

West Midlands Ownership Hub Evaluation Report

[Fry Creative](#)

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A photograph of a person with short, curly brown hair, wearing a dark blazer over a maroon shirt. They are holding a microphone to their mouth with their right hand and have their left hand over their heart. The background is a dark brick wall.

be part of it

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Executive Summary

The West Midlands Ownership Hub (WMOH) was a two-year pilot designed to test how employee and worker ownership (E&WO) could be supported in a regional setting, with a distinctive focus on the creative industries. Launched in November 2023 with a £215,000 grant from Power to Change and delivered by Co-operatives UK, the Employee Ownership Association (EOA) and the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), it was the third Ownership Hub, following earlier initiatives in South Yorkshire and London. Its premise was clear: E&WO models are proven to be more productive, resilient and locally rooted than conventional business models, yet remain under-used due to lack of awareness and visibility. The Hub set out to change that picture by embedding a coordinator within WMCA's cultural team to stimulate the formation of worker co-ops and employee-owned businesses in the creative industries in the West Midlands.

WMOH delivered a number of interventions to create a pipeline of support for individuals and businesses at different stages of their journey with E&WO. To engage prospective co-operatives and employee-owned businesses, WMOH presented at events organised by existing business and creative networks in the region, organised their own introductory events and co-produced events with community partners - aiming specifically to reach racialised communities. If prospective organisations were interested in finding out more about co-operatives or employee ownership, the Hub provided them with bespoke support. After an initial conversation, it offered a Dream Together workshop, pre-technical support in which a group could test its co-op idea with a creative facilitator. It could then offer technical information, 1-2-1 coaching and introductions to other E&WO businesses. They would then signpost them to longer-term support from Co-operatives WM, Co-operatives UK, and the EOA. Finally, WMOH trained the business advisors in E&WO and spent considerable time advocating for E&WO within the WMCA.

The Hub demonstrated the value of place-based, sector-focused investment in alternative ownership models. It achieved significant short-term outcomes: individuals gained knowledge of support routes, felt empowered to take greater control of their working lives, developed an understanding of how E&WO could benefit their sector, and built connections with peers pursuing similar goals. Advisors and facilitators grew in their knowledge and confidence, strengthening advocacy capacity in the region. Barriers and myths were addressed across the board, inclusive engagement methods were tested, and policy conversations within WMCA were influenced in ways that will outlast the pilot. Throughout this executive summary we have outlined the extent to which WMOH has achieved its intended outcomes (which are listed in full in the evaluation framework attached in [annex one](#)), before using the rest of this report to more fulsomely outline the evidence, impact and learning across its multiple strands of work.

Increased understanding of Employee & Worker Ownership

The Hub increased individuals' understanding of what employee and worker ownership actually means in practice. Many participants began with little or no knowledge of different models, often confusing what co-operatives are or how they work, or assuming employee ownership required large capital investments from staff. Through workshops, events, and creative resources such as

the Be Part of It film, the Hub translated technical concepts into accessible and relevant language. This helped people grasp the ideological principles of Employee & Worker Ownership and how these principles can be applied to their sectors, businesses and community organisations.

However, as perhaps expected, levels of understanding were often described as the first step, enough to spark interest but remaining at a foundational level. As noted, E&WO transition can often be a long journey with considerable learning involved, but nonetheless WMOH provided organisations with enough information and knowledge to pursue the model further. It therefore fulfilled its principal functions: inspiration and base knowledge, prior to passing on groups to more technical, ongoing support.

Knowledge of ongoing support

A complementary core achievement of engagement was the increase in awareness about where to source ongoing support for pursuing alternative ownership models, beyond the life of the Ownership Hub. Individuals who had never previously encountered co-operatives or employee ownership were, via their initial engagement with the Hub, introduced to pathways of advice such as Co-ops West Midlands, Co-operatives UK, Business Growth West Midlands and the Employee Ownership Association. In total, 56 enquiries were made about co-ops, with 16 groups going on to participate in Dream Together workshops or equivalent sessions, and a number progressing to more formal business support programmes. For many, this represented the first time they understood that tailored, accessible advice existed, and that they could take practical next steps with confidence. Another key factor in providing ongoing support was the role the Hub played in connecting prospective co-operatives to industry peers, who were also viewed as a useful source of insight and ongoing support. Business advisors and creative facilitators equally benefitted from targeted training, leaving them with a stronger grasp of referral routes and resources, thereby strengthening the region's wider support ecosystem.

As will be noted throughout, there was a variance between the impact of the programme amongst prospective co-ops and those exploring employee-ownership (EO). Many prospective co-ops became more aware of ongoing sources of support for their work but there was comparatively little evidence of this for those exploring EO. This was principally due to the fact that general engagement in this space was lower, therefore causing there to be less need to signpost for further guidance. In some instances, whilst prospective co-operatives were able to identify sources of ongoing support for their development, many suggested that a gap would be left if WMOH ceased to exist. This was principally due to its strong footprint on the ground, geographically, within a specific sector. Participants also described the support landscape as sometimes fragmented and confusing, and the lack of visible funding or expertise could leave groups uncertain about how to proceed. Overall whilst awareness of ongoing support has grown for those who have engaged, without the Ownership Hub connecting people on the ground to this support there will remain a pipeline gap.

Empowerment to take control of working situations

The Hub empowered individuals, particularly freelancers and small collectives in the creative industries, to take greater control of their working lives. Throughout, individuals - exploring co-ops and EO alike - spoke of the ideological appeal of E&WO as a key factor in them wanting to explore modes more. In noting E&WO's value in organisational longevity and sustainability, in facilitating more democratic approaches to decision making, and in more equally distributing resources amongst people - participants noted how E&WO had helped them to take greater control of their working situations.

Through exploratory workshops and one-to-one support, participants reported a new sense of agency in shaping their futures. Many described how the process helped them envision collaborative structures that could provide fairer conditions, shared resources, and greater resilience. The Dream Together workshops were especially important here: by framing discussions around creative ambitions and shared values, rather than immediately focusing on technicalities, the sessions gave people confidence that they could own and direct their work collectively.

Yet empowerment did not always translate into action. Some left workshops feeling inspired but struggled to dedicate time and resources to follow through, given the pressures of freelance or part-time work. Without sustained mentoring and resourcing, initial motivation could fade, showing that empowerment alone is insufficient without practical support to follow up. Without sufficient support in taking action on this empowerment, individuals will not significantly shift control over their working situations.

Understanding sector benefits

The Hub also improved participants' understanding of how E&WO could strengthen the infrastructure of the creative industries more broadly. Many stakeholders noted the region's particularly challenging climate within cultural industries, where freelancers face low security and competition for funding and contracts is high. Beneficiaries understood that by pooling resources and embedding democratic governance, co-ops and employee-owned businesses are a means of addressing these systemic challenges. Participants reported greater appreciation of how these models could enhance collaboration, strengthen networks, and make the sector more sustainable in the long term. This was reinforced by case study examples and peer connections that showed how collective models had already been adopted successfully by organisations with similar profiles.

In spite of this, many questioned the choice of sector, principally in how well it aligned to broader WMCA priorities. Some stakeholders suggested that development in other areas would have engendered greater impact on productivity, for example,, whilst others noted that they felt the creative industries were not a natural fit specifically due to the economic challenges it currently faces.

Relevance to businesses

For business owners considering succession, the Hub provided a practical introduction to employee ownership as a credible and values-based exit route. While only two companies worked with WMOH to explore EO in depth during the pilot, the conversations that did occur highlighted its potential to safeguard workforce stability and preserve organisational culture in transitions.

Co-operative pathways were often seen as more immediately relevant to early-stage creative groups, offering benefits such as access to funding, reputational legitimacy and stronger community links. Others noted increased sustainability provided by E&WO models and the fact that E&WO businesses are more likely to use local suppliers. In many instances, those exploring co-operatives were not intending to form organisations which would generate a large amount of income, they often relied on secondary sources, and did not see co-operatives as a model to centralise their income. Therefore whilst co-operatives were seen as a good business model by these groups, it was not a model that was supporting them financially. The Hub nonetheless demonstrated that E&WO is not just an ideological choice but a model with tangible business advantages. These advantages were more keenly felt by start-ups, as opposed to those who had been running a business for a longer period of time.

Aside from benefits associated with business or economic growth, a number of stakeholders, in particular WMCA policymakers, highlighted the key contribution E&WO makes to the social economy. In short, therefore, whilst the model deployed in the creative industries might not drive more pure economic growth - for the broader economy and the business itself - it would deliver more inclusive growth, benefitting a broader range of people in the region.

Addressing barriers

Before the Hub, many individuals held misconceptions that deterred them from exploring E&WO, including the belief that co-ops were only suited to specific industries, that decision-making would be impossibly slow, or that employee ownership required staff to buy out their employer directly. The Hub actively addressed these barriers by producing myth-busting resources, embedding creative language and storytelling into its outreach, and designing events that demystified complex structures. This was especially evident in its co-produced work with racialised communities, such as the Creative Caribbean Convention and the InKongbator for Hong Kongers. These events provided culturally relevant entry points, significantly raising knowledge levels and building trust among groups previously excluded from mainstream business support. In some instances common misconceptions remain stubborn, but those believing in them now have access to new sources of information, which should, in the long term, provide new insight.

Building connections

Another significant outcome was the strengthening of connections between and amongst individuals and organisations alike. Participants described how the Hub's events and workshops enabled them to meet potential collaborators, hear from established co-ops, and access peer advice. In some cases, these connections directly led to new ventures, as with Five Senses, a group

that first met at InKongbator and has since progressed towards forming a co-operative. Even where immediate conversion did not occur, the sense of belonging to a wider movement left many participants motivated to continue exploring collective ownership. A key element of this network facilitation was the ability to connect prospective co-operatives or individuals exploring employee ownership to other organisations who'd been on similar journeys. As will be noted, this is a crucial route of aiding understanding, productive development and ongoing support. Whilst comparatively lower than prospective E&WO organisations, facilitators and advisors also noted developed networks that they could draw on in their wider practice, creating ripple effects beyond the life of the pilot.

However, across the board sustaining these networks is difficult. Without structured resourcing for peers to support each other, the ongoing support they can provide may wane. Equally, enthusiasm of pursuing a co-operative model sometimes dissipated after events, risking groups losing momentum before maturing into functioning co-ops. Early networks are fragile, pointing to the need for a more localised, specialist infrastructure to maintain them.

Growing knowledge among advisors and facilitators

As a shop window for businesses seeking support across the West Midlands, Business Growth West Midlands provides a unique opportunity for ongoing development of E&WO. Their Business Advisors were trained by the Hub on co-operatives, and training on EO is planned for later this year. Those trained reported greater confidence in introducing co-ops as options for clients, ensuring that these models are now part of the mainstream business support landscape in the region. In spite of this, business advisors have not yet been trained on EO, and therefore are less well equipped to deliver this support to perspectives. As a crucial and rare opportunity to engage with business owners about succession planning, this highlights a principal shortfall of the Ownership Hub's activity. It is intended to be addressed before the end of the year. It is also worth noting that one training delivered to Business Advisors on co-operatives is not enough to sustain their knowledge of the model in changing business climates.

Despite some confusion in the function of Dream Together workshops, Creative facilitators often not only increased their technical knowledge but also deepened their own appreciation of the cultural fit between co-operatives and artistic practice. Their involvement has created a cadre of advocates who can continue to champion co-operatives in their networks, extending the Hub's reach long after the pilot ends.

Policy influence and advocacy

The Hub's positioning within WMCA gave it direct access to policy influence. Staff engaged with multiple directorates, leadership boards, and inclusive growth forums, successfully linking E&WO to the Authority's wider agendas around productivity, inclusive growth, social economy and cultural development. Policymakers reported that engaging shifted their understanding of alternative ownership models, making them more visible within strategies and plans, even if references remain partial and uneven. The Hub also influenced WMCA's approach to community engagement, demonstrating how trusted intermediaries and co-production could connect with

groups often overlooked by mainstream business advice. Sustained advocacy will be needed to secure deeper policy alignment. These successes are in spite of some WMCA policymakers having different understanding of the Hub's policy purpose and contribution - leading to confusion in how successful or otherwise it has been.

Balancing successes and challenges

The evaluation highlights both achievements and limitations to the delivery of WMOH. Tangible successes included the progress towards the creation of new co-ops such as Walkspace and Five Senses, the engagement of 381 individuals at 34 events, the training of 16 business advisors and five facilitators, and the embedding of awareness across WMCA. Yet progress on employee ownership was more limited, hindered by the difficulty of reaching founders, confidentiality concerns, and the creative sector's lower alignment with EO transitions. Communications across the board could also have been stronger, with some potential participants unaware of opportunities, and the inherently slow pace of ownership transitions meant that immediate conversions were modest.

The evaluation shows that the West Midlands Ownership Hub has certainly contributed to a more resilient and inclusive regional economy, demonstrating that with the right support, alternative ownership models can inspire individuals, strengthen sectors, and influence policy.

Although employee ownership progress was limited and co-operative development takes time, the Hub created conditions for long-term change by building awareness, seeding new networks, and embedding E&WO in both community and policy ecosystems. Its legacy lies not only in the organisations directly supported but also in the learning it offers: that with trusted leadership, inclusive engagement, and clear pathways of support, employee and worker ownership can move from niche to mainstream in shaping a more resilient and inclusive regional economy.

Recommendations

A number of specific recommendations, which are given more detail throughout the report, have been highlighted below. Whilst all recommendations are relevant to central and devolved government authorities; sector bodies and organisations; and delivery vehicles, we have categorised recommendations into two principle groups: those delivering activities and those funding them, in the future:

Recommendations for Delivery

1. Boots on the Ground

Maintain a dedicated resource for on the ground support of E&WO in the West Midlands to foster an entry point for people to find out about alternative business models.

Structures for ongoing support exist, but knowledge about the models in the first place and accessing ongoing support does not. The Ownership Hub was most successful when it was introducing people to co-ops and then signposting them to further support

2. Tailored Support & Ongoing Dialogue with Prospectives

Triage prospects and stay in touch with them.

A key success was actively in staying in touch with prospective organisations to understand if the support they had received was appropriate and if they need anything further.

Understanding whether groups need visioning workshops or technical expertise, and tailoring specifically to these needs is crucial in moving them forward in their journey.

E&WO models take time to develop and solidify, therefore ongoing points of contact are crucial in making sure that perspectives have someone to be in touch with over the course of their development, who know the context of their organisation. This can often be lost when temporary interventions such as WMOH cease.

3. Communications and Visibility

Deepen communications and expand visibility.

On the ground success would have been bolstered by stronger communications support broadening the reach of messaging and delivering a higher intake of perspectives to introductory events. In short, the work would have been more effective if undertaken with a higher volume of initial points of contact.

This is particularly the case for EO, where more directed interventions and targeted communications are needed.

4. Leverage Community Partnerships

Build on the success of community partner events by continuing to co-produce with racialised communities and underrepresented groups.

Co-production proved to be a way of expanding inclusive access to alternative ownership models.

Work with community groups, ensuring they have autonomy over the direction of events, even if this is at the expense of an E&WO focus - it will pay dividends in relationship building.

5. Clarity of Purpose

Ensure all stakeholders (beneficiaries, facilitators, deliver partners) understand and what each individual intervention/step of the pipeline is intended to achieve.

As noted elsewhere in this report, wraparound support was available to participants before and after the workshops, but not all facilitators were aware of it, leaving some to feel they needed to cover more ground than intended during the sessions themselves.

6. Importance of Peers and Real Examples

Invite co-ops and employee-owned businesses to share their stories.

One of the most commonly identified sources of gaining knowledge and accessing ongoing support was the role of real case study examples and contact with organisations who'd been on a similar journey. Prospectives and WMCA policymakers alike identified this as a principal point at which information stuck.

By focusing hyperlocally, and fostering better knowledge of other co-operatives, a higher volume will arise following a critical mass of co-operatives.

Recommendations for Funding and Oversight Partners

7. Policy Alignment

Embed E&WO more clearly within WMCA's multiple policy agendas, highlighting from the off what WMOH is intended to deliver for each.

Evidence shows that throughout different facets of WMCA, policymakers anticipated WMOH delivering on different policy outcomes, which were sometimes at odds - to drive productivity vs to drive growth for everyone, for example.

8. Sector Focus

Focus on a specific sector.

This has proved to be productive in maximising impact. If a Hub is intended to be the 'boots on the ground', making initial introductions to E&WO, then recruiting people with strong personal networks in those target sectors - as opposed to strong knowledge of E&WO - is most effective.

The target sector needs to align with policy agendas of the combined or local authority. This was not the case for WMOH, which was situated in a culture where the policy focus was on productivity and economic growth. In reality, WMOH's work in this sector delivered more on social economy and growth for everyone, as opposed to the productivity agenda.

9. Integration with Business Growth West Midlands

Build on the relationship with Business Growth West Midlands.

Whilst the Hub clearly focused its efforts on on the ground engagement, stronger integration with BGWM will lead to stronger long-term outcomes, and high conversion rates.

Training on E&WO needs to be regularly delivered for business advisors within BGWM, in order to fully embed these models within its current offer.

Whilst this will further the long term aims of WMOH it will also help bring social economy policy closer to BGWM delivery.

Programme Overview

The West Midlands Ownership Hub (WMOH) was a two-year pilot project designed to stimulate the formation of worker co-ops and employee-owned businesses in the creative industries in the West Midlands.

The premise of the project was that worker co-ops and employee-owned businesses are good for communities and good for the economy. These ways of working - known collectively as employee and worker ownership (E&WO) - have been proven to be more productive, resilient and empowering of local workers, than those of traditional business. They aren't more common simply because they aren't widely known about. The Ownership Hub was set up to do something about that.

The pilot, which ran from November 2023 to November 2025, was funded by a £215,000 grant from Power to Change and delivered through a partnership between Co-operatives UK, the Employee Ownership Association and the West Midlands Combined Authority.

It was the third Ownership Hub. The first was set up in South Yorkshire in 2021 and the second in London in 2022. Unlike the earlier Ownership Hubs, the Hub in the West Midlands had a sector focus – the creative industries. This was because the model was considered a good fit for the sector which is naturally collaborative and which has a precarity that comes from a mainly freelance workforce.

WMOH took on a co-ordinator, Jo Ind, to manage the programme working 21 hours per week. Jo was based within the Creative and Cultural team at the West Midlands Combined Authority and managed by Colette Harvey, from Co-operatives UK.

Jo's approach was to use the budget to build a team in the West Midlands to help deliver the programme. Kathy Hopkin from WMOH was taken on one day a week as a co-op developer and administrator. Kathy triaged the enquiries and kept track of people as they made their way through the E&WO pipeline. A pool of creative facilitators was trained to deliver Dream Together workshops – the first step for many in exploring their E&WO options.

In general, the approach was to host events or have a presence at events that were held by creative, cultural or business organisations. Jo from WMOH made a high-quality film, did presentations, delivered seminars and went out and about talking to people. From this, those who were interested would sign up for a one-to-one conversation. Kathy would contact all who enquired to assess their needs. She would then team them up with a Dream Together workshop facilitator, or refer them to the Employee Ownership Association or to Co-operatives West Midlands and keep track of their progress. The focus was on going out to communities rather than broadcasting on social media.

Jo was also particularly concerned about reaching racialised communities. To this end, she experimented with co-producing events with people from those communities – a Creative

Caribbean Convention and an InKongbator (a business incubator for people from Hong Kong). The initiative for these events came from people within those communities with Jo supporting in making them happen.

WMOH teamed up with the University of Warwick's Centre for Cultural and Media Policy Studies in a research project with students on a MA in Creative and Media Enterprises. Under the supervision of Dr Vishalakshi Roy, Assistant Professor in Creative Industries, six students investigated how different legal forms of creative businesses affect access to funding.

In addition to the community outreach work, Jo worked on raising awareness of the benefits and support needs of E&WO within regional infrastructure bodies, such as with WMCA policy-makers, those involved in business growth and those supporting creative and cultural organisations. She ensured WMOH played a role in WMCA events such as the West Midlands Business Festival and the Social Economy Drive, which meant its work was visible to policy makers as well as potential participants. She also contributed to the conversations and thinking of the Reclaiming our Regional Economies programme, a key deliverable for Co-operatives UK in the West Midlands.

Methodology

Scope of the Evaluation

In early 2025, FRY Creative were commissioned to undertake an independent evaluation of the West Midlands Ownership Hub (WMOH). The evaluation was designed to understand the outcomes and impacts of the Hub's work in raising awareness, building networks, and supporting pathways into employee and worker ownership across the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) area.

Whilst the evaluation focused on activities delivered through the WMOH pilot, findings also reflect the wider context of employee and worker ownership development within the region. In some instances, experiences of the Hub were inseparable from interaction with other Employee and Worker Owned (E&WO) organisations. As such, impacts captured through the evaluation are presented as part of an interconnected landscape, rather than being attributed solely to the Hub in isolation.

Evaluation Framework and Data Collection Design

Following a project inception meeting, FRY Creative worked with WMOH staff to design an evaluation framework that mapped project inputs, activities, outputs, and intended outcomes. This process drew on a document review that included: programme planning materials, WMCA strategic documentation, monitoring data on outputs and reach, and communications materials such as event call-outs and training resources. Indicators were attached to each outcome area, and data collection methods were aligned accordingly. Given the pilot nature of the initiative, the evaluation placed greater emphasis on qualitative enquiry and stakeholder perspectives, supported by monitoring data and illustrative case studies. All outputs data was provided by WMOH, along with feedback survey data from each of the community partner events. The evaluation framework has been attached in [annex one](#).

Data Collection and Analysis

Three principal sources of evidence were used to address the evaluation framework:

Key Informant Interviews | A total of 26 stakeholders were engaged via semi-structured interviews. This included:

- 2 WMOH staff,
- 5 delivery partners,
- 1 co-op advisor/workshop facilitator,
- 6 WMCA policymakers,
- 5 prospective employees and freelancers,
- 2 founders of existing businesses,
- 3 creative facilitators, and
- 2 event partner organisations.

Interviews typically lasted between 30–60 minutes. Participants were offered anonymity, and quotes used throughout this report have either been anonymised or attributed with permission. Interviews were recorded, transcribed using Otter.ai, and coded thematically. Analysis was undertaken in line with a coding framework derived from the evaluation framework, ensuring findings could be triangulated against project outcomes. Interviews were conducted 1-2-1 or with two stakeholders simultaneously. Quotes captured in Key Informant Interviews have been edited to remove repetition or hesitancy.

Surveys | Two short surveys were disseminated during the evaluation period: one targeted at prospective co-operatives and one at businesses considering employee ownership. Response rates were low (10 responses from prospective co-ops, 1 from an EO business). WMOH were responsible for disseminating the survey and chasing responses, though securing key informant interviews was prioritised for the evaluation, as it was anticipated that we would not attain a statistically confident sample. Given the limited final sample size, the data was not used in analysis or findings, though responses were reviewed to cross-check emerging themes from qualitative evidence.

Secondary Data Sources | Monitoring data on WMOH activities and outputs was provided by the Hub. This included participant numbers at events, training sessions, Dream Together workshops, and co-produced activities. FRY Creative did not independently verify this data, and it has been utilised as supplied.

Reporting Process

Following completion of fieldwork and analysis, an initial draft report was shared with WMOH staff and delivery partners for comment. Feedback informed revisions and the production of this final version.

Limitations

As with any evaluation of this scale, there are limitations. Surveys received a poor response rate and are therefore excluded from the evidence base. Engagement with businesses exploring employee ownership proved challenging, with fewer direct participants from these organisations engaging in Key Informant Interviews. As such, findings relating to employee ownership development are less conclusive. This was due to the fact that, in line with broader engagement trends, fewer people who had engaged in EO development participated in the evaluation, when compared to those who had delivered, or engaged with, co-operative provision. In addition, secondary monitoring data has been used as provided, without external validation. Nonetheless, the evaluation has benefitted from a wide and diverse set of stakeholder interviews, providing a robust and balanced account of the Hub's work and its emerging impact across the region.

Outputs Summary

Co-operatives Development

- 56 individuals and groups have reached out to WMOH about exploring co-operatives further, of which
 - 16 groups have taken part in Dream Together workshops or equivalent support sessions
 - 7 individuals or groups are in the pipeline for a Dream Together workshop

Following this engagement:

- 1 group has gone on to apply for 'Business Support for Co-ops' with Co-Ops UK
- 1 group has gone on to form a fully constituted Co-Operative as a result of their engagement with the Hub
- 5 individuals/groups have been signposted to Co-operatives West Midlands (CWM) or Coventry and Warwickshire CDA.
 - 1 of these went on to Business Support for Co-ops and is now registering as a co-op
 - 4 are currently in progress

Employee Ownership Development

- 2 business owners have been in touch with WMOH to explore employee ownership further, one of which has been passed on for further advice

Advocacy and Awareness

- 381 individuals attended one of 34 events spreading awareness of cooperatives and employee ownership
- WMOH has platformed employee and worker ownership at 47 events or meetings across a range of contexts including: 16 instances within the broader WMCA; 10 with policy influencers such as Arts Council England or Creative UK; and 21 directly with prospective co-operatives or employee owned businesses.
- WMOH have directly engaged with 21 individuals within the WMCA team, advocating for E&WO

- 15 piece of media generated influencing public perception of E&WO
- 1 short film, which has since been entered for the Global Sustainability Films Awards, created to engage creatives in E&WO
- 2 events co-produced with organisations engaging racialised communities

E&WO Support

- 16 mainstream West Midlands Business Advisors were trained on co-operatives
- 5 Creative facilitators were trained on E&WO to go out and deliver Dream Together workshops
- 16 Co-ops and EO businesses involved in delivering the programme

Employee & Worker Ownership Landscape and Understanding

Barriers to knowledge, understanding and exploration

Across all sectors and geographies, individuals and organisations face barriers to engaging in employee and worker ownership (E&WO). These include a lack of knowledge about the movement, uncertainty about next steps, and limited visibility of co-operatives or employee ownership as viable business options.

In mainstream business development settings such as university courses or public sector advice, E&WO is rarely given space. Co-operatives are often perceived as a niche topic, while employee ownership is even less visible. Dan Carins from WMCA reflected that: *“Because cooperatives are so niche in this country they're never on the syllabus of degree subjects. [Even] Though I've known local government associations, even universities, getting [co-ops] on syllabuses, we dismiss them.”* They went on to explain that if co-ops are niche, then this is even more the case for employee ownership.

Others pointed to broader cultural attitudes that reinforced this invisibility. One prospective co-operative explained: *“I think it's that idea [that] there's no alternative. You can't have everyone democratically making decisions. Or people need to be paid more because they have more responsibility.”*

The limited platform for E&WO was also linked to perceptions of low economic value. Dan from WMCA described the challenge of making the case: *“I have a [difficult] time struggling to persuade my managers about the benefits of cooperatives,”* because it's such a small part of the economy. Despite the fact that *“They might be sympathetic to the cause, there's always another thing higher up the list of priorities, because we need to deliver big, big, big numbers quickly for small amounts of money.”*

Another issue identified was the lack of people actively promoting co-operatives to those setting up new businesses. As Jo White from Co-operatives West Midlands observed: *“The gap is the boots on the ground. Where are the people who are out there telling [people] that the co-op is an option they should be considering.”*

Accessing learning on co-operatives and employee-ownership is even harder for those who don't access more mainstream sources of business support. As Amy Dalton-Hardy, Creative Facilitator, observed: *“Most artists that I speak to who are considering incorporating as any type of model, they wouldn't even know to go to [business] growth [WM].”* This was further perpetuated for *“People that are more deprived: working class, racialised identities, disabled, are at more of a disadvantage because there are [even] more barriers in the way.”*

Once people discover employee and worker ownership, the journey can still feel daunting — from understanding the models to navigating the practical steps. The West Midlands Ownership Hub has

helped many organisations overcome these hurdles, but some challenges are simply part of building any new enterprise, regardless of the model in question.

Michael Ford from Three Wise Productions, who explored employee ownership for his company Three Wise Productions discussed the difficulty in negotiating employee ownership whilst still trying to attract private investment: *“The biggest negative is if you've got investors. In order for us to grow, we're going to need private equity. And I think that being able to drive your price up to the highest bidder is probably going to be something that appeals to them.”* In doing so, he reflected that they’d *“Probably [be] denying [ourselves] the opportunity to become employee owned”*

Similarly, Alan Heap from Purple Monster, another business owner exploring employee ownership, explained how the process of becoming employee owned involved too much work at a time when the company had many other competing priorities. He suggested that further development of employee ownership easily fell down the priority list. *“When I looked at the employee ownership trust and everything that that entailed, it just looked pretty complicated. It's really quite involved, and probably a bit more than I need to [...] be worried about at the moment. We're trying to do a number of different things [and therefore] I don't think that this is the moment.”*

Instead, he suggested a more incremental approach: *“I imagine at some point going down a route that enabled everyone in the company, that wanted to, to have shares in it. And actually, I think I can probably do that without any of the other stuff, I think it will be interesting to see how we might develop that ourselves, and do a bit of a DIY version, rather than the full EO.”*

Part of the challenge is that becoming employee owned takes time and dedication, and therefore has to be a priority for those exploring it. As noted from one business owner: *“There was a lot to take in at the start [...] so you can't learn it all in five minutes.”* One business advisor, who has helped to develop co-operatives, noted this as a common feature of co-ops as well as employee owned businesses: *“When I've put too much information forward, you end up with paralysis by analysis. They'll spend all their time looking at what it should look like, worried to death they'll get it wrong. And actually, it doesn't matter. The only thing that really matters is that they've got a good value proposition and that they can engage with customers, and actually people want what they've got.”*

Many of the barriers faced by those exploring employee ownership were similar to those exploring co-ops. Several organisations expressed that whilst co-operative development is something they are interested in, now doesn't feel like the right time for them to move forward with it. One Prospective Co-operative explained: *“I want to get it right. We all want to make sure we know what we're signing up for and I think that needs some time and focus.”*

Emmanuelle Henry from the Midlands African Heritage Collaborative Network (MAHCN) described how his organisation was interested but not yet ready: *“I think we're at a very early stage, so therefore, we're not quite ready to step into that round. However, we have, as a group, made a commitment that we need to be aware of all of these processes and how cooperatives have set up [...]”* He concluded that the organisation is incorporating as a CIC to begin with, to then explore co-operatives in the long term: *“At the moment, with the scale that we're at, we have to be realistic*

about our endeavor and there's certain strategic kind of aims that we need to work on prior to becoming a full on cooperative." The challenge therefore becomes how centralised sources of guidance stay in touch with these groups over the longer term, in order to be able to support them with their ongoing growth.

Another perceived barrier raised by facilitators and participants was that co-ops can struggle with leadership and decision-making. There was concern that responsibility often fell to a small number of people, while others disengage, resulting in slow progress or inaction. Nyasha Daley, Creative Facilitator explained: *"My worry with co-ops from what I've seen from groups I've worked with [...] they are already in a collective that wasn't formal. This is what happens on most non-executive charity and not profit boards. A small group of people who all say they want the same thing, but there's only three people really doing the work."* She added: *"Nothing ever gets actually actioned because no one ever puts their hand up. And I think this is the challenge with co-ops."* Colette from Co-operatives UK also observed: *"People have already got preconceived ideas about it, a bit scared of it. Decisions are going to take forever."* Whilst this common misconception can be combatted by a number of consent-based decision making strategies or sociocracy, the perception still remains a barrier to participants' exploration of co-operatives.

This was linked to another barrier: the need for individuals to remain invested and committed along the journey. Andy Howlett from Walkspace linked this to the voluntary nature of participation, especially in the creative industries. Other co-operatives, who provided advice to Andy suggested that *"Being a co-operative changes nothing in terms of getting activity to happen. It's not like a magic wand that you suddenly have a very active membership all stepping up and doing things... while it is a voluntary thing, there's only so much we're going to be able to do... That made me realise, to manage my expectations with Walkspace."*

These barriers were less relevant for employee-owned organisations, which typically retain linear leadership structures. However, one barrier raised as specific to employee ownership was that the model can be harder to adopt for those who have already run businesses in traditional ways, compared with those encountering it for the first time. Michael from Three Wise Productions reflected on the difficulty of "retrofitting" employee ownership: *"If you've never run a business, it's probably easier because you're reading something with no understanding of how things normally work, whereas I was trying to retrofit what I know."*

By contrast, co-operatives face the specific requirement of being established by a group. As Jo from WMOH explained: *"Very often a sole trader/a single person would come to a business advisor, setting up as a sole trader. But when it's a co-op you've got to have the group there. So there is a particular challenge around how you get everybody in the room."*

Finally, many noted that in a tough financial climate this might be a root cause for people not to look to co-operatives as a priority. Hayley Pepler, Head of Culture, Creative Industries and Digital Roadmap at WMCA, suggested that co-ops *"Are not the easiest way forward"* in a financially hard climate. She noted that often creative or cultural businesses are viewed as "emerging" and

“Actually getting to a point where you're an employee owned model or a co-operative model requires a certain amount of maturity.”

Amy, Creative Facilitator agreed, pointing to survival pressures: *“The reason why they didn't proceed to form a co-op, is a common reason across the industry. It is so fraught out there and everyone's just surviving, and their focus is on, how can I put food on the table next week, rather than, can I start this thing and dream into the future. That is not in people's brains right now.”*

Gaps In Understanding

As with barriers to engagement, gaps in understanding predated, and also occasionally prevailed through, WMOH activity. There are substantial gaps in understanding across both models largely afforded by complex systems and processes, which are largely new to people as a result of the barriers discussed above. These gaps in understanding range from fundamental misconceptions about what the structures entail, to widespread myths that shape how individuals and organisations perceive their relevance.

For employee ownership, participants often struggled to grasp the mechanisms through which ownership was transferred. Some participants assumed it required employees to buy out their employer directly, rather than understanding the role of trusts and financing. Michael from Three Wise Productions explained: *“It took me ages to understand: I thought employee ownership meant the employees bought the company. I realised it was a trust that essentially borrowed the money to buy it.”*

Similar misunderstandings were common around co-operatives. Some organisations expressed reluctance towards co-ops based on inaccurate assumptions of what was involved. As will be discussed later in the ‘deliver methods’ section, this prompted WMOH to produce a “myth-busting” resource: *“The interviews with creative organisations [conducted as part of research by the University of Warwick] were really interesting because they all said, ‘we don't want to be a co-op’. And then they said why, and their reasons weren't based in the reality of what co-ops are.”*

The lack of visible examples in the creative sector also left some feeling uncertain. One prospective co-operative said: *“The co-op sounded like a really good fit for us, but I don't know of many co-ops, particularly artistic, creative co-ops. I know lots of, like barber shops, who are co-operatives and pubs... So I spoke to somebody, and they said: you need to speak with Jo.”*

Others explained that their understanding of co-operatives shifted through engagement. As one participant put it: *“I think a lot of people, in my sector, have an idea of what a co-operative is, but actually, when it comes down to legally, that it is quite different. And I think that was really good in terms of shedding some of the myths that maybe we thought the co-operative was.”*

Another added: *“People have heard the word co-operative, [and] start formulating their own ideas about what it means. I don't think people understand it, that it's a legal structure, a way of operating*

more than just a mindset or an ethos, which is obviously important, but [they don't understand] that it has something real, tangible that could work for artists."

Some also feared losing individual autonomy, particularly in creative industries where freelance work was the norm. Facilitators highlighted the importance of clarifying that there are a number of ways through which you can retain your status as a freelancer and still be part of a co-operative. Amy, Creative Facilitator explained: *"It enables [you] to remain as a freelancer ... [whilst] you are part of a sum greater than all its parts, and you get a share ... but there's a bit of demystification that still needs to happen."*

Others pointed to the broader lack of education and awareness around co-operatives at a systemic level, noting that even within social enterprise spaces, co-ops were often absent. Amy went on to explain: *"There is a huge gap in awareness and education around co-ops even being a thing."* An event partner agreed: *"If they're a social enterprise, they may not be aware of co-ops as the original form of social enterprise."*

Taken together, these findings highlight that there are widespread misconceptions, fears, and knowledge gaps about both co-operatives and employee ownership models. These knowledge gaps are often intertwined with, or caused and influenced by the multiple barriers to engagement people face when exploring both co-operatives and employee ownership.

As we will discuss throughout this report, the WMOH undertook a wide range of activities to plug these gaps, and remove these barriers, enabling a higher volume, and broader range of individuals and organisations to pursue E&WO as a viable option for them. These interventions were undertaken across a range of stakeholder groups, to a range of different successes. Across all, is the pervasive sense that more work is needed, much of it inspired by the successes and learnings of WMOH, in order to enable E&WO to reach its full potential in the West Midlands.

West Midlands Ownership Hub Activities

Engagement Approach

A core feature of the Ownership Hub's work was its approach to engagement. We will first discuss the methods used to draw people into early conversations about co-operatives and employee ownership. Recognising that awareness was comparatively low and misconceptions widespread, the Hub prioritised approaches that were welcoming, accessible, and rooted in trusted relationships.

Across all stakeholders we spoke to, the Hub's engagement methods were described as accessible, positive and confidence-building, helping people who had little prior knowledge to feel included and motivated. As one event partner observed: *"I think the bit that makes it more valuable is its accessibility."* Colette from Co-operatives UK reflected on the strength of the messaging: *"Jo's been able to build a really strong narrative."*

From a WMCA perspective, events were described as lively and engaging, with strong participation and follow-up. Ian McClaughlan from WMCA noted: *“The events that we’ve held have been really, really busy, full of engagement, lots of follow up.”* Dan from WMCA added: *“Jo has been able to talk to people, raise awareness, develop use of those case studies, even if its actual economic performance and number of businesses helped or jobs created, things like that, are quite modest compared to some of the other large projects we run.”*

Participants also emphasised good communication, responsiveness and the ability to distil complex information into accessible sessions. Emmanuelle from MAHCN said: *“The communication with Jo and her team was very good [...] All inquiries, any questions that we’ve had have been answered in detail.”* Michael from Three Wise Productions added: *“What I’ve accessed so far was really good.”* He also praised the clarity of introductory events: *“I thought that first event did a really good job of distilling it in a short amount of time. But when that’s the first time you hear it, you almost want to go to that event again.”*

This range of reflections shows that the Hub’s initial engagement methods were seen as successful across multiple groups - event partners, policymakers, and prospective co-operatives and employee owned organisations alike.

Trusted boots on the ground

A recurring theme from interviews that led to strong engagement was the importance of having a trusted, credible presence in the community. Jo’s role was consistently highlighted as central to opening doors, maintaining relationships, and making the subject approachable.

One Dan from WMCA reflected: *“I don’t think it would have been anywhere near as successful if it hadn’t been to Jo and her ability to straddle two worlds of our boring policy, public sector work, as well as having credibility, networks and contacts within that creative sector.”* An event partner agreed: *“Jo had that credibility in the community. She wasn’t coming in cold. She knew people, and she had that reputation that meant people would listen. That was huge. [...] that one person on the ground who’s trusted. It’s not the same as parachuting in an expert. It’s somebody who can connect on a human level. [...] She wasn’t just standing at a lectern talking about co-ops. She was actually hanging out with people, showing up in their spaces. That’s how people felt comfortable engaging.”*

Co-operatives UK emphasised that this mirrored experiences elsewhere: *“The view in co-ops UK is that you need one inspirational person within a place that’s getting people to understand what co-ops are, how and why they’re different. [...] then you’ll find that co-ops pop up around that person because they’ve just inspired them.”*

WMCA representatives also stressed the value of Jo’s bottom-up approach, bringing awareness into communities directly rather than relying on abstract messaging. Ian from WMCA commented: *“It’s always been a very bottom up approach.”* He added: *“This is quite a powerful offer, and it’s also something that the vast majority of people just will not have a clue.”*

Co-operatives West Midlands (CWM) highlighted the significance of having resources to expand beyond Birmingham, reaching communities across the wider region: *“Jo [WMOH] has had capacity and resources to go outside of Birmingham, to do things in other parts of the Combined Authority, geographically... That has been absolutely brilliant.”*

The evidence shows that a trusted and credible figure embedded in local communities was essential to the Hub’s success, enabling connections that top-down approaches alone could not achieve.

Meeting people where they are

The Hub deliberately engaged people in the spaces and with language they were familiar with. By working through creative networks, using relatable formats, and ensuring communication felt natural, engagement was more effective. As Jo from WMOH, explained: *“We hang out where people who work in the creative industries hang out. And because I’m connected with the creative industries, I know what those networks are.”* They also sighted their placement in the Culture team of the WMCA as paramount in broadening these already strong networks.

A prospective co-operative reflected: *“So that’s been really great, and that’s what really drew me to this programme. It’s like, Oh, great. Here’s a really specific scheme that is something that relates to what I do ... So I think that’s kind of what really made me feel like we have to do this.”*

The Hub also produced tailored resources to support this approach. The [‘Be Part of It’](#) video, for example, was praised for being accessible and engaging: *“It spoke in the language of the people we were trying to reach. It wasn’t a dry PowerPoint.”* Jo from WMOH emphasised the importance of its artistic quality: *“I think it was necessary to create something that was of artistic merit to an audience of artists. [...] When I’ve shown it wherever I’ve been, people have loved it. You know, they’re going, Whoa.”*



Be Part of It Filming

Commissioning facilitators with creative backgrounds assisted in creating a familiar and welcome tone for creatives, as it was anticipated that prospective organisations would respond more readily to peers than to traditional business advisors, as Jo from WMOH noted: *“It wasn’t always a business advisor turning up in a suit, sometimes it was another creative, talking their language, understanding their world. That opened the door.”*

Local connections reinforced this approach. One prospective co-op highlighted the importance of having specific regional information about co-ops. Emmanuelle from MAHCN echoed: *“We were overjoyed [to] actually have regional people.”* Different narratives were tailored to different groups. Jo explained: *“One narrative that I would use was about ‘being a co-op to support your creativity.’ Another one was, ‘who can own your creative business after you.’ The freelancer narrative ‘stronger together’, that was used a lot.”*

By meeting people where they were, in familiar spaces, through trusted networks, and with creative formats, the Hub ensured engagement felt relevant, credible and accessible.

Events and visibility

Events were an entry point to broader engagement in WMOH activity. WMOH both produced its own introductory events, whilst also appearing at those organised by other organisations, communities and groups. Both enabled co-ops and employee ownership to be introduced as part of a wider ecosystem rather than as a niche or an isolated initiative. These included speaking at Create Central Expo; Birmingham Black Business Conference; Coventry Arts and Culture Business Booster Programme; and Solihull Creative Symposium to name a few.



WMOH Launch Event

An event partner explained: *“The Ownership Hub was present at lots of different [organisations’] events, and that visibility mattered. It wasn’t just one-off. It was repeated. [...] it feel less like they were trying to sell something, and more like they were part of the ecosystem.”* Lauren Bond from RORE, from Centre for Local Economic Strategies agreed: *“There would be loads of people that would come to the table, and they were really interested. They had loads of questions. They were really inspired by it.”* Amy, Creative Facilitator recalled one event aimed at freelancers: *“The aim of the day... was Surviving and Thriving. Main audience was independent freelancers and creative entrepreneurs at the beginning of a journey.”* Jo from WMOH attended the event to give a talk on co-operatives as a possible model.

One of the earliest engagement methods used by the Ownership Hub was to produce introductory events focused on both co-operatives and employee ownership. These provided a low-barrier entry point for creatives, freelancers and business owners who were curious but uncertain about how E&WO might work in practice. Events were targeted at prospective co-operatives and prospective employee owned business leaders separately.

For initial events engaging co-operatives, participants described how the events combined case studies, presentations, and interactive exercises to both inform and spark interest. Andy from Walkspace reflected: *“The first thing was a cooperative event... and that was when I heard the ownership hub were offering support ... we decided we should go and explore it further.”*

These initial events helped to seed awareness and curiosity and provided a pathway into more tailored follow-up support.

As will be noted throughout this report, engaging people in exploring employee ownership models proved significantly more challenging than with co-ops. Nonetheless, one of the initial methods of engaging this group was public events, targeted at founders and CEOs of businesses in the creative industries. These provided opportunities for businesses to learn more about succession planning and employee ownership structures.

Michael from Three Wise Productions recalled attending a breakfast event that gave practical exposure to the subject, hosted in partnership with professional advisors: *“There was a breakfast event as well that Jo invited me to, that was really helpful.”*

Jo from WMOH reflected on running a succession planning event in Leamington Spa, which, although positively received, struggled to reach a broad pool of relevant businesses: *“I did a succession planning event in Leamington Spa, and it was a lovely event but we only had about three businesses that were relevant.”*

From the perspective of the Employee Ownership Association, EO events were recognised for their enthusiasm and energy, but again there were challenges in reaching the specific founder audience most likely to benefit from them. Keely Lead from Employee Ownership Association commented: *“I think there was great energy from Jo and the training people around EO events. They had lots of*

people talking about futures to ... pipelines and everything. I think what they did get was attendees, but not from that founder market.”

Events were widely recognised as a visible and effective entry point to engagement, but evidence suggests they were more successful in introducing co-operatives than in securing sustained interest in employee ownership, the reasons for which will be explored throughout.

Community Partner Events

Alongside mainstream events targeting the groups outlined above, WMOH produced two events in partnership with particular racialised communities. These events were co-produced with community organisations and designed to create accessible, trusted spaces for engagement. The aim of these events was to specifically engage racialised communities in the programme, in response to their comparative lack of inclusion within the broader E&WO sector. The events combined cultural celebration, networking, and practical information, enabling people who had little prior exposure to co-operatives to encounter the model for the first time.

Post-event survey data show that both the Caribbean Creative Convention and the InKongbator Business Lab successfully increased understanding of co-operatives. At the Caribbean Creative Convention, participants’ average self-rated understanding rose from 2.9 before the event to 4.15 after, while at the InKongbator it increased from 3.21 to 4.21. Overall satisfaction was high across both events (4.47 and 4.46 out of 5 respectively), with participants also reporting strong intentions to learn more and seek further support (4.25 and 4.5 out of 5).

As one Caribbean Creative Convention participant explained: *“The whole event was eye opening with a great explanation of how co-operatives work and how we could use them in our own communities.”* Another added: *“The Black community needs more access to capital and business models like co-ops, so this was very timely.”*



InKongBator: Community Partner Event

At the InKongbator, participants valued the clarity and inspiration the event provided: *“I have more understanding in deciding the next steps for my organisation... This gave me confidence to explore co-ops more seriously.”*

Events were often discovered through cultural networks and resonated strongly with attendees who saw their own communities reflected in the programming. Emmanuelle from MAHCN reflected: *“Part of my research led me to find a cooperative conference that was taking place at the legacy center [Creative Caribbean Convention], straight away I was like, ‘Wow, this sounds really interesting’. It’s all about assisting people from Caribbean communities to engage or learn more about cooperatives.”*

The Hub worked in genuine partnership with community leaders to co-produce events, with Jo from WMOH playing a key role in driving delivery. One event partner noted how *“Jo was the motivation. [...] [and] ... did all the background work ... [booked] the speakers. I put together some of the structure for the program itself.”* Colette from Co-operatives UK confirmed: *“Jo genuinely co-created those events with different communities. Doing the comms in a different way [...] really kind of handing over the organisation of those events”*

The Caribbean Creative Convention took a celebratory, cultural approach, while the InKongbator emphasised business development, including pre-event training sessions to ensure participants shared a baseline of understanding.



Creative Caribbean Convention: Community Partner Event

For many attendees, these events represented their first encounter with co-operatives and proved inspiring. One participant at the Caribbean Creative Convention reflected that WMOH *“Presented a model that [attendees] hadn’t heard of before and they recognised that it’s one of the best ways for people to work together.”* Similarly, Emmanuelle from MAHCN reflected: *“My knowledge on cooperatives is quite small... So I went along [to] the conference and it was just so well attended and put together. The information that I took away really led me to the point of thinking... this is a tangible vehicle, legal entity that could be used... not only to the Caribbean community, but also widening out to the broader African diaspora as well.”*

Jo from WMOH confirmed that, even where only a smaller proposition continued their engagement with WMOH, the targeted approach still broadened reach. The Hub’s work would not have engaged these people without it such an approach: *“The creative Caribbean convention... in terms of the sort of number of people that we got in the room [compared to the number who followed up] ... It’s probably a lowish percentage, but we still engaged with more people that way than if we’d have just gone out and said, ‘are you interested in co-ops?’”*

In the case of the InKongBator, pre-event training sessions were also used to give participants a common baseline of understanding, so they could take more from the events themselves. As one event partner explained: *“First of all we did some training to gain an understanding of what a co-operative business looks like, what their intentions are, how they operate and how they work together.”*

For many attendees both events were pivotal in changing how they perceived co-ops, moving from unfamiliarity to inspiration. It focused on the attractive ideological benefits of co-operatives: collaboration, democracy, parity, in order to gain people’s buy-in to the model. One event partner reflected that it helped attendees to *“Form their perception of what the business could look like in future.”*

For some, events catalysed direct pipelines into further support. William Ng from Five Senses, recalled: *“We [were] there, five of us sitting at the same table, forming a team, and she flow[ed] out this idea.”* Five Senses, who met for the first time at the InKongBator, are currently enrolling on the ‘business support for co-operatives’ programme with Co-ops UK. They represent a major success of WMOH in taking a group from never having heard of a co-op, to committing to the formation of one.



InKongBator

Even where attendees did not move immediately into co-operative development, the events were seen to provide skills, confidence, and inspiration for future work. Community partner events demonstrated the value of co-production with trusted organisations. They helped broaden reach into communities underrepresented in mainstream business support, and in some cases acted as a catalyst for new co-operatives to form.

Engagement challenges

Despite positive feedback on the Ownership Hub's activities, some stakeholders reflected that the breadth of engagement was limited in particular areas. One prospective co-operative described how peers they spoke to were unaware of initiatives such as Dream Together, suggesting that communication and reach did not always extend far enough: *"I'm curious to know what the outreach was, because I would speak to lots of people[who] were like 'I'd never heard of that. I wish I'd done that.' I think maybe it's harder than what it looks sometimes."*

Creative facilitators also identified marketing and communications as a weakness. Amy, Creative Facilitator observed: *"If there were a negative thing to say about the ownership hub is that they could have had more reach. I think the comms could have been stronger."*

Part of the challenge was the wider regional context. Following Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games, the creative and cultural sector was inundated with opportunities, events, and initiatives. This crowded landscape meant that even targeted offers like the Ownership Hub risked getting lost in the noise. Amy, Creative Facilitator explained: *"I think it's only really scratching the surface, it [risks] get lost in the ocean because of the other things that have gone on over the last couple of years as a result of the Commonwealth."* She reflected that there were *"An overwhelming [number] of things that people could do to better or advance their practice, their knowledge, their skills, but*

there's almost been too much of an offering, and I think the ownership hub has come at the end of that."

These reflections show that while the Hub succeeded in engaging those it reached, broader awareness and stronger communication channels remain critical for ensuring initiatives connect with the widest possible audience. Part of the challenge, as identified by the Ownership Hub, was around the term 'Employee and Worker Ownership', used by the project and partners to encompass co-operative and employee ownership.

Engagement Learning for WMCA

Beyond impacting the WMCA's understanding and engagement in E&WO, as will be discussed in the next section, the Hub also played a role influencing engagement methods at the Combined Authority. Policymakers reflected that the techniques demonstrated new ways of working with communities, particularly in reaching groups who may not usually engage with mainstream business support. Learnings from these ways of working have been synthesised by WMOH, and can be found in [annex two](#) of this report. One policymaker highlighted how engagement with Black creatives revealed the importance of tailoring approaches to different communities, and how this learning could be applied more widely across WMCA: *"[The approach] worked with a lot of the Black creatives in the region, [which was engendered by] understanding that we that we needed different ways to reach different creative communities."*

Another policymaker reflected that the Hub had shown the value of meeting communities where they are, rather than expecting them to come into institutional spaces, suggesting that this lesson could inform other areas of WMCA practice: *"It's recognising that in order to spread the word, you need to go to where the community is, and that's what's happened. I think the rest of the Combined Authority could do with that learning of how you engage communities in different ways."*

These reflections suggest that the Ownership Hub's engagement techniques had a legacy beyond the programme itself, offering WMCA insights into inclusive approaches that could shape how the Authority connects with diverse communities in the future.

Overall, the Ownership Hub's engagement approach was widely praised for being accessible, creative and rooted in trusted relationships. It not only helped to demystify employee and worker ownership for participants, but also offered WMCA a model of inclusive practice that could inform future community engagement across the region.

Delivery Strands

Following initial engagement of prospective co-operatives and business founders, WMOH undertook a number of different delivery stands to work with different stakeholders. Here we will discuss the role that WMOH played in developing a pipeline of development for both co-ops and employee owned businesses.

Bespoke Support in the Creative Industries

Stakeholders consistently emphasised that supporting creative businesses requires a tailored and flexible approach, as the diversity of business models in the sector means that generic advice is rarely effective. Contributors highlighted various aspects of this challenge — from the inherent diversity of creative enterprises, to the lack of consistency in the wider social enterprise and co-operative landscape. From a WMCA perspective, the key point was that creative businesses are not uniform, and support therefore needs to be adaptable. As Hayley from WMCA noted: *“There isn't a one size fits all for a creative business.”*

Delivery partners equally pointed to the lack of consistency across the wider social enterprise and co-operative sector as an added challenge for those trying to navigate it. As one event partner explained: *“I saw a recent paper, [...] of the problems that exists within the social enterprise / cooperative network is the fact that they all operate in a very different way, and that there's no consistency.”*

Co-operatives UK reinforced this point, emphasising that without sustained, personalised support, many groups risked being lost along the way or defaulting to easier but less appropriate legal structures. As Colette from Co-operatives UK reflected: *“It's being able to have that kind of hand holding and support through the process otherwise, because co ops are so new and different, you might get a little bit kind of lost and not find your way to co ops in the end, because a business advisor would say, yeah, just set up a limited company. I guarantee you that's easier and straightforward.”*

From the outset, stakeholders involved with the planning of WMOH understood the requirements of bespoke support for prospective co-ops and employee owned businesses alike. Whilst resources and capacity was limited, WMOH aimed to provide bespoke support to all of those who engaged with it. One of the ways they managed this was via an engagement pipeline.

Overall, participants agreed that bespoke, hands-on support is essential for creative enterprises exploring employee and worker ownership. The evidence shows that generic business advice is rarely sufficient: without personalised guidance, many groups risk defaulting to more familiar structures. WMOH's focus on tailoring support, despite limited resources, was therefore seen as both necessary and valuable.

Developing a Pipeline

The Ownership Hub developed a pipeline of support, ensuring that organisations could be matched with the most appropriate facilitators and resources at each stage of their journey. This aimed to build continuity and give groups a clear pathway from initial enquiry to further development. In its simplest form this pathway followed perspectives through the following journey:

1. an initial engagement event - as discussed above
2. to a short meeting with WMOH to understand the needs of the organisation
3. to a Dream Together workshop with a creative facilitator or more technical session with a co-op developer
4. a follow up with WMOH to understand further needs
5. Then either to:
 - a. Further support delivered by WMOH
 - b. Ongoing support from Co-operatives UK or the EOA

As discussed, this pipeline intended for people at various stages of their E&WO journey to engage with the Hub, and gain support which was relevant to them. It achieved various levels of success across stakeholders at different stages of their journey, with the greatest discrepancy between development of co-operatives and that of employee owned businesses. As Kathy from WMOH explained: *“If we get people that are interested, they get in touch with me. I have an initial conversation with them about the sort of support that's on offer. And I then coordinate with all of our workshop facilitators and match people up with the best facilitator, and then generally pick the group up again after to see what their next steps are and refer them on to co-operatives UK for further development support.”*

This pipeline approach was praised as one of the Ownership Hub's strongest achievements, in particular in its ability to take people from not knowing about E&WO to having a form of structured support, as noted by Jo from Co-operatives WM: *“Filling that pipeline creation is absolutely where Jo really, really got it right.”*

Participants also described positive experiences of being guided smoothly between different points of contact, from a community engagement event to a Dream Together workshop. Emmanuelle from MAHCN recalled: *“After attending the day, I was then in direct contact with Jo and said, 'Yes, we were interested'. From that point, I was signposted to Kathy. From that point, we had some very efficient and straight dialog with Kathy, who let us know what the options were for us to find out more. And from there, we've recently had a dream together workshop, which was run by Nyasha.”*

However, in some instances, not all stakeholders had understood, or were fully aware of, how prospective organisations moved through the pipeline, or where they were directed to after engaging with WMOH. This was noted by Jo from Co-operatives WM, who expressed that they were not sure of where co-ops were being directed following their initial engagement with the Hub. This was with the acknowledgement that they didn't necessarily need to be in touch with CWM, but rather that their journey of engagement was not visible to all stakeholders.

Others noted that handovers between different facilitators at different points of the process sometimes disrupted the flow of support. Andy from Walkspace reflected: *“Sometimes the support steps felt a little disjointed due to the fact that it was different individuals dealing with each session.”*

Dream Together Workshops

The Dream Together workshops were a cornerstone of the Ownership Hub's early-stage support. They were designed to help creatives clarify their vision, connect with peers, and explore whether a co-operative model might fit their ambitions. Rather than beginning with technical or legal detail, the sessions placed emphasis on creative exploration, asking participants to reflect on their goals, the value of their work, and the possible income streams that could sustain them.

The purpose, as Jo from WMOH reflected, was *"To help the creatives to identify their shared creative dream, what they're good at, whether there is a need for what they want to offer, and where the money will come from."*

This approach was perceived as particularly effective in engaging people who might otherwise feel excluded from business support. Participants often responded more positively to a creative framing of the workshops than to traditional advice, especially at the early stages. Jo noted that *"There is massive strength in one artist speaking to another artist as an artist, and once people have experienced that, then you can take them on to the next stage of the journey and be connected with somebody who's more legal, more businessy."*

This view was echoed by Colette from Co-operatives UK, who described the workshops as valuable *"pre-technical support."* They reflected that *"More needs to be done between the inspiration and then getting people on business support for co-ops, that's just a big gap. Jo's work has really leaned into that."*

For many participants, the workshops created valuable space for blue-sky thinking that might otherwise have been squeezed out by day-to-day pressures. The workshops provided opportunities for organisations to reflect on their mission, explore future audiences and partners, and begin to consider how the co-operative model might support their aspirations. One prospective co-operative explained: *"The Dream Together workshop [was] the most formative thing we've done. [It] was really strong because it offered quite an accessible format."*

Others described how the sessions enabled them to articulate ambitions for their organisations. Emmanuelle from MAHCN reflected on the benefits of a half-day activity with clear communication, explaining that it allowed the group to *"Really sit and unpack what our vision was... realise what some of the challenges may be... This information was absolutely key, informative and left us really with our next steps now of what we need to take as a collaborative network."*



WMOH Launch

Practical benefits were also noted. Another participant said: *“I don't think we'd have the time to sit down and do that, big blue-sky thinking is quite hard to do. So I'm really glad we've got maybe six people from our group to come along.”*

For others, the workshops clarified the potential of co-operatives for their practice. As one prospective co-operative put it: *“I think it's definitely bolstered my knowledge... it helped us see it is possible, but it will need lots of work, and a little bit of lateral thinking... I just feel much clearer now.”*

Yet the broad and exploratory nature of the workshops also created challenges. Some facilitators found that participants arrived expecting more detailed information on technical, legal or financial issues. Jenny Martin, a Creative Facilitator, explained: *“I did an element of [visioning exercises] in my workshops, but [participants] were wanting to go, ‘is a co-op the right option for us? What are the other ways that we can set up? What does it mean in terms of finances, or legal ramifications?’ I was equipped to do a lot of that, but it wasn't what the brief was.”*

Others agreed that more technical detail could have been helpful. Nyasha Daley, Creative Facilitator reflected: *“I would have really liked to see more detail on... the different kinds of entities and just a few pros and cons [of each]... If you've got that deeper understanding it drives your follow-up questions.”*

For some participants, this mismatch of expectations created frustration. One recalled: *“It definitely felt like there was some value. But... there was also a sense that this person wasn't*

particularly from the co-op world, and perhaps didn't fully see how the values of co-operative business are different from the values of traditional business.”

Facilitators also noted that many grassroots organisations and freelancers were seeking direct business support rather than visioning. Amy, Creative Facilitator, reflected: *“Everyone I spoke to in the research [conducted outside of the WMOH project], who were majority freelancers or grassroots organisations, start-ups, not-for-profits, said they want an agency to support us: ‘We want to know how we can grow our business, how to scale, how to tap into XYZ business, money, or tech money, or whatever the thing is.’”*

Others argued that the workshops might work better if split into shorter, iterative sessions with follow-up. Jenny, Creative Facilitator suggested: *“Something that was more clearly a mentoring relationship, where there might be more than one advisor. [...] [the workshop participants] were just overwhelmed. Whereas if that had been three one hour sessions, and in between, I've gone away and talked to Kathy a little bit, and come back to them [with answers or resources then it would have been more successful].”* Amy, Creative Facilitator added that *“The handholding ... support needs to be much more structured and clear”* from the start of organisations engagement.

As noted elsewhere in this report, wraparound support was available to participants before and after the workshops, but not all facilitators were aware of it, leaving some to feel they needed to cover more ground than intended during the sessions themselves.

Overall, the Dream Together workshops filled an important gap between inspiration and technical support. They were praised for creating accessible, creative spaces where participants could clarify their vision and see how co-operatives might be relevant to their practice. At the same time, the feedback highlights the importance of clearer communication about workshop aims, and the need for differentiated pathways to support newly forming co-operatives and pre-established groups — ensuring that visioning, technical guidance and follow-up are better aligned.

Active Engagement and Follow-Up

Alongside the delivery of workshops, many participants highlighted the importance of the Ownership Hub's active follow-up. Respondents described how WMOH's persistence in checking back in, clarifying next steps, and offering reassurance often made the difference between initial interest and longer-term commitment. Ongoing communication gave prospective co-operatives confidence and a clearer sense of direction. One participant reflected: *“What was even better is, after that one off workshop, the Hub did reach out to us again and say, ‘Look, how are we doing? Is there any more support we need?’”*

Another prospective co-operative described being impressed by the personal attention, they *“Really appreciated how [WMOH] took the time to listen and get an understanding of us.”* This sense of being supported was echoed by William from Five Senses: *“There is some advice given to us from time to time. We are in touch [with WMOH] but without it we will be left in the middle of nowhere.”*

Several participants also stressed the value of having complex ideas explained clearly and reinforced through dialogue between sessions. One prospective co-operative explained: *“Kathy, talked to us about what a cooperative is, how it works, how it's different from other legal structures. And we came away from that [feeling] like we made a decision at that point. We felt [in] a stronger place that this was potentially the right path for us, because it was demystified or clarified.”* This was echoed by another respondent: *“I was reading the website about the co-ops, but I didn't think I fully understood what it was until after the presentation that Kathy gave.”*

Emmanuelle from MAHCN also described how this clarity and follow-up provided direction: *“From that point, Kathy let us know kind of what the options were to us to find out more. [...] I've literally got an email in my inbox which says, ‘when you're ready to talk about the next steps, please let me know.’ So that's our intention.”*

These reflections demonstrate that the follow-up mechanisms were as important as the workshops themselves. By maintaining contact, demystifying complex ideas, and providing reassurance, WMOH helped participants feel supported and prevented them from disengaging during what is often a long and uncertain process

Specialist Expertise

From the outset, the Ownership Hub made a deliberate choice to draw on external expertise where its own team did not have specialist knowledge. This approach helped avoid duplication and ensured participants had access to high-quality support already present in the region. As one respondent observed how WMOH *“Brought in expertise, rather than trying to recreate something that already existed.”*

This collaborative approach was reinforced by Jo from WMOH, who explained her reasoning: *“I really was convinced that it was stronger if there were other people involved in the delivery. I was aware of two things, one that I'm not a co-op expert [...] and I also thought that it was stronger to have a range of different people from Creative Industries to be involved in the delivery of the project.”*

While this collaborative model was valued, some participants still felt that more specialist knowledge, particularly around artists co-operatives, would have been beneficial. Andy from Walkspace reflected: *“I think it would have been good to have more specialist knowledge about artists cooperatives or freelance cooperatives. There wasn't anyone with direct knowledge of those who could break down exactly what those models look like. So we had more general advice about co-operatives.”*

Overall, the Ownership Hub's commitment to drawing on external expertise was seen as a strength, ensuring that participants could access credible support without duplicating what already existed. However, the feedback also suggests that supplementing this model with deeper, more tailored expertise, especially on creative and freelance co-operatives, would have further enhanced its impact.

Bespoke 1-2-1 Support for Co-Ops

Beyond workshops, many organisations highlighted the value of one-to-one support. Participants described how these sessions allowed them to set goals, reflect between meetings, and build momentum.

One prospective co-operative explained how the structured nature of support from WMOH created focus and accountability: *“They offered a further catch up chat, and said there's some more of a resource available for us. It's up to one day in total, with an individual consultant who is specialist in this field [...] we're in the middle of that at the moment [...] and that has a lot more potential, because of it being a periodic thing, we'll have a discussion, we'll identify as concrete thing, and then there'll be action: this is going to happen by the next time. And then we reflect and do the steps, you know, very systematic ... I feel that it has potentially more value to us than the workshop in the end.”* Another participant stressed the importance of receiving something bespoke rather than generic: *“For them to offer something different, not just, ‘Oh, here's another workshop that's just off the shelf,’ but actually this very tailored [workshop].”*

For newer entrants to the UK business landscape, coaching also provided clarity that could not be gained from written resources alone. William from Five Senses described how the opportunity to combine resources with tailored guidance was crucial: *“We have explored those very rich documents on the co-op website. What is a co-op all those things, but I don't think just reading all those things would equip us with sufficient knowledge to move forward. So receiving the program, six days core training and consultancy, that would be much [more] benefi[cial] for us to learn more.”*

Taken together, these reflections underline the value of one-to-one coaching as a complement to workshops, offering a more personalised, systematic and confidence-building form of support, particularly for those unfamiliar with the UK business environment or seeking practical next steps.

Tailored Support for EO Organisations

Some Employee Ownership (EO) organisations also benefitted from personalised one-to-one support, which allowed them to ask specific questions and explore options relevant to their own business circumstances. Michael from Three Wise Productions described the support received: *“I was very happy with my one to one call. I got to ask everything I wanted to ask, and politely I didn't have to listen to anything I didn't want to know about. [...] Whereas perhaps if I'd had a half day every other week for six weeks, then I probably would have felt like I could have asked more questions. I'd have had a bit of more time to reflect, maybe in between.”*

He also highlighted the value of follow-up invitations and being connected with other practitioners and professional events: *“I went to an event, and then I had a follow up with Jo, she did hook us up with another co-op, which we spoke to. And then she also invited me to an event in Bristol, which was about employee ownership, run by the chap that did the Aardman deal. I found that really valuable as well.”*



Aardman Animations Talk at WMOH Launch

These reflections show that one-to-one support for EO organisations was highly valued, offering space for tailored discussion, reflection between sessions, and practical connections to people and events with relevant expertise.

Difficulty in EO development

Stakeholders reflected that, while there was genuine interest in employee ownership, engaging organisations meaningfully proved far more difficult than for co-operatives. Several noted that the impact of EO activity had been limited to date. As a representative of the Employee Ownership Association (EOA) explained: *“We’ve not really seen in the data any kind of tangible impact on the growth of employee ownership arising out of the west mids.”* Even where referrals did come through, they remained modest in number, especially compared to pilots from both London and South Yorkshire: *“I think maybe one or two have been put through for discussion. At GLA we did get about five or six referrals through and about 10 referrals from South Yorkshire”.*

EO audiences are harder to locate and engage

Part of the difficulty lay in the nature of the audience. EO depends on reaching founders and owners considering succession — a group that is much harder to identify and approach than the early-stage creatives drawn into co-op development. As Jo from WMOH acknowledged: *“The particular challenges that I’ve had around employee ownership, how to reach people that are founders and prospective businesses.”* This was, however, something not unique to WMOH, Jo was *“Consoled to discover that Colette had had the same challenges in South Yorkshire.”*

Several contributors observed that the routes to EO audiences differ significantly from those used in the co-op space. According to Keely from EOA: *“Startup or freelance collaboration in the creative industries is a much easier route. Trying to get these businesses when they're more mature, they're probably more going to be in [more] generalist settings... breakfast briefings at the Chamber of Commerce, however boring, is probably where I'm going to pick up those mature businesses.”*

This was compounded by regional context. As Keely from EOA reflected, the *“West Midlands has just got more familiar relationships with the cooperative community than it does with EO.”* The available market was also limited, as her colleague from EOA described: *“There's 26 employee owned businesses with their main addresses being in the West Midlands, [and] given the on the ground focus on the creative industries... there isn't a critical mass of employee owned businesses who are relevant.”*

The EOA attributed the lower conversion of EO organisations to the comparative lack of relevant and effective engagement of founders in the region. This was also felt in WMOH reflections: that inviting people into public conversations about succession may have deterred them. Jo from WMOH reflected: *“I was inviting people into a public space that perhaps they weren't comfortable [in] ... another blocker is around me not knowing where these people hang out.”* She noted that once creative businesses reach a certain size, they tend to behave like other professional firms, making sector-specific networks less effective: *“Architecture or PR, for example, are the kinds of businesses that might be ripe for employee ownership, but they don't hang out as creatives together. So... it might be going to the Royal Institute of British Architects Midlands, or... Birmingham Chamber of Commerce... maybe that approach would be more successful.”* Where WMOH had been particularly successful in reaching creatives pursuing startups, they have not been as successful in the founder market.

Jo also admitted that the EO “playbook” was still being worked out locally: *“The absolutely honest answer... is that I haven't quite worked it out. I think I need to do a little bit more blundering before I can say that's what works. If it isn't an event, I don't quite know what to do. The approach of Colette and Richard was to train the business advisors so that they can have... one to one dialogues, and I fully intend to do that.”*

Whilst Business Advisors were trained on co-operatives, the training on Employee Ownership, which was originally planned to take place in June 2025, was cancelled. This training is now due to take place in October 2025. This has impacted development of EO models via WMOH.

A potential cause of the comparative lack of success for EO, was also perhaps due to existing EO resources not being fully leveraged, as noted by the EOA: *“Rather than relying on the assets [and learning] that we have ... there's been a duplication, but without the long history of people being involved and having expertise in the sector... and that's obviously not only a duplication of effort, but also just leads to... the outcome being less evidence based... perhaps why we've not seen impact for the employee ownership sector.”* As will be discussed later in this report, this is at odds with other instances where stakeholders identify WMOH being built on learning, albeit learning related to the other Ownership Hub Pilots, as opposed to specifically on EO.

Overall, whilst there was a comparatively low level of EO development undertaken by the Hub, it still nonetheless did engage people in conversations about the model, and did work with several individuals to connect them with further guidance, albeit this was of a lower volume compared to co-operative development. This learning can be taken forward by partners for future iterations of the ownership hub model.



EO Masterclass with Wyatt International

Confidentiality barriers

Another inherent barrier to EO engagement was confidentiality. Founders often want to avoid publicly signaling that they are considering a sale or transition. As the EOA observed, hosting public events can be tantamount to *“Them saying, Hi, I’m selling my business.”* Jo gave an example of how seriously confidentiality is taken, noting that *“There’s a massive confidentiality issue around founders... They’re not going to be public about that. I even discovered that solicitors...are asked that they don’t put ‘employee ownership advice’ on their invoices, because they don’t want anybody in accounts to see that this is there.”*

To manage this, Keely from EOA stressed the need for confidential channels where founders can explore EO more anonymously: *“If you were a founder and, in confidence, you want to explore if EO is for you and your business. We have ways people can go anonymous in our systems, and can be helped... then at the point they want to bring [their senior leadership team] along, they would then pay for a membership and widen that out.”*

Finally, stakeholders noted that organisational positioning within WMCA played a role in shaping priorities. Jo’s position in Culture was in direct contrast to the South Yorkshire Ownership Hub

pilot, where the representative was placed in the Business Development team, and faced more success in employee ownership development.

The favorable co-op positioning within the WMCA was also reinforced by a broader focus on startups and scale-ups, which better aligns with co-operative development than EO. Keely from EOA noted that *“If you look at any growth hubs, or any combined authorities... they’re very much focused on scale up and startup.”* A representative from EOA added that *“The startup is very much [a] cooperative issue... very rare that a business would be founded as an employee owned business. Usually it’s a more established business that then transitions into employee ownership... which perhaps comes from... the focus of individuals, or whether it’s just a lack of broader organisational understanding.”* This, combined with a specific mayoral commitment to co-operatives, set a position of bias for WMOH.

Together: inherent challenges with developing employee owned businesses; stronger personal networks in creative spaces more conducive to co-operatives; difficulty engaging owners and founders; miscommunication with partners; and a favourable bias to co-ops within the WMCA has resulted in co-operative development being significantly more successful than EO development via the WMOH.

However, as we will go onto discuss, whilst engagement and conversion of businesses into EO may not have been successful, the ability of the Ownership Hub to create advocates for E&WO, build support networks of organisations in the region; and make the case for co-ops and EO businesses within the WMCA, will pay dividends for the model in the coming years.

Long-Term and High Engagement Needed

Participants throughout reflected on the realities of developing employee and worker ownership models, emphasising that the process requires significant time, persistence and long-term engagement. The journey from initial awareness to the establishment of a co-op or conversion to employee ownership was described as slow and resource intensive. While this has been a challenge for short-term initiatives, the West Midlands Ownership Hub was nevertheless recognised for successfully supporting a small number of organisations to take significant steps forward.

Several contributors emphasised the lengthy timelines involved in moving from awareness to action. John Goodman, a co-operatives advisor, observed: *“I think the problem we have is that it can be years from somebody mention[ing] a co-op to [it] actually being developed. That’s always the problem with these short term projects.”*

Kathy from WMOH described how momentum can be difficult to maintain: *“It is quite a slow process. And a lot of them after the workshops [would say] ‘yes, we think a follow up call would probably be quite useful for us’. Then it can take weeks or even months for them to actually get themselves together, to think about the business planning. A lot of the people that have had workshops are kind of freelancers in their own right, and are coming together with people that*

they've collaborated with, but then getting all of those freelancers to find time to think about what that structure is going to look like in the future. Yeah, that's the bit that takes time."

Practical barriers, associated with development in a sector with a high density of freelancers, were also highlighted. WMOH staff observed: *"A lot of the people that have had workshops are freelancers in their own right, and are coming together with people that they've collaborated with, but getting all of those freelancers to find time to think about what that structure is going to look like in the future, that's the bit that takes time."* In this instance, prospective freelance co-operatives perceived barriers to setup resulting from the time taken to arrive at decisions. As has been noted, this is a common misconception about many co-operatives which can be mitigated by particular division making methodologies. Nonetheless, this perception was the cause of slow progress for some co-operatives. The result is that whilst focus on a sector which did not have such a high density may have resulted in a higher volume of conversions to co-ops within the timeframe of WMOH, this does account for the depth of engagement needed to convert freelancers into co-operatives. WMOH laid quality groundwork for the future development of these organisations.

Colette from Co-operatives UK also underlined the longer horizon that is typical of both new start-ups and EO conversions: *"From the point where you have an idea about setting up a business to then setting up a business can take 2, 3, 4 years and that was one of the challenges. That's also the same with hearing about EO and then converting to EO, it can take like five years or more."*

Although these long timelines made progress difficult to demonstrate within the life of the project, there are nonetheless clear examples where the Hub's sustained support helped organisations take decisive steps towards employee and worker ownership.

Successful Conversions

Despite the slow pace of ownership transitions, respondents were able to demonstrate tangible successes, supporting several organisations to move from early exploration to concrete steps towards employee and worker ownership.

The challenge of achieving conversions was illustrated by comparison with other pilots. In South Yorkshire, for example, the project ran for only 18 months rather than the full two years. The South Yorkshire pilot also did not provide direct business support in the same way as WMOH. During its delivery therefore, the co-ops which were established were done so following signposting to Co-ops UK for further support, as opposed to as a result of their direct engagement with this hub.

By contrast, the WMOH directly supported a number of organisations to move further along their ownership journeys. For William from Five Senses, this resulted in concrete progress, *"We start[ed] to learn about what is Co-op. And then finally, when we thought okay, that's something we should look into. And then, yeah, actually, just last week, we submitted our application. We are applying for this co-op [support programme Business Support for Co-ops] in July 2025."*

WMOH staff confirmed: *"Five Senses, who's now applied for the Business Support for Co-ops programme, is a group of freelancers who didn't know each other before."* Their trajectory was also

noted by Byron from Be Water Hong Kongers: *“I believe at the end we get Five Senses, they start[ed] the co-ownership business”* following the InKongBator.

Walkspace offered another example of success. Andy from Walkspace explained: *“I’m co-founder of Walkspace. We’re now a cooperative since going through the process with the Ownership hub.”*



Five Senses Co-operative being formed

These reflections highlight both the challenge and the achievement of WMOH. Developing co-ops or transitioning to employee ownership takes years of nurturing, making it difficult for short-term projects to demonstrate immediate results. Nonetheless, the Hub was able to play a catalytic role in helping organisations such as Five Senses and Walkspace to formalise their ownership structures and begin their journey. The evidence suggests that while the pace of change is slow, consistent engagement can generate meaningful and lasting impact.

Building Networks

West Midlands Ownership Hub fostered networks of support, collaboration, and peer learning across the region. These networks were built in multiple ways — through facilitators, community events, direct signposting, and matchmaking — and were then used by participants to access knowledge, examples, and ongoing support.

Creative facilitators were often the first to connect groups to wider resources. Jenny, Creative Facilitator explained that she *“Linked them to Involve and other regional organisations that I thought would be helpful to them.”* Community events also highlighted the breadth of co-operative activity in the region, with Emmanuelle from MAHCN noting how valuable it was to see *“A number of credible examples of cooperatives that are active in our region.”*

In some cases, events led directly to new co-ops forming. William from Five Senses described how: *“We don't know each other before the meeting, and we do think Co-op is the best way to move forward... We people come together with different background[s]. We are all from Hong Kong. We speak the same language, but we don't know each other. We can just go out and say we are setting up a limited company, but without all the support from the hub and from Co-op, we are not.”* Jo from WMOH reflected that this illustrated a broader role for the Hub: *“There perhaps is a need for that kind of matchmaking... the idea was that groups of Hong Kongers who already collaborate would come... and in fact, that didn't really happen. What happened was individuals, freelance creatives came, and the really exciting thing was that they found each other.”*



WMOH Launch

Once new connections were established, and participants who were new to co-ops or EO were brought into them, they used these new relationships to gain real-world examples and peer advice. For Andy from Walkspace, speaking directly to Stroud Artist Co-op was invaluable: *“They particularly stood out from their website... I wanted to talk to them and just ask very specific questions about organisation structure.”* Another prospective co-operative expressed a desire to speak to people *“Who are living that experience now... because they've done it, they've gone through all of the difficulties.”*

This knowledge-sharing also shaped how examples were presented. As EoA representative Keely pointed out, while high-profile names like John Lewis generated recognition, they were often less relatable *“Aardman Animations was a great company to launch with... but how replicable was that for people in the West Midlands ... it's a bit like when we use the John Lewis partnership, it's not very understandable by other people.”*

Networks provided to potential co-operatives also become a bridge to longer-term support, both from other co-ops and from development organisations. Andy from Walkspace recalled: *“I did come across a list somewhere, like someone involved in the co-op movement, I think in Birmingham give me a list.”* Another prospective co-op noted: *“[Kathy] gave me a list of people... some people are kind of secretly co-ops... so that was really good.”*

For Michael from Three Wise Productions, this included direct introductions: *“Jo put us in touch with [an] Actors Co-op... they were really helpful, open and transparent. They talked about what worked for them, when it didn’t work, where members have been easy or difficult.”* Others described drawing on national contacts Co-operatives WM, or Co-operatives UK. Many stressed the reassurance this provided: *“I’ve got those contacts now... even if the Ownership Hub doesn’t continue, I still have the contacts that have helped us.”*



Birmingham Dance Co-operative

Not all facilitators felt their own networks had grown substantially. Jenny, Creative Facilitator noted: *“I wouldn’t say I’ve made loads of new contacts and networks, because I’ve only done two workshops, and one of them was a group of people I already know.”* Amy, Creative Facilitator also explained that her impact may have been limited by the fact she already had strong existing connections: *“I also have quite strong connections into the new Birmingham Dance Co-op, who I know have been through the Ownership Hub and been successful, not once, but twice, with getting some Arts Council funding to get that off the ground.”*

Across the board: from helping organisations to understand what E&WO is; to enabling development throughout their journeys; to lobbying for E&WO in public sector settings; tangible, real examples of organisations who operate in the market as co-operatives and employee owned businesses is essential. As noted in at many junctures throughout this report, reaching a critical mass of co-operatives and/or employee owned organisations theoretically will result in more rapid growth of the E&WO sector.

Stakeholders reflected that once a few co-operatives are established in a community, they create the conditions for others to emerge. This dynamic was already visible in Stirchley, Birmingham, where the presence of multiple co-ops was shaping local attitudes. As Andy from Walkspace

explained: *“Being in Stirchley actually meant that the cooperatives [were] very much in the air and people are aware of what that’s all about, so that had an influence on us.”*

Jo from Co-operatives WM described this as a ripple effect, noting that *“Co-ops beget co-ops, there’s no two ways about it. When you start to see successful co-ops, that message then starts to get out, but you need a starting point.”* John, co-operatives advisor, similarly emphasised that building a solid base was crucial for this process to take hold: *“If you’d got three, four more years working in the creative industries to really give it a solid base, that then starts to filter out to other people, starting small to create that kind of strong baseline is really important.”*

Creating Advocates

This critical mass is essential because it gives rise to greater advocacy for E&WO. Whilst the WMOH may not have resulted in a critical mass of organisations, it has built advocates in a number of other ways. Firstly, the prospective co-ops and EO businesses who have been engaged have begun talking to others about E&WO. As Michael from Three Wise Productions, a business founder has noted: *“I met a young guy last week and I was preaching that he should seriously look at a co-op model. I was able to tell him quite a lot of stuff that I’d learned, with the caveat of [he] should speak to the ownership hub.”*

Equally, Creative Facilitators noted increased likelihood to promote E&WO to organisations they work with. Amy, Creative Facilitator, reflected that co-ops had previously been a *“Vague gray area”* compared to charities or limited companies. She found the early breakdown of co-op structures particularly useful, noting that it had: *“Filled another gap in [her] knowledge”* and now supported her wider freelance work. She explained that co-ops are now *“Near the top of my list, especially if [artists] are working in partnerships or in a collective already, my first suggestion is, have you thought about a co-op because there’s many advantages to it.”*

Elsewhere, WMOH has worked training Business Advisors via Business Growth West Midlands. It has also held a number of meetings with other departments within the WMCA. A central aim was to embed co-op and EO literacy inside Business Growth West Midlands (BGWM) so advice wouldn’t rely solely on project staff. BGWM is positioned as a visible, first-contact route — a kind of “shop window” for general business support — with Ian from WMCA explaining that *“Business Growth West Midlands, that’s our shop window, the place where much of our business advice is.”* He also noted joint promotion and convening, saying *“Business Growth West Midlands and the WMOH [have] helped to bring together other partner organisations and use their networks to promote these activities.”*

As well as promoting WMOH activity via the hubs, Business advisors were trained on co-operatives. Stakeholders were clear that baseline knowledge in growth hubs is uneven, especially for creative sector models. As Amy, Creative Facilitator put it: *“There is a massive gap in the growth hubs’ knowledge around creative industries and ... what business support looks like for a creative organisations”* From inside WMCA, Charles Rapson observed a default to conventional advice: *“They’re thinking conventional business setup and route to market. So they’re not necessarily*

thinking you could do a variety of different things which give different forms of governance, different forms of exit strategy.”

This was acknowledged by Ian, WMCA lead for BGWM: advisors starting knowledge is low because they *“are generalists, so will not necessarily know about employee ownership, or have knowledge around mutuals or cooperatives.”*

To directly address this: *“The Ownership Hub has also worked with business advisors to provide training, awareness raising, case studies and a bit more technical knowledge around how these things work and what the pitfalls are for people.”* (Ian from WMCA).

Jo from WMOH explained how the hour and half, face to face workshop *“Ignited some interest and gave people some understanding, but just one training session is not quite enough for them to feel totally confident in it.”* This was gleaned from information provided by the advisors who were trained.

However, as noted, planned EO-specific advisor training has not yet taken place. As Keely from EOA explained: *“The full business advisor trainer hasn’t run”*. She added practical frustrations on WMOH delivery: *“Are they interested and are they looking at how they could use the right interventions to grow their knowledge in the place?”*

Some suggested alternative settings where capability-building for development individuals and organisations might land better with creatives. As Amy, Creative Facilitator put it suggested that support may be best situated within the specific sector development organisations. Partners cautioned that the effectiveness of the BGWM link depends on integration, with one saying: *“From a personal level, I think that [connection with BGWM] still stands and falls on personalities, and maybe it’s a little too early for this to have gripped and become the day to day, but it’s hugely important that it does.”*

Influencing WMCA

Influence of thinking inside WMCA, raising awareness of co-operatives and employee ownership among policymakers, and drawing the link between E&WO and policy agendas are crucial for ongoing investment in the models. This influence was achieved through multiple mechanisms: internal presentations, attendance at policy forums, positioning within the Combined Authority, and the ability to provide concrete examples of success.

WMOH held meetings with a number of different departments including: the WMCA Leadership Board, Policy Working Group, Inclusive Growth Team, Cultural Leadership Board and Race Equality Network amongst numerous others.

Across much of this engagement, stakeholders stressed that influence inside the Combined Authority depended less on directives from the top and more on peer-to-peer engagement across teams. To support this, Jo and colleagues used existing WMCA forums to raise awareness. A crucial example of this was the presentation at the internal policy working group, as noted by Dan from

WMCA: *“Jo, Charles and I did one session on cooperatives last week... we have a guest speaker slot [every month] So I’m trying to get either someone from Co-ops UK or Hub to speak at that.”*

There was also recognition that officers engage more readily when they are funding the work. As Colette from Co-operatives UK explained: *“CA officers find it easier if they’ve commissioned you to do something, than if you sort of come in and basically offer them free work.”* In this respect WMOH’s positioning within the WMCA worked as an asset. Jo’s location within WMCA was seen as critical to her ability to influence. Hayley from WMCA described how she ensured Jo was embedded across directorates: *“Really rooting her into colleagues... developing social economy strategies in our economy directorate, our inclusive growth colleagues, also our wider sort of planning and thinking around our strategy, economy and Net Zero Directorate.”* This access allowed Jo to attend governance forums such as the Policy Working Group and to build the internal legitimacy needed to make the Hub’s voice heard.

Several colleagues pointed to Jo’s ability to generate interest among CA officers as a clear success. Lauren from RORE, from Reclaiming Our Regional Economies, contrasted the Hub’s progress with other projects: *“It’s been... really interesting seeing the impact that Jo has been able to make within the CA, that actually they’ve grown really interested in it in a way that I think we’ve struggled with elsewhere.”* Dan from WMCA similarly stressed the importance of this awareness raising: *“The fact that [they’ve] been able to... talk about employee ownership, in itself is a massive achievement, because very few people internally [were] either aware of it or prepared to support it when there are so many other priorities.”*

Colleagues also described how the Hub helped align the co-op movement with other WMCA priorities. Charles from WMCA noted that *“Some of the work that Jo’s done has helped move the cooperative movement much closer to what we’re doing [in social economy].”* A policymaker echoed that personal involvement had shifted their own perspective: *“I came in knowing quite little about it, and through the involvement I got a much better understanding... particularly of how it could work in the creative sector.”*

Influence was strongest when accompanied by real-life examples. As one policymaker reflected: *“I’ve always been an advocate of it. But advocacy is not very powerful when there are no actual examples that you can point at.”* Another policymaker described how Jo’s use of a local example helped to illustrate the value of EO: *“As well as understanding how you could get that community to buy in and sustain those businesses in localities.”*

WMOH was particularly successful in aligning with the social economy agenda - as a clear example of how growth can come with additional, non financial benefits. However, as Dan from WMCA noted: *“The social economy gets a few mentions in the local growth plan, but nothing specifically around cooperatives or employee ownership... The risk is, because it’s niche, it’s kind of left, it’s forgotten under lots of other things. So that’s something I’m trying to advocate for.”*

Charles from WMCA stressed how far the agenda had advanced: *“[WMCA] had very little understanding or even reference to the social economy whatsoever. But now it features in the annual*

business plan... the plan for growth... and the devolution settlement with central government. It's gone from not really being recognised to suddenly playing a much more predominant part." A policymaker also reflected that while *"There's still a lot of traditional economic thinking... there's much more appreciation across the organisation that this is one way of doing things that can transform the economy and provide... benefits in ways that traditional growth models don't do."* WMOH has been successful in helping to raise the profile of the broader social economy agenda, by displaying that E&WO is a tangible way to deliver social economic growth.

Despite these achievements, policymakers acknowledged that influence remained partial and uneven. One noted: *"If you go to a random person in the WMCA and ask, what do you know about the Ownership Hub, I think it won't be there just yet. That's the challenge, really, if this is to be effective at the policy piece... we need to say a lot more about it."*

WMCA Policies and Priorities

The positioning of the West Midlands Ownership Hub (WMOH) within the Combined Authority raised different perspectives. Some valued the integration as a model for closer collaboration, while others felt it was poorly aligned or even unhelpful. At the same time, wider reflections showed how employee and worker ownership was seen within WMCA's economic growth and social economy agendas, where the emphasis on productivity, sustainability and inclusive growth often sat uneasily alongside the realities of the creative industries. Policy changes at both regional and national levels also influenced how WMOH was perceived and where it could contribute.

Positioning in the WMCA

The decision to host the West Midlands Ownership Hub within the Combined Authority was seen by some as a distinctive strength, giving the initiative access to networks and opportunities, but others questioned whether this positioning created barriers or diluted its effectiveness.

Some respondents praised the unusual arrangement of hosting WMOH inside the Combined Authority. Hayley from WMCA said: *"The model of having somebody hosted within the Combined Authority is actually a really brilliant one, and we should try and do that more... it's quite an unusual setup to have an employee ... but [Jo's] been able to benefit from all of the potential matrix working opportunities."*

Whilst other policymakers saw value in the role being housed with the CA, they questioned the departmental positioning. Charles from WMCA noted that there could have been more crossover between his work and Jo's: *"What Jo was doing within cooperatives and ownership was very much part of the work that I was doing, but she worked in a different team, and that, for me, never made sense. We should have been part of the same team, because we were trying to achieve the same goals."* Other policymakers however, saw value in individuals delivering similar work from different departments. This is because it enables different policy agendas, in different departments, to be influenced in the same direction, whilst also facilitating a 'matrixed' approach to delivery, where multiple policymakers become accountable for a particular policy direction.

For Amy, Creative Facilitator the problem was deeper: *"I don't think the growth hub should sit within WMCA. I think there are other agencies that have been told this could be a purpose and function of their work. For example, Culture Central and Create Central, as organisations with a sector development remit."* They felt that all business advice could be situated within sector organisations, as opposed to WMCA.

Overall, the Hub's positioning within the Combined Authority is viewed as both an opportunity and a constraint, it provides unique access and visibility, but also presents organisational barriers and sector confusion that some feel limits its effectiveness.

Economic Growth via Employee and Worker Ownership

For WMCA, one motivation behind supporting employee and worker ownership was the potential to drive productivity. As Hayley from WMCA explained: *“Part of the work that we're trying to do to support growth is not necessarily to support organisations to continue with models they already have. We're invested in supporting creative businesses to explore if cooperative working is the way in which they can move their particular business model onto a more productive footing, or a more sustainable financial footing.”* She also pointed to policy alignment: *“We, in the cultural and creative industries, our main piece of policy that we're working on now is the creative industry sector plan, which was launched three weeks ago, which is very squarely rooted in economic growth for creative industries.”* Here, these new models would be supported in the creative industries if they deliver more sustainable growth for organisations.

However, not everyone saw co-operatives in the creative industries as major economic drivers. A WMCA policymaker stated: *“Co-ops can be a driver of economic growth, but aren't going to be in the creative sector. [It would] need to focus more on energy or on housing.”*

Others reflected that while co-ops in the cultural sector were valuable, they often did not provide full-time livelihoods. Jo from WMOH said: *“Five Senses, for example, they've got a fabulous artistic vision and I think co-op works really well for them. However, I think it's probably unlikely that they're going to be able to get a full-time living [any time soon] from what they're going to create together.”* She added: *“There's only some forms of creativity where you really do stand a chance of having a viable business, the graphic artists and so on, but many are going to have to have multiple income streams in order to be sustainable.”*

This was echoed by others within WMOH: *“The majority of people that have engaged with the project are already freelancers and probably doing quite a lot of different things, [they] are interested in forming a co-op with some collaborators on a certain element of their work, but are probably not looking for that to then become their full-time role.”*

For Andy from Walkspace, one of the co-ops to be formed via WMOH, the challenge was scale: *“It's a voluntary organisation. We're limited in the amount of energy that we can put into things.”* A prospective co-operative added: *“None of us do this, sadly, full time, we have to work around part-time jobs, full-time jobs.”*

Whilst it's been broadly proven that E&WO models drive productivity and economic growth, this was not seen in their application for creative organisations in the West Midlands.¹ This may have been due to the challenging context of the sector, as discussed throughout, or the specific individuals who engaged with WMOH activity.

¹ 'Exploring the potential of the Employee Ownership business model', WPI Economics, 19/10/2023 [[Accessed 08/10/2025](#)]

'Co-operative and Mutual Economy Report', Co-operatives UK, 23/10/2025 [[Accessed 08/10/2025](#)]

Some also felt the business emphasis was misplaced. Howlett reflected: *“I also felt like there was a lot of focus on cooperatives as businesses, and business being the main driving thing, whereas Walkspace, that doesn't really fit what we are, or what we're trying to do.”*

While employee and worker ownership was recognised as a potential route to improving productivity and supporting sustainable growth, respondents noted that in the creative industries it often delivers part-time or supplementary livelihoods rather than large-scale economic impact or sustainability.

Social Economy and Inclusive Growth

The WMCA has region wide ambitions around social economy and inclusive growth. WMOH's work contributed to both. The WMCA Board have clearly defined their ambition for inclusive growth: a more deliberate and socially purposeful model of economic growth - measured not only by how fast or aggressive it is; but also, by how well it is created and shared across the whole population and place, and by the social and environmental outcomes it realises for our people.

Participants linked E&WO closely to broader social economy aims, where success is measured not only by profits but also by social outcomes. Charles from WMCA explained: *“Ultimately we're [social economy] growing impact, [sometimes] through arts and culture, some through other means. So growth isn't necessarily growth in turnover, employment, or any of those things, though those are factors. It's going to have to become more sustainable, think about its income streams, think about the number of people employed.”*

This broader vision was echoed by WMOH: *“That's really the whole point of the inclusive growth framework, that it isn't just about money.”* Colette from Co-operatives UK added: *“Ultimately, they're trying to ensure that the growth that's created in the West Midlands is inclusive to all the residents and looking at all the different things that that encompasses, not just wealth, but like housing and transport and the environment and so on.”*

For a WMCA policymaker, WMOH played a role in this agenda: *“One of those ways we can do it is by building a more inclusive economy, and one of the contributions to that is the creation of the Ownership Hub.”*

Several participants argued that co-operatives and employee-owned businesses tend to deliver more socially generative outcomes. Charles from WMCA said: *“In becoming a co-op or employee-owned business, the business becomes more socially aware.”* Lauren from RORE added: *“The cooperative sector is a really big part of that, a lot of our research shows that those kinds of businesses tend to be more generative rather than extractive. So when they create economic growth, they share that more fairly, because they're owned by their workers, and they're more likely to employ local people. They're also more likely to have local supply chains and so on.”*

This agenda was also visible at the political level. Charles from WMCA reflected: *“I'm providing them with that ammunition to make the case for better support for these different types of organisations. Political will is key. The change in government, the change in mayor.”* Paul from WMCA

echoed that: *“With Richard being mayor, there's an increased emphasis on that [social economy] agenda.”*

Hayley from WMCA highlighted the crossover between social economy and cultural industries: *“When you are developing cultural and creative industries, it will have knock-on benefits in the social economy, particularly in this region.”*

At the same time, frustrations were expressed about the delivery of inclusive growth within WMCA. Several stakeholders expressed discrepancy between the buy-in to, and delivery of, inclusive growth. Whilst E&WO is noted as a foundational aspect of the social economy in the new growth plan, these stakeholders referenced the comparative lack of mention throughout the document as a case in point.²

This reflected other points on the relationship between inclusive growth and traditional economic growth at WMCA. Members of the inclusive growth team expressed how sometimes the nuance of its policy agenda is missed - growth can be inclusive and benefit an equitable range of people, but this isn't the whole meaning of inclusive growth. Rather, inclusive growth is also who is generating the growth in the first place, and whether that is inclusive too. It is in the latter point, where WMOH's work epitomises how the social economy can play a role in furthering inclusive growth in the broadest sense.

Some also felt employee ownership specifically was sidelined in WMCA policy alignment. Keely from EOA explained that EO is *“Not sexy as startup or scale up. It's maintaining what you've got, but it does stop jobs leaving the region. For me, that's why the economic regional focus of how do you keep businesses in the region [shouldn't be] just growing more, it's retaining what you've got.”*

Overall, respondents saw E&WO as an important contributor to the social economy and inclusive growth agenda, though they stressed that political will, cross-departmental collaboration, and a clearer positioning of EO within regional priorities will be essential if its full potential is to be realised.

Change in WMCA Policy Direction

The work of the West Midlands Ownership Hub unfolded against a backdrop of shifting policy priorities at both national and regional levels. Changes in political leadership, evolving debates about the role of E&WO in economic growth, and differing interpretations of national pledges all influenced how the Hub was perceived and positioned within WMCA's wider agenda.

Participants pointed to the changing policy environment as a key factor. Paul from WMCA observed: *“Since the activity started, policy and strategy background has changed substantially, nationally, regionally, not least having a change of Mayor.”*

Overall, the West Midlands Ownership Hub operated within a shifting and sometimes contradictory policy landscape. Its hosting within WMCA was both praised and criticised, reflecting different

² 'West Midlands Growth Plan', WMCA, 13/09/2025 [[Accessed 08/10/2025](#)]

views on whether such work should sit inside the Combined Authority at all. While some questioned the scale of economic impact in the creative sector, WMOH was widely recognised for helping to connect cultural and creative businesses with the broader social economy agenda, and for demonstrating how alternative models of ownership can contribute to inclusive growth. The continuing challenge is to align employee and worker ownership more clearly with WMCA's economic growth priorities, and to ensure that inclusive growth commitments translate into practice. If this alignment can be achieved, the Hub's experience shows that E&WO has the potential to play a more central role in shaping the region's future economy.

Sector Focus and Future Directions

The West Midlands Ownership Hub's decision to focus on the cultural and creative industries was seen by many as both distinctive and valuable. Participants recognised that co-operatives can be a natural fit for some creative practices, given the emphasis on collaboration and autonomy. Others, however, questioned whether this was always the right sectoral emphasis, highlighting challenges such as freelancer precarity, low levels of economic return, and difficulties in sustaining engagement. Several contributors argued that future initiatives should broaden their sectoral focus to drive greater economic impact and productivity, while retaining the benefits of sector-specific approaches.

Creative Sector Focus

Some saw the creative industries as especially well suited to employee and worker ownership. Colette from Co-operatives UK explained: *"The arts and culture lead in South Yorkshire was really interested in this because she felt like it was a model that would work really well for freelancers who'd suffered during COVID."*

John co-operatives advisor also noted the historical fit: *"It works well for the creative sector, because I think most artists of all colours want an element of their independence and autonomy around the pieces of work that they take on. But equally, the co-op model enables an infrastructure to be put around that. ... If you look at acting agencies, there are a number that are co-ops. And certainly financially, they're a real bonus for those members, as opposed to using private agents. So there is quite a long tradition in some parts of the cultural industries, and probably less so in others."*

Yet not everyone agreed it was a natural fit. Hayley from WMCA recalled: *"Co-operatives UK was saying it's a natural fit for creatives to come together and want to work together. I'm not 100% in agreement with that. You only have to look at the trope of the 'difficult second album' in music."* Her reference to the "difficult second album" underlined that creative collaboration can be fraught, and collective ownership is not always a natural or easy fit.

Despite these challenges, others argued that having a clear sector focus, creative industries or otherwise, had been a clear strength of the Hub. Kathy from WMOH reflected: *"We should probably be looking at sectors rather than just shouting into the void of everyone in the West Midlands...that's the standout thing for me that's been different in this project than any other co-op development"*

project I've worked on." Jo from WMOH agreed: "It was going to a specific sector, and I think that has worked really well in terms of our engagement."

For Charles from WMCA, the focus gave useful clarity: *"It was fine that she helped us having a creative industries and arts and culture focus, because it is a very distinct subset of the social economy."* Jo from Co-operatives WM added: *"I think it works in a particular sector, because they can focus and specialise and use their networks within that sector."*

Whilst this is true, some participants also highlighted that employee ownership transitions were particularly difficult to achieve in creative industries. Keely from EOA noted: *"Some of the really good examples of employer and business transitions probably haven't been in the creative sectors. In South Yorkshire, it was more apparent in manufacturing and professional services like architecture, which together made up about 50% of the EO sector."*

While many saw the creative industries as a natural and effective focus for co-operatives others pointed out that collaboration in this sector can be fraught and freelancers face practical barriers. Equally, transitions to employee ownership have historically been less common than in other industries such as manufacturing and professional services, which perhaps highlighting how the sector focus further exacerbated difficulties in this strand of work.

Expanding Beyond the Creative Industries

While the creative industries provided a valuable starting point for the West Midlands Ownership Hub, many respondents argued that its future impact depends on broadening the focus. They suggested targeting sectors with greater economic scale, such as housing, energy, social care and hospitality, and engaging more mature businesses that are ready to consider employee ownership transitions. The creative industries gave the Hub a distinctive identity and access to important networks, but its freelancer-heavy profile and modest economic scale were seen as limitations.

For some, the creative focus demonstrated the potential of employee and worker ownership but also highlighted the need to apply the model more widely. A WMCA policymaker reflected: *"There's no reason to say why this model can't work for organisations in our hybrid sectors."* Michael from Three Wise Productions shared a personal example: *"The breakfast I went to had mostly non-creative companies, and that was helpful too."*

Others emphasised the importance of focusing on sectors with higher economic impact. Dan from WMCA argued: *"We should build on the work the Employee Ownership Hub has been doing, but we should target it at sectors where there are more economic outputs, such as energy cooperatives, housing cooperatives. Simply promoting cooperatives or employee ownership generally tends to drift towards creative industries, which don't have the bigger GVA impacts."*

This was echoed by Paul from WMCA: *"Let's take the learning of the Ownership Hub to date, but look at different sectors of the economy where there's an opportunity to unlock something at a larger scale to drive productivity."*

Others framed the challenge as one of scale. Dan from WMCA explained: *“It probably does need to be sector specific, but grow beyond the creative industries. Although it’s useful and one of our priority clusters, in terms of employee numbers it’s modest. A sector tends to be characterised by freelancers, rather than larger employment sectors like construction or retail.”*

This limitation was also evident in how engaged others were with the Hub. Ian from WMCA noted: *“I’ve come across advisors that were really excited, and then when they found out it could only really help creative industries, it was like, ah, okay, right.”*

Expanding, however, was recognised as requiring additional resources. One contributor noted: *“Having a bit more capacity, the ability to work with different sectors to be more responsive and to offer that intensive account management level of support to those businesses would be very powerful.”*

The creative industries focus gave WMOH a distinctive identity and allowed it to engage with networks that might otherwise have been difficult to reach. For some, this confirmed the relevance of co-operatives and EO to a sector characterised by collaboration, freelancing and autonomy. Yet others stressed the difficulties of sustaining creative co-ops, the low economic scale of the sector, and the need for expansion into areas such as housing, energy, social care or hospitality. The consensus was that sector-specific approaches are valuable, but that the future of ownership support in the West Midlands will require a broader, more resource-intensive focus if it is to deliver both inclusive growth and significant economic impact.

Perceived Benefits of Employee and Worker Ownership In the West Midlands

Why Participants Were Drawn to Collective Ownership

The appeal of E&WO was described by respondents as being deeply rooted in values of fairness, democracy and collaboration. Some were motivated by ideological or political traditions that rejected exploitative ownership structures, while others emphasised how naturally the model aligned with the collaborative practices of the cultural and creative industries. Across the accounts, there was a consistent belief that employee and worker ownership provides a fairer, more inclusive and more sustainable way of doing business.

Respondents contrasted E&WO with what they saw as unfair and exploitative practices in conventional business. Alan from Purple Monster reflected on his own guiding principles: *“There are many companies, many small companies, who are doing fine and earning great money, but ... the people that are earning the money are the owners, and they’re paying poor wages, not recompensing people, giving them poor circumstances. ... I hate that idea ... I don’t like it. It just doesn’t suit me.”*

This sense of fairness was echoed by those who came to employee and worker ownership through political or cultural traditions. One prospective co-operative explained: *“A lot of my peers become*

CICs. That feels like that's the natural progression people take in community arts, but could [there] be something else? I think we come from quite a leftist, socialist place where we want the ownership to be shared, or the ownership of the work to be shared between the artists we work with. So naturally, the co-op sounded like a really good fit for us."

For William from Five Senses, the attraction was straightforward: *"We do think Co-op is the best way to move forward, to make it a democracy between these five people."* Michael from Three Wise Productions observed how some co-operatives begin in practice before adopting a legal structure: *"It's that collaboration and democratic process ... a lot of co-ops start as unofficial co-ops, as people working together that realise they need a bit of structure."*

For others, the model resonated because of how closely it reflected creative practice. Amy, Creative Facilitator reflected: *"That's a nice future and the co-op model is critical to that, because creatives, artists, no matter what their practice, are inherently collaborative and also brought into shared decision-making, shared power, distributed leadership...The potential for that is massive."*

The importance of values was also emphasised by an event partner organisation, who explained: *"If you like that collective model, and you recognise and agree with the value system that they have, because the values and principles are important, it tends to work quite well. And then, as the business evolves, you can start to think about what the structure should be."*

For some, employee and worker ownership represented a way of reconnecting with political traditions. A prospective co-operative drew on their trade union background: *"My background is the Trade Union movement [but] I lost my connection with that world, and I was very keen to retain some sort of collective organisation. With all of us having that political background knowledge, we do have a head start ... it's because it's an alternative to the capitalist structure where the owner holds all the power there's vested interest in keeping that dominant model."*

Alan from Purple Monster emphasised the underlying principle: *"I believe in the basic principle of people owning stuff, as opposed to just the owner owning stuff. Fundamentally, how do you share with the people that are working in the company the benefits of the company's progress and success?"*

Michael from Three Wise Productions captured the spirit of curiosity that also motivated some respondents: *"I was curious if there were different models where everybody's got a bit more of a stake and a say."*

Taken together, these reflections show how employee and worker ownership appeals to those motivated by fairness, equality and collaboration. While the specific motivations varied, respondents consistently described E&WO as an empowering alternative to conventional ownership models, one that offered both ideological alignment and the promise of more equitable working relationships.

Practical Benefits of the Model

Alongside the ideological motivations for employee and worker ownership, respondents emphasised a wide range of practical benefits. These included the potential for business growth, increased access to funding and opportunities, stronger structural and community ties, enhanced wellbeing, reputational advantages that opened doors to partnerships, and greater resilience and succession planning. Together, these insights underline how employee and worker ownership is seen not only as a fairer model, but also as a more sustainable and empowering way of doing business.

Respondents stressed that employee and worker ownership created the conditions for businesses to grow and thrive. A business advisor challenged the common perception that co-ops are less scalable, arguing: *“That's a widely held view, but it's actually incorrect, because actually the differences are the strength, the fact that a cooperative is more likely to trade, buy and sell goods, and to grow is an important element of that. But it's very different to a social enterprise, because if you think about what the guiding principle of a social enterprise should be, it should really be to cease to exist.”*

Formalising as a co-op or employee-owned business was also described as essential for unlocking resources. Andy from Walkspace reflected: *“I think so [the legal structure has helped to secure new opportunities]. In the past, there have been opportunities that we haven't been able to go to because we haven't had a governing document or a bank account.”* Another prospective co-operative added: *“The limitations you have as a freelancer with applying for funding, we're at a stage now [where] we think we need to start focus[ing] on the boring legal stuff, because that will help us grow in 5, 10, years plus.”* This echoed the perspective shared by Jo from WMOH, who noted: *“And the prime recommendation from [research done by the Creative and Media Enterprises students at] Warwick was that ownership hub should be focusing on the sort of funding infrastructure if it's wants to promote co ops, because this is where the blocker is, the perception that co ops aren't fundable.”*

Beyond growth and funding, respondents highlighted how E&WO offered structural advantages and deeper community engagement. Emmanuelle from MAHCN observed: *“There are also a range of employee benefits: security of trade, CPD, occupational health, pension schemes, obtaining wider assets [like] office areas ... These are all things that I feel the cooperative model gives. ... That then makes your operational methods, your reach, stronger and more secure.”* He continued, elaborating how establishing a co-op would further disseminate benefits for others not directly involved: *“[The co-op] becomes a beacon or a sanctuary for other smaller, freelancers or smaller businesses that might think, okay for security, let's come together. And I feel that when we're applying for funding it may be that a cooperative recipient model could help to bring in larger amounts of regional money with the security that then it would [be] spread out over an established network.”*

For others, the attraction lay in the sense of collective power and wellbeing that the model could provide. As creative facilitator Amy, Creative Facilitator put it simply: *“I think it's strength in numbers.”* William from Five Senses agreed, explaining: *“There is an objective we want to achieve, to support well being, and from there if we just go out as a company limited, we don't think that is reputable.”*

The status of being a co-op also brought reputational value, opening doors that had previously been closed. Dalton-Hardy reflected: *“The main thing which seems to have pricked up everybody's ears in the wider dance sector ... is the fact that [Dance Co-operative Birmingham] because they're a co op, they've levered in some free space, which is, if you know anything about performing arts, it's a nightmare. Now I believe that is on the strength of the co op entity.”*

Pooling and sharing resources was another strong theme. Dalton-Hardy explained: *“A distributed capacity, being a co-op, enables each of the artists involved [to] have their own following, their own community, their body of work.”* She continued: *“You know, it enables [you] to remain as a freelancer. [...] you are part of a sum greater than all its parts, and you get a share. You also are an individual. You get to remain who you are, and you can have your freelance practice.”*

Finally, resilience and succession were regarded as long-term benefits of employee and worker ownership. Byron, from BWHK reflected: *“I learned it's more resistant, [the] co-ownership structure, [it] can stay longer compared with the other new business.”* For Andy from Walkspace, it was about continuity: *“And another factor was that two of the other founding members were stepping back in different degrees from taking a leading role but we didn't just want to wrap things up, we wanted to give Walkspace, a chance to carry on beyond the the direct influence of the founding members. Cooperative seemed like the obvious way to go.”*

Taken together, these testimonies show that employee and worker ownership is valued not only as an alternative to conventional business models, but as a pathway to growth, legitimacy and long-term stability. Respondents consistently emphasised that E&WO helps organisations overcome structural barriers, strengthens their reputation and partnerships, and provides resilience through shared resources and succession planning. In doing so, it offers both practical and cultural benefits that make it particularly well suited to the needs of the cultural and creative industries.

Employee Ownership: Securing Legacy and Exit Routes

For some founders, employee ownership was valued not only as a fairer way of running a business but as a practical strategy for succession and legacy. It offered a structured exit route, an opportunity to protect the workforce, and a way of ensuring that organisational culture would endure beyond the founding generation.

Alan from Purple Monster reflected candidly on the personal realities that led him to consider employee ownership as a way forward for his organisation: *“I'm a senior citizen these days, and there's a point at which I'll have to have an exit strategy. I don't have one at the moment. I think I'd love the younger members of our team, predominantly a female-led management team, [to] take over the business and be able, ideally, to buy me out.”*

Michael from Three Wise Productions built on this perspective, highlighting how employee ownership could secure not just an individual's exit but the long-term integrity of a business and its workforce: *“Exit value, basically. If you started your company, and you own most of it, and you're, looking to exit [and] you're looking to protect your workforce: that seems to be the biggest benefit of*

it, that you want to preserve your workforce and your culture. We've seen big companies coming through our industry buy up small companies, and then within a year or two, those small companies don't really exist anymore."

These reflections underline that employee ownership is not only about present-day fairness or collaboration but also about continuity. For founders, it provides reassurance that their businesses can transition smoothly, that their teams will be protected, and that organisational culture will be preserved. In this sense, employee ownership was understood as both an exit strategy and a way of embedding values for the long term.

Recognising that Employee and Worker Ownership is Not for Everyone

While respondents spoke positively about the benefits of employee and worker ownership, there was also a recognition that it is not a universal solution. Some organisations found the model unsuitable for their needs, and emphasised that E&WO should be offered as one option among many, not as a prescription for every business or social outcome.

Colette acknowledged that not everyone who explored employee and worker ownership found it the right fit: *"There has been a few people who've gone through that process and then decided co-operatives are not for them, that's great, like it's good to have explored it and then decided no."*

Others reflected on the limits of the model in relation to the wider economy. Paul from WMCA argued: *"Am I going to change DPD, or Amazon, or whoever [to] choose ownership models, probably not ... we've almost had to get through that kind of no, no, this isn't the answer to all the readers problems. This is part of the answer."*

For Charles from WMCA, suitability was about context and relevance: *"It's a model that suits certain purposes but doesn't suit everybody. I used to run a social enterprise, there would be no advantage of becoming a co-op. It wouldn't add any value. Doing it would probably distract from the value. That's true of ours, but it may not be true of others."*

Colette from Co-operatives UK emphasised that the Hub's approach was to avoid pushing the model where it did not make sense: *"We're not trying to push co ops on people who are not interested in co ops, it's about genuinely trying to understand whether or not this could be of benefit."*

However, some felt that in practice co-ops were sometimes positioned as the only pathway. Jenny, Creative Facilitator, reflected: *"We're kind of saying we can support you if we pick this one, but it's not the only one, and here's where you can go if you want the other one."*

Taken together, the evidence shows that employee and worker ownership is viewed as a powerful alternative to conventional business models, valued for its fairness, democratic ethos, and alignment with collaborative creative practice. Respondents emphasised both ideological and practical benefits, from reducing inequality and strengthening wellbeing to enabling growth, resilience, and succession planning. At the same time, they acknowledged that the model is not a one-size-fits-all solution: its effectiveness depends on context, purpose and organisational needs.

While respondents valued the opportunity to explore employee and worker ownership, they also stressed the importance of choice, ensuring that businesses and individuals can adopt the ownership structure that best fits their circumstances. Overall, employee and worker ownership was seen as an empowering option that can deliver meaningful economic and social benefits, provided it is applied where it genuinely aligns with the ambitions of the people involved.

Connections to Other Employee and Worker Ownership Organisations

The West Midlands Ownership Hub was seen as both distinctive and complementary to other efforts to promote employee and worker ownership nationally and regionally. Respondents reflected on its relationship to earlier pilots, the unique role it played in awareness-raising and local connection, and how it contributed to, and sometimes relied on wider ecosystems such as Co-ops West Midlands, Co-operatives UK, and Business Growth West Midlands. While some questioned whether it filled a genuine gap, some highlighted the Hub's value in signposting, building relationships, and ensuring that organisations could access tailored support at different stages of their journeys.

Role of the Ownership Hub

Respondents reflected on the distinctive role played by the West Midlands Ownership Hub, with many emphasising its value as a connector and source of localised support, while others questioned the extent to which it filled a genuine gap in provision.

For some, the Hub's strength lay in its connecting role. Colette from Co-operatives UK explained: *"We already deliver co-development here [in the region], so Jo found ... the place where work needed to be done, which was more on that inspiring, promoting, raising awareness, and then connect[ing] people into the support."*

This localised presence was also valued. One prospective co-operative said: *"Having a local representative was really good. Having someone like Kathy and Jo that we can reach out to and ask questions is great, because a lot of stuff can seem a little bit removed. It's either in London, or it's in a Chamber of Commerce in Birmingham, and ... it doesn't feel as on the ground or as connected."*

At the same time, Jo from Co-operatives WM queried whether WMOH filled a gap: *"So in terms of, did it fulfil a gap within the sector? Not sure is the answer ... it's played a role."* Others argued that WMOH directly met unmet needs. A prospective co-operative explained that WMOH went broader than provision of CWM: *"I think there would definitely be a gap [if WMOH concluded its work], because ... we've kind of exhausted all support available [from other support organisations]. It would be great if it did continue ... I'd say a strong yes to that, because it's helping us materially now, and there hasn't been anyone else for a while that's been able to offer us [that]."*

This sense of value led many to express a desire for the Hub to continue. Charles from WMCA put it simply: *"I would like to see something like the ownership continued."* Andy from Walkspace agreed: *"I hope it continues and I can definitely see us in the future returning to the ownership hub, when we*

might get to other stages of our progress as a co-op and need more guidance.” Another prospective co-operative added: “It’d be great if it does continue, if there were more of the ownership hubs.”

Yet this also raised wider structural questions. As Amy, Creative Facilitator reflected: *“It points me to the question of, whose role is it? You know, whose role is it to support creatives, awareness that co-ops, but all the other entities, everything as well.”*

Overall, the Hub is valued for its role in raising awareness, providing a trusted local point of connection, and signposting support, though views differed on whether it was filling an essential gap or simply complementing existing provision.

Relationship to the Other Pilots

The West Midlands iteration comes after two other pilot ownership hubs, one in South Yorkshire, and one in London. The three have focused on different areas of E&WO. Colette from Co-operatives UK reflected on the value of each pilot having a different emphasis: *“So [South Yorkshire] did EO, [London] did policy, and Jo [focused more on] co-ops ... I quite liked that we focused in three different areas and three different places.”*

West Midlands Ownership Hub design and delivery drew heavily on the experiences of the earlier Ownership Hub pilots, which provided valuable lessons about what worked, what did not, and how to adapt the model to the regional context.

Jo from WMOH emphasised that regular dialogue with colleagues in the other hubs was a vital source of learning. She explained: *“I’ve met with Collette every week and pretty much any problem that I take to her, she’s come across it before in South Yorkshire, and so she talks to me about her experience. Secondly, ... Rich, me and Colette used to meet once a fortnight, and so we would share our learning and experiences there. So through conversation, I picked up a lot. I felt that they had paved the way.”* This regular exchange meant that WMOH could avoid repeating early mistakes and instead build on established practice.

Practical resources were also transferred between hubs, allowing WMOH to save time and draw on trusted expertise. As Jo explained: *“How to deliver training to business advisors, who could I commission to do that? Well, Collette just told me the people that they’d used that had worked well, they’d already got the decks together. Why go any further?”* This reuse of materials and networks ensured consistency across pilots and avoided duplication of effort.

One of the main lessons from South Yorkshire was the importance of clear, targeted messaging. As Colette from Co-operatives UK reflected: *“[In South Yorkshire] no one quite got what we were trying to say, because we designed campaigns where we were trying to appeal both to employees and businesses and co-ops, and then kind of do more targeted comms [...] We learned from what happened on that one, that we really needed to focus on the sector.”*

Not all aspects of the pilot design were seamless. Some stakeholders in the West Midlands felt they had not been adequately consulted about the setup of WMOH. As Jo White reflected: *“It came about from a conversation between Co-ops UK and the other partners and the Combined Authority without reference to what was already happening on the ground... We heard mention of it, asked to be involved in the design of it, and the next thing we knew, they were recruiting a member of staff [...] we were not involved in any conversation. The only time anybody came to talk to us was when Jo was in post.”*

In spite of these examples of building on prior learning, representatives from EOA also felt that the WMOH was not built on their organisational expertise or resources, which have resulted in less successful outcomes: *“The big shame around all that activity is that rather than relying on the assets that we have and the learning that we have ... there's been duplication of the same assets and same experience, but without the long history of people being involved and having expertise in the sector that we have within the EOA and within our membership network. That's obviously not only a duplication of effort, but also just leads to, inevitably, the output, the outcome, being less evidence based. I think that has a big aspect of perhaps why we've not seen impact for the employee ownership sector.”*

Co-operatives West Midlands (CWM)

Participants highlighted the strong links between the West Midlands Ownership Hub and Co-ops West Midlands, noting how the partnership provided credibility, networks, and practical resources beyond the Hub's cultural and creative focus.

WMOH was widely seen as having integrated effectively with CWM. Jo from Co-operatives WM explained: *“Jo [WMOH] has been part of the Co-ops West Midlands management group, she's come along to those meetings to make sure there is that relationship between what we're doing in the co-op sector across the region, but also to provide contacts and networks and what have you, to the co-operative movement.”*

This integration was important, as the Hub often needed to signpost people whose needs fell outside its cultural and creative focus. WMOH noted: *“We've reached a few people in other sectors that we've referred [on].”* Colette from Co-operatives UK added: *“If they haven't fitted within the arts and culture sector, then they've been signposted to Co-operatives West Midlands.”*

Managing the relationships between local and national bodies was seen as sensitive but successful. Colette from Co-operatives UK acknowledged: *“It's hard, when you're managing the relationships between the local advisors and the national body, ... there's always going to be tensions, but I think Jo's navigated that really well.”* Jo from Co-operatives WM agreed: *“Jo's success has been that she has worked cooperatively. And I think she's been really keen to make sure those connections and that networking is all there, that there is this sort of two-way relationship, and that has really been down to Jo recognising that she knows about the cultural industries, but she doesn't know about co-ops, and therefore couldn't do it all on her own.”*

For some organisations, the relationship with Co-operatives WM provided additional tangible support. A prospective co-operative noted: *“We'd actually had some previous help from Co-operatives West Midlands. They helped us get founded with our legal structure and essentially launch as a business and have a bit of a business plan at that point.”*

Overall, this integration ensured that organisations were able to access wider support, with Co-ops West Midlands offering both strategic connections and tangible tools to help new co-operatives establish themselves on a firmer footing.

Co-operatives UK

Beyond regional partnerships, the West Midlands Ownership Hub also connected organisations to Co-operatives UK, the national body able to provide intensive and long-term support. This referral process was seen as an important next step for groups whose ambitions or challenges went beyond the Hub's immediate scope, ensuring they could access the specialist expertise needed to take forward more complex ownership journeys. Perspectives were signposted to Co-operatives UK 'Business Support for Co-ops' programme. WMOH also utilised the Co-ops UK advice team to provide guidance to perspectives.

This referral process was built into one of the community engagement events, as explained by one of the event partners: *“At that stage, [a prospective co-op] were aware that it's a positive possibility, but also aware that there's quite a bit of complexity around that, and that complexity was the next stage for them to start to understand. And that's the bit that Co-operatives UK then picked up. That was essentially the prize, to get that business support through Co-operatives UK, and I know they do that very well.”*

In other instances prospective co-operatives noted accessing resources developed by Co-operatives UK, and disseminated online. These included video tutorials, as well as constitution templates.

Overall, Co-operatives UK was recognised as a critical partner in the support pathway, offering structured training, consultancy and tailored advice that complemented the Hub's early-stage awareness and guidance. This collaboration highlighted the importance of clear referral routes between local, regional and national organisations, enabling prospective co-operatives to progress with confidence through each stage of their development.

Business Growth West Midlands

Growth Hubs offer free, impartial advice to businesses within the local authority in which they are based. The Growth Hubs delivered by the seven local authorities of the West Midlands are managed by Business Growth West Midlands which is funded by the UK Government. As part of its wider ecosystem, the West Midlands Ownership Hub engaged with Business Growth West Midlands (BGWM). This relationship was viewed in mixed terms: while some felt BGWM could have played a stronger role in communications and promotion, others pointed to useful contributions that

helped raise the Hub's visibility and spark wider conversations, in particular in the training of business advisors.

Some felt the growth hubs could have done more to support communications and promotion. As one event partner organisation noted: *"I'd say one of the biggest challenges to this was communication, and I'd openly say that actually Business Growth West Midlands were not helpful when they could have been. I thought they'd have embraced it when I explained to them what was going on. I think partly because they're busy, they've got a lot on, [and] the Birmingham and Solihull Growth Hub doesn't have comms."* In other instances BGWM has been more active in communications. Jo of WMOH notes: *"Business Growth West Midlands made a video of me talking about the ownership hub, which did very well on LinkedIn."*

As noted throughout, BGWM are a central route of entry across the region for organisations to find out more information about business models. Their understanding of E&WO is essential for the success of the models in the region.

Taken together, these accounts show that the West Midlands Ownership Hub was embedded within, and dependent upon, a wider ecosystem of support. Its distinctive role was to act as a first point of connection, raising awareness locally, building trust, and then signposting organisations on to regional and national partners for more specialised, long-term assistance. While views differed on whether WMOH filled an entirely new gap or complemented existing provision, there was strong recognition that it added value by navigating relationships effectively and creating clear referral pathways. Importantly, the Hub generated momentum that respondents hoped would be sustained and scaled beyond the life of the pilot, ensuring that employee and worker ownership remains accessible through joined-up support across local, regional and national levels.

Conclusions

The West Midlands Ownership Hub has demonstrated the value of place-based, sector-focused investment in employee and worker ownership development. It succeeded in raising awareness in the cultural and creative industries, building trust through accessible engagement, and providing tailored early-stage support that bridged the gap between inspiration to start something new and technical business advice about employee and worker ownership development. WMOH's credibility and community connections were consistently highlighted as central to engaging creatives who might otherwise not have accessed business support, while innovative engagement methods such as workshops, peer-led facilitation and community co-production proved effective in making co-operatives more accessible and relatable both to the creative industries, but also those who are less likely to engage in E&WO across the board. The Hub created clear referral pathways into regional and national bodies such as Co-ops West Midlands and Co-operatives UK, ensuring that organisations could progress beyond initial awareness. This was despite limited success in signposting to the Employee Ownership Association. It positioned employee and worker ownership within wider policy conversations at the WMCA, laying the groundwork for future investment in on the ground development for E&WO.

The practical outcomes achieved, such as the development of new co-operatives like *Five Senses* and *Walkspace*, illustrate the catalytic role that the Hub played in turning interest into action, while training and advocacy work helped to increase regional capacity to sustain activity beyond the pilot. At the same time, the evaluation highlights persistent challenges. Awareness of, and development in employee ownership remains comparatively low, and myths and misconceptions across both models continue to shape perceptions. Many prospective groups faced barriers of capacity, resources and timing, meaning that development is often long-term and challenging. Support for employee ownership in particular struggled to reach founder-level audiences, limiting progress compared with co-operative development, while communications and visibility could have been stronger.

Overall, the Hub made a significant contribution to demystifying employee and worker ownership within the creative industries, creating accessible entry points, and embedding the agenda within the region's cultural and policy ecosystems. Its legacy lies not only in the organisations it directly supported but also in the lessons it offers for how to engage communities inclusively and build pathways into alternative business models.

Glossary

Co-operative: A co-op is a business or organisation that is democratically owned and controlled by its members, to meet their shared needs. The members can be its customers, employees, residents or suppliers, who have a say in how the co-op is run.

Co-operatives UK (CUK): The membership organisation for co-ops in the United Kingdom. More than 700 co-ops have direct membership of CUK and around 4,000 are represented through federal membership.

Co-operatives West Midlands (CWM): The regional body representing and supporting co-operatives across the West Midlands.

Employee-owned (EO): Employee ownership is when employees have a say and a stake in the company they work for. Ownership occurs in a variety of ways – from employees directly owning shares in the company, to having shares held on behalf of employees in an Employee Ownership Trust. The employees must own more than a quarter of the business for it to be described as employee-owned.

Employee and worker-owned (E&WO): The term used to describe employee-owned businesses, worker and freelance co-op collectively.

Employee Ownership Association (EOA): As champions and advocates of employee ownership, the eoa empowers businesses at any point in their EO journey with tailored support, guidance, and the tools needed to grow. Together, we're building pride in a rapidly expanding sector that truly delivers people powered business.

Freelancer co-operative: A co-op that is democratically owned and controlled by workers, who retain their freelance status and invoice the co-op for their work.

Growth Hubs: Growth Hubs offer free, impartial advice to businesses within the local authority in which they are based. The Growth Hubs delivered by the seven local authorities of the West Midlands are managed by Business Growth West Midlands which is funded by the UK Government.

Reclaiming our Regional Economies (RORE): A five-year programme developed by the New Economics Foundation (NEF), the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES), Co-operatives UK and the Centre for Thriving Places (CTP). It brings communities together with political and institutional leaders to test ideas that help to re-wire and reform their regional economies, so that they deliver good lives now and for generations to come. It has programmes in the West Midlands, North East and South Yorkshire

Worker co-operative: A co-op that is democratically owned and collectively controlled by the workers, who all participate in decision making

Annex One - Evaluation Framework

TYPE	DETAIL
INPUTS	£215,230 of funding
	Delivery partner guidance and expertise
	Part time WMOH Co-ordinator
	A narrative relating E&WO to WMCA policy priorities
	Existing evidence and information about co-ops in the West Midlands
	An E&WO development pipeline – points of contact and next steps for those engaged
	A narrative around co-op benefits tailored for freelancers and employees in the creative industries
	A narrative that speaks to business owners, especially around succession planning
	A database of Business Advisors from Business Growth West Midlands
	A network of creative facilitators with a deep knowledge of the creative industries in the West Midlands
	Co-production with communities
ACTIVITIES	Meetings with WMCA employees, Local Authorities, Business Growth WM
	Generate media around businesses with employee ownership trusts in the creative industries
	Database of prospective freelancers who may be interesting in forming co-ops, built by individuals who know the creative and cultural sector
	Contributing to research with the University of Warwick
	Generate media explaining how co-ops work in a way that resonates with creatives – video, brochures, flyers
	Launch Event
	Dream Together Workshops
	Employee Ownership Focused Events
	Signposting to business support for coops programme
	Signposting to co-ops West Midlands
	Signposting for Single explorer programmes
	Business advisors training
	Training for creative facilitators on cooperatives
	Creative facilitators use their networks to advocate for co-ops, winning confidence of creatives
OUTPUTS	# WMCA events or meetings where E&WO has been platformed
	# WMCA employees and policymakers engaged in the programme
	# media articles focused on the public perception
	# individuals signposted to Co-ops West Midlands

	# business owners who are actively pursuing EO
	# individuals/groups who are actively pursuing co-operatives
	# pieces of media aimed to resonate with creatives (EO and Coops)
	# event interventions (launch event, dream together, EO events)
	# people signposted business support for co-ops programme
	# attendees at event interventions (launch event, dream together, EO focused events)
	# co-production partnerships with organisations
	# individuals registered on database as interested in co-ops
	# individuals signposted to Single Explorer Programme
	# individuals signposted to further advice on EO
	# business advisors trained
	# training sessions held (business advisors, creative facilitators)
	# creative facilitators
SHORT TERM OUTCOMES	Individuals report increased understanding of E&WO
	Individuals report knowledge of ongoing support for pursuing E&WO
	Individuals report increased empowerment to take control of their working situation as a result of engagement
	Individuals report increased understanding of how E&WO can benefit their sector's infrastructure
	Individuals report knowledge on why E&WO is relevant to their business
	Individuals identify that WMOH & partners addressed barriers to their interest in E&WO
	Individuals with a desire to pursue E&WO report increased connection to other organisations who are pursuing similar aims
	Business advisors & creative facilitators report increased knowledge of how E&WO can benefit businesses
	Business advisors & creative facilitators report knowledge of ongoing support for pursuing E&WO
	Creative facilitators report connection to prospective individuals who need support around E&WO
	Creative facilitators report increased likelihood to advocate for E&WO
MEDIUM TERM OUTCOMES	WMCA stakeholders working in local growth plan (productivity, retaining wealth and foundational economy) understand the role of the E&WO models in broader policy aims.
	Freelancer co-opc, consortium co-ops and worker co-ops are set up or are in the process for being set up in the cultural and creative sector in the West Midlands
	WMOH has raised the profile of E&WO in regional Cultural and Creative Industries
	Individuals are setting up, or are in the process of setting up, Employee Ownership at their organisations in the cultural and creative sector in the West Midlands
	Those invested and interested in pursuing or promoting E&WO in the WM are better connected and networked with each other
	WMOH has raised the profile of E&WO in relevant business advisors and their local authorities

Annex Two - Learnings on co-production with racialised communities

One way of reaching people from under-represented communities is to work with people from those communities to create events together. West Midlands Ownership Hub has produced its reflections on how best to do this.

Visibility: Be visible in the community you are trying to reach. It's important that the initiative for working together comes from people within the racialised community. This will only happen if you are visible, approachable and forming relationships within that community.

Power: Be aware of your own power. You have power in all sorts of ways - as the funder, as someone embedded within an established organisation, as someone whose first language is English (in some instances). Keep checking that you are using your power on behalf of the community you are working with and not to get your own way.

Branding: Ensure the branding, style and language of the event is that of the community you are working with rather than your organisation.

Suppliers: Wherever possible, use suppliers for the event from the racialised community - photographer, caterer, designer, host, AV engineer etc. This helps ensure the event truly belongs to the community. It's always a way of supporting the community through paying people working within it.

Accountability: Be prepared to work with people who have never invoiced, expect to be paid in cash and aren't used to written contracts. To do this, you have to work harder to ensure you have the paper trail you need to satisfy funders.

Listen: Be alert to cultural nuances – how actions, words and processes are understood differently in different communities. Be prepared to adapt your approach accordingly. If you know everything about the people you are working with, the partnership would not be necessary.

Conflict: You may find that there are conflicts within the racialised community you are working with. Try to be aware of this and don't add to it by favouring one group over another.

Time: Developing trust takes time. Be prepared to have to wait years to see that fruits of the partnerships you are working on.

Give permission to fail: If co-production was easy, everyone would be doing it. Enjoy the rewards when it goes well and make sure you learn when it doesn't.