



# Social mobility, inclusion, and belonging at The Co-op

Key findings from research with colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders from lower socio-economic backgrounds

[Full report](#)



**Making the Leap.**

## About this report

This report examines the extent to which Co-op supports social mobility, inclusion, and belonging for its workforce. Based on in-depth qualitative research with Co-op Colleagues, Leaders, and Senior Leaders from lower socio-economic backgrounds (LSEBs), the report explores views and experiences of three key building blocks of social mobility – financial security, job stability, and career progression – as well as inclusion and belonging. The research considers similarities and differences across business areas, and adopts an intersectional lens to explore how LSEB individuals’ experiences vary by personal characteristics including age, disability, ethnicity, gender, and location. Based on this evidence, the report offers recommendations for action to support social mobility for LSEB individuals at Co-op, and to improve conditions for the workforce as a whole.

## About the author

Dr Padmini Iyer is Head of Research and Advocacy at Making The Leap. A mixed-methods social researcher, her work has focused on education, employment, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic background in countries including the UK, Ethiopia, India, and Vietnam. Before joining Making The Leap in 2021, Padmini led UK-based research at the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), and worked on international research studies at the University of Cambridge and the University of Oxford. She completed her doctorate in International Education at the University of Sussex.

Founded in 1993, Making The Leap is a grassroots charity which works with schools, young adults, charities, and employers to advance social mobility and race equity in the UK. In addition to its direct delivery with schools and young adults, Making The Leap organises nationwide social mobility initiatives including the [UK Social Mobility Awards](#), [the Social Mobility Podcast](#), and [Social Mobility Day](#).

To learn more about Making The Leap, please visit [www.makingtheleap.org.uk](http://www.makingtheleap.org.uk).

## Acknowledgements

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## Citation

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# List of terms & abbreviations

## Terms

### Business areas

The Co-operative Group (Co-op) has six main business areas: Food, Funeral-care, Insurance, Legal Services, Logistics, and Support Centre. The Funeral-care and Insurance business areas are collectively referred to as Life Services.

### Colleagues

Co-op employees at Work Level 6 and below.

Examples of Work Level 6 roles include Store Manager (Food) and Shift Manager (Logistics). Examples of roles below Work Level 6 include Customer Team Members and Team Leaders (Food), Drivers and Warehouse Operatives (Logistics).

### Leaders

Co-op employees at Work Levels 4 to 5.

Examples of roles at Work Level 5 include area managers and specialists without teams. Examples of roles at Work Level 4 include senior professionals.

### Senior leaders

Co-op employees at Work Levels 1 to 3.

Examples of roles at Work Level 3 include heads of departments. Examples of roles at Work Levels 1 to 2 include directors.

### Socio-economic background

Refers to the particular set of social and economic circumstances that an individual has come from. In this study, we use the Social Mobility Commission's measurement of socio-economic background using parental occupation at aged 14.<sup>1</sup> "Lower socio-economic background" refers to individuals who come from households with lower income and/or lower levels of parental education. These backgrounds may also be referred to as "working-class".

<sup>1</sup> Social Mobility Commission (2021) Socio-economic diversity and inclusion. Employers' toolkit: Cross Industry Edition. London: Social Mobility Commission.

## Abbreviations

<b>CTM</b>	Customer Team Member
<b>D&amp;I</b>	Diversity and inclusion
<b>LGBTQ+</b>	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and further (+) non-binary, non-heterosexual identities.
<b>LSEB</b>	Lower socio-economic background
<b>SEB</b>	Socio-economic background
<b>WL</b>	Work Level

# Foreword



Too often our life chances are defined by things over which we have no control - be that gender, ethnicity, disability, or socio-economic background<sup>2</sup>. It cannot be right that those from poorer backgrounds are almost twice as likely to end up in working-class jobs than others from more privileged backgrounds. It is a question of fairness.

Unfairness in the UK existed before the pandemic, and before the cost-of-living crisis. However, both seem to have made the ability to 'get on' through access to good work and career progression that much harder than ever before, especially for those from less privileged backgrounds.

Our members asked our Co-op at our 2021 AGM to 'campaign for change, tackle inequality and challenge Government to address the root causes of these injustices to enable social mobility and equal opportunity.'

I am proud of the work our Co-op already does to promote fairness, both inside and outside of our business, and how we co-operate with others who share our vision of a fairer society. But we know that to drive the change we want to see, we must lead by example.

We must share our experience of how socio-economic backgrounds affect progression and performance within our Co-op, and that includes where our colleagues may be feeling held back. We have found some evidence of this, and we will address what we have found.

We have to be open about what more we can do, to give all our colleagues access to the opportunities they deserve, and that includes going beyond our zero-discrimination culture and adding a new depth to diversity and inclusion.

That is why we asked Making The Leap to undertake this research. It is the first social mobility study of its kind from any UK retailer and the first of its kind from any major employer in the UK private sector.



Shirine Khoury-Haq

CEO of The  
Co-operative Group

*Shirine*

We have turned the lens on ourselves and asked hundreds of colleagues who identify as coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds to share their experiences of working at our Co-op, good and bad, and to say what they think needs to change.

I wholeheartedly welcome this report. It shares valuable advice on where our Co-op is helping those from lower socio-economic backgrounds to thrive and where we need to do more. I take the findings very seriously and they will be embedded in our revised social mobility strategy.

I am grateful to Dr Padmini Iyer and the team at Making The Leap for the work they have done and the clear recommendations that they have made.

I am also grateful to those colleagues who shared their own personal background as part of the research, and how our Co-op serves them, their needs, their families' needs and their communities' needs. Once again, as we see every day at our Co-op, change is achieved together, and I look forward to creating a better business for our colleagues, with our colleagues, based on the rich insight we have gained.

I encourage everyone reading this report to think long and hard around what more they could do to promote fairness. I urge other employers, large and small, to consider what more they could do to better support colleagues from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Alongside creating greater equity for those with protected characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity and disability, this is an important route, if not the only route, to true social mobility.



# Foreword



At Making The Leap, we work in a variety of ways to address the lack of social mobility in the UK. This is a seemingly intractable problem, which has only been given the focus it deserves in the last decade. Social mobility is one of the defining issues of our time, yet it seems to mean different things to different people. To some, it is about ensuring that bright people from disadvantaged backgrounds get an opportunity to access professional careers. For others, social mobility is about creating a fairer society and making sure that people of all backgrounds get equal opportunities, irrespective of the family they were born into, the area they were brought up in, or the school they went to.

We believe that social mobility has two goals. Firstly, no matter what your job - and regardless of your socio-economic background, race, gender, or other characteristics - your pay and employment conditions mean that you have, at the very least, the ability to feed yourself and your family, decent housing, and financial security. Secondly, no matter what your parents' job, you have fair access to education and training opportunities, which in turn means you have fair access to any employment opportunities you wish to pursue. Linking back to our first goal, you will have access to a good standard of living no matter what occupation/s you choose.

Of course, government policy has a role to play in advancing social mobility, however it is defined. But it is far too big an issue to be left to government alone - every business and institution has to embrace the challenge and tackle it head on if we are to ever move the dial. Some companies have been early adopters on social mobility, and for a number of years have been looking at their recruitment or what they are doing in the community to make a difference. Not many, though, have had the courage to take an in-depth look at how social mobility plays out within their walls and how it affects their employees, and even



**Tunde Banjoko OBE**

Founder and Chief Executive,  
Making The Leap



fewer have published these findings. The Co-op, to its great credit, has.

This excellent report takes a deep dive into the Co-op and finds that the business is doing a lot right, and that those from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds do feel a strong sense of inclusion and belonging at Co-op. There is yet more that needs to be done, but by commissioning this work, Co-op has shown that it holds itself to the highest standards and wants to make improvements wherever it needs to.

I applaud Co-op for the actions it has taken, and the actions it will take to support social mobility for its employees. Co-op provides an example that, if followed widely, would see social mobility advance in this country and how wonderful that would be.



# Social Mobility, Inclusion, and Belonging at Co-op



Making the Leap.

In 2022-23, [Making The Leap](#) conducted in-depth qualitative research with Co-op colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders from lower socio-economic backgrounds (LSEBs) to explore their views and experiences of social mobility, inclusion, and belonging. Read the full report [here](#).

## The research found three levels of social mobility at Co-op:



## What can Co-op do?

By providing financial security, job stability, and fair progression opportunities, Co-op can support social mobility for LSEB individuals at all work levels, and improve working conditions for its whole workforce. To do this, Co-op should:



Continue and widen access to financial support for the lowest-paid colleagues.



Improve transparency and communication about working hours for colleagues on variable-hours contracts.



Facilitate more pathways for career progression and ensure fair and transparent processes.



Draw on Co-op's core values and engage social mobility role models to improve inclusion and belonging.





# Executive Summary

# Introduction

## Background

In the UK, social mobility is typically defined as creating opportunities for individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds (LSEBs) to become more economically successful<sup>3</sup>. Employers can support social mobility by ensuring LSEB individuals have financial security, job stability, and fair access to career progression<sup>4</sup>. The UK retail industry is a major employer of people from LSEBs, and socio-economic diversity is typically reflected among shop floor staff. However, this is not replicated at middle and senior management levels, which are dominated by those from more advantaged SEBs.<sup>5</sup> There are therefore important opportunities to improve social mobility in the UK retail industry: by supporting a good standard of living for LSEB individuals in frontline roles; by providing fair opportunities for LSEB individuals to progress to middle and senior management; and by creating inclusive workplaces for people from LSEBs.

At The Co-operative Group (Co-op), over 13,000 members of staff identify as LSEB.<sup>6</sup> Co-op aims to support social mobility by empowering its colleagues to define and realise their own version of success, regardless of their starting point in life. To do this, Co-op aims to ensure colleagues can build purposeful careers without having to leave their communities, and to provide the relevant tools, support, and processes individuals need to succeed. Co-op takes an intersectional approach to social mobility, recognising that some groups face compounding disadvantages due to historic oppression.

Trends from Co-op's internal diversity and inclusion (D&I) data indicate that - as in the wider retail industry - people from LSEBs are underrepresented in management and leadership positions. To gain more in-depth insights into the challenges facing those from LSEBs, and to support evidence-based action to improve social mobility, Co-op commissioned grassroots charity Making The Leap to conduct qualitative research with LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders across the business.

## Exploring social mobility, inclusion, and belonging at Co-op

This study examines the extent to which Co-op supports social mobility, inclusion, and belonging. Making The Leap conducted qualitative research to explore the views and experiences of LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders across the business from November 2022 to March 2023. LSEB individuals from a range of locations and across Food Stores / Operations, Life Services, Logistics, and Support Centre were included in the study. Consistent with the wider Co-op workforce, the majority of LSEB individuals who participated in the research were aged 31-60, White, cisgender, female, and heterosexual. Among minoritised groups, LSEB individuals who identified as LGBTQ+, disabled, and younger individuals were well-represented in the study. The research provides valuable insights into the intersections between race and LSEB at Co-op; however, ethnic minority individuals are under-represented in the study when compared to the wider Co-op workforce.

## Key findings and recommendations

Below, we summarise key findings from the research and offer recommendations for action, which are based on a synthesis of participants' views, key research findings, and our understanding of Co-op's ongoing and planned activities.

<sup>3</sup> Social Mobility Commission (2021) Socio-economic diversity and inclusion. Employers' toolkit: Cross Industry Edition. London: Social Mobility Commission.

<sup>4</sup> Iyer, P. (2022) Widening the gate? Advancing social mobility in 2021-22. London: Making The Leap.

<sup>5</sup> British Retail Consortium & The MBS Group (2022) Tracking progress on diversity and inclusion in UK retail. London: The MBS Group.

<sup>6</sup> This accounts for 33% of the total workforce. 30% of Co-op employees did not disclose their SEB in 2022, and so the actual LSEB population at Co-op is likely to be higher. Ipsos (2022) Diversity and Inclusion report 2022. Manchester: Co-op. Internal report.

# Key findings

## 1. Co-op does support social mobility for LSEB individuals - but this is not yet a reality for all LSEB colleagues.

The research identified three groups of LSEB individuals at Co-op: those who are **struggling** and have not yet experienced social mobility; those who are **managing** and have conditional experiences of social mobility; and those who are **comfortable** and have experienced social mobility. Below, we characterise each of these three groups in terms of their financial security, job stability, and career progression opportunities at Co-op.

### Struggling

This group consists of LSEB colleagues experiencing financial insecurity and job instability, who feel they have limited or no opportunities for career progression. As a result, working at Co-op does not yet provide these LSEB colleagues with the building blocks required for social mobility.



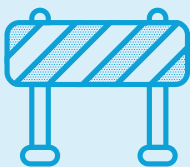
**Who?** LSEB colleagues in lower-paid roles across the business who are not accessing Co-op's wider benefits or support schemes. The group includes disabled LSEB colleagues and LSEB colleagues with chronic health conditions who feel they have not received support with required adjustments in the workplace.



**Financial insecurity:** Although they are paid the Real Living Wage as a minimum,<sup>7</sup> during the cost-of-living crisis in 2022-23, LSEB colleagues in this group struggle to meet their basic needs - to afford food, heat their homes, meet housing costs, and pay their bills. These experiences are consistent with challenges identified by Co-op in its recent research on colleagues' financial wellbeing.<sup>8</sup>



**Job instability:** In Food Stores, these LSEB colleagues' experiences of financial insecurity are compounded by job instability, as their working hours are unpredictable, irregular, or insufficient to meet their financial needs. This causes stress due to over-work, and an inability to plan hours for other jobs.



**Barriers to career progression:** LSEB colleagues in Food Stores, Logistics, and younger LSEB colleagues in this group tend to feel pessimistic about their career prospects at Co-op. Barriers to career progression include a lack of information about career pathways, limited access to training and development, and limited opportunities to progress in local areas.

For those who have unsuccessfully applied for promotions in the past, another barrier is a lack of feedback on their performance, which means they are unsure how to improve and progress in future. This includes ethnic minority LSEB colleagues who have observed White colleagues being promoted while their own progression attempts have been unsuccessful.

<sup>7</sup> As a minimum, all Co-op colleagues are paid the Real Living Wage, which means that wages are set and increased annually on the cost of living.

<sup>8</sup> Atay, A. & Walker, T. (2023) Shifting sands: employer responsibility during the cost-of-living crisis. The Work Foundation: Lancaster University.

# Managing

This group includes LSEB colleagues and leaders currently experiencing a degree of financial security and/or job stability, who may have access to career progression opportunities. Working at Co-op is therefore providing these LSEB colleagues and leaders with the building blocks for social mobility, but the foundations are not fully secure.



**Who?** LSEB colleagues in lower-paid roles and LSEB leaders in higher-paid roles, across business areas. On top of their base pay, these LSEB colleagues and leaders are typically accessing Co-op's wider benefits and support schemes.



**Some financial insecurity:** While LSEB colleagues in this group are in lower-paid roles, they have access to a degree of financial security through Co-op's benefits and support schemes. In particular, targeted cost-of-living payments for those in the lowest-paid roles and 30% member discounts on own-brand products help these LSEB colleagues to meet their basic needs. Across business areas, higher-paid LSEB leaders in this group are similarly reliant on the 30% member discounts and schemes such as Wagestream to meet their financial responsibilities. While Co-op's additional benefits allow these LSEB colleagues and leaders to be 'managing' rather than 'struggling', they are not financially secure enough to plan for the future, and have little to no disposable income.



**Some job stability:** Across business areas, LSEB colleagues in this group have a degree of job stability through guaranteed and/or reliable hours. However, Support Centre LSEB colleagues and leaders in this group can experience job instability due to the risk of redundancy during organisational restructures.



**A range of career progression experiences:** There are LSEB colleagues in this group who face barriers to career progression at Co-op, as described above for the 'struggling' group. However, LSEB colleagues and leaders in this group are more optimistic about their career prospects when they have ongoing conversations about professional development with their managers, access to training and development opportunities, and hope to take advantage of "squiggly career" paths at Co-op. LSEB colleagues and leaders are more likely to feel optimistic about career progression when there are opportunities in their local areas. This is particularly true for those who live in and around Manchester, and those who are able to work from home.

# Comfortable

This group consists of LSEB leaders and senior leaders experiencing financial security and job stability, who either have clear opportunities for career progression, or have largely fulfilled their career ambitions. Working at Co-op has provided social mobility for these LSEB leaders and senior leaders, who feel they have a significantly higher standard of living compared to their parents.



**Who?** LSEB leaders and senior leaders in higher-paid roles across business areas, who are on permanent contracts and accessing Co-op's wider benefits and support schemes.



**Financial security:** Across the business, these LSEB leaders and senior leaders feel they are fairly compensated for their work, and are able to afford a decent standard of living. In addition to covering their basic needs and meeting their financial responsibilities, they have some disposable income for leisure and holidays, and are able to plan for the future through savings and/or pension contributions.



**Job stability:** LSEB leaders and senior leaders in this group gain a sense of job stability from their permanent contracts, and safety nets such as notice periods and remuneration payments to compensate for redundancy. Feeling that Co-op is being transparent about its financial situation and planned restructures also helps LSEB leaders and senior leaders to feel more secure in their jobs.



**Career progression:** There are LSEB senior leaders in this group who reflect the 'shopfloor to management' route to social mobility which is often described - but not always observed - in the retail industry.<sup>9</sup> For all LSEB senior leaders, key enablers to career progression have included developing transferable skills, knowledge, and professional qualifications through formal training schemes, and "squiggly careers" which involved roles across a range of Co-op business areas and teams. Formal and informal support from mentors and sponsors was also vital to help LSEB senior leaders overcome a range of barriers on their career journeys. Key support included providing information and encouragement to pursue a range of career paths, and helping LSEB senior leaders to overcome imposter syndrome in increasingly middle-class spaces as they progressed in their careers.

## 2. When Co-op puts its values and D&I commitments into practice, LSEB individuals feel a high sense of inclusion and belonging. However, those from LSEBs can experience exclusion in the workplace related to their SEB and a range of other characteristics.

Co-op's values of cooperation over competition - reflected in giving back to members and the community, prioritising workers' rights, D&I commitments, and campaigning on social issues - are a strong driver of inclusion and belonging for LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders. LSEB senior leaders also see Co-op's values as a strong foundation for promoting social mobility.



**Inclusion and belonging:** Across work levels, LSEB individuals are more likely to feel included when they are valued, respected, and heard by their peers and managers, when they are kept informed about developments in the business, and when they feel accepted and understood for who they are. When they see diversity and inclusion in their teams and at senior levels, and when diverse cultures are celebrated by Co-op, a wide range of LSEB individuals feel a sense of inclusion and belonging. This includes ethnic minority, LGBTQ+, and disabled LSEB individuals, as well as LSEB individuals who are White, cisgender, heterosexual, and non-disabled. LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders feel a sense of belonging when they personally share Co-op's values, when they feel confident Co-op is putting these values into practice, and when Co-op invests in their professional development.



**Exclusion and disconnect:** LSEB individuals across Co-op also report experiences of exclusion in the workplace. There are LSEB individuals who experience bias and harassment based on their accents, and who are excluded from team-based activities due to financial barriers. Across work levels and business areas, LSEB individuals who identify as ethnic minority, disabled, female (including trans women), and LGBTQ+ face experiences of bias and harassment based on these characteristics, while others report exclusion based on their age, caring responsibilities, and religion. When managers and team members fail to support LSEB individuals facing these experiences, this further drives a sense of exclusion. Unsurprisingly, LSEB individuals who face bias and harassment are less likely to feel a sense of belonging at Co-op. This can lead to LSEB individuals feeling they have to mask their accents or other characteristics to 'fit in' at work. LSEB colleagues can also feel disconnected from their teams when they are in lone working roles, largely working from home, and due to limited (or unaffordable) opportunities to socialise with their team members.

# Recommendations

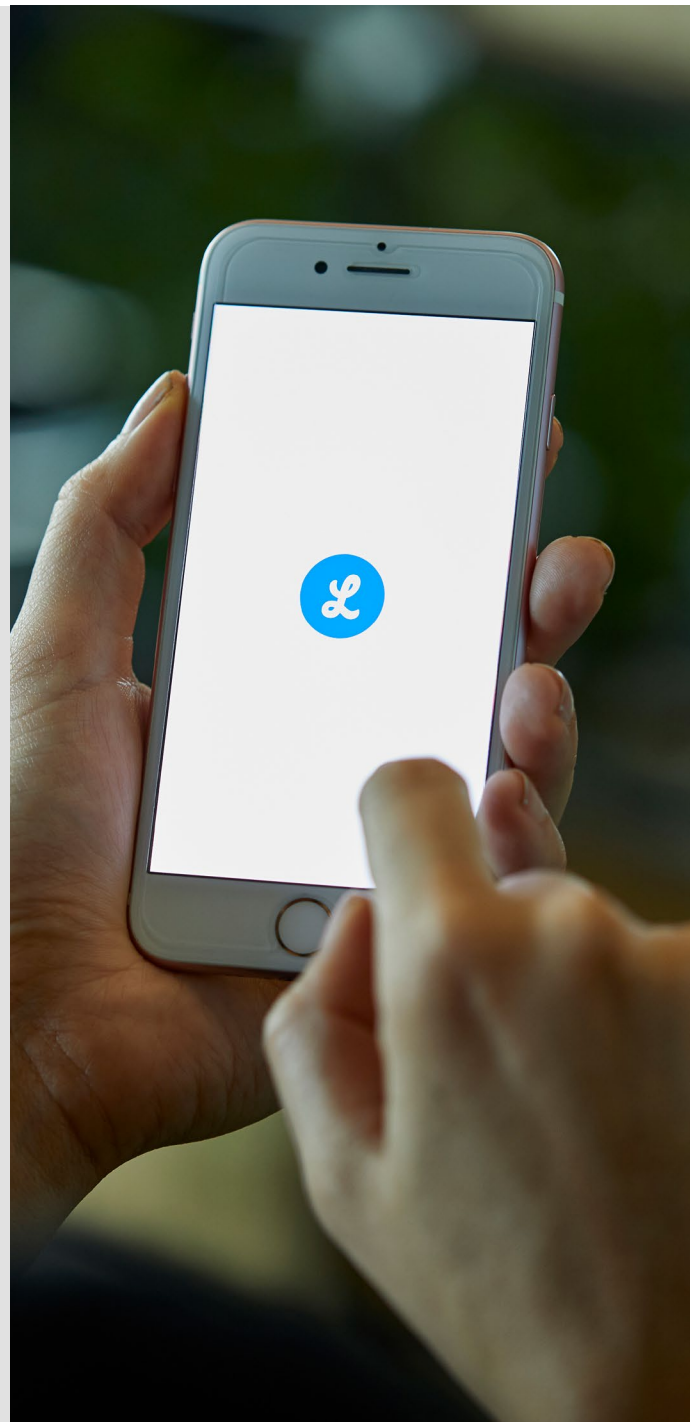
The key research findings show that Co-op has made social mobility a reality for many of its LSEB leaders and senior leaders. However, this does not mean that becoming a leader or a senior leader is the only route to social mobility at Co-op. Instead, Co-op can support social mobility across all work levels by providing financial security, job stability, and fair progression opportunities to all LSEB individuals.

The recommendations include targeted actions for LSEB individuals, and actions that will benefit employees from all socio-economic backgrounds. Taken together, the recommendations aim to ensure that no-one at Co-op is struggling in terms of financial security or job stability, all employees have fair opportunities for career progression, and that inclusion and belonging are realised across the business.

## 1. Continue and widen access to financial support for the lowest-paid colleagues.

LSEB colleagues and leaders are more likely to experience financial security when they access Co-op's wider benefits and support schemes on top of their pay. Continuing these schemes is therefore vital, and Co-op has already extended its cost-of-living support schemes (such as 30% off member discounts) to December 2023. Over the past two years, Co-op has targeted pay increases to lower-paid colleagues during Annual Salary Reviews, and continuing this will also improve financial security for LSEB colleagues.

Improving awareness and access to Co-op's benefits and support schemes is key to ensure as many colleagues as possible transition from 'struggling' to 'managing' financially, whether they are from LSEBs or more advantaged SEBs. Access could be widened by providing dedicated time during working hours for managers to explain available schemes, and for colleagues to register to and explore available support. This will overcome time, capacity, and technological barriers that currently prevent lower-paid colleagues from exploring support schemes outside work. Accessibility could also be increased by offering a single account through which all Co-op benefits and schemes can be accessed, rather than requiring multiple accounts.





## 2. Improve transparency and communication about working hours for colleagues on variable-hours contracts.

For Food Stores colleagues on variable hours contracts, working hours are allocated based on the takings of the store and covering absence. This means that matching colleagues' required hours may not always be feasible for Co-op. However, transparency and communication about the variability of available hours in each store can be improved, including by providing colleagues with sufficient notice about any changes to their working hours. Predictable and regular working hours reduce stress, improve job stability, and support financial security for Stores colleagues by allowing them to plan their time more effectively (including hours with other employers, where required). Job stability could also be improved for Stores colleagues by matching contracts to actual hours worked, rather than regularly requiring overtime.

Across business areas, job stability for colleagues and leaders can be further improved through transparency and communication about organisational restructures. LSEB colleagues and leaders are more likely to experience job stability if they feel they can trust Co-op to provide updates about the organisation's financial situation, future restructures, and any potential redundancies. Whether related to working hours or restructures, these improvements to job stability will benefit all colleagues and leaders. They will also provide important building blocks for social mobility to LSEB individuals, who are more likely to be negatively impacted by insecure employment conditions.





### 3. Facilitate more pathways for career progression, and ensure fair and transparent processes.

For all colleagues, lateral progression opportunities offer a range of benefits. Exposure to different teams and business areas can help colleagues to develop transferrable skills, support informed decisions about career progression, and increase a sense of belonging to the organisation. To realise these benefits, more secondment opportunities could be offered as part of colleagues' training and development. When vacancies are advertised across the business, relevant transferable skills could be highlighted, to encourage colleagues to consider a lateral move. During organisational restructures, lateral redeployment can also offer job stability as an alternative to redundancy.

Ensuring all line managers are facilitating newly introduced "career conversations" is an important way for all colleagues to have fair access to development opportunities. Additionally, targeted social mobility initiatives can address barriers faced by LSEB individuals and improve socio-economic diversity at management and leadership levels. A targeted mentoring and coaching scheme could help LSEB individuals to improve confidence and increase professional networks, while a targeted development programme could support high-potential LSEB colleagues to progress to WL5 and above.

Fair, transparent processes for internal recruitment and promotion will also help to overcome progression barriers faced by LSEB colleagues and leaders. Providing all unsuccessful candidates with clear, constructive feedback will support colleagues to understand how they can improve and progress in future. A combination of contextualised and anonymised approaches to internal recruitment could also support positive action for LSEB individuals and other minoritised groups currently under-represented at senior levels.



#### 4. Draw on Co-op's core values and engage social mobility role models to improve inclusion and belonging.

Co-op's organisational culture, values, and commitments to D&I are already a strong source of inclusion and belonging for LSEB individuals across the business. Demonstrating how these values are being put into practice by communicating concrete examples - including progress towards achieving D&I commitments - can further foster inclusion and belonging for colleagues across minoritised and more advantaged groups. Senior leaders' visible participation in D&I and community-based activities can also demonstrate that Co-op is putting its values into practice. When it comes to social mobility, LSEB senior leaders' career journeys can be shared to inspire LSEB colleagues' own progression at Co-op, and LSEB senior leaders can be engaged as advocates for social mobility across the business.

D&I training for managers can be used to put Co-op's intersectional approach to social mobility into practice. This can include helping managers to understand how to support LSEB colleagues to overcome the specific barriers they face - from career progression to bullying and harassment in the workplace - and how these barriers may be exacerbated for LSEB colleagues who identify as ethnic minority, disabled, female, and/or LGBTQ+.

To include those who feel they are 'left behind' by D&I efforts, Co-op can use its data-driven approach to explain the need for targeted schemes for minoritised groups. For example, the low representation of ethnic minority and/or LSEB colleagues in management and senior roles illustrates the need for targeted career progression initiatives. To strengthen support for these schemes, Co-op should develop a core offer that provides financial security, job stability, and career progression opportunities for all, to realise its aim to empower all colleagues to realise their own version of success.



# Full Report



# Introduction

## Social mobility in the UK

Over the past decade, there has been a growing focus on the role of employers in improving social mobility in the UK. Social mobility is typically defined as creating opportunities for individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds (LSEBs) to become more economically successful<sup>10</sup>. Challenges related to social mobility are reflected in limited socio-economic diversity, equity, and inclusion across UK employment sectors. For example, people from LSEBs are under-represented in industries including finance, media, medicine, and law,<sup>11</sup> and in senior positions across most industries.<sup>12</sup> There is a socio-economic pay gap in the UK; on average, LSEB professionals earn £6,718 less per year than their peers from more advantaged SEBs.<sup>13</sup> LSEB individuals are less likely to experience inclusion and belonging in the workplace. Recent evidence indicates that 29% of LSEB senior managers report experiences of accent bias in the workplace,<sup>14</sup> while 31% of LSEB young people are concerned that their backgrounds will negatively impact their career prospects.<sup>15</sup>

To date, social mobility efforts among UK employers have largely been seen in industries such as law, finance, and professional services, where people from LSEBs have been historically underrepresented. In recent years, there have been growing commitments to social mobility in the retail industry. While only 20% of UK retailers mentioned social mobility in their Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) strategies in 2021, this increased to 59% in 2022.<sup>16</sup> However, evidence of action on social mobility in the retail industry remains low, with retailers under-represented in nationwide initiatives such as the Social Mobility Employer Index and UK Social Mobility Awards.<sup>17, 18</sup>

The retail industry is a major employer of people from LSEBs, and socio-economic diversity is typically reflected among shop floor staff. However, this is not replicated at middle and senior management levels, which are dominated by those from more advantaged SEBs. There are therefore important opportunities to improve social mobility in the UK retail industry: by supporting a good standard of living for LSEB individuals in frontline roles; by providing fair opportunities for LSEB individuals to progress to middle and senior management; and by creating inclusive workplaces for people from LSEBs.

### What is social mobility?

Social mobility is typically defined as creating opportunities for individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds (LSEBs) to become more economically successful.<sup>10</sup>

Employers can support social mobility by ensuring LSEB individuals have financial security, job stability, and fair access to opportunities for career progression.<sup>17</sup> Co-op aims to advance social mobility by empowering colleagues to define and realise their own version of success, regardless of their starting point in life.

10 Social Mobility Commission (2021) Socio-economic diversity and inclusion. Employers' toolkit: Cross Industry Edition. London: Social Mobility Commission.

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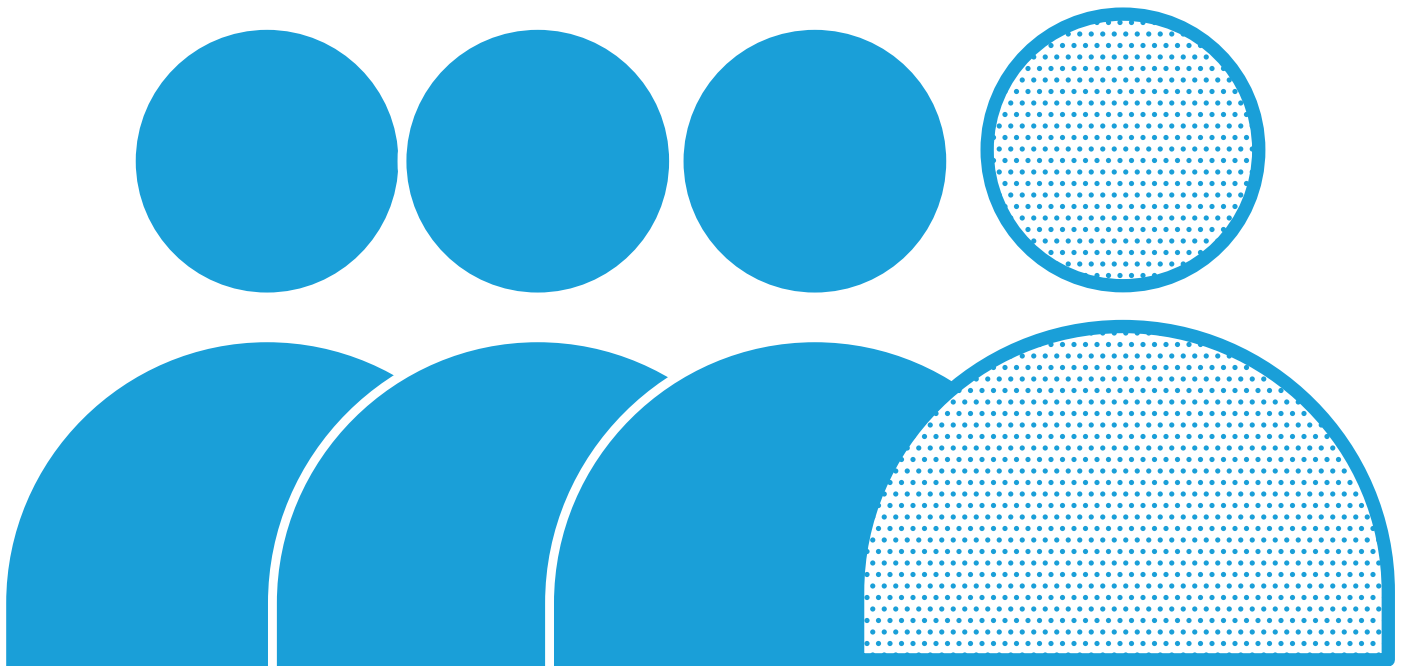
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## Social mobility at Co-op

At The Co-operative Group (Co-op), **over 13,000** members of staff identify as LSEB.<sup>19</sup>



Co-op aims to support social mobility by empowering its colleagues to define and realise their own version of success, regardless of their starting point in life. To do this, Co-op aims to ensure colleagues can build purposeful careers without having to leave their communities, and to provide the relevant tools, support, and processes individuals need to succeed. Co-op takes an intersectional approach to social mobility, recognising that some groups face compounding disadvantages due to historic oppression.

Co-op is adopting a data-driven approach to its social mobility work, and has collected workforce socio-economic background (SEB) data through annual D&I surveys since 2021. Consistent with trends from the wider retail industry, these data indicate that people from LSEBs are underrepresented in management and leadership positions at Co-op. While 49% of colleagues are from LSEBs, only 33% of leaders and senior leaders are from these backgrounds. On average, LSEB colleagues receive slightly lower performance ratings than their more advantaged colleagues. However, four in five LSEB colleagues at Co-op report a sense of inclusion across a range of measures, which is comparable to those from more advantaged SEBs across the business, and higher than the UK Retail Benchmark.<sup>20</sup>

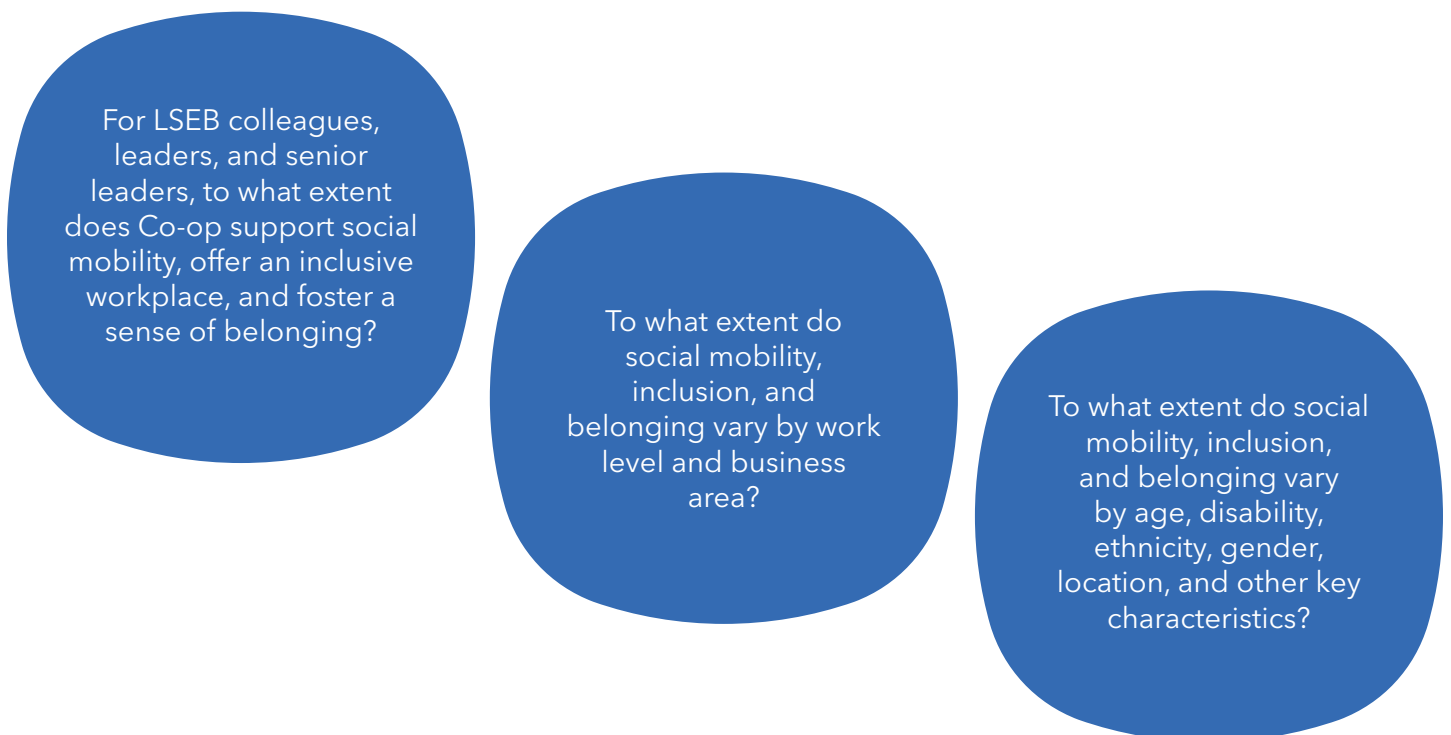
To support meaningful action to improve social mobility, more in-depth insights are required to understand the 'why' behind Co-op's LSEB trends. In September 2022, Co-op therefore commissioned grassroots charity Making The Leap to conduct qualitative research with LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders across the business.

## Research aims and scope

This study explores the extent to which Co-op supports social mobility, inclusion, and belonging. As social mobility aims to improve opportunities and outcomes for those LSEBs, the study focuses exclusively on the views and experiences of LSEB individuals. In the Conclusions chapter, we offer reflections on the relevance of the research findings to the LSEB and wider workforce at Co-op.

As a qualitative study, the research aims to reflect the diversity of views and experiences among LSEB individuals across work levels and business areas. Consistent with Co-op's intersectional approach to social mobility, the research also aims to capture a range of views and experiences among LSEB individuals who may face compounding disadvantages related to age, disability, ethnicity, gender, location, and other key characteristics.

The study is therefore guided by the following research questions:



Guided by wider literature on social mobility,<sup>21,22</sup> and key areas of interest to Co-op, we adopt the following definitions of social mobility, inclusion and belonging in the study:

### Social mobility

A better standard of living for LSEB individuals, which is made possible through financial security, job stability, and fair access to career progression.

### Inclusion

What an organisation does to ensure everyone feels valued, respected, and understood in the workplace. This includes targeted efforts to address the challenges faced by people from less advantaged groups.

### Belonging

How individuals feel, and are made to feel, when they are connected to their organisation and are able to be themselves at work.

19 This accounts for 33% of Co-op's total workforce. 30% of Co-op employees did not disclose their SEB in 2022, and so Co-op's actual LSEB population is likely to be higher. Ipsos (2022) Diversity and Inclusion report 2022. Manchester: The Co-operative Group. Internal publication.

20 Ipsos (2022) Diversity and Inclusion report 2022. Manchester: The Co-operative Group. Internal publication.

21 Social Mobility Commission (2021) Socio-economic diversity and inclusion. Employers' toolkit: Cross Industry Edition. London: Social Mobility Commission.

22 Iyer, P. (2022) Widening the gate? Advancing social mobility in 2021-22. London: Making The Leap.

## Research methods and sample

To explore the above research questions, Making The Leap conducted a three-stage qualitative study from November 2022 to March 2023, as summarised in Table 1.

	Research Methods	Participant group	Number of participants
Stage 1	Individual interviews	LSEB senior leaders	10
Stage 2	Focus group discussions	LSEB colleague and leaders	44
Stage 3	Follow-up Survey	LSEB colleagues and leaders	39
<b>Total</b>			<b>93</b>

Table 1: Research methods and sample

Across each research stage, we explored LSEB colleagues', leaders', and senior leaders' views and experiences of social mobility, inclusion, and belonging at Co-op. Where interviews and focus group discussions were over-subscribed, we used a purposive sampling approach to achieve a gender-inclusive sample with a range of job roles, business areas, and geographical locations. LSEB colleagues and leaders who were eligible but unavailable to participate in focus group discussions were invited to share their views and experiences via an online survey.

Just under half of all participants were in Food Stores / Operations (49%), with the remaining in Support Centre (31%), Life Services (10%), and Logistics (10%) (Figure 1). The majority of participants were colleagues (69%), with 16% leaders and 13% senior leaders (Figure 2). Consistent with the wider Co-op population, participants were typically aged 31 to 60, White, cisgender, female, and heterosexual. Among minoritised groups, LSEB individuals who identified as LGBTQ+, those who identified as disabled, and younger LSEB individuals were well-represented in the study sample. Full details of the research methods and sample are provided in the Technical Appendix.

Figure 1: Study sample by business area (n = 93)

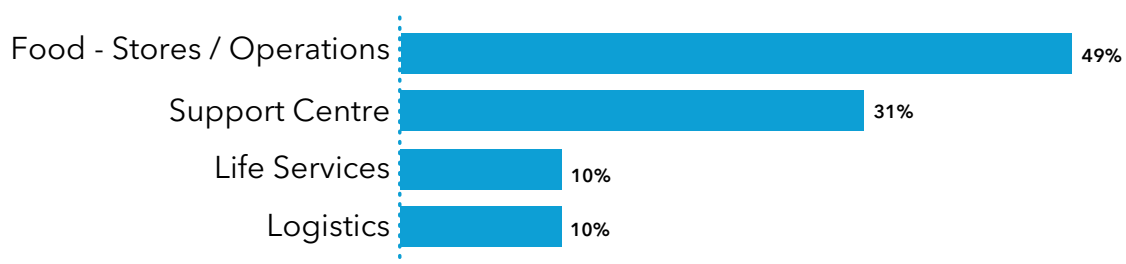
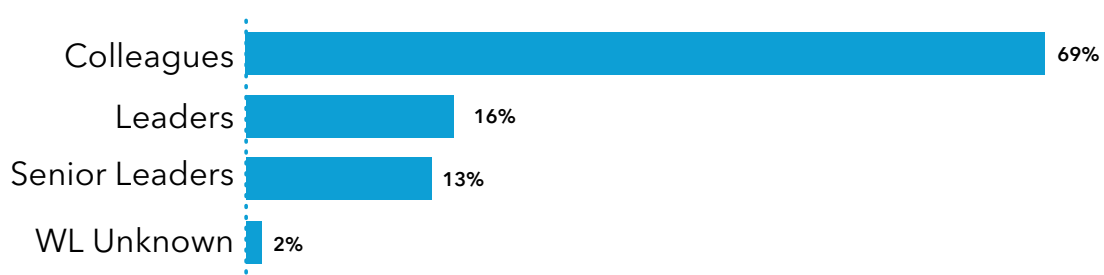


Figure 2: Study sample by work level (n = 93)



## Navigating the report

The following chapters present key findings across three key areas of interest related to social mobility – financial security, job stability, and career progression – as well as inclusion and belonging for LSEB colleagues, leaders and senior leaders at Co-op. Each chapter draws out similarities and differences based on work level, business area, and personal characteristics, and considers the organisational, interpersonal, and individual factors that contribute to participants' views and experiences.

### Financial security

What financial security means to LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders; experiences of security, 'getting by', and insecurity; enablers of financial security and drivers of financial insecurity; and views on how to improve financial security at Co-op.

### Job stability

What job stability means to LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders; experiences of stability, uncertainty, and instability; enablers of job stability and drivers of job instability; and views on how to improve job stability at Co-op.

### Career progression

LSEB senior leaders' career journeys; LSEB colleagues' and leaders' expectations of career progression; enablers and barriers to career progression; and views on improving career progression at Co-op.

### Inclusion

What inclusion means to LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders; experiences of inclusion and exclusion; enablers of inclusion and drivers of exclusion; and views on how to improve inclusion at Co-op.

### Belonging

What belonging means to LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders; experiences of belonging and not belonging; enablers and barriers to belonging; and views on how to improve belonging at Co-op.

In the **Conclusions** chapter, we summarise key findings and offer recommendations based on the research. In the **Technical Appendix**, we present full details of the research methods, including recruitment, sampling, data collection, and data analysis, and present an overview of the final study sample by business area, work levels, location, and personal characteristics.





# Research Findings

## Financial security



## What does financial security mean to LSEB colleagues & leaders?

For LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders, financial security was strongly linked to being able to afford a decent standard of living. This meant:

- Covering basic needs for themselves and their families, such as food, heating, and housing.
- Meeting financial responsibilities by paying bills on time every month.
- Having some disposable income for leisure activities and holidays.
- Being able to plan for the future through savings and/or pension contributions

Across business areas, LSEB colleagues were most likely to refer to covering basic needs and meeting financial responsibilities when defining financial security. Having disposable income and being able to plan for the future were mentioned across business areas and work levels.

### LSEB colleagues' & leaders' experiences of financial security

#### Secure



LSEB leaders and senior leaders across the business were most likely to describe themselves as financially secure when they were paid regular salaries, felt their pay was fair based on their responsibilities, and had access to wider Co-op benefits and support schemes. In contrast to their experiences of growing up in low-income households where their families struggled to afford the essentials, these LSEB leaders and senior leaders could now afford comfortable lifestyles for themselves and their families. As such, they felt they had experienced social mobility, and often attributed this to their careers at Co-op.

“When I think about my life growing up [...] it was just my dad working and [my parents] really struggled. There was literally five kids in a three bedroom council house. My life is not like that at all [now]. Me and my partner, we're in a three-bed semi and we live comfortably [...] Financial security [means] not ever having to live like I used to in the past.”

- Male leader, WL5, Support Centre

## Getting by



LSEB colleagues in Food Stores, Logistics, and Support Centre on low pay were less likely to describe themselves as financially secure. However, those with regular working hours and with access to Co-op benefits and support schemes were just about able to afford basic needs and meet financial responsibilities. In the context of the cost-of-living crisis in 2022-23, there were also LSEB leaders in better-paid roles who considered themselves "one pay cheque away from disaster". For these leaders, accessing financial support from Co-op similarly provided a lifeline and a degree of security.

"[The colleague discount] supports financial stability [...] Just taking the mind off a bill might appear small, but is actually integral to keeping the heating on, keeping food in the cupboard, lights on in the house [...] I think those things are ultimately very, very vital for financial stability."

- Male colleague, Store Manager, Food Stores

LSEB leaders in this situation had experienced a degree of social mobility, but this was tempered by precarious financial situations.

with chronic health conditions were also more likely to be struggling financially. Given their ongoing financial challenges, LSEB colleagues in these situations had not yet experienced social mobility.

## Enablers of financial security for LSEB colleagues & leaders

### Organisational factors

For LSEB leaders and senior leaders across the business, a key enabler of financial security was receiving **regular, fair, and sufficient pay**. This typically meant being paid a salary which they perceived as sufficient compensation for their role, and which they were reliably paid every month. In addition to their base pay, LSEB leaders typically described their salary increases and bonuses as fair and sufficient to provide them with ongoing financial security. There were also LSEB leaders who appreciated the Co-op's pension scheme for providing future financial security. Among LSEB colleagues who felt financially secure, being paid regularly and transparency about the amount paid were key enablers. In the context of the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, this group also welcomed a planned 10% pay increase for Food Store colleagues (CTMs and Team Leaders, due to be implemented in April 2023) as a measure to improve financial security.

"I just think everything that comes with it, so the doctor, eye tests, all that stuff, it all comes together and helps. You get discounts on insurance, legal services, it helps. I mean, it's not 100% great, it's not perfect. It doesn't make things really good, but it helps save a little bit of money. And if you save in all these areas, it does add up."

- Male colleague, WL6A, Funeralcare

## Insecure



There were LSEB colleagues across Food Stores, Funeralcare Homes, Logistics, and Support Centre who described struggling to afford food, heat their homes, meet housing costs, and pay their bills. In addition to low pay, these colleagues were more likely to have fewer or irregular working hours, and were not accessing Co-op benefits or support schemes. Disabled LSEB colleagues and those

"Me and my husband both work [...] We can't even afford to put our gas on in the house, so we don't have any heating because it's too expensive. The electricity bills, they're only going to go up again and again."

- Female colleague, Funeral Arranger, Funeralcare

Across all work levels and business areas, LSEB colleagues, leaders and senior leaders highlighted the importance of **Co-op benefits and support schemes** as enablers of financial security. LSEB colleagues noted that specific cost-of-living support schemes introduced by Co-op in 2022 had been vital to cover food costs and other household expenses. These schemes included monthly cost-of-living payments on colleague membership cards for the lowest-paid colleagues, and 30% member discounts on own-

brand products in Co-op stores. There were also LSEB leaders who appreciated the boost to their family income provided by a one-off cost-of-living payment (provided via membership cards) in December 2022.

LSEB colleagues and leaders valued being able to manage their salary through Wagestream, which allowed flexible access to wages and included an option to direct a proportion of income directly into a 'rainy day' pot. LSEB leaders particularly appreciated the financial security offered by Wagestream in December 2022, as the automatic saving-up feature provided reassurance that they would be able to afford a good family Christmas. Research also suggests that a flexible pay cycle benefits employees who may be financially excluded and otherwise struggle to access mainstream financial products to manage their money. This is more likely to impact individuals with the following characteristics: women-led, single parent households, households where one or more individuals have a disability, and individuals from an ethnic minority background .

Beyond direct financial support, LSEB colleagues and leaders noted that wider benefits provided by Co-op supported an improved standard of living. These included access to GP appointments, eye tests, discounts on insurance and legal services, and free counselling through the LifeWorks scheme. LSEB senior leaders valued the package and benefits around their salary as enablers of wider financial security, and particularly appreciated their access to life insurance, health insurance, work cars, and contractual provisions such as maternity leave and paid holidays.

Co-op's support for financial awareness and wellbeing was also highlighted as an enabler of financial security for LSEB colleagues and leaders. Access to advice via a helpline and Co-op's Money Matters campaign were appreciated for acknowledging and seeking to address the psychological impact of financial insecurity.

## Individual factors

While earning a good salary and being paid regularly were key enablers to their sense of financial security, there were LSEB senior leaders who emphasised that their **personal money management** was also an important factor. For example, LSEB senior leaders noted that their current financial security was attributable to

choices and decisions around saving, financial planning, and being financially cautious throughout their working lives. There were LSEB senior leaders who directly linked this to their working-class backgrounds. As a result of their parents' financial struggles, insecure housing, and being unable to afford essentials when growing up, some LSEB leaders described developing a 'scarcity mindset' early on in their lives. In turn, this mindset acted as an ongoing motivator to maintain financial security through their jobs, career decisions, and personal money management.

## Drivers of financial insecurity for LSEB colleagues & leaders

### Organisational drivers

For LSEB colleagues who were struggling financially, the most common driver of financial insecurity was **insufficient pay**. LSEB colleagues in Food Stores, Funeralcare, and Support Centre who were struggling noted that their base pay was not sufficient to cover their basic needs, including due to wider contextual factors such as the cost-of-living crisis, increased energy bills, and high rental costs in their local areas. Particularly in Food Stores, LSEB colleagues highlighted insufficient or irregular working hours as a driver of both financial insecurity and job instability - this is discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

Within Food Stores, one view was that the removal of Customer Team Managers and a single pay band for Team Leaders meant that those with management responsibilities in stores were **insufficiently remunerated for their responsibilities** and experience. Concerns about insufficient pay based on professional responsibilities were also

"Growing up, we would lurch from one financial crisis to another [...] We were always on a financial knife edge during my childhood. Now, I'm very financially prudent, we save like crazy, we try not to borrow. That's definitely a learned behaviour from when I was younger."

- Female senior leader, WL1-2, Support

raised among LSEB colleagues in Funeralcare. Based on the level of skill required and stress involved in their roles, there were LSEB colleagues in Funeralcare Homes who felt their pay was insufficient, and their work was undervalued.

**Limits to sick pay** were highlighted as a driver of financial insecurity among LSEB colleagues with chronic health conditions and those experiencing ongoing illness. In Food Stores, Customer Team Members mentioned a lack of sick pay for missing shifts due to illness, while a colleague in Logistics noted limited access to sick pay while signed off due to a chronic health condition.

As mentioned above, benefits and support schemes offered by Co-op provided a lifeline to LSEB colleagues and leaders during the cost-of-living crisis. However, there were LSEB colleagues who highlighted the **shortcomings of Co-op benefits and support schemes** as drivers of financial insecurity. A common concern was that LSEB colleagues in lower-paid, high-stress roles were less likely to be aware of, and therefore less likely to benefit from, the various support schemes on offer. LSEB colleagues in Food Stores and Logistics noted that using financial voucher schemes via an app could be challenging for those less comfortable using technology. Meanwhile, LSEB colleagues who had joined Co-op recently felt that the amount of information provided to new starters - via email, booklets and leaflets in the staff room - could be overwhelming and difficult to navigate, which meant they had not yet accessed any support schemes.

"I've got no free-flowing cash to go buy that coffee sometimes or to do that little thing. I have to think, right, that will have to come out of the food budget or that will have to come out of the saving pot with the cost of living."

- Non-binary colleague,  
WL6C, Support Centre

"I know the Co-op are doing the best they can to inform you that these tools are there for you. But [...] trying to get my head around a new job and then coming home and reading, I felt like I was at school reading all these emails and reading up all this information just to try and work out what these benefits were."

## LSEB colleagues' & leaders' views on improving financial

### Increase pay for colleagues

LSEB colleagues in lower-paid roles across Food Stores, Logistics, and Support Centre felt that their **base pay should be increased**, and that **pay rises should consistently be in line with inflation**. This was seen as a priority during the cost-of-living crisis and in areas with higher housing costs. In Food Stores, Team Leaders and Store Managers felt that **bonus payments should be increased**. There were also LSEB leaders who felt **Annual Salary Reviews (ASRs) should be more equitably distributed** in favour of those in lower-paid roles across the business. Beyond base pay, LSEB colleagues felt that **sick pay and provisions should be improved** for those experiencing illness and chronic health conditions.

### Improve benefits & support schemes

Across work levels and business areas, Co-op's benefits and support schemes were seen as a key enabler of financial security. A common recommendation from LSEB leaders and senior leaders in Support Centre was to **increase awareness and accessibility** of schemes such as Wagestream, as there were concerns that those most in need - for example on shop floors, in depots and in funeral homes - might not be aware

of available support. This view was shared by younger LSEB colleagues in Food Stores, who felt that awareness and engagement with support schemes were highly dependent on the level of information shared by managers. Younger LSEB colleagues also felt the accessibility of various Co-op benefits could be improved by offering a single account through which all schemes could be accessed – the current requirement to sign up for multiple, separate accounts and services was seen as a potential barrier to access.

LSEB leaders in Support Centre noted that colleagues working in Food Stores and Logistics were less likely to have time and capacity to engage with the various schemes on offer. LSEB leaders therefore recommended that managers should not only inform colleagues about benefits and support schemes, but also **facilitate dedicated time** for colleagues to explore and sign up for schemes while at work. Another recommendation was to **continue cost-of-living support schemes** such as the 30% member discounts. This was raised by LSEB colleagues in Food Stores and Logistics, who were concerned about additional financial support being withdrawn while food costs and energy prices continued to rise.<sup>23</sup>

There were LSEB colleagues and leaders in Food Stores, Logistics, and Support Centre who felt benefits and support schemes could be **better tailored to colleagues' needs**. For example, one view was that the additional Employee Assistance Programme and discounts in other businesses (such as restaurants and cinemas) were less useful than cost-of-living support schemes, since colleagues were struggling to meet food and energy costs. Based on an understanding that Co-op would need to prioritise which benefits and schemes to continue, LSEB colleagues and leaders felt these decisions should be based on consultations with colleagues to understand what they really need.

Finally, there were LSEB senior leaders who felt that Co-op should **provide financial education** to colleagues and leaders. This was based on senior leaders' views that their own ability to manage and save money had been central to their experiences of financial security, and that colleagues and leaders across the business would similarly benefit by developing their financial management skills and knowledge.

<sup>23</sup> 30% member discounts were originally due to end in April 2023. However, in April 2023 (after data collection for the study had ended), Co-op announced that the discount would be continued until the end of December 2023.



# Research Findings

## Job stability



# What does job stability mean to LSEB colleagues & leaders?

LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders across business areas linked job stability to:

- Being part of an essential sector, such as the food industry.
- Working for an organisation that is financially viable, competitive in its sector, and has longevity.
- Working in a business area and in a job role that is integral to the organisation.
- Having a reliable contract, whether in terms of guaranteed working hours or a permanent contract.

Additionally, LSEB colleagues in Funeralcare, Logistics, and younger LSEB colleagues highlighted the importance of fair and supportive employment conditions to provide reassurance that they had secure employment regardless of ill health, disability, or caring responsibilities.

## LSEB colleagues' & leaders' experiences of job stability

### Stable



Those experiencing job stability were typically LSEB leaders and senior leaders across the business who were on permanent contracts and had safety nets in the context of redundancy (such as notice periods and remuneration payments). These LSEB leaders and senior leaders felt that their hard work and skillsets were valued by Co-op, which was reflected in their long service and the organisation's support for their career progression. Among LSEB colleagues in Support Centre, permanent contracts and notice periods were also a source of job stability.

"If we're talking about social mobility, if you get a job that is a permanent job and has benefits attached to it, that is an important anchor for people. Those aspects of working at the Co-op are important to me."

- Female senior leader, WL1-2, Support Centre



## Uncertain



There were LSEB senior leaders who felt less certain of their job stability. In spite of the benefits mentioned above, those who had recently progressed to senior roles could feel more "exposed" to job instability due to their seniority, compared to relative "safety in numbers" at lower work levels.

"One of my main reasons for making that leap to head office was a full-time contract, full-time employment. It was an advancement in the career and better job stability [...] But [with the risk of restructures], my job is not actually always secure here."

- Non-binary colleague, WL6C, Support Centre

Among LSEB colleagues, those who had moved from Food Store roles to Support Centre roles described a relative increase in job stability due to full-time contracts and better pay. However, these colleagues also experienced a degree of uncertainty, as Support Centre roles were seen as more vulnerable to redundancy during organisational restructures.

LSEB colleagues with fewer educational qualifications experienced some job instability. In Funeralcare, there were LSEB colleagues concerned that their lack of further and higher education qualifications meant they were less valued than their peers, and therefore more likely to be seen as expendable during funeral home closures.

## Unstable



LSEB colleagues in Food Stores experienced job instability when their working hours were unpredictable, irregular, or insufficient to meet their financial needs. Experiences among these colleagues included not being offered enough hours each week, regularly working more than their contracted hours, and inconsistency in the number of hours offered per week. These experiences also caused financial insecurity, stress due to overwork, and an inability to plan hours

for other employers where needed.

### Enablers of job stability for LSEB colleagues & leaders

#### Organisational factors

Being on a **permanent contract** was the most commonly cited enabler of job stability among LSEB leaders and senior leaders across the business. Additionally, their contractual arrangements provided a sense of stability through **safety nets in the context of potential redundancy**. Through notice periods and remuneration payments, LSEB leaders and senior leaders were reassured that they would have time and money to find alternative employment should their roles become redundant in future organisational restructures. LSEB senior leaders with a significant **length of service** at the Co-op noted that they had more generous notice periods based on their time spent at the organisation.

**Full-time contracts** were a source of job stability for LSEB colleagues in Support Centre, who noted the relative increase in stability in contrast to variable-hours contracts in previous Food Store roles, and in comparison to their parents' job instability when growing up. In Food Stores, LSEB colleagues who had **regular and sufficient hours** felt that this offered a source of job stability, and

"I've taken [...] a second job because last March I realised that things were getting tougher and it was something I had to do. I personally wouldn't be able to live on just a 16-hour contract from the Co-op. There would be no way."

- Female colleague, CTM, Food Stores

"When my dad was alive and he used to work like cash in hand, and you'd never know, like one week to the next whether he'd be working or not. [...] Just the fact that I've got a contract of employment and [a] permanent job means I've got job stability. "

- Female colleague, WL6, Support Centre

those contracted to work between 30 and 40 hours per week were most likely to describe this. However, LSEB colleagues contracted to work fewer hours also experienced stability when their hours were guaranteed, regular, and matched the actual time they worked.

As discussed in more detail below, Co-op's organisational restructure in 2022 was a significant driver for job instability across business areas and work levels.

However, LSEB leaders and senior leaders noted that

**transparency about planned restructures**

helped them to maintain a sense of job stability during the 2022 restructure.

When they felt Co-op had been open and honest about the organisation's financial situation and performance, LSEB leaders' job stability was increased by a sense of trust in the organisation. Although less commonly mentioned, there were LSEB colleagues in Food Stores and Logistics who

described clear communication and transparency about the restructure as a source of reassurance and job stability.

"[My] current role as a Team Leader is very stable [...] I know without Team Leaders the stores cannot function. So you are valued a bit more [...] I'm given the hours I would like to work and my manager is happy to arrange alternatives if I speak to him in plenty of time."

- Male colleague, Team Leader, Food Stores

## Interpersonal factors

LSEB leaders and senior leaders highlighted the role of **stable teams** to their own job stability. In Funeralcare and Support Centre, LSEB leaders felt able to build a sense of stability for themselves and their team members when there was less frequent staff turnover. LSEB colleagues and leaders in Food Stores and Support Centre felt that **supportive line managers** provided job stability by being approachable and facilitating honest conversations about their performance and development.

## Individual factors

LSEB leaders and senior leaders across the business referred to their own **hard work** as an enabler of job stability. These leaders felt they had developed positive reputations and added value during their time at Co-op, which in turn meant they were rewarded with stable employment. There were also LSEB colleagues in Food Stores who felt their jobs were secure due to their hard work - however, in contrast to LSEB leaders, these colleagues' sense of job stability could be more directly undermined by the interpersonal and organisational factors described below.

## Drivers of job instability for LSEB colleagues & leaders

### Organisational drivers

An **organisational restructure** in summer 2022 - in which 400 out of 2,000 roles at Co-op's Support Centre were made redundant - was a key driver of job instability for LSEB leaders and senior leaders across the business, and LSEB colleagues based in Support Centre. LSEB senior leaders described themselves as "the lucky ones" who had survived the restructure, but also noted a wider sense of anxiety and loss of psychological safety in their teams. LSEB colleagues and leaders referenced Co-op's **recent financial difficulties** as the primary reason for the 2022 restructure, and these difficulties were another source of concern regarding the organisation's stability and implications for their ongoing employment.

"There's a lot of change, there's a lot of reorganisation. Financially our numbers have not been that sound these last couple of years [...] That probably makes me feel less secure about the Co-op than other places."

- Female senior leader, WL3, Support Centre

While Co-op's recent financial situation and the 2022 restructure were commonly referenced, there were LSEB leaders and senior leaders across the business and LSEB colleagues in Support Centre who described a sense of instability **due to multiple, frequent restructures** during their time at Co-op. There were LSEB senior leaders who reflected that working in the private sector - and in the retail industry specifically - meant that rapid change, restructures, and redundancies were to be expected. Nevertheless, across work levels, frequent restructures caused ongoing anxieties about job stability, which in turn made LSEB colleagues and leaders feel less confident about pursuing career progression opportunities (discussed in more detail in the following chapter).

LSEB colleagues and leaders across the business noted that **certain business areas were more vulnerable** to change and redundancies. LSEB colleagues and leaders felt that Field-based operational roles and those in Support Centre were typically less secure than those in Food Stores - a common view was that

"food stores will always be needed". However, LSEB colleagues in Food Stores also shared concerns about instability due to potential store closures, particularly where stores were rented.

As discussed above, when they felt well-informed about organisational change, LSEB colleagues and leaders could retain a sense of job stability during restructures. Conversely, **limited**

**information and a perceived**

**lack of transparency** contributed to job instability. This was highlighted by LSEB colleagues in Food Stores, who did not have a clear sense of how their stores' performance was assessed and therefore did not know what profit level might lead to stores being considered for closure. Similarly, after

unexpected branch closures during the Covid-19 pandemic, colleagues in Funeralcare Homes described an ongoing sense of instability in their new branches, as they feared these could close at any time without any prior warning.



Beyond organisational change, **unpredictable and/or insufficient working hours** were a common driver of job instability for LSEB colleagues in Food Stores. In some cases, this was related to geographical location - for example, those working in coastal towns experienced instability due to reduced hours over the winter months. More commonly, LSEB colleagues in Food Stores described being offered insufficient shifts compared to the number of hours they needed for financial security, or regularly working significantly more hours than they were contracted for each week. Those with unpredictable working hours experienced job instability on a weekly basis, as they struggled to plan their time for other responsibilities, including childcare and commitments to second jobs.

**Bias and harassment** were further drivers of job instability for LSEB colleagues from marginalised groups. In one example, a transgender LSEB colleague described stress and instability following their transition. After requesting time off for medical reasons, this colleague reported being told by their manager that their job was at risk if they did not find someone to take over their in-store responsibilities. In another example, an older LSEB colleague described instability in her role as she felt her team was "waiting for [her] to leave" due to her age.

## Contextual drivers

LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders across the business reflected on the role of wider contextual factors - such as **ongoing economic uncertainty** in the UK - which contributed to job

"You hear it said everyone will always need to eat, so you're quite safe, but I think it depends which element of the business you work within because obviously, [if] you work in a food store then, yes [...] However, the bits around that food store that help [it] function, that's very different and they do change [...] the priorities change."

- Male senior leader,  
WL3, Food - Operations

instability across companies and employment sectors. **Changes to the labour market** were also described as a driver of job instability. One view was that stable employment with a single company for an entire career was now a “myth”; instead, it was asserted that people expected a degree of instability and change in their careers. Lastly, **technological change** was cited as a wider driver of instability in the retail sector and beyond. LSEB leaders in Support Centre were among those who questioned whether their jobs might become redundant in future due to new technology.

## LSEB colleagues' & leaders' views on improving job stability

### Improve processes around restructures

Across business areas, LSEB colleagues and leaders felt that **transparency around restructures** should be improved. In particular, LSEB colleagues and leaders emphasised that the reasons for any restructures should be clearly explained, with plenty of notice and clarity about the implications for different business areas and job roles.

While LSEB colleagues and leaders understood that Co-op needed to adapt to remain relevant and competitive, another recommendation was to **reduce the frequency of organisational change**. This was seen as a way to reduce the level of uncertainty caused by regular restructures and redundancies. LSEB colleagues and leaders felt that improved lateral progression opportunities, and in particular, **support for redeployment across the business** when a business area faced redundancies, could also offer significant improvements to job stability. Lateral progression opportunities are discussed in more detail in the

following chapter.

### Offer greater stability through contracts and contracted hours

LSEB colleagues and leaders in Food Stores and Logistics emphasised that **permanent contracts** were a key component of job stability, and that these should be offered for more job roles. In Food Stores, LSEB colleagues felt that the **allocation of hours should be improved significantly** to offer job stability to those in the lowest-paid roles. Recommendations included increasing contracted hours rather than regularly relying on overtime; improving transparency around the allocation of hours, including

explaining why hours cannot be increased when requested; and offering more regular work shifts to reduce instability from unpredictable hours each week.

“I used to work anywhere between 22.5 & 32 hours most weeks whilst on a 12-hour contract [...] All I ever asked was for consistent hours to know what to budget each month, and not to then expect me to work 30 hours a week without a discussion about it [...] It was very frustrating and I felt like I was not respected as a result [...] Because of this uncertainty in hours, I had to have another job [...] There were many, many periods where I was working 13 days a fortnight, sometimes 19 days in a row without a break [...] I had no financial stability and I had no way of knowing what hours I was working.”

- Female colleague, Team Leader, Food Stores



# Research Findings

## Career progression

## LSEB senior leaders' career journeys

LSEB senior leaders described a range of career journeys: from shop floors to senior management (at Co-op and through other retailers), and across different sectors before joining Co-op in senior roles.

Among LSEB senior leaders who had spent their careers in the retail industry, there were individuals who had started on checkouts at the age of 16 (including in Somerfield stores, which were bought by Co-op in 2009), and reported continuous service of 20-30 years at Co-op. Experiences included working part-time while at school, or starting work after completing GCSEs, and then working up through store, area, and regional management roles in Operations and support functions. Within this group, there were senior leaders who had received direct support from Co-op to gain graduate, post-graduate, and professional qualifications over the course of their career. Among those who had started their careers elsewhere in the retail sector, LSEB

senior leaders described going to university (often the first in their families to do so) before entering work through graduate training schemes.

There were LSEB senior leaders who had spent most of their careers elsewhere in the private sector - including accountancy, the energy industry, and professional services - and the public sector. There was a mix of school leavers and university graduates in this group, and their early and ongoing career progression

had been facilitated by graduate programmes, talent programmes, and employer support for professional qualifications.

Across these different career journeys, LSEB senior leaders described formal training and development schemes provided by their employers as crucial to their career progression. These schemes - whether graduate training programmes or support for further and higher education later on in their careers - helped LSEB senior leaders to gain experience and

qualifications which were typically less accessible to their LSEB peers. Being supported to have a "squiggly career" at Co-op was another important factor in LSEB senior leaders' career journeys.

By working across multiple business areas and teams, LSEB senior leaders had developed a wide range of transferable skills and knowledge, which in turn meant they were well-placed to progress through management and senior management positions.

LSEB senior leaders highlighted formal and informal mentoring, support, and senior sponsorship as key to their personal and professional development. Supportive managers and mentors provided information and encouragement to pursue progression opportunities, and helped to improve confidence for those who experienced imposter syndrome as LSEB individuals progressing into largely middle-class spaces (whether in retail management roles or in other sectors).

In combination with these organisational and interpersonal factors, LSEB senior leaders described the importance of their personal drive and work ethic, which they linked to their working-class backgrounds and a desire to achieve a better standard of living for themselves and their families.

"Everything I've done has been driven by myself, but I've always had somebody there supporting me, somebody took an interest in me or could see a bit of potential and they helped me."

- Female senior leader, WL3, Support Centre

"I think without my graduate placement, I think it would have been really difficult for me to be where I am now. I do sometimes worry that we don't run those graduate training programmes anymore [at Co-op] and the opportunities are much harder, I think, for people."

- Female senior leader, WL1-2, Support Centre

"I think [Co-op's] a wonderful learning ground just because it's so diverse. It's just there's so much going on in different industries that have their own individual cultures and their own individual nuances going on."

- Male senior leader, WL1-2, Life Services

## LSEB colleagues' & leaders' expectations of career progression

Among LSEB colleagues who had experienced no or limited career progression so far, and LSEB leaders who were mid-career, expectations of career prospects at Co-op ranged from optimism to pessimism. There were also individuals for whom career progression was not an immediate priority.

### Optimistic



Among LSEB colleagues in Food Stores and Funeralcare Homes who had not yet experienced career progression and/or were in early management roles, there were those who felt positive about their future prospects at Co-op.

These colleagues were more likely to have supportive line managers who facilitated ongoing conversations about professional development and access to training opportunities. These conversations helped colleagues to feel well-informed about available career opportunities within and across different business areas.

LSEB leaders across the business with positive expectations for their career progression similarly had supportive line managers, access to training and development, and felt they could take advantage of the "squiggly career paths" available to them at Co-op.

"I feel quite positive about the progression at Co-op. [...] Because I'm team leader at the moment, I'm going to temporary cover as store manager for a month. [...] I feel that there [is] stuff there. If you've got the right team to help you and look at your positive attributes and see where you can go."

- Female colleague, Team Leader, Food Stores

### Pessimistic



There were LSEB colleagues in Food Stores, Logistics, and younger LSEB colleagues who felt pessimistic about their career prospects at Co-op.

These colleagues were more likely to have unsupportive managers, felt there were few vertical or lateral progression opportunities available to them, lacked information about career pathways, and did not have access to training and development opportunities.

Additionally, there were LSEB colleagues in Support Centre who were unwilling to pursue progression opportunities when they felt roles at WL5 and above were more at risk of redundancy during future restructures.

Disabled LSEB colleagues and those experiencing chronic health conditions were doubtful about their career prospects when they were unsupported in their current roles, and did not expect to be supported in more senior roles.

LSEB colleagues who unsuccessfully applied for promotions, and who had received limited feedback on their performance, also felt frustrated and unsure about the likelihood of future progression. This included ethnic minority LSEB colleagues who had seen White colleagues regularly promoted while their own promotion attempts had been unsuccessful.

"I don't really know how to progress because I do want to progress on. Because I love the business and I love my job, but I've got no idea where to even progress from because all I can do is keep checking the Boost, and with nothing coming on, I can't exactly do anything else."

- Female colleague, CTM, Food Stores

### Not focused on progression

Career progression was not a priority for all LSEB colleagues and leaders. In Food Stores, Logistics,

and Support Centre, there were LSEB colleagues and leaders who described feeling comfortable at their current work levels.

This was particularly true when LSEB colleagues and leaders felt they had opportunities for professional fulfilment and growth in their current roles. There were also LSEB colleagues and leaders who were less focused on career progression as they approached retirement age.

However, older LSEB colleagues cautioned against assuming that everyone in their position felt the same way - as discussed in more detail below, there were older LSEB colleagues who felt frustrated when managers did not acknowledge or support their career aspirations.





## Enablers for LSEB colleagues' & leaders' career progression

### Organisational factors

Among LSEB senior leaders, **targeted training and development programmes** were cited as key enablers for their career progression to date. Both at previous employers and while at Co-op, there were female senior leaders who cited targeted development programmes for women as key factors in their professional development. While at Co-op, one LSEB senior leader credited a targeted leadership development programme for those in Food - Shining Stars - as "transformational" for her personal and professional growth. Another LSEB senior leader who began his career in Food accessed a six-month training programme supporting store managers with the transition to regional management. This senior leader described the combination of behavioural, technical and operational training as essential to develop his confidence and for his ability to progress in his career.

LSEB colleagues and leaders who had accessed **apprenticeships** at Co-op described these as beneficial for their career progression.

Younger LSEB colleagues in Food Stores and Support Centre referred to team manager apprenticeships and upcoming coaching apprenticeships as important for their professional development, while LSEB colleagues in Funeralcare also referred to Level 2 and Level 3 apprenticeships which had supported their

progression to management roles. Younger LSEB colleagues in Support Centre and LSEB colleagues in Food Stores also appreciated **on-the-job training and**

**development.** For example, one LSEB colleague described starting at Co-op in a warehouse role as a school leaver, and receiving support with career development to progress to an HR role in Support Centre.

Support with **further education and qualifications** was another enabler for career development. There were LSEB leaders in Logistics and Support Centre who had received support from Co-op with their professional exams early on in their careers, which they credited as a key enabler for increasing their career options later on. Career progression was also facilitated through opportunities for **cross-organisational learning.** LSEB leaders and senior leaders described seeking out informal opportunities to spend time with other teams to understand what they do, and formal initiatives such as Lend a Hand, through which Support Centre colleagues and leaders gained experience in Food Stores. LSEB leaders and senior leaders described these opportunities as important enablers for understanding and pursuing a "squiggly career path" at Co-op.

### Geographical factors

LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders in Support Centre noted that **living in and around Manchester** was an important enabler to their career progression at Co-op, given the number of job opportunities available in head office. There were LSEB senior leaders from Manchester who described Co-op's location as a key factor in their decision to work for the business, both when starting their career, and when making the transition from other companies.

For LSEB colleagues in Support Centre who did not live near Manchester, **increased flexibility to work from home** during and after the Covid-19 pandemic meant they were able to largely work remotely, and therefore continue working for Co-op while living in their local communities. These colleagues did not view geography as an important factor in their ability to progress at Co-op.

"[On Co-op's Shining Stars programme] they unhooked you, basically, really unwired you all. It was all about really looking within yourself and understanding yourself. I always say now, until that point, I don't think I really knew me, and maybe had to realise that I was enough and I don't need to be someone else... Just to be yourself."

- Female senior leader, WL1-2, Food Operations

## Interpersonal factors

"I think working from home and the digital infrastructure has fundamentally changed the ability of people to work in the community that they grew up in and still have a career that isn't just tied physically to a location."

- Male senior leader, WL1-2, Support Centre

Across work levels and business areas, **senior sponsorship and mentoring** was the most commonly cited enabler for career progression.

Whether from line managers or senior colleagues, this interpersonal support was described as key to LSEB colleagues' and leaders' career progression.

Supportive managers, mentors, and senior sponsors encouraged personal growth by helping LSEB colleagues and leaders to understand their strengths, develop confidence, and overcome imposter syndrome. They facilitated professional development by ensuring LSEB colleagues and leaders had access to formal training, creating opportunities for on-the-job learning, providing constructive feedback, and growing their professional networks. And by encouraging LSEB colleagues and leaders to think about their career goals and keeping them informed about career pathways, supportive managers and mentors directly supported career progression.

LSEB colleagues and leaders also described **important connections to managers with whom they shared characteristics**.

For example, managers who were of the same gender (for women) or ethnicity (for ethnic minorities) were able to better understand and offer support to overcome shared barriers and challenges.

## Individual factors

There were LSEB senior leaders who referred to their **personal work ethic** as an important enabler for their career progression. This was often linked to their working-class backgrounds; LSEB senior leaders described being instilled with the importance of hard work and needing to "better themselves" by their parents. Being committed to **personal growth and development** was another

characteristic which LSEB senior leaders saw as key to their career trajectories. This had driven them to continually improve their professional knowledge and skills, which in turn better prepared them to progress in their careers.

Linked to geographical factors, there were LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders who described their **willingness and ability to relocate** as an enabler for their career progression. There were LSEB senior leaders who moved away from their local areas and lived in multiple locations across the UK prior to joining Co-op.

These choices had been based on a personal preference to travel through work, and/or because pursuing career opportunities had been more important to them than staying in their local communities. There were also LSEB colleagues who reflected that their personal circumstances made it easier for them to relocate to progress in their careers at Co-op. For example, one LSEB colleague in Food Stores described travelling to take up an apprenticeship opportunity, which he had been able to do as he was single and did not have children at the time. After having children, he noted that similar career moves would be less feasible.

"I've had great feedback, I've had great mentors, I've had great sponsors, and people have influenced me, and it's given me more and more confidence [...] I'd just gotten a job in the Food business and they said, "What's your next job?". I said, "Well, I've been here for a week". They said, "Well, you need to start thinking about what that could be, because you've got bags of potential and you're ambitious [...] It spurred me on."

- Male senior leader, WL3, Life Services

## Barriers for LSEB colleagues' & leaders' career progression

### Organisational barriers

LSEB senior leaders' career journeys, and experiences of career progression among LSEB colleagues and leaders, clearly indicated a range of available pathways at Co-op. However, early-career LSEB colleagues and mid-career LSEB leaders also described a number of barriers to their career progression.

"Sometimes it's not about promotion, it's sometimes about a sideways step, isn't it? I think we don't always know what other parts of the Co-op do, to understand what those job roles are."

- Female leader,  
WL4, Support Centre

Across Food Stores, Funeralcare, Logistics, and Support Centre, LSEB colleagues and leaders felt there were limited opportunities to progress at Co-op. Some business areas were seen as having **fewer vertical progression opportunities**.

In Support Centre, LSEB leaders at WL4-5 described being in teams where their peers were all vying for a single leadership role - which meant that most team members would need to leave the team (or the business) to progress.

Colleagues in Food Stores and Logistics described feeling that their only option for career progression was to wait for those in more senior positions to vacate their roles. For Team Leaders in Food Stores who viewed Store Manager roles as their main avenue for progression, there were similar experiences of feeling "stuck" when these roles were unavailable at their store or in their local area.

LSEB colleagues and leaders also described **barriers to lateral progression**. While a "squiggly career" at Co-op was described by LSEB colleagues and leaders as ideal in theory, there were doubts about how realistic it was to pursue such a career in practice.

In Food Stores, Funeralcare, Logistics, and Support Centre, LSEB colleagues and leaders had limited information about available opportunities in different business areas, a lack of formal channels to learn about these opportunities, and little understanding of whether their skills and knowledge would be transferable across the business.

Younger LSEB Customer Team Members particularly felt that they had limited access to information about vacancies across the business, as they did not have access to Yammer (an internal social channel available to those at WL6 and above) or staff mailing lists (as they did not have Co-op email addresses).



**Organisational changes following recent restructures** were cited as a barrier to career progression. In Food Stores and Funeralcare, LSEB colleagues at WL6 noted that a reduction in managerial positions at WL5 meant that they were unsure how to progress beyond their current work level. In Logistics and Support Centre, fears around career progression and potential redundancy were often mentioned. LSEB colleagues and leaders

"Do you want to progress to the next level? But I think if you go to next level, I think it's at that level where you are more at risk of [Co-op] cutting out the middle management and whatnot."

- Male colleague, WL6A, Support Centre

referred to being uncertain about (or actively declining) promotion opportunities due to concerns that roles at higher work levels were more vulnerable to redundancy in future restructures.

LSEB colleagues and leaders described barriers related to **training and development programmes** currently offered by Co-op. While there were LSEB colleagues and leaders who described benefitting from Co-op's apprenticeship schemes, challenges with these schemes were also raised. For example, in Funeralcare, LSEB colleagues described a lack of support from their managers to apply for apprenticeships, and eligibility restrictions which meant they could only access apprenticeships at their current level (and so were unable to gain exposure and experience for the next level).<sup>24</sup>

Beyond apprenticeships, LSEB colleagues felt there were limited training and development opportunities available to them. Ethnic minority LSEB colleagues highlighted a lack of targeted initiatives for those from ethnic minorities – while there had been a recent Diverse Talent programme, ethnic minority LSEB colleagues noted that this had been discontinued.

In contrast to the support available to LSEB leaders and senior leaders in the past, LSEB colleagues in Food Stores and Logistics felt that Co-op did not offer relevant schemes to support their professional development and career progression.

Among LSEB colleagues and leaders who had unsuccessfully applied for promotion at Co-op, issues with a **lack of transparency** in promotion decisions were highlighted as a barrier. In Food Stores, Support Centre, and among ethnic minority LSEB colleagues, there were experiences of receiving limited or no feedback on their performance in internal recruitment processes, and therefore being unable to address areas for development. In other cases, LSEB leaders described witnessing their peers being promoted into roles which, as far as they were aware, had not been advertised widely. This was linked to concerns of **internal politics** and a culture of "who you know" in promotion decisions – which in turn acted as a barrier to LSEB colleagues and leaders who did not have access to the networks and connections utilised by their peers from more advantaged SEBs.

Among ethnic minority LSEB colleagues in Food Stores and Support Centre, there were concerns that **bias related to race and ethnicity** – whether conscious or unconscious – had acted as a barrier to their career progression. These concerns were driven by repeated, unsuccessful attempts at promotion, a lack of feedback following internal applications, and seeing White colleagues with less experience progressing ahead of them.

Ethnic minority LSEB colleagues also noted that it could be difficult to disentangle whether a perceived lack of "fit" was due to their race, class, or a combination of both.

"I'm not saying people are deliberately [biased] against me because I'm brown. I'm saying they might feel like they've got a better affinity with someone because they're White or they've got more life experience in common with that person because they're White, or they think that person is going to be a better fit to the team because they're white, or those unconscious things. I don't have confidence in the processes anymore."

- Female colleague, WL6, Support Centre

<sup>24</sup> These eligibility restrictions are based on Department for Education funding guidance.

LSEB senior leaders from ethnic minority backgrounds reflected on similar experiences during their careers both at Co-op and at other organisations. A lack of **targeted support** was described as a barrier to career progression for disabled LSEB colleagues and those experiencing chronic illness. This included disabled LSEB colleagues whose needs were not being accommodated in their current roles, and were therefore pessimistic about likely support if they tried to progress. In other cases, adjustments

had been made for LSEB disabled colleagues in their current

roles, but they were unsure whether similar adaptations would be made should they wish to progress in future.

### Geographical barriers

There were LSEB colleagues in Food Stores, Funeralcare, and Logistics based in Northern Ireland, Wales, and across England (including East of England, East Midlands, South East and South West England) who viewed location as a key barrier

to career progression. A common view was that the majority of job opportunities at Co-op were based in Manchester, and by contrast, there were **limited opportunities to progress in their local areas**. While these colleagues were aware of the hybrid working offer in Support Centre roles, travelling to Manchester on a regular basis was not feasible due to the time and cost of regular commuting. Family commitments and preferences to live and work in their local communities also meant these colleagues did not view relocation to Manchester as a feasible or desirable option. Beyond Manchester-based roles, LSEB colleagues in Food Stores noted that, due to limited opportunities in local stores, they might be required to commute or relocate to other towns or cities to progress to Store Manager roles. Again, issues with transport time, costs, and family commitments acted as barriers to career progression for these colleagues.

### Interpersonal barriers

Just as senior support was a key enabler, LSEB colleagues who were yet to progress described **unsupportive managers** as a barrier to their career progression. In Food Stores and Logistics, there were LSEB colleagues whose managers did not follow up on requested training opportunities, did not discuss career development during appraisals, and had failed to make requested adjustments for LSEB disabled colleagues. There were also CTMs who observed that their managers did not have sufficient hours to facilitate on-the-job or formal training opportunities for their teams.

Another interpersonal barrier to career progression was **limited access to professional networks**. There were LSEB colleagues in Food Stores and younger LSEB colleagues who linked their lack of professional networks to their SEB, as they were less likely to form connections with managers and leaders (who were typically perceived to be middle class). LSEB colleagues in Food Stores also noted that they had less time, capacity, and (for those who did not work in Manchester) limited access to form networks across the business that might support their career progression.

### Individual barriers

LSEB senior leaders referred to individual barriers such as **imposter syndrome and a lack of confidence** as impeding their early career progression. LSEB senior leaders who had started their careers outside retail recalled feeling insecure as working-class individuals in largely middle-class spaces. Meanwhile, female LSEB senior leaders who had worked up through the retail industry described additional issues with confidence and asserting themselves as women in male-dominated spaces. LSEB senior leaders noted that interpersonal support (from managers and senior sponsors) and organisational factors (including personal development programmes) had been key to overcoming these barriers and progressing in their careers, both at Co-op and with previous employers.

Ethnic minority LSEB colleagues described a **lack of support networks outside work** as a potential barrier to their career progression. For example, one ethnic minority colleague noted that, coming from an LSEB immigrant family, their immediate family members could not offer advice on how to dress for an interview at head office, how to proactively seek out senior sponsorship, or how to navigate workplace politics.

"I guess that's where I think me [being from] a lower income household, is where my progression is hindered. It doesn't matter how much I know or what I know. Whether I'm going to be a store manager or go in retail support centre all depends on who I network with, and getting those networks is now impossible within the Co-op unless you're in a specific team group."

- Male colleague, Team Leader, Food Stores

## LSEB colleagues' & leaders' views on improving career progression

### Improve support for lateral progression

A common recommendation across work levels was to facilitate more opportunities for lateral progression within and across business areas.

LSEB senior leaders felt that **offering more secondment opportunities** would be a valuable way to provide colleagues and leaders with insights into other business areas, and would support more informed decisions about career progression across the business.

LSEB colleagues and leaders suggested that **increased awareness of job roles across the business** could also support lateral progression. Recommendations included a 'navigator system' to help colleagues understand roles in different parts of the business, along with information about transferable skills required to fulfil these roles. **Storytelling about "squiggly careers"** was also seen as a way to encourage more colleagues and leaders to explore career progression opportunities across Co-op.

Overall, lateral progression was described as a valuable solution for LSEB colleagues and leaders who were "stuck" waiting for limited vertical progression opportunities in their teams, a way to provide greater job security within Co-op during restructures, and opportunities for progression within local areas (for example, between local Food Stores, Funeralcare Homes and/or Logistics depots).

### Ensure fair, transparent, and accessible processes

LSEB colleagues and leaders felt that internal recruitment processes should be improved to increase equity and transparency. Suggestions included **providing clear, consistent feedback** to internal candidates whose promotion applications were unsuccessful, and providing training to minimise bias for everyone involved in hiring processes. For Support Centre roles, LSEB leaders suggested that job adverts should be **clearer about remote working options**, including (where relevant) indicating that any location could be

accommodated through flexible working. LSEB leaders also felt that internal interview processes could be **simplified and made more accessible**, for example by reducing the number of interview stages to better accommodate LSEB candidates who were less able to take time off on multiple occasions.



### Improve training and development opportunities

There were a number of recommendations to improve training and development opportunities at Co-op. **Increasing awareness** of opportunities was seen as an important first step, particularly among LSEB leaders and senior leaders who felt colleagues did not receive consistent information across the business. LSEB colleagues in lower-paid roles felt that there should be **dedicated time** for training and development, since they had limited capacity within their existing hours to explore and take up opportunities.

**Developing employability skills** through CV writing support and mock interviews was also seen as a way to improve career progression for LSEB colleagues, particularly for those who had not been to university and did not have family support to develop these skills.

## Provide targeted mentoring and support

LSEB senior leaders commonly described acting as mentors to colleagues and leaders from similar backgrounds and who were experiencing challenges they had previously overcome. To widen the benefits to those from less advantaged groups across the business, one recommendation was to provide targeted mentoring and support schemes to connect LSEB senior leaders with LSEB colleagues and leaders, with attention also paid to gender, ethnicity, disability, and other shared characteristics.

## Improve manager support for professional development

Managers were seen as a key source of support for professional development. LSEB colleagues and leaders felt that managers should provide a **consistent source of support for professional and personal development** across the business. To realise this, LSEB colleagues and leaders recommended that all managers should be aware of relevant opportunities, and actively encourage and support their team members to access formal development schemes, on-the-job training, and/or promotion opportunities.

Another recommendation was to provide managers with **training and development** themselves, so that they could effectively mentor and support career development for each of their team members.





# Research Findings

## Inclusion





# What does inclusion mean to LSEB colleagues & leaders?

LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders described an inclusive workplace as one where everyone, regardless of their background...

- Feels valued, respected, and heard.
- Has fair access to progression opportunities.
- Is able to contribute to decision-making

Feeling valued, respected and heard, and fair access to progression opportunities were viewed as key to inclusion across work levels and business areas. LSEB leaders and senior leaders highlighted the importance of inclusive decision-making, through which diverse perspectives are heard and involved in developing solutions.

## LSEB colleagues' & leaders' experiences of inclusion

### Feeling included



LSEB leaders and senior leaders across the business described a sense of inclusion when they felt heard by their peers and senior leaders, and (particularly for those who had been with the organisation for a long time) when they felt Co-op had invested in them and valued their contributions. LSEB leaders and senior leaders whose needs had been accommodated by Co-op - for example, in relation to caring responsibilities or disabilities - were also more likely to feel included.

LSEB colleagues across business areas were more likely to feel a sense of inclusion when Co-op kept them informed about developments in the business. LSEB colleagues who felt included in this way typically had managers who cascaded and communicated organisational information, and/or participated in regular meetings (such as monthly Teams calls in Funeralcare) through which they

were given updates about their business area. There were also LSEB colleagues who felt valued and included by Co-op due to investments in their professional development, for example through apprenticeships.

Across business areas, a strong contributing factor to LSEB colleagues', leaders' and senior leaders' sense of inclusion was being accepted and understood for who they were, whether working class, ethnic minority, LGBTQ+, or disabled.

"I think what we do is excellent and does set a standard for the industry [...] I really do enjoy the way that Co-op goes about all of its diversity [and] inclusion projects and the way that they make you as a manager feel able to be part of it."

- Male colleague, Store Manager, Food Stores

# Feeling excluded



There were LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders across the business with ongoing experiences of exclusion.

Across work levels, LSEB individuals were less likely to feel included if they did not feel their contributions were valued at work.

Experiences of bias and harassment based on region, accent, race, and gender were another driver of exclusion, and were described by LSEB leaders and senior leaders in Life Services and Support Centre.

Meanwhile, there were LSEB colleagues in Food Stores, Funeralcare Homes, Logistics, and Support Centre who reported experiences of bias, bullying and/or harassment at work based on accent, age, caring responsibilities, disability, gender identity, health conditions, race, religion, and sexual orientation.

“Because I don’t do much, I get [criticised] for it [...] That affects my mental health. I want to go and get in, get [the work] done [but] I’m limited to what I can do with my disability.”

- Male colleague, Warehouse Operative, Logistics

Experiences included negative comments from team members related to these characteristics, and a lack of support with career progression compared to their peers from more advantaged groups.

LSEB colleagues’ sense of exclusion was compounded when their managers failed to offer support (or demonstrated exclusionary behaviours themselves), and when they experienced a lack of allyship from their team members.



## Enablers of inclusion for LSEB colleagues & leaders

"I think one of the reasons you choose to work at the Co-op is because it is so inclusive and the ethics and stuff like that. I think that they are quite a good advocate in that. "

- Male leader, WL5, Support Centre

### Organisational factors

For LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders who felt a sense of inclusion, **Co-op's inclusive culture** was an important enabling factor.

Co-op was described as a socially responsible business, and internal commitments to D&I as well as wider campaigns related to the environment, racial inequality, sexual exploitation, and food poverty were cited as examples of this. Celebrations of diverse cultures - from Pride to Jewish and Muslim religious festivals - further contributed to a sense of inclusion for LSEB colleagues and leaders of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and across ethnic and religious groups.

**Targeted initiatives** such as colleague networks, the Race At Work programme, and D&I focus groups were cited as further enablers of inclusion at work. Colleague networks including Aspire, Strive, and Rise were mentioned as providing supportive spaces for female LSEB colleagues, younger LSEB colleagues, and ethnic minority colleagues respectively. White LSEB senior leaders valued allyship initiatives such as Rise Allies, while there were LSEB colleagues who appreciated having their assumptions challenged through D&I focus groups.

Across work levels and business areas, LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders were more likely to feel a sense of inclusion if they had received **support and understanding for their personal circumstances**.

This included flexible working arrangements for those with caring responsibilities and during religious festivals; reasonable adjustments for disabled LSEB colleagues and leaders; non-gendered toilets in Logistics depots to accommodate non-binary colleagues; and adaptations and support for Logistics colleagues for whom English was a second language. These accommodations fostered a sense of inclusion for LSEB colleagues and leaders who received the support, and also for LSEB colleagues and leaders who did not directly benefit but felt that these adjustments reflected Co-op's inclusive values being put into practice.

### Interpersonal factors

Seeing Co-op's values and cultures translated into **diverse and inclusive teams** was an important factor in creating a sense of inclusion. LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders in teams that were diverse in terms of class, gender identity, race, region, and sexual orientation were more likely to feel that Co-op was an inclusive business, which in turn increased their own sense of inclusion. This was reported by LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders who identified as members of both majority and minoritised groups.

"My colleagues are all White, but they understand me and they talk to me about things that make me different and they make an effort to ask questions and to learn more.

So I feel they're curious but in a really good and healthy way. I feel like it's good actually."

- Female colleague, WL6, Support Centre

Beyond observed diversity, LSEB colleagues from minoritised groups described a sense of inclusion when they were **accepted, understood and accommodated in their teams**. In one example, a Muslim LSEB colleague noted that her team accommodated her needs during Ramadan through flexible working hours, accepting late holiday requests, and arranging virtual meetings so she did not have to travel. In another example, a transgender LSEB colleague felt that her team had been supportive and understanding during her transition, and accepting of her identity as a trans woman.

For LSEB colleagues across majority and minoritised groups, inclusive teams were described as those in which team members were supportive, friendly, and committed to working well together..

"It's all down to people and relationships. If you can consistently show up as an inclusive person, you'll start to create that warmth and that energy and people will come towards you, people will want to be around you [...] The more you do it, the more you practise it, the more it spreads [...] You'd want people to be reflecting this from all parts of the organisation."

- Female senior leader, WL1-2, Support Centre

LSEB leaders and senior leaders described facilitating inclusive working environments by **ensuring all colleagues felt valued and heard**. For LSEB leaders and senior leaders, inclusive team dynamics were evident when colleagues across work levels and backgrounds felt able to express their views openly, and felt confident they would be listened to.

Similarly, LSEB colleagues noted that their line managers played a key role in creating a sense of inclusion, from their own behaviours and support offered to the way they handled issues such as non-inclusive language in the workplace. **Allyship** was regarded as an important enabler for inclusion - across work levels, ethnic minority LSEB individuals and LSEB individuals who identified as LGBTQ+ appreciated allyship from their team members and managers, which was demonstrated through active participation and support for events such as Black History Month and Pride. Similarly, there were LSEB colleagues, leaders

and senior leaders from majority groups who appreciated learning about ways in which they could be better allies for those from minoritised groups.

## Individual factors

There were LSEB colleagues and leaders who were conscious that their sense of inclusion may be related to **intersectional advantages**.

For example, although they may be in a minority due to their working-class backgrounds in some parts of the business, there were LSEB colleagues and leaders who acknowledged that they were more likely to feel included as White men compared to their female and/or ethnic minority peers.

"I'm quite conscious of white privilege. I feel included. I like to think that I include people around me, but I don't actually know what it feels like if I wasn't included."

- Male colleague, WL6, Logistics

## Drivers of exclusion for LSEB colleagues & leaders

### Organisational drivers

While they had not personally experienced exclusion, there were LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders who expressed doubts about inclusion at Co-op.

A key driver of these doubts was a feeling that Co-op's **stated commitments were not always translated into meaningful action**. The reduction of Co-op's D&I team following the 2022 restructure was cited as an example of potentially waning D&I commitments, particularly since this left much organisational D&I work to be driven by volunteers across the business.

Among LSEB colleagues who were active in colleague networks and engaged in community-based activities, there were frustrations that - while they drew personal fulfilment from D&I and community work - these activities were not always valued or acknowledged by the wider organisation. In another example, an ethnic minority LSEB colleague referred to low engagement in Black History Month events,

which made them feel that stated commitments to race equity were not reflected in actual interest or engagement among White colleagues and leaders.

**Varying levels of commitment and action** on D&I across the business were mentioned as a potential driver of exclusion. Comparing their past experiences of working in Food Stores and their current experience of working in Support Centre, a pansexual LSEB colleague noted there were many more opportunities to engage with LGBTQ+ inclusion in head office (for example through the Respect colleague network) than in store. LSEB colleagues whose needs and circumstances were not **accepted, understood or supported** described actively feeling excluded in the workplace. This included LSEB colleagues with caring responsibilities whose requests for flexible or part-time work had been denied. Similarly, LSEB colleagues with mental health issues and disabled LSEB colleagues who had not received support or reasonable adjustments did not feel included at work. Although expressed by a minority, there were also White, male LSEB colleagues who felt they were excluded by Co-op's D&I activities. These views were compounded when these individuals felt their challenges- for example related to disabilities - were not being addressed by the organisation.

Just as diverse teams were a driver of inclusion for LSEB colleagues and leaders, **a lack of diversity** could drive a sense of exclusion for LSEB colleagues from minoritised groups. This included female LSEB leaders in Logistics and Support Centre who had experienced exclusion in male-dominated teams (although these leaders often noted that their teams were now more gender inclusive), and ethnic minority LSEB colleagues in Food Stores and Support Centre who felt excluded in teams that were largely or exclusively White. A lack of ethnic diversity was also a concern among White LSEB colleagues and leaders in Funeralcare and Support Centre, who felt that their branches and teams were not always representative or inclusive of their local communities and customers.

LSEB colleagues described a range of barriers which excluded them from participating in D&I activities. These included a **lack of time and capacity** for LSEB colleagues in Funeralcare Homes, and **limited access to social media** among older LSEB colleagues. LSEB colleagues also described **financial barriers** which prevented them

from participating in activities such as Pride, as they could not afford to pay travel costs and wait for reimbursement via expense claims.

**Inequitable progression opportunities**, described in more detail in the previous chapter, were also a driver of exclusion for ethnic minority LSEB colleagues and leaders. Importantly, even though ethnic minority LSEB colleagues appreciated interpersonal inclusion in their teams, they could feel a wider sense of exclusion at Co-op when they did not feel they had a fair chance at progression compared to their White peers.

Among LSEB senior leaders, **top-down decision-making** and developing strategies without consulting frontline colleagues were viewed as potential drivers of exclusion. This was echoed by LSEB colleagues in Support Centre, who reported growing apathy with annual Talkback surveys, as they felt there had been no visible changes or improvements to issues that had been raised over several years.

"While I personally do feel included, I can completely see where other people wouldn't because I don't think our commitment to diversity and inclusion is constant. I think it has waned, I think, a little bit. But the people that are involved in it are passionate and driven."

- Female colleague, WL6A, Support Centre

"I remember we were in Black History Month and [we were] trying to get people to join some of the events we're doing. Nobody joined on some of [them]. I think there's only one person who joined and no one else did. It just felt like for me they weren't making that much of an effort."

- Male colleague, WL6A, Support Centre

## Interpersonal drivers

There were LSEB colleagues and leaders who felt a sense of exclusion due to **experiences of bias in the workplace**. White LSEB leaders in Support Centre reported experiences of class-related bias, which most commonly manifested through negative comments about regional accents. There were LSEB leaders who were unsure whether these experiences would be considered relevant if reported via Co-op's bullying and harassment hotline.

"More recently, as I've been trying to actively pursue career progression and it's not been happening for me, I've been reflecting that for me, inclusion is about feeling like everyone's got equal opportunity to be successful and to have opportunities, and I don't feel like that's what's happening."

- Female leader, WL6, Support Centre

There were ethnic minority LSEB leaders and colleagues who had experienced bias and exclusion in their teams based on race and ethnicity. Among ethnic minority LSEB colleagues, one view was that it was hard to distinguish whether exclusion was based on race or class when they were being treated differently at work.

However, where ethnic minority LSEB colleagues and leaders had felt the need to mask their SEB at work,

they were more likely to feel that their experiences of exclusion were based on race. For others, experiences of exclusion were primarily based on religion - for example, due to social events based around drinking alcohol, which excluded Muslim colleagues.

Transgender LSEB colleagues reported varied experiences of exclusion across Food Stores. In one case, an LSEB colleague described feeling accepted as a transgender woman, but had received limited support as someone with autism and ADHD. In another store, a transgender LSEB colleague described exclusion in the form of transphobic comments from fellow team members and her manager.

Among LSEB colleagues in Food Stores and Logistics, there were reported experiences of bias related to age and disability. In one example, a disabled LSEB colleague described being criticised by some team members because he was unable to manage the same workload, which was

having a negative impact on his mental health. There was a range of experiences of age-related bias among LSEB colleagues. Among older LSEB colleagues, there were experiences of feeling dismissed by managers who assumed that career progression was not a priority for them, and feeling undervalued compared to younger colleagues. However, there were also younger LSEB colleagues who felt they were not taken as seriously as older colleagues, and would not be considered for certain promotions until they reached their mid-20s

"I know it's not done with anything, but it makes you feel... It takes you back to feeling not good enough and it's that imposter syndrome and that insecurity, I guess. I've tried to regulate it, but I can't. Why should I change my accent for work?"

- Female leader, WL5, Support Centre

**Unsupportive managers** were a driver of exclusion for LSEB colleagues in Food Stores, Logistics, and Support Centre. In particular, neurodivergent LSEB colleagues and LSEB colleagues with ongoing health conditions described feeling unsupported and undervalued when their managers failed to understand or accommodate their needs in the workplace.

## LSEB colleagues' & leaders' views on improving inclusion

### Use Co-op's values to drive action and positive change

LSEB senior leaders felt that Co-op should draw on its founding principles to drive meaningful action towards inclusion and positive social change. LSEB senior leaders drew a direct link between the values of co-operation and social mobility, in terms of supporting progress for all and creating an environment in which everyone feels included and valued.

## **Adopt more consultative approaches to decision making**

As part of putting Co-op's values into action, LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders felt that there should be more 'bottom-up' approaches to decision-making, based on consultation across the business and clear demonstrations of factoring colleague voice into organisational decisions. This would drive inclusion by ensuring people at all work levels and across business areas felt heard and valued, and would also demonstrate consistency between Co-op's values in theory and in practice.

## **Increase understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion**

Across work levels and business areas, another recommendation was to improve understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion at Co-op. In addition to increasing awareness of areas such as social mobility, race, and disability, LSEB leaders and senior leaders noted the importance of talking about inclusion using real-life, relatable examples to help widen understanding across the business.

## **Increase diversity at Co-op**

Improving representation of minoritised groups - including disabled people, ethnic minorities, and LSEB people - was another recommendation to increase inclusion at Co-op. Increasing representation at senior levels was seen as an important driver of inclusion for colleagues and leaders from minoritised groups who did not see themselves reflected among senior leaders, and therefore felt pessimistic about their own career paths at Co-op. LSEB senior leaders felt that targeted recruitment programmes and better support for disabled people and ethnic minorities were important ways to increase both diversity and inclusion at the organisation.

## **Ensure equitable pay and outcomes**

LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders highlighted the links between inclusion and equity - if there were gender and ethnicity pay gaps at Co-op, then women and ethnic minorities could not feel fully included. Younger LSEB colleagues and ethnic minority LSEB colleagues emphasised that all colleagues needed to have fair access to progression opportunities, including through

targeted schemes where needed, to fully realise diversity, equity, and inclusion.

## **Develop inclusive leaders and managers**

LSEB senior leaders felt that they (and their peers) had an important role to play in implementing inclusive leadership. This included acting as role models as senior leaders who were LSEB, female, disabled, and/or with caring responsibilities; acting as mentors to support career development for their team members and those from minoritised groups at Co-op; adopting collaborative approaches to decision-making; and acting as "servant leaders". LSEB colleagues felt inclusive leadership should also be modelled through senior leaders' active participation in D&I events and activities.

LSEB colleagues recommended targeted D&I training for managers across the organisation, to ensure consistent understanding, guidance, and inclusive practice for issues related to age, caring responsibilities, disability, gender identity, health conditions, neurodiversity, race, and sexual orientation.



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# Research Findings Belonging



# What does belonging mean to LSEB colleagues & leaders?

LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders across business areas described a sense of belonging as:

- Being your authentic self at work.
- Feeling connected to your team members.
- Sharing values with your team and the wider organisation.

Across work levels, there was some overlap between definitions of inclusion and belonging. In particular, feeling valued by your team and by the wider organisation was highlighted as an important part of both inclusion and belonging.

## LSEB colleagues' & leaders' experiences of belonging

### Feeling a sense of belonging at work



LSEB leaders and senior leaders who felt a sense of belonging at Co-op attributed this to support they had received during their service - for example, formal development programmes and informal mentoring or sponsorship - which had helped them to feel comfortable and confident being themselves at work.

LSEB colleagues who were able to have open, honest conversations about their needs with their managers, and felt heard and supported when they did this, felt a sense of belonging and able to be their authentic selves at work.

Among LSEB colleagues and leaders, length of service also contributed to a sense of belonging and loyalty, particularly when they felt valued and listened to by Co-op over the years.

For those who felt disconnected from the wider organisation, a sense of belonging could still be formed through connections to their immediate

team. Younger LSEB colleagues and ethnic minority LSEB colleagues who were part of colleague networks formed connections with those from similar backgrounds across Co-op, which in turn helped to develop a wider sense of belonging. Across work levels and business areas, there were LSEB individuals who felt they belonged at Co-op based on shared individual and organisational values.

"I think for me being in the Co-op man and boy, if you like, 18 years is a long time. I've had children, got married, et cetera. So I think that service element gives me a natural belonging. [...] I [also] feel like I add value. I feel like that is welcomed. I feel accepted, listened to."

- Male leader, WL3, Food Operations

# Not feeling a sense of belonging at work



There were LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders who did not feel able to be their authentic selves at work, which meant they did not feel a strong sense of belonging to the organisation.

This included LSEB leaders and senior leaders in Support Centre who felt they had to mask elements of their socio-economic background to fit into pre-dominantly middle-class teams. A lack of connection to team members and a sense of isolation contributed to a feeling of 'not belonging' across work levels and business areas.

There were LSEB senior leaders who had felt increasingly isolated as they progressed to more senior roles, and others who felt isolated from their teams due to increased remote working during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. LSEB colleagues in Funeralcare Homes also referred to lone working as a source of disconnection from their teams.

"If I'm on shift with the two team leaders that accept and understand who I am and understand [my health issues], I do feel a real sense of belonging and a real sense of inclusion with them. But then if I'm on with the two that don't really do that and they think I'm this odd and strange person and they don't think I'm capable of doing anything, they'll just leave me [alone] on the till all night."

- Female colleague, CTM, Food Stores

Among LSEB colleagues across business areas, those who were unable to participate in team-based social activities due to financial and technological barriers were less likely to feel a sense of belonging. Challenging working environments, due to unsupportive managers and difficult customers, also undermined LSEB colleagues' sense of belonging.

"It's about that sense of belonging in an organisation where your own core values matches your organisation's values, and both organisation and yourself are pulling in the same direction."

- Female senior leader, WL1-2, Food Operations

## Enablers of belonging for LSEB colleagues & leaders

### Organisational factors

LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders across the business cited **sharing Co-op's values** as a key factor in their sense of belonging. The organisation's values were characterised as focused on co-operation rather than competition, and reflected in giving back to members and the community, prioritising workers' rights and physical safety in the workplace, and campaigning on social issues.

When LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders felt that Co-op was **putting its values into practice**, this contributed to a sense of meaning and purpose from being part of the organisation. LSEB colleagues cited the implementation of inclusive policies within their teams, such as compassionate leave, as another factor that improved their sense of belonging.

Co-op's values were also reflected in **connections to communities**, and LSEB colleagues in Food Stores and Logistics described working with local food banks and charities as contributing to their sense of belonging.

There were LSEB senior leaders who felt that **Co-op's senior leadership** played an important role in translating Co-op's values into action, and therefore enhancing a sense of belonging across the organisation. They felt that effective senior leaders did this by investing in their teams, encouraging team members to be themselves in the workplace, and being open and honest about their own experiences and backgrounds.

Female LSEB senior leaders and ethnic minority LSEB colleagues referred to **training and development initiatives** as playing an important role in their sense of belonging. Co-op's Shining Stars Programme was cited as helping one LSEB senior leader to feel more confident and able to be her authentic self at work. In

another example, an ethnic minority LSEB colleague felt that the Diverse Talent Programme had a profound effect on her sense of belonging at Co-op, as she was able to share experiences with and feel understood by Black and Asian colleagues across the business.

There were LSEB colleagues and leaders across the business who emphasised the role of **line managers** in creating a sense of belonging. Line managers did this by demonstrating shared values, making time for one-to-one conversations, being responsive to team members' needs, and offering timely support when LSEB colleagues faced challenges with customers or team members. In addition to supporting a sense of inclusion, being part of **colleague networks** such as Strive and Rise contributed to a sense of belonging for younger LSEB colleagues and ethnic minority LSEB colleagues respectively. These networks offered a safe space to connect with others across the business with shared experiences, seek and offer support, and work together to drive positive change.

"We all stay in touch with each other a bit. We have this solidarity that we work together, we had great fun times and we're all looking forward to coming back together, hopefully in the future, within Co-op or without Co-op in a sense. I do feel like there are pockets of belonging with different parts in different teams, but in between those, I'm not so sure."

- Non-binary colleague, WL6C, Support Centre

"I have dyed my hair Co-op blue. I've had my nails Co-op blue. I'm the first one to put on a promo t-shirt and everything [...]. I'm all singing, all dancing. I make a joke that I live, breathe Co-op because I do. It's given me a lot and I will give it back. Therefore, I belong."

- Female colleague, CTM, Food Stores

## Interpersonal factors

For LSEB colleagues who did not necessarily feel connected to Co-op as an organisation, **positive team dynamics** could contribute to a sense of belonging within their immediate teams. LSEB colleagues in Food Stores, Logistics, and Support Centre described a strong sense of belonging when they were part of supportive, collaborative teams with shared values, regular communication, and in which they enjoyed working together. For LSEB colleagues in Funeralcare Homes, staying connected to others in their branch via phone or text messages also supported a sense of belonging for those who spent most of their time lone working. Across business areas, these team dynamics meant LSEB colleagues felt able to be themselves in the workplace.

## Barriers to belonging for LSEB colleagues & leaders

### Organisational barriers

As discussed in the Inclusion chapter, LSEB colleagues and leaders who felt that **Co-op's values were not always put into practice** could feel sceptical of stated commitments and therefore less likely to feel a sense of belonging at the organisation. Among LSEB colleagues and leaders who felt this way, one view was that trying to be yourself at work was a "daily fight" rather than something that was supported by the business.

In Support Centre, the 2022 **organisational restructure** had diminished a sense of belonging across work levels.

There were LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders who had found themselves reflecting on whether they were "disposable" to the business during the restructure, while changes to team composition and limited understanding of the new structure meant LSEB colleagues and leaders in Support Centre could feel disconnected from the business.

"I see a lot of people [in my function] wanting to leave because they don't have faith in the principles of the organisation that they joined [after the restructure]. The same principles do not apply. Within my function, there's some disaffection at the moment."

- Female senior leader, WL1-2, Support Centre

**Ongoing changes to leadership** at the top of the organisation were cited as part of the "churn and change" which could undermine LSEB leaders' and senior leaders' sense of belonging and connection.

LSEB colleagues who had worked in different parts of the business referred to a **varied sense of belonging across business areas**. In one example, an LSEB colleague had felt a greater sense of belonging when working in Logistics, particularly since their team members were from similar SEBs.

In their current role in Support Centre, this colleague felt less comfortable within more middle-class teams, particularly as they were in a much lower-paid role than their team members.

### Interpersonal barriers

There were LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders who described **being disconnected from their teams** as a barrier to belonging.

Although there were LSEB colleagues in Funeralcare Homes who managed to connect with their teams while lone working (discussed above), there were others in lone working roles who struggled to do this without regular face-to-face interactions.

In teams where there were team-building and social activities organised outside of working hours, there were younger LSEB colleagues who were unable to participate due to financial barriers, and therefore less able to form connections and feel a sense of belonging in their teams.

Among LSEB senior leaders, there were those who felt increased flexibility to work from home had diminished their sense of day-to-day connection and belonging with their teams, in spite of other advantages of hybrid working.

Just as positive team experiences contributed to a sense of belonging, **negative team dynamics** could act as a barrier to belonging for LSEB colleagues. Feeling that their team members did not share their values, that they were treated unfairly compared to other colleagues, and being

"I think because [...] I do lone work, you only ever get to see your other colleagues if there's a meeting or if they come over to do a funeral. You do feel left out because everyone's chatting to each other. But you're never in them conversations."

- Female colleague, Funeral Arranger, Funeralcare

"This notion of integrating and maybe that whole piece around trying to integrate in society. It's just subconscious now that you're constantly thinking, "Am I now part of it or am I still trying to integrate?" I think whether that's work or society, it's just in a bit in your mindset and it's really hard to describe, really."

- Male senior leader, WL3,  
Support Centre

in teams which were competitive rather than collaborative were all described as barriers to belonging, particularly among LSEB colleagues in Food Stores.

Again, **line managers** set an important tone for these LSEB colleagues, and those who did not feel a sense of belonging described managers who were unsupportive with personal and health issues, and drove a "cutthroat culture" in their stores. LSEB colleagues who experienced negative team dynamics or worked with unsupportive line managers described **a lack of psychological safety** and an **inability to be themselves at work**.

In Food Stores, there were LSEB colleagues with mental health issues and neurodivergent LSEB colleagues who described "heavy masking" on a daily basis to try and fit in when their managers did not provide them with the support they needed.

Ethnic minority LSEB colleagues and senior leaders also described masking their SEB at work, due to concerns that, in order to fit in, they had to "compensate" for their more visible ethnic difference in largely White teams.



## LSEB colleagues' & leaders' views on improving belonging

### Communicate Co-op's values and vision

LSEB leaders and senior leaders felt that Co-op should do more as a business to communicate its values and vision across the business. This included talking not just about Co-op's work in communities, but how its values are put into practice through ways of working, choices made in the workplace, and - specifically in relation to social mobility - using LSEB senior leaders as role models and sharing their social mobility 'success stories'. LSEB colleagues echoed the importance of this, referencing past events where senior leaders shared their experiences with colleagues as inspirational, motivating, and fostering their sense of belonging at Co-op.

### Increase community-based opportunities

In Support Centre, there were LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders who recommended increasing opportunities to engage with and support local communities. Suggestions included facilitating community engagement through Co-op Academies.

### Improve connections across business areas

LSEB senior leaders felt that Support Centre colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders should regularly engage with colleagues in Food Stores and Logistics depots to better understand their working environments. Similarly, these LSEB senior leaders recommended that front-line colleagues should have opportunities to visit Angel Square to increase their connection to and understanding of Support Centre. Opportunities for engagement between other business areas - for example, building on existing connections between Food Stores and Logistics by improving colleagues' understanding of each other's job roles - were also recommended.

### Invest in LSEB colleagues' personal development

Given the importance of interpersonal and organisational factors in their own career journeys - including mentoring, senior sponsorship, and formal development programmes - LSEB senior leaders felt there should be targeted initiatives to support LSEB colleagues' and leaders' personal development. In particular, LSEB senior leaders highlighted the role of these initiatives in developing confidence, overcoming imposter syndrome, and helping LSEB individuals to feel able to be their authentic selves at work - particularly since they may not have received this kind of support or felt valued in this way previously.

### Facilitate more opportunities for team building

From LSEB colleagues in lone-working roles (for example in Funeralcare Homes), LSEB colleagues in Food Stores with hectic work schedules, and LSEB individuals across work levels in Support Centre whose roles were increasingly home-based, a consistent recommendation was to facilitate regular opportunities for teams to connect and spend time together. To do this, suggestions included introducing more social events (with expenses covered for those in lower-paid roles), providing in-person opportunities to connect during inductions for new starters, and facilitating regular in-person team meetings and/or away days.

A hand holds a white ceramic mug filled with a latte, featuring a heart-shaped latte art design. The mug has the 'coop' logo printed in blue. In the background, another similar mug is visible, slightly out of focus. A blue horizontal bar is overlaid on the image, containing the word 'Conclusions' in white text.

# Conclusions

# Conclusions

In this chapter, we summarise key findings from the research and offer recommendations for action, which are based on a synthesis of participants' views, key research findings, and our understanding of Co-op's ongoing and planned activities. Before this, we reflect on the 'generalisability' of the research findings, to indicate their relevance for Co-op's wider LSEB population and its non-LSEB workforce.

## How generalisable are the research findings?

As a qualitative study, the research aims to capture the diversity of views and experiences of LSEB individuals across work levels, business areas, and a range of personal characteristics. Based on the size<sup>25</sup> and composition of the final sample (presented in the Technical Appendix), we can be confident that the research provides robust insights into LSEB individuals' views and experiences across work levels in Food Stores / Operations, Funeralcare, and Support Centre. Consistent with the wider Co-op workforce, the majority of LSEB individuals in the research sample are aged 31-60, White, cisgender, female, and heterosexual. Among minoritised groups, LSEB individuals who identify as LGBTQ+, those who identify as disabled, and younger LSEB individuals are well-represented in the study sample, which further means that the research offers valuable insights into the views and experiences of these groups. In terms of location, the sample does not provide in-depth insights into experiences across all UK nations and regions. However, it does allow us to understand differences between LSEB individuals who are based in and around Manchester, and those who are not.

There are groups whose views and experiences are insufficiently represented in the research. Colleagues in Logistics are under-represented, and there are no Logistics drivers and no participants from Legal Services in the final sample. While the study provides valuable insights into the intersections between race and LSEB at Co-op, ethnic minority individuals are under-represented in the study. Data on the SEB profile of these groups at Co-op (Logistics drivers, Legal Services, ethnic minorities) are not currently available. However, we may infer that the absence of participants from Legal Services reflects low LSEB representation in this business area, based on the SEB profile of the legal sector. By contrast,

we would expect a fairly high proportion of LSEB individuals among Logistics colleagues, and of LSEB individuals from ethnic minorities across the Co-op workforce. Lower participation among these groups may reflect research barriers related to time, capacity, and/or technology.

## To what extent are the study findings generalisable to members of the Co-op workforce from more advantaged SEBs?

Understanding the views and experiences of these individuals is beyond the scope of the study – as social mobility aims to improve opportunities and outcomes for those from LSEBs, the research focuses exclusively on this group. However, we can reasonably expect to find those from more advantaged SEBs across the groups described in the key findings below, based on similar pay, working conditions, prospects for career progression, and related to shared characteristics beyond SEB.

We can also expect important differences between LSEB and more advantaged SEB individuals in these groups. For example, the challenges facing LSEB individuals on lower pay and/or with unpredictable working hours will be more acute than more advantaged SEB individuals in similar conditions, who are more likely to have external safety nets such as financial support from their families. Some barriers to career progression may be shared across SEBs – for example, in teams with fewer opportunities for vertical progression. However, other barriers are likely to be specific or exacerbated for LSEB individuals – who may be less likely to learn about opportunities due to fewer professional networks, less financially able to move to a new location, or perceived as the wrong 'fit' for promotion in teams where leaders are typically from more advantaged SEBs.

25 The final sample of 93 participants took part across 10 interviews and nine focus group discussions. This exceeds the recommended sample size for robust qualitative research (nine to 17 interviews, or four to eight focus groups). Hennink, M. & Kaiser, B. N. (2022) Sample sizes for saturation in qualitative research: a systematic review of empirical tests. *Social Science & Medicine* 292. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114523>.



# Key findings

## 1. Co-op does support social mobility for LSEB individuals - but this is not yet a reality for all LSEB colleagues.

The research identified three groups of LSEB individuals at Co-op: those who are **struggling** and have not yet experienced social mobility; those who are **managing** and have conditional experiences of social mobility; and those who are **comfortable** and have experienced social mobility. Below, we characterise each of these three groups in terms of their financial security, job stability, and career progression opportunities at Co-op.

### Struggling

This group consists of LSEB colleagues experiencing financial insecurity and job instability, who feel they have limited or no opportunities for career progression. As a result, working at Co-op does not yet provide these LSEB colleagues with the building blocks required for social mobility.



**Who?** LSEB colleagues in lower-paid roles across the business who are not accessing Co-op's wider benefits or support schemes. The group includes disabled LSEB colleagues and LSEB colleagues with chronic health conditions who feel they have not received support with required adjustments in the workplace.



**Financial insecurity:** Although they are paid the Real Living Wage as a minimum,<sup>26</sup> during the cost-of-living crisis in 2022-23, LSEB colleagues in this group struggle to meet their basic needs - to afford food, heat their homes, meet housing costs, and pay their bills. These experiences are consistent with challenges identified by Co-op in its recent research on colleagues' financial wellbeing.<sup>27</sup>



**Job instability:** In Food Stores, these LSEB colleagues' experiences of financial insecurity are compounded by job instability, as their working hours are unpredictable, irregular, or insufficient to meet their financial needs. This causes stress due to over-work, and an inability to plan hours for other jobs.



**Barriers to career progression:** LSEB colleagues in Food Stores, Logistics, and younger LSEB colleagues in this group tend to feel pessimistic about their career prospects at Co-op. Barriers to career progression include a lack of information about career pathways, limited access to training and development, and limited opportunities to progress in local areas.

For those who have unsuccessfully applied for promotions in the past, another barrier is a lack of feedback on their performance, which means they are unsure how to improve and progress in future. This includes ethnic minority LSEB colleagues who have observed White colleagues being promoted while their own progression attempts have been unsuccessful.

<sup>26</sup> As a minimum, all Co-op colleagues are paid the [Real Living Wage](#), which means that wages are set and increased annually on the cost of living.

<sup>27</sup> Atay, A. & Walker, T. (2023) [Shifting sands: employer responsibility during the cost-of-living crisis](#). The Work Foundation: Lancaster University.

# Managing

This group includes LSEB colleagues and leaders currently experiencing a degree of financial security and/or job stability, who may have access to career progression opportunities. Working at Co-op is therefore providing these LSEB colleagues and leaders with the building blocks for social mobility, but the foundations are not fully secure.



**Who?** LSEB colleagues in lower-paid roles and LSEB leaders in higher-paid roles, across business areas. On top of their base pay, these LSEB colleagues and leaders are typically accessing Co-op's wider benefits and support schemes.



**Some financial insecurity:** While LSEB colleagues in this group are in lower-paid roles, they have access to a degree of financial security through Co-op's benefits and support schemes. In particular, targeted cost-of-living payments for those in the lowest-paid roles and 30% member discounts on own-brand products help these LSEB colleagues to meet their basic needs. Across business areas, higher-paid LSEB leaders in this group are similarly reliant on the 30% member discounts and schemes such as Wagestream to meet their financial responsibilities. While Co-op's additional benefits allow these LSEB colleagues and leaders to be 'managing' rather than 'struggling', they are not financially secure enough to plan for the future, and have little to no disposable income.



**Some job stability:** Across business areas, LSEB colleagues in this group have a degree of job stability through guaranteed and/or reliable hours. However, Support Centre LSEB colleagues and leaders in this group can experience job instability due to the risk of redundancy during organisational restructures.



**A range of career progression experiences:** There are LSEB colleagues in this group who face barriers to career progression at Co-op, as described above for the 'struggling' group. However, LSEB colleagues and leaders in this group are more optimistic about their career prospects when they have ongoing conversations about professional development with their managers, access to training and development opportunities, and hope to take advantage of "squiggly career" paths at Co-op. LSEB colleagues and leaders are more likely to feel optimistic about career progression when there are opportunities in their local areas. This is particularly true for those who live in and around Manchester, and those who are able to work from home.



# Comfortable

This group consists of LSEB leaders and senior leaders experiencing financial security and job stability, who either have clear opportunities for career progression, or have largely fulfilled their career ambitions. Working at Co-op has provided social mobility for these LSEB leaders and senior leaders, who feel they have a significantly higher standard of living compared to their



**Who?** LSEB leaders and senior leaders in higher-paid roles across business areas, who are on permanent contracts and accessing Co-op's wider benefits and support schemes.



**Financial security:** Across the business, these LSEB leaders and senior leaders feel they are fairly compensated for their work, and are able to afford a decent standard of living. In addition to covering their basic needs and meeting their financial responsibilities, they have some disposable income for leisure and holidays, and are able to plan for the future through savings and/or pension contributions.



**Job stability:** LSEB leaders and senior leaders in this group gain a sense of job stability from their permanent contracts, and safety nets such as notice periods and remuneration payments to compensate for redundancy. Feeling that Co-op is being transparent about its financial situation and planned restructures also helps LSEB leaders and senior leaders to feel more secure in their jobs.



**Career progression:** There are LSEB senior leaders in this group who reflect the 'shopfloor to management' route to social mobility which is often described - but not always observed - in the retail industry. For all LSEB senior leaders, key enablers to career progression have included developing transferable skills, knowledge, and professional qualifications through formal training schemes, and "squiggly careers" which involved roles across a range of Co-op business areas and teams. Formal and informal support from mentors and sponsors was also vital to help LSEB senior leaders overcome a range of barriers on their career journeys. Key support included providing information and encouragement to pursue a range of career paths, and helping LSEB senior leaders to overcome imposter syndrome in increasingly middle-class spaces as they progressed in their careers.



## 2. When Co-op puts its values and D&I commitments into practice, LSEB individuals feel a high sense of inclusion and belonging. However, those from LSEBs can experience exclusion in the workplace related to their SEB and a range of other characteristics.

Co-op's values of cooperation over competition - reflected in giving back to members and the community, prioritising workers' rights, D&I commitments, and campaigning on social issues - are a strong driver of inclusion and belonging for LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders. LSEB senior leaders also see Co-op's values as a strong foundation for promoting social mobility.



**Inclusion and belonging:** Across work levels, LSEB individuals are more likely to feel included when they are valued, respected, and heard by their peers and managers, when they are kept informed about developments in the business, and when they feel accepted and understood for who they are. When they see diversity and inclusion in their teams and at senior levels, and when diverse cultures are celebrated by Co-op, a wide range of LSEB individuals feel a sense of inclusion and belonging. This includes ethnic minority, LGBTQ+, and disabled LSEB individuals, as well as LSEB individuals who are White, cisgender, heterosexual, and non-disabled. LSEB colleagues, leaders, and senior leaders feel a sense of belonging when they personally share Co-op's values, when they feel confident Co-op is putting these values into practice, and when Co-op invests in their professional development.



**Exclusion and disconnect:** LSEB individuals across Co-op also report experiences of exclusion in the workplace. There are LSEB individuals who experience bias and harassment based on their accents, and who are excluded from team-based activities due to financial barriers. Across work levels and business areas, LSEB individuals who identify as ethnic minority, disabled, female (including trans women), and LGBTQ+ face experiences of bias and harassment based on these characteristics, while others report exclusion based on their age, caring responsibilities, and religion. When managers and team members fail to support LSEB individuals facing these experiences, this further drives a sense of exclusion. Unsurprisingly, LSEB individuals who face bias and harassment are less likely to feel a sense of belonging at Co-op. This can lead to LSEB individuals feeling they have to mask their accents or other characteristics to 'fit in' at work. LSEB colleagues can also feel disconnected from their teams when they are in lone working roles, largely working from home, and due to limited (or unaffordable) opportunities to socialise with their team members.

# Recommendations

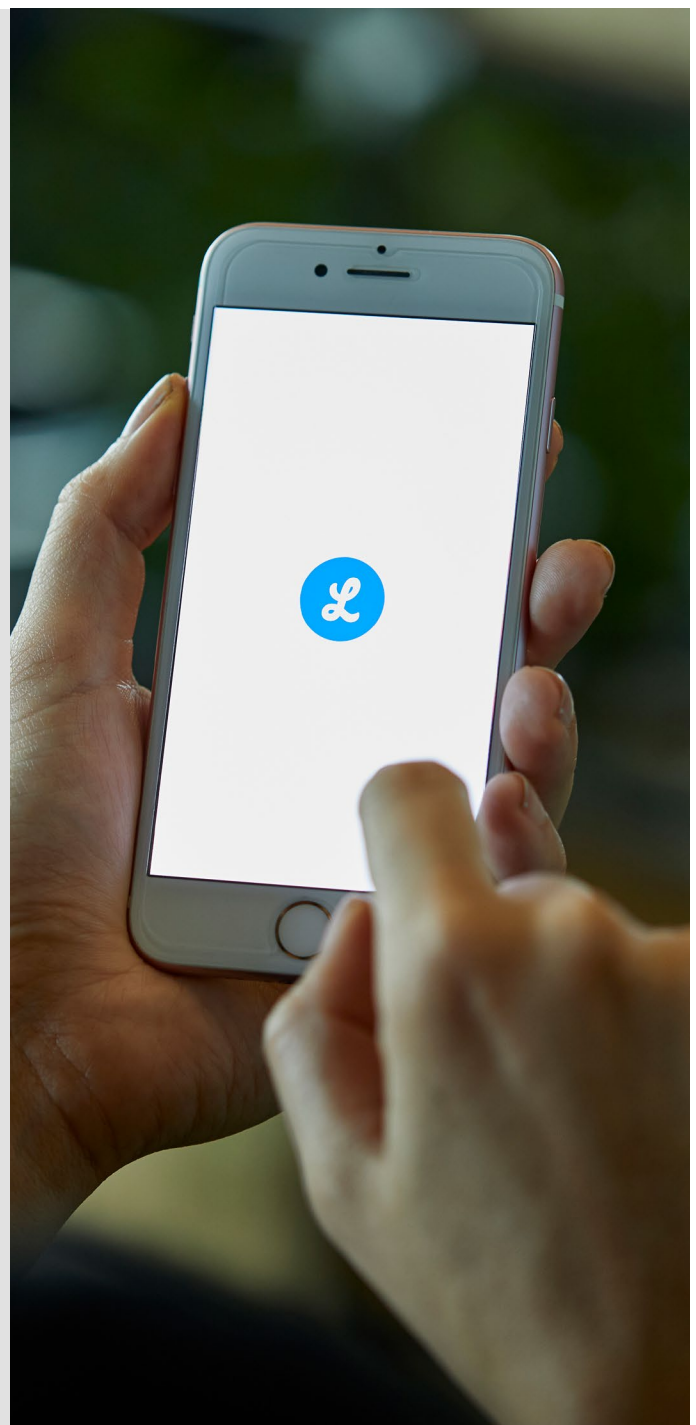
The key research findings show that Co-op has made social mobility a reality for many of its LSEB leaders and senior leaders. However, this does not mean that becoming a leader or a senior leader is the only route to social mobility at Co-op. Instead, Co-op can support social mobility across all work levels by providing financial security, job stability, and fair progression opportunities to all LSEB individuals.

The recommendations include targeted actions for LSEB individuals, and actions that will benefit employees from all socio-economic backgrounds. Taken together, the recommendations aim to ensure that no-one at Co-op is struggling in terms of financial security or job stability, all employees have fair opportunities for career progression, and that inclusion and belonging are realised across the business.

## 1. Continue and widen access to financial support for the lowest-paid colleagues.

LSEB colleagues and leaders are more likely to experience financial security when they access Co-op's wider benefits and support schemes on top of their pay. Continuing these schemes is therefore vital, and Co-op has already extended its cost-of-living support schemes (such as 30% off member discounts) to December 2023. Over the past two years, Co-op has targeted pay increases to lower-paid colleagues during Annual Salary Reviews, and continuing this will also improve financial security for LSEB colleagues.

Improving awareness and access to Co-op's benefits and support schemes is key to ensure as many colleagues as possible transition from 'struggling' to 'managing' financially, whether they are from LSEBs or more advantaged SEBs. Access could be widened by providing dedicated time during working hours for managers to explain available schemes, and for colleagues to register to and explore available support. This will overcome time, capacity, and technological barriers that currently prevent lower-paid colleagues from exploring support schemes outside work. Accessibility could also be increased by offering a single account through which all Co-op benefits and schemes can be accessed, rather than requiring multiple accounts.





## 2. Improve transparency and communication about working hours for colleagues on variable-hours contracts.

For Food Stores colleagues on variable hours contracts, working hours are allocated based on the takings of the store and covering absence. This means that matching colleagues' required hours may not always be feasible for Co-op. However, transparency and communication about the variability of available hours in each store can be improved, including by providing colleagues with sufficient notice about any changes to their working hours. Predictable and regular working hours reduce stress, improve job stability, and support financial security for Stores colleagues by allowing them to plan their time more effectively (including hours with other employers, where required). Job stability could also be improved for Stores colleagues by matching contracts to actual hours worked, rather than regularly requiring overtime.

Across business areas, job stability for colleagues and leaders can be further improved through transparency and communication about organisational restructures. LSEB colleagues and leaders are more likely to experience job stability if they feel they can trust Co-op to provide updates about the organisation's financial situation, future restructures, and any potential redundancies. Whether related to working hours or restructures, these improvements to job stability will benefit all colleagues and leaders. They will also provide important building blocks for social mobility to LSEB individuals, who are more likely to be negatively impacted by insecure employment conditions.



### 3. Facilitate more pathways for career progression, and ensure fair and transparent processes.

For all colleagues, lateral progression opportunities offer a range of benefits. Exposure to different teams and business areas can help colleagues to develop transferrable skills, support informed decisions about career progression, and increase a sense of belonging to the organisation. To realise these benefits, more secondment opportunities could be offered as part of colleagues' training and development. When vacancies are advertised across the business, relevant transferable skills could be highlighted, to encourage colleagues to consider a lateral move. During organisational restructures, lateral redeployment can also offer job stability as an alternative to redundancy.

Ensuring all line managers are facilitating newly introduced "career conversations" is an important way for all colleagues to have fair access to development opportunities. Additionally, targeted social mobility initiatives can address barriers faced by LSEB individuals and improve socio-economic diversity at management and leadership levels. A targeted mentoring and coaching scheme could help LSEB individuals to improve confidence and increase professional networks, while a targeted development programme could support high-potential LSEB colleagues to progress to WL5 and above.

Fair, transparent processes for internal recruitment and promotion will also help to overcome progression barriers faced by LSEB colleagues and leaders. Providing all unsuccessful candidates with clear, constructive feedback will support colleagues to understand how they can improve and progress in future. A combination of contextualised and anonymised approaches to internal recruitment could also support positive action for LSEB individuals and other minoritised groups currently under-represented at senior levels.



#### 4. Draw on Co-op's core values and engage social mobility role models to improve inclusion and belonging.

Co-op's organisational culture, values, and commitments to D&I are already a strong source of inclusion and belonging for LSEB individuals across the business. Demonstrating how these values are being put into practice by communicating concrete examples - including progress towards achieving D&I commitments - can further foster inclusion and belonging for colleagues across minoritised and more advantaged groups. Senior leaders' visible participation in D&I and community-based activities can also demonstrate that Co-op is putting its values into practice. When it comes to social mobility, LSEB senior leaders' career journeys can be shared to inspire LSEB colleagues' own progression at Co-op, and LSEB senior leaders can be engaged as advocates for social mobility across the business.

D&I training for managers can be used to put Co-op's intersectional approach to social mobility into practice. This can include helping managers to understand how to support LSEB colleagues to overcome the specific barriers they face - from career progression to bullying and harassment in the workplace - and how these barriers may be exacerbated for LSEB colleagues who identify as ethnic minority, disabled, female, and/or LGBTQ+.

To include those who feel they are 'left behind' by D&I efforts, Co-op can use its data-driven approach to explain the need for targeted schemes for minoritised groups. For example, the low representation of ethnic minority and/or LSEB colleagues in management and senior roles illustrates the need for targeted career progression initiatives. To strengthen support for these schemes, Co-op should develop a core offer that provides financial security, job stability, and career progression opportunities for all, to realise its aim to empower all colleagues to realise their own version of success.



# Technical Appendix

# Recruitment, sampling and data collection

## Stage 1: Senior leader interviews (n = 10)

In September 2022, senior leaders at Co-op who self-identified as LSEB based on their parents' occupation and/or their educational background were invited to participate in in-depth individual interviews. A total of 20 eligible senior leaders expressed an interest in being interviewed; to select the target sample of 10 senior leaders, a purposive approach was used to achieve a sample that was gender inclusive and represented a range of business areas.

Interviews were conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams in November - December 2022, and typically lasted around 60 minutes. Each interview explored senior leaders' educational backgrounds and career journeys to date, as well as their views and experiences of financial security, job stability, career progression, inclusion, and belonging over the course of their careers. This included their current and previous roles at Co-op, and with any previous employers.

## Stage 2: Colleague and leader focus group discussions (n = 43)

In January 2023, colleagues and leaders who were interested in participating in focus group discussions were invited to complete a recruitment survey to determine their eligibility. Information about the study was sent out to Co-op's entire workforce, through internal communication channels, the Shifts app used by all Food Stores colleagues, via colleague networks, and was also cascaded through team meetings across the business.

After an initial screening question to identify LSEB individuals (parental occupation at age 14), eligible participants were asked to provide further information related to their business area, job role, and personal characteristics. This allowed the research team to sample LSEB eligible individuals for focus group discussions organised by business area and/or work levels. One focus group was reserved for ethnic minority individuals (who expressed an interest in participating in a group focused on race and ethnicity), and another was reserved for younger colleagues (aged 16 to 30). Where focus group discussions were over-subscribed, a purposive sampling approach was used to achieve a gender-inclusive sample, and to represent a range of job roles and geographical locations.

**Nine focus groups were conducted virtually in February - March 2023, with the following groups:**

Ethnic minority colleagues	Food Operations, Logistics & Support Centre leaders	Food Stores & Logistics colleagues (A)	Food Stores & Logistics colleagues (B)	Funeralcare Homes colleagues	Logistics & Support Centre colleagues	Support Centre leaders	Support Centre leaders	Younger colleagues
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While separate focus group discussions had been planned for Logistics colleagues, these groups were under-subscribed and/or could not go ahead due to insufficient attendance. Based on their availability, interested Logistics colleagues were therefore invited to join two focus group discussions with Food Stores colleagues, and one with Support Centre colleagues.

Each focus group discussion lasted between 60 to 90 minutes, and explored colleagues' and leaders' views and experiences of financial security, job stability, career progression, inclusion, and belonging in current and any previous roles at Co-op. As discussions covered potentially sensitive areas, such as experiences of exclusion in the workplace, all participants were provided with links to LifeWorks, Co-op's free Employee Assistance Programme, so they could access confidential wellbeing support after the focus group discussions if needed.

### Stage 3: Colleague and leader follow-up survey (n = 39)

Our target sample size for focus group discussions was 60 to 80 participants. However, in spite of over-recruitment to reach this target, low attendance for certain business areas and work levels meant this target was not achieved by the end of the planned fieldwork period. This was primarily due to barriers to participation among colleagues in Food Stores and Logistics, such as last-minute changes to work shifts and technology-related issues. In March 2023, we therefore invited all LSEB eligible and interested colleagues and leaders to complete an online survey, as an alternative means to participate in the research. The survey included closed and open-text questions exploring the same topics as focus group discussions, and was available for completion over three weeks in March 2023.

### Stages 1 to 3: final sample

Across the three stages described above, a total of 311 Co-op employees expressed an interest in the research (Figure 3). Of this initial group, 205 were eligible as LSEB individuals, and 200 were invited to participate in the research (after excluding five individuals who asked not to be contacted about the research following their initial expression of interest). Of those who were invited to participate, 93 individuals took part in the study.



Figure 3: Study recruitment: numbers of interested, eligible, invited, and final participants

## Data management and analysis



Qualitative data from interviews, focus group discussions, and open-text survey questions were managed and analysed using the Framework approach,<sup>29</sup> which allowed systematic analysis within and across cases.

An iterative thematic approach to analysis focused on identifying similarities and differences between work levels, business areas, and based on characteristics of interest including age, disability, ethnicity, gender identity, and location.

<sup>29</sup> Gale, N.K., Heath, G., Cameron, E., Rashid, S. & Redwood, S. (2013) Using the framework method for the analysis of qualitative data in multi-disciplinary health research. *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 13 (177). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-13-117>.

# Sample description

## Business area, work levels and location

Food Stores / Operations (49%) and Support Centre (29%) were the most represented business areas in the final study sample. 10% of participants came from Logistics, and 10% from Life Services (Funeralcare and Insurance) (Figure 4). Colleagues from Food Stores were the most represented group, followed by leaders in Support Centre.

## Personal characteristics

Participants were typically aged 31 to 60, White, cisgender, and heterosexual (Figure 6, Figure 7, Figure 9, Figure 10). 57% of participants identified as female, with 41% male and 2% non-binary (Figure 8). A third of participants (34%) identified as disabled (Figure 11). Just under half of the participants had caring responsibilities (47%), with 42% reporting no caring responsibilities (Figure 12).

LGBT+ colleagues were well-represented in the sample, with 18% identifying as LGB+ (Figure 10) and 4% identifying as transgender (Figure 9). Ethnic minority colleagues were under-represented in the final sample - only 5% of participants identified as ethnic minority (Figure 7), compared to 5 to 12% across work levels in the wider Co-op population.

## Reporting conventions

The figures present data provided by participants via the study recruitment survey. As interview participants were not asked to complete this survey, they were categorised as 'unknown' during demographic data analysis, unless this information was offered during interviews. For all other participants, demographic data were available unless they selected 'prefer not to say' during the recruitment survey. As a result of rounding, percentages in Figures 6 to 12 may not sum exactly to 100.

**Figure 4).** Colleagues from Food Stores were the most represented group, followed by leaders in Support Centre.

In terms of location, the sample included participants from across the UK, with the highest proportion located in the South West (23%) and North West (20%, likely reflecting the location of Co-op's head office) (Figure 5).

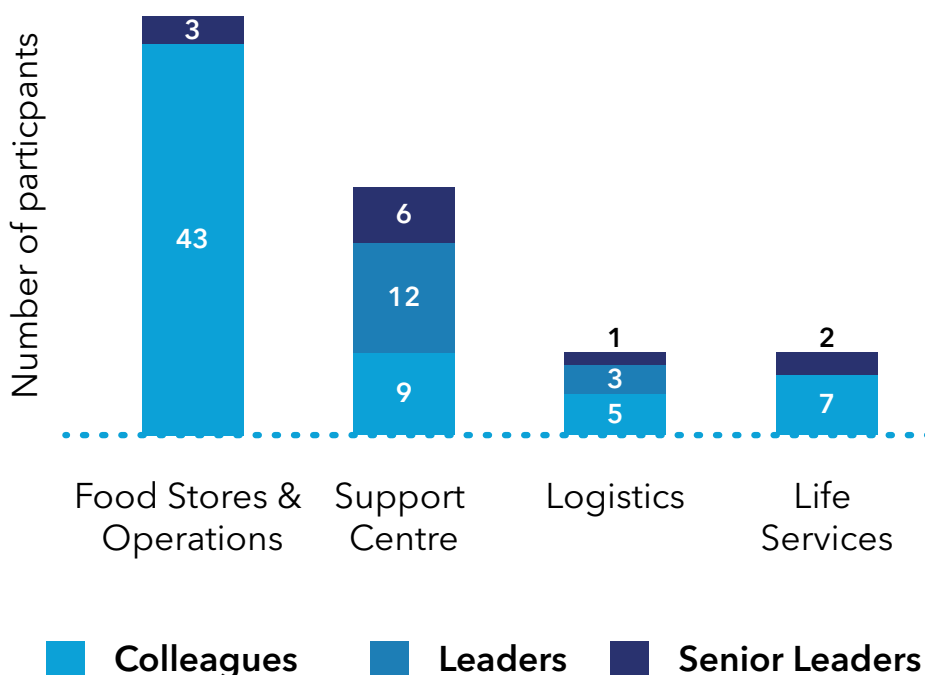


Figure 4: Study sample by business area and work level

Figure 5: Study sample by location

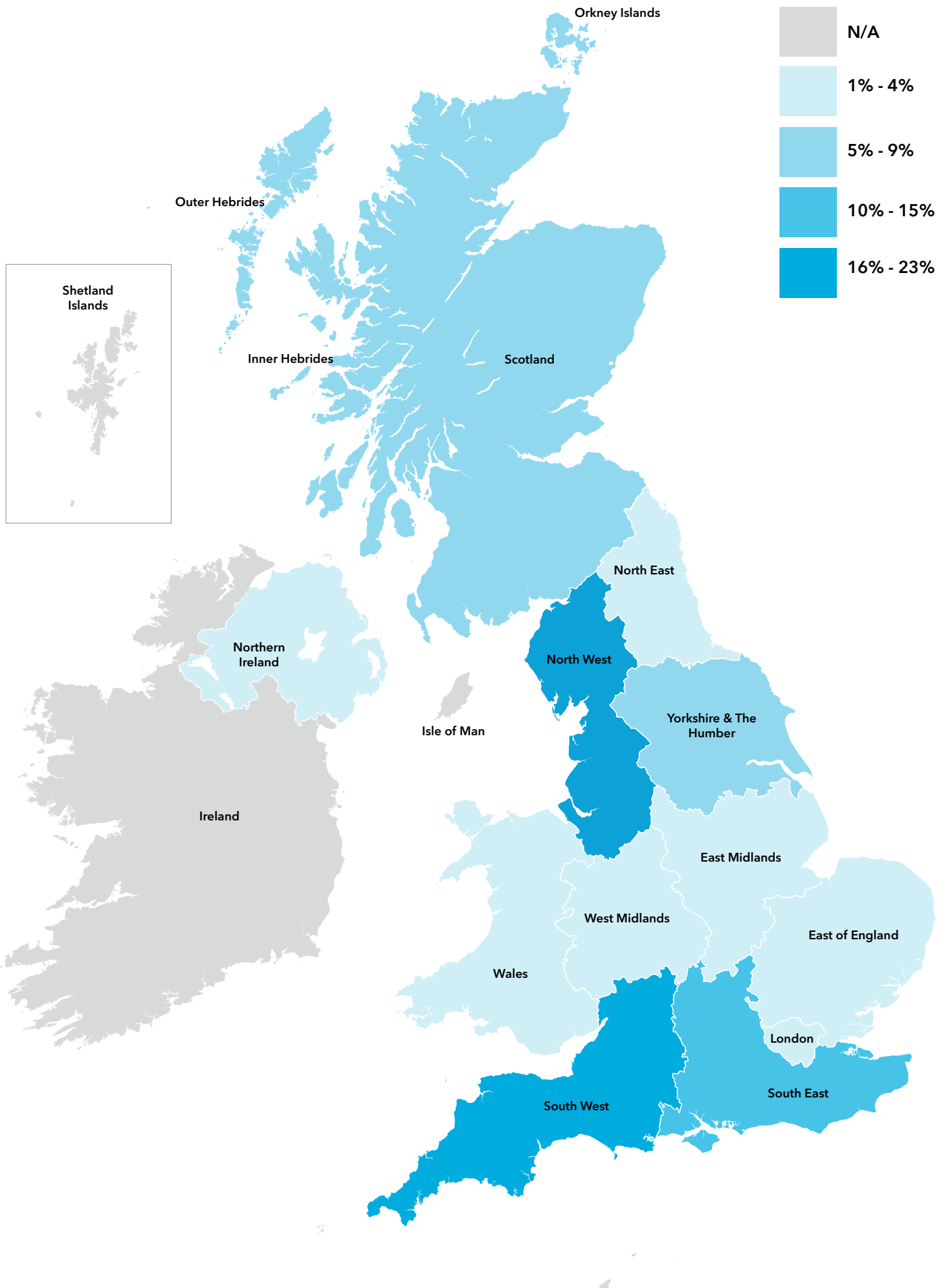


Figure 6: Study sample by age

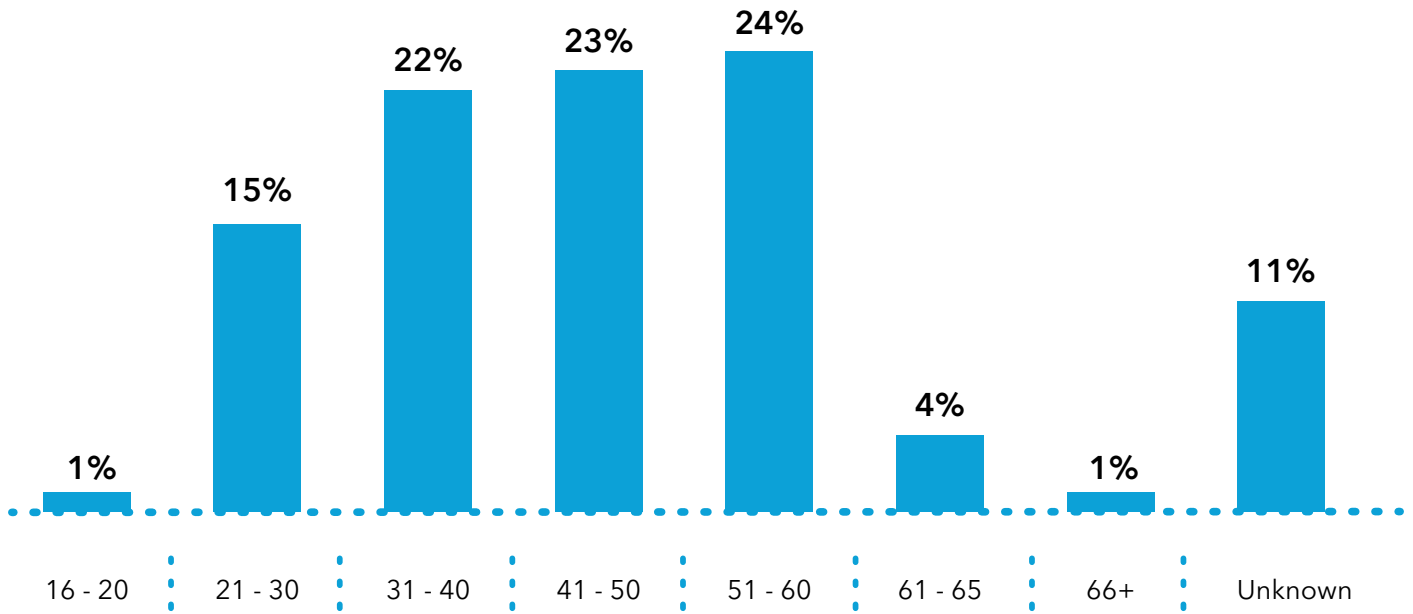


Figure 7: Study sample by ethnicity

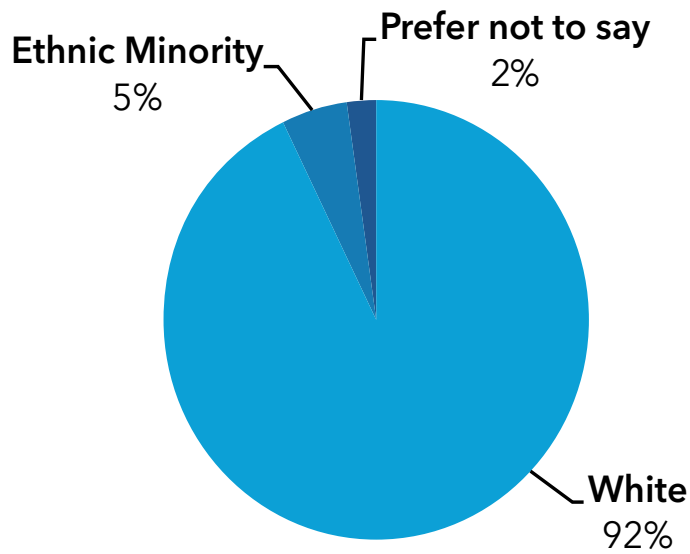


Figure 8: Study sample by gender

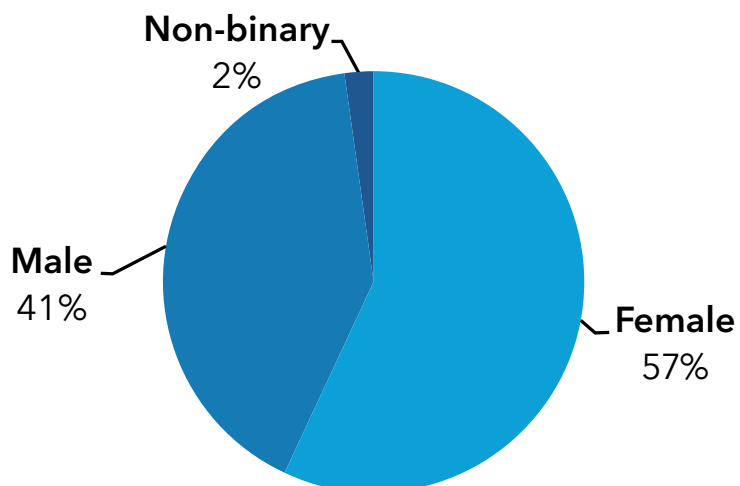


Figure 9: Study sample by gender identity

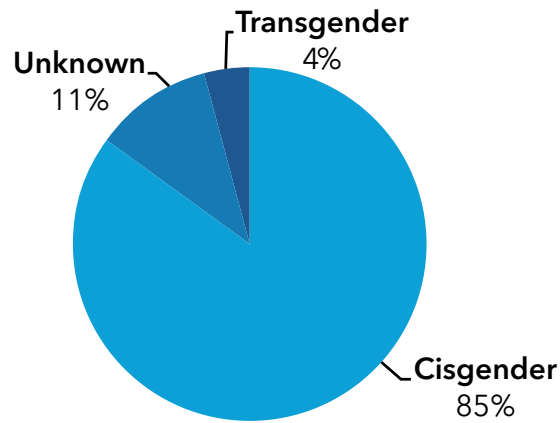


Figure 10: Study sample by sexual orientation

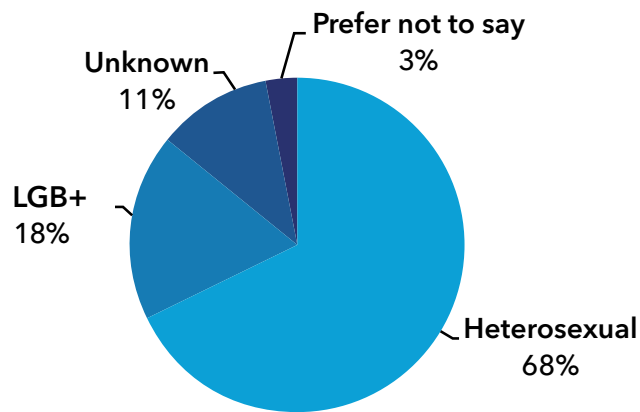


Figure 11: Study sample by disability

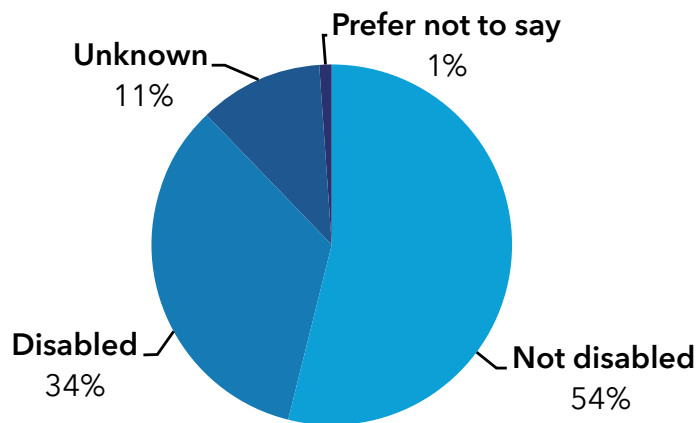
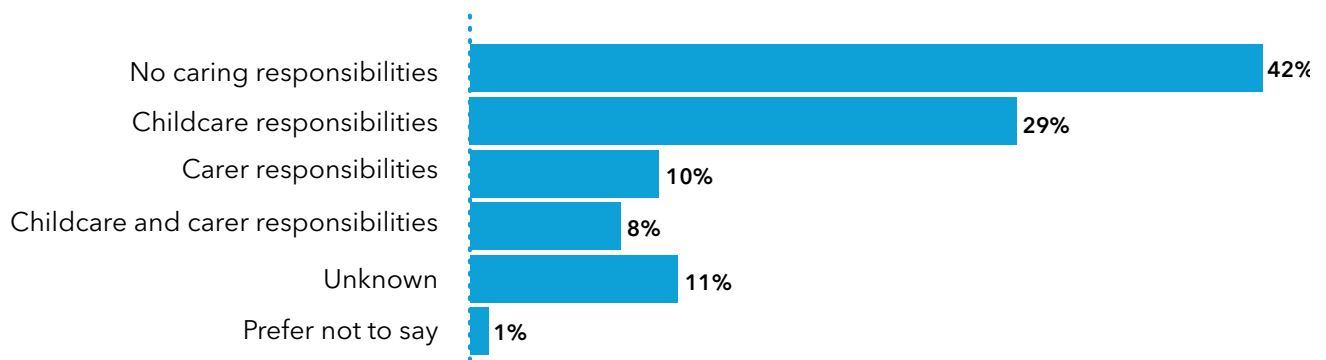


Figure 12: Study sample by caring responsibilities



For more information visit:  
[coop.co.uk/social-mobility](https://coop.co.uk/social-mobility)

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