give passengers and workers a say on fares, routes and services.

**4** Promote community-led housing and land ownership to deliver genuinely affordable homes that are democratically managed by residents and local communities.

**5** Enable a level playing field when procuring goods and services through a fair process that includes consideration of social value.

**6** Protect retail workers and promote community safety through increased partnership working, community involvement and targeted enforcement.

**7** Launch an independent Co-operative Commission to help to identify barriers and solutions to growing the co-operative economy.

## Promises

In the spirit of co-operation, we won't wait before acting. We will continue to promote and support the co-operative sector in the West Midlands. And we will work with the West Midlands Mayor and West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner to implement these proposals.

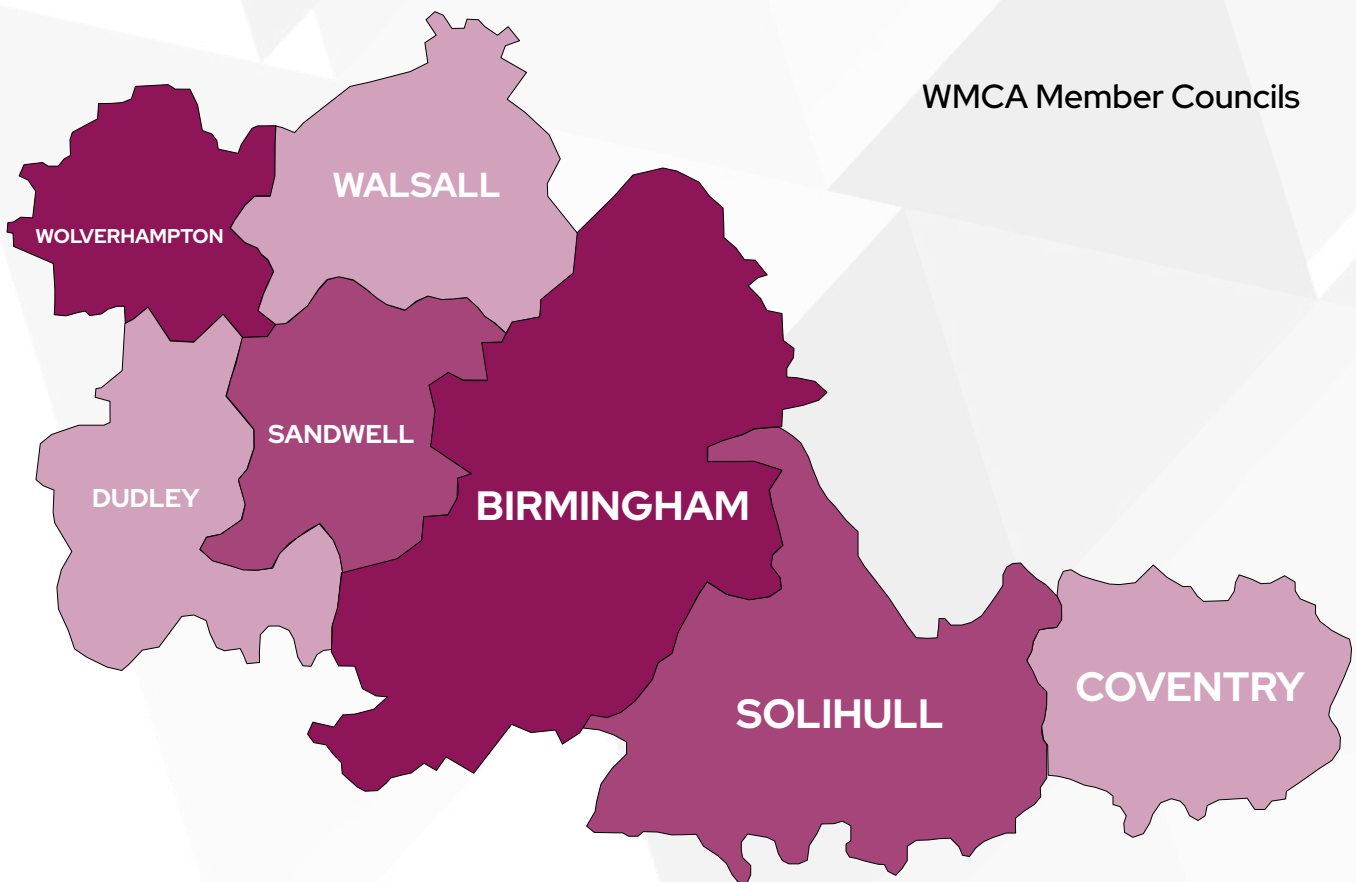
**By working together, we can deliver a co-operative future for the West Midlands.**



# Introduction

In a matter of weeks, more than two million residents will be able to vote for the West Midlands Mayor, who will serve a four-year term until 2028.

The successful candidate will chair and lead the West Midlands Combined Authority, which covers the seven local authorities of Birmingham, Coventry, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Walsall and Wolverhampton – with representatives from nearby authorities and partner organisations.<sup>1</sup>



The West Midlands Combined Authority has a significant impact on people's lives. It is responsible for economic development, skills, housing, land and transport – and has influence over a range of areas including the environment and public health and wellbeing. Next year, the West Midlands Combined Authority expects to spend around £1.2 billion.<sup>2</sup>

On the same day, more than two million residents will also be able to vote for the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner, who is responsible for representing them and holding to account West Midlands Police, the country's second largest police force.

## Ownership matters

Co-operatives are businesses that are owned by their members, who can be consumers, workers or members of the community. Co-operatives are democratic, open to all and act ethically and responsibly.

Last year, more than 7,500 co-operatives contributed £41 billion to the UK economy, providing economic and social benefits for their millions of members and around 250,000 employees.<sup>3</sup>

Earlier this year, the Community Ownership Commission found that while there are up to 8,000 community-owned assets in England, there is significant scope for growth.<sup>4</sup> But this follows local councils selling more than £15 billion of community assets since 2010.<sup>5</sup>

There are currently around 550 co-operatives with registered addresses in the West Midlands, with many more operating across the region.<sup>6</sup> They include retail businesses, community shops and pubs, sports and social clubs, agriculture, financial services and credit unions, community energy generators, arts and cultural organisations, housing providers and more.

## Unleashing co-operatives

Co-operatives are part of the social economy – they create economic and social value for local communities at the same time that people are increasingly looking for more responsible models that share success. Research for the Future Economy Alliance finds that only 15% of people think the current approach to business should stay the same.<sup>7</sup>

**‘Co-operatives have a higher survival rate than other types of business, making them more resilient to economic headwinds.’**

Co-operatives have a higher survival rate than other types of business, making them more resilient to economic headwinds.<sup>8</sup> However, they face a number of challenges – from an uneven playing field, a lack of awareness and limited access to key institutions and finance.

With the right support and an enabling environment, they can meet community needs, provide inclusive employment opportunities for all, boost the region's economy, empower residents, improve community cohesion and ultimately unlock substantial economic and social value for communities.

**The rest of this document sets out what needs to change to support the co-operative sector across the West Midlands:**

- **our proposed principles** – the co-operative principles and ways of working we expect from the West Midlands Combined Authority and Office of the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner.
- **our proposed policies** – the policy changes we are calling for, based on the roles and responsibilities of the West Midlands Mayor and West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner.
- **our promises** – the commitments we make to support the co-operative sector in the West Midlands.





# Our proposed principles

The world is changing fast.

Only last year, the UK government announced a new trailblazer devolution deal for the West Midlands. That deal delivers a new single funding settlement, with more funding and powers on transport, housing, land and skills – as well as influence over a broad range of wider policy areas such as energy, the environment and public health.<sup>9</sup>

In the last few months, financial challenges and government intervention in the heart of the West Midlands have highlighted the importance of community places – suggesting a new approach to council owned or run services may be needed.

And a general election is expected later this year, which could further change the roles and responsibilities of Mayors, Combined Authorities and Police and Crime Commissioners.

One way to deal with change is to have clear principles. These principles of co-operation reflect the high-level approaches that will support the co-operative sector in the West Midlands.

**We call on all candidates for West Midlands Mayor and West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner to support policies and actions that:**

- **Empower people and communities** breaking down barriers and giving them the tools to solve the problems they face.
- **Raise awareness of co-operative models** championing the regional co-operative sector and providing education and training about democratic business models to enable growth.
- **Enable a level playing field for co-operatives** removing unnecessary barriers so co-operatives have a chance to succeed and deliver economic and social value.
- **Provide co-operative leadership** through a co-operative and collaborative approach, that works with partners and communities to deliver change.



**We also call on the West Midlands Combined Authority and Office of the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner to adopt co-operative values and ways of working,** which are followed by more than three million co-operatives across the world. This means acting in ways that promote self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, solidarity, honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others.<sup>10</sup>



# Our proposed policies

As well as adopting co-operative principles and ways of working, we are calling for policy changes that will support the co-operative sector in the West Midlands.

They reflect the role and responsibilities of the West Midlands Mayor, Combined Authority and Police and Crime Commissioner.

But they cannot be achieved in isolation. They require co-operation and collaboration with strategic partners, including the public, private and voluntary sectors – as well as communities themselves.

## **We call for the West Midlands Mayor and Police and Crime Commissioner to:**

### **1. Establish a Co-operative Development Network and Co-operative Growth Fund**

Championing and accelerating co-operative growth can deliver key economic and social benefits, and should build on existing efforts through targeted actions.

The Co-operative Development Network would bring together existing providers of business support and advice and lead the delivery of a pioneering apprenticeship programme to train a new generation of co-operative business advisors. It would also ensure that all business advice and support programmes procured or delivered by the Combined Authority explicitly include co-operatives as an option alongside other business models.

The Co-operative Growth Fund would provide necessary funding for communities that are in the early stages of creating or converting to co-operative business models. This could be through a combination of targeted grants, revolving loans and 'seed funding' – inspired by Co-operative and Community Finance's Thrive Together Fund and Power to Change's Community Shares Booster Fund.<sup>11 12</sup>





## 2. Create a West Midlands Community Development Corporation

The **Save Birmingham campaign** shows that people care about their community places, and local councils are expected to continue asset sales without financial support by the UK government. Recent research by Power to Change found that prioritising community ownership during asset sales is the most favoured option by a clear margin.<sup>13</sup>

Supporting local action, a new community development corporation would help to protect community assets at a strategic and economical scale that is not available to individual local authorities. It could enable social investment to finance the purchase and development of community places, while retaining local accountability and control. It should build on the support provided to communities to save assets at risk by the UK government's Community Ownership Fund, with a stronger regional focus.

## 3. Explore mutual solutions for local transport services

The West Midlands Combined Authority is responsible for procuring local bus and train services through franchise agreements. When franchise agreements come up for renewal, it should facilitate competitive bids from potential mutual operators and ensure a level playing field.

If it pursues a public option, the West Midlands Combined Authority should explore giving passengers and workers a say on routes, fares and services through participative structures.







#### **4. Promote co-operative and community-led housing and land ownership**

Co-operative housing has a rich history in the West Midlands, from early housing co-operatives in Birmingham, pioneering self-builds in Redditch and a new mixed-use development underway in Stirchley. Community land trusts (CLTs) are a growing way to enable the building of affordable homes on land that is either too expensive, deprived or unwieldy for conventional housebuilding.

The West Midlands Combined Authority should embed the use of co-operative and community-led housing in its housing and land strategy, working with key partners.

#### **5. Enable a level playing field when procuring goods and services**

This should build on existing work by the Co-operative Councils Innovation Network, which supports local authorities across the country to deliver progressive procurement policies.<sup>14</sup>



## 6. Protect retail workers and promote community safety

There is an opportunity to promote community-based policing and crime prevention through increased partnership working, community involvement and targeted enforcement.

Recent campaigns by the co-operative movement have highlighted that violence against retail workers has risen by more than 50% while securing legal changes.<sup>15</sup> Local police services are responsible for enforcing this, and they must be held to account.



## 7. Launch an independent Co-operative Commission

Just like Greater Manchester did in 2018, an independent co-operative commission made up of subject matter experts could help to identify barriers and solutions to growing the region's co-operative economy.<sup>16</sup>

The West Midlands Combined Authority should fund the commission, working with partners to identify immediate needs as well as long-term risks and opportunities. As a first step, it should seek to measure the size and scale of the regional co-operative economy and then develop plans that map against national ambitions to grow the co-operative sector to ensure that the West Midlands is not left behind.

The commission should build on previous work, including the West Midlands Co-operative Taskforce from 2021, which considered co-operative solutions for broader policy areas such as community banking, energy, food poverty, and social care.<sup>17</sup>





## Our promises

In the spirit of co-operation, we will not wait before acting.

We will continue to promote and support the co-operative sector in the West Midlands, including the delivery of our co-operative development strategy for the West Midlands.<sup>18</sup>

We commit to:

- Work with the successful candidates for West Midlands Mayor and West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner, and their respective organisations, to implement these proposed principles and policies.
- Convene meetings between the regional co-operative sector and the West Midlands Mayor and West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner after the election in May 2024.
- Continue to attend the West Midlands Combined Authority's Social Economy Taskforce to support insights and action.
- Share best practice and learning with other regions, including around our work with the Save Birmingham campaign to promote community ownership.

**By working together, we can  
deliver a co-operative future  
for the West Midlands.**



# References

- <sup>1</sup> This includes the local authorities of Cannock, North Warwickshire, Nuneaton and Bedworth, Redditch, Rugby, Shropshire, Stratford-on-Avon, Tamworth, Telford and Wrekin, Warwick and Warwickshire.
- <sup>2</sup> <https://www.wmca.org.uk/news/1-2bn-wmca-budget-to-help-cut-carbon-and-deliver-new-homes-jobs-and-economic-growth/>
- <sup>3</sup> <https://www.uk.coop/sites/default/files/2023-11/Economy%202023%20final.pdf>
- <sup>4</sup> <https://party.coop/wp-content/blogs.dir/5/files/2024/01/20240104-community-ownership-report-final-compress.pdf>
- <sup>5</sup> <https://www.ippr.org/news-and-media/press-releases/revealed-an-estimated-15-billion-local-public-assets-sold-since-2010>
- <sup>6</sup> According to Co-operatives UK's open data, accessed in March 2024: <https://www.uk.coop/resources/open-data>
- <sup>7</sup> <https://www.futureeconomyalliance.co.uk/media/uk-business-leaders-demand-bold-economic-reform-as-new-data-shows-public-agreement>
- <sup>8</sup> <https://www.uk.coop/news/co-op-businesses-more-resilient-covid>
- <sup>9</sup> <https://www.wmca.org.uk/media/0wkntfwp/devolution-deal-summary-final-ea0963523623144ae8a9afd0534d462df94d61b24202832dde2f6e1b77abd8c3.pdf>
- <sup>10</sup> <https://ica.coop/en/cooperatives/cooperative-identity>
- <sup>11</sup> <https://coopfinance.coop/thrive-together-fund/>
- <sup>12</sup> <https://www.powertochange.org.uk/our-work/our-programmes/community-shares-booster/>
- <sup>13</sup> <https://www.powertochange.org.uk/news/community-ownership-key-to-saving-local-council-assets/>
- <sup>14</sup> <https://www.councils.coop/growing-the-co-op-economy/community-wealth-building/procurement/>
- <sup>15</sup> <https://www.centralcoop.co.uk/press-and-media/central-co-op-urges-members-and-customers-to-take-action-against-retail-crime>
- <sup>16</sup> <https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/media/2598/gm-co-operative-commission-report.pdf>
- <sup>17</sup> <https://party.coop/wp-content/blogs.dir/5/files/2020/10/OurFutureInOurHands.pdf>
- <sup>18</sup> <https://www.cooperatives-wm.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CWM-Making-Co-ops-Thrive-final-screen-version.pdf>

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