

SOCIAL MOBILITY EMPLOYER TOOLKIT



OWNED BY YOU.
RIGHT BY YOU.

FOREWORD

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At Co-op, togetherness is part of who we are – it’s in our DNA. Social mobility is a cause I care deeply about because it’s not just about fairness; it’s about unlocking potential.

We’ve learned that when businesses take meaningful steps to promote social mobility, it can transform lives, workplaces, and communities. That’s why I’m proud to share Co-op’s experience.

While we’re still on our journey, I hope this toolkit offers valuable insights to help you take your own steps. Together, we can build a society where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

”



Shirine Khoury-Haq
CEO, Co-op Group

WHY IS CO-OP ADVOCATING FOR BETTER SOCIAL MOBILITY?

At our 2021 AGM, Co-op members made it clear - they wanted us to challenge inequality and advocate for change. Their call to action inspired us to go further in addressing the barriers that prevent people from reaching their potential.

The reality is stark: too often, a person's background, whether that's gender, ethnicity, disability, or socioeconomic status, determines their opportunities. Those from less privileged backgrounds are nearly twice as likely to end up in lower-paying roles, and that simply isn't right. At Co-op, we've committed to making a difference. In 2023, we partnered with the charity Making the Leap to explore what social mobility, inclusion, and belonging look like for our colleagues.

In 2024, we published our first socioeconomic pay gap report and worked with Demos on The Opportunity Effect to explore the economic benefits of improving social mobility. We've learned a lot along the way, and while we're still learning, we want to share our experiences to help others make meaningful changes. By working together, we can create workplaces where everyone has the chance to succeed.

WHAT YOU'LL FIND HERE:

This toolkit shares lessons from Co-op's journey over the past three years. It focuses on the most practical and relevant topics for organisations just beginning to prioritise social mobility. We're not claiming to have all the answers, but we hope these insights will help make the path smoother for others. By taking action, we can ensure more colleagues benefit from initiatives that promote social mobility.

If you'd like to discuss anything further or have additional topics in mind, feel free to reach out to socialmobility@coop.co.uk.

YOU'LL FIND INFORMATION ON:

In October 2024 we launched the Backgrounds into the Foreground campaign. You can access our Communications toolkit by [clicking here](#).

DATA COLLECTION

Collecting data is the foundation of any meaningful effort to promote social mobility. Understanding the socioeconomic background (SEB) of your workforce, alongside protected characteristics, is essential for building a comprehensive picture of diversity within your organisation.

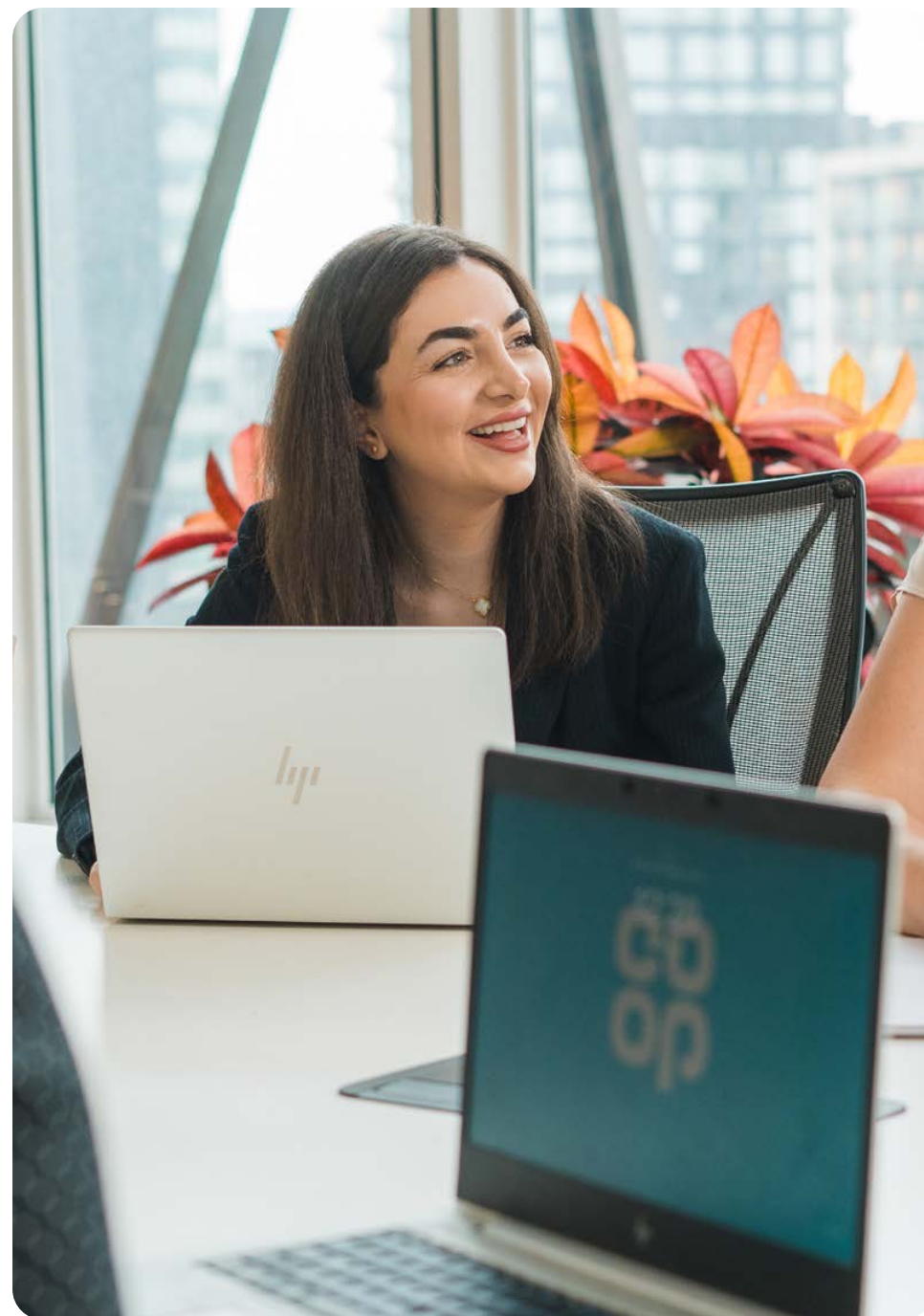
It's about knowing who is getting in and who is getting on. Data also helps identify how these characteristics intersect and contribute to disadvantage, enabling you to prioritise and tailor interventions effectively. Without it, it's impossible to measure progress or understand whether the actions you're taking are making a difference.

THIS INCLUDES:

**QUANTITATIVE
DATA**

**QUALITATIVE
DATA**

**WHAT WE HAVE
LEARNED**



QUANTITATIVE DATA

Quantitative data provides the numbers you need to understand your workforce's socioeconomic diversity. By analysing this data, organisations can identify representation gaps at various levels, compare against national benchmarks, and uncover where interventions are most needed.

A key question recommended by the Social Mobility Commission (SMC) is:

"What was the occupation of your main household earner when you were aged about 14?"

Supplementary questions can provide deeper insights, such as:

- "Which type of school did you attend for the most time between ages 11 and 16?"
- "If you finished school after 1980, were you eligible for free school meals during your school years?"
- "Did either of your parents attend university by the time you were 18?" (recommended for graduate schemes only).

The SMC offers a wealth of resources, including webinars and toolkits, to help organisations collect, analyse, and benchmark SEB data. Links to these resources are included in the **Useful Information** section below.

TOP TIPS FOR COLLECTING QUANTITATIVE DATA

TEST FIRST

Trial data collection through an engagement survey before embedding questions into your HR system. This can help gauge understanding and improve response rates.

INTEGRATE INTO RECRUITMENT

Adding SEB questions to your recruitment process not only sets a clear tone about the importance of diversity but can also increase completion rates. Provide a transparent explanation about why the data is being collected.

TAILOR TO YOUR NEEDS

Select questions that are relevant to your organisation's structure and processes. For instance, you may only ask the key SEB question during recruitment but include additional questions in your HR system for current colleagues.

SET TARGETS

It's normal for completion rates to be low when introducing a new characteristic. Setting ambitious targets can help to keep momentum. Aim to match completion rates for protected characteristics, but recognise that this may take a number of years.

QUALITATIVE DATA

“DATA PROVES, STORIES MOVE”

TOP TIPS FOR USING QUALITATIVE DATA

ENGAGE LEADERSHIP

Share detailed findings with senior leaders to highlight the impact of SEB on progression and decision-making. Personal stories can resonate more deeply than numbers alone, building greater understanding and empathy.

WORK WITH EXTERNAL PARTNERS

If budget allows, partnering with a social mobility expert ensures robust insights and reassures colleagues about anonymity, leading to more open sharing.

COMBINE DATA

Integrating quantitative and qualitative data unlocks a deeper understanding and allows you to create truly impactful strategies.

Quantitative data provides the numbers, but qualitative data gives you the stories behind them. By capturing colleagues’ lived experiences, you can understand how socioeconomic background affects their careers, decisions, and progression.

At Co-op, our initial quantitative data revealed that colleagues from lower SEBs were underrepresented at senior levels and less likely to achieve promotions or top performance ratings. To uncover the reasons, we partnered with Making the Leap to conduct focus groups, online surveys, and interviews with colleagues and leaders. These insights informed our social mobility strategy and commitments, shaping initiatives to address key challenges and opportunities.

In the research we asked colleagues the following questions:

- To what extent does Co-op support social mobility, inclusion and belonging for LSEB individuals?
- To what extent do social mobility, inclusion, & belonging vary by work level and business area?
- To what extent do social mobility, inclusion, & belonging vary by age, disability, ethnicity, gender, location, and other key characteristics?

We used our findings in conjunction with our quantitative data to inform our social mobility commitments and strategy, some of which are detailed in subsequent sections of this toolkit.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED:

LEADERSHIP ADVOCACY

Having visible leadership support, especially from operational leaders, significantly increases colleague participation and trust in your initiatives.

RADICAL TRANSPARENCY

Share your findings publicly, even when they highlight areas for improvement. This approach builds trust and accountability while demonstrating your commitment to action.

COMMUNICATION MATTERS

Be transparent about why you're collecting data and how it will be used. Reassure colleagues that responses are voluntary, confidential, and only used to drive positive change.

INTERSECTIONALITY UNLOCKS INSIGHTS

Collecting SEB data opens the door to understanding how socioeconomic background intersects with other characteristics like gender or ethnicity, leading to a more holistic inclusion strategy.

USEFUL INFORMATION

- Social Mobility Commission Resources: Access webinars, toolkits, and detailed guidance here: [Social Mobility Commission Employer Resources](#).
- Co-op's Research Report: Learn more about our social mobility journey: [Social Mobility at Co-op](#)

PAY GAP REPORTING AND STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

On average, professionals from working-class backgrounds earn 12% less per year than their more privileged peers in the same roles. This disparity means they effectively work one in eight days for free. In 2024, this translated to millions of professionals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds effectively stopping being paid on 17th November—a stark reminder of the need for change.

THIS INCLUDES:

**WHAT OUR PAY
GAP REPORT
TOLD US**

**TOP TIPS
FOR PAY GAP
REPORTING**

**WHAT WE HAVE
LEARNED**





Pay gap reporting compares the average rates of pay between different groups of people. While gender pay gap reporting has been mandatory for employers with more than 250 employees since 2017, other types of pay gap reporting, such as ethnicity and disability, remain voluntary (although this is anticipated to change through the Equality (Race and Disability) Bill. Socioeconomic pay gap reporting is similarly voluntary but is increasingly recognised as best practice, particularly when it incorporates intersectionality.

At Co-op, our journey began with the publication of our internal research report, Social Mobility, Inclusion and Belonging at the Co-op. This provided the foundation for our first socioeconomic pay gap report in 2024. Combining quantitative and qualitative data has helped us set clear goals for 2025 and beyond while driving internal conversations and support for our social mobility work.

WHAT OUR PAY GAP REPORT TOLD US

We've produced our analysis using the same data set and approach that we've used to produce our 2024 Gender and Ethnicity Pay Gap reports. We have 55,124 pay-relevant colleagues. In 2024, 32,483 colleagues shared their SEB with us, which represents 59% of our workforce (an increase of 11% from the previous year). Our completion rate at the time of writing stands at 81% across the organisation.

5.2%

is the mean pay gap between Professional and LSEB colleagues at the Co-op

0.3%

is the median pay gap between Professional and LSEB colleagues at the Co-op

59%

of our workforce (27,385 colleagues) disclosed their socio economic background

In the data set used to complete the analysis, the median role is a Team Leader (TL) in a food store which explains why the gaps are very small, as we pay them the same fixed hourly rate.

Our most powerful findings came in the intersectionality of SEB and gender. Our biggest pay gap is between female colleagues from a lower SEB and their professional counterparts, which we know is due to representation at more senior levels of the organisation.

You can access our full report including our actions in [Useful information](#).

TOP TIPS

1. BE SENSITIVE

Remember, the numbers represent real people. Be sensitive to this in your communications - colleagues who make up the most marginalised groups in your organisation may find it difficult to hear that they are disadvantaged.

2. PRESENTATION IS KEY

Think about how you present your report to engage your audience, particularly your colleagues who may not ordinarily read pay gap reports. We found using case studies and creating a one page summary helped us to generate interest and reach a wider audience.

3. SOCIALISE THE FINDINGS AND ACTION PLAN

Share the report actively. Use team meetings, huddles, and other forums to explain the findings and, most importantly, your action plan to address gaps.

4. SHARE THE POSITIVES

Share the good news as well as the challenges. For example, although our report shows that we do have pay gaps at the Co-op, it also shows that our operational roles - which are spread across many different communities in the UK - can be real vehicles for social mobility. Share the good news as well as focussing on what can be improved.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

DON'T WAIT FOR PERFECTION

Pay gap reporting guidance suggests that a 70% completion rate is the recommended required minimum - this would have meant a delay of at least twelve months for us. Our decision to go ahead with a lower completion rate has not been detrimental to our positioning and has provided an excellent starting point to build on with our 2024 report.

RADICAL TRANSPARENCY

As referenced in the data section, it can feel uncomfortable publicly sharing insight that may not meet your expectations. Sharing not only drives accountability ("what gets measured gets done"), but it can also reassure others facing similar challenges and encourage them to take action.

PLAN AHEAD

Introducing a brand new report of this kind to the organisation requires a lot of stakeholder engagement. It can feel exposing and you may be questioned about both the value and required effort to create it. Start your conversations with the relevant internal teams early, and leave plenty of time for approvals and revisions ahead of the publication date.

LEARN FROM OTHERS

As part of our initial research we read socioeconomic pay gap reports from other organisations, alongside the more technical guidance activity. This helped us to understand how we wanted our report to look and feel for the reader.

USEFUL INFORMATION

- The [Social Mobility Foundation](#) have a wealth of useful contextual information as well as a step-by-step guide to creating your own report, created in collaboration with The Bridge Group
- [Our pay gap report](#) and a [one-page summary](#)

COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT

The most important advocacy work begins with your own colleagues. Engaging credible leaders to become advocates for your social mobility strategy is critical, especially in the early stages, to demonstrate that it is an organisational priority – not just another HR initiative.

THIS INCLUDES:

**INTERNAL
ADVOCACY,
COMMUNICATIONS
AND ENGAGEMENT**

**EXTERNAL
ADVOCACY**

**WHAT WE HAVE
LEARNED**





INTERNAL ADVOCACY, COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT

It's often said that you can't be what you can't see. As socioeconomic background is often described as the hidden facet of diversity, visible leadership is key. When colleagues see leaders openly sharing their own backgrounds and experiences and championing social mobility, it can provoke curiosity and encourage others to feel comfortable sharing their own data and talking about their experiences.

At Co-op, our 2023 internal research report, [Social Mobility, Inclusion and Belonging at The Co-op](#) was a turning point in our internal advocacy journey. It amplified the voices of colleagues from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and spotlighted leaders who shared their personal stories to inspire others. This insight has continued to inform our broader engagement strategy, helping us share relevant findings with senior leaders and colleagues across the organisation.

From a communications perspective, ensuring the narrative remains consistent and accessible across all colleague groups is critical. Internal advocacy is most impactful when supported by clear, engaging content tailored to specific audiences. For example, operational colleagues may benefit more from videos or huddle-style updates, while senior leaders may prefer concise data-driven insights that align with strategic goals. Consistently framing communications around the "why" behind the strategy helps embed key messages across the organisation.

TOP TIPS

1.

ENGAGE USING COLLEAGUE VOICES

Hearing from colleagues in their own words is one of the most powerful tools to engage both colleagues and leaders.

2.

SPEAK THEIR LANGUAGE

Consider the different colleague groups and tailor your communications to meet their preferences.

3.

BRING IT BACK TO 'WHY'

Use a consistent, positive narrative and reiterate key messages from your strategy in every communication to embed them with colleagues.

4.

MIX IT UP BY USING DIFFERENT METHODS AND MEDIA

Use a variety of media for your communications. Videos can be particularly powerful for front line colleagues working in more operational roles.



EXTERNAL ADVOCACY

Co-op's member-owned model drives us to take action to drive social change on behalf of our members. In 2021, we launched an external social mobility campaign and we have consistently used our platform to speak publicly to Government, media and employers and other stakeholders on the issues we believe can have the most impact on social mobility in the UK.

One of our fundamental principles is to share all our actions and learnings with other employers, and particularly with our supplier base. We regularly share information and encourage action with our suppliers, including through a quarterly newsletter and an annual supplier conference where we have time dedicated to social mobility. We believe in the power of partnerships and collaboration.

Since 2021 we have built relationships with key stakeholders who share our campaigning objectives. This has included organisations like the Social Mobility Foundation, whose work to promote Socioeconomic Background Pay Gap reporting we have supported and promoted. We have also supported The Purpose Coalition, a group of employers committed to improving social mobility and sharing best practice.

We have sought to help build a compelling evidence base for action on social mobility – both the why and how – by supporting think tanks and academics to produce new insight. In 2024, we partnered with the think tank [Demos](#), to publish a report exploring the economic benefits of improved social mobility for businesses. Key findings included:

Increasing social mobility in workplaces
could boost the UK economy by

£19bn

and UK business profits by £1.8bn annually

76%

of senior business
leaders believe
social mobility
would help attract
and retain staff

70%

of senior business
leaders believe it
would aid business
results

29%

of consumers are
more likely to buy
from companies
promoting social
mobility

This report also identified recommended actions for Government and employers, which enabled us to lobby Government and share best practice with other employers.

Whilst there is much employers can already do to promote social mobility, with the right legislative and regulatory conditions and incentives we believe even more could be achieved. That's why we have lobbied Government to make changes such as to make socioeconomic background the 10th protected characteristic under the Equalities Act and to reform the Apprenticeship Levy.

We have engaged directly with Ministers and politicians and also with institutions such as the Social Mobility Commission, sitting on their Employers Advisory Group. In Parliament we have sponsored the All-Party Group on Apprenticeships to help ensure there is an effective forum to develop policy on this issue. When relevant inquiries have been held in Parliament we have submitted written evidence and provided oral evidence when asked to do so.



TOP TIPS

**1.**

ENTER THE SOCIAL MOBILITY FOUNDATION'S EMPLOYER INDEX

The index is an annual benchmarking and assessment tool, using the latest research and best practice to measure entrants' performance on eight areas of employer-led social mobility. If you are at the start of your social mobility journey you don't need to complete all sections, and you can remain anonymous. You will receive a personalised report with expert guidance on how to improve.

**2.**

PUBLISH A SOCIOECONOMIC PAY GAP REPORT AND ACTION PLAN

Not only does it demonstrate commitment to making positive changes internally, but it also shows leadership and may encourage other organisations to do so.

**3.**

PARTICIPATE IN SECTOR OR INDUSTRY - WIDE INITIATIVES WHERE POSSIBLE

Seek out opportunities to collaborate and share learnings with others.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

EVERYONE HAS A ROLE TO PLAY

Recognise that progress on social mobility will be made by Government, employers and other stakeholders – everyone has a role to play – Government action is only part of the solution.

WORK WITH OTHERS

Working in partnership with others is a must. Seek out those organisations who share your campaigning objectives and work together to avoid duplication of efforts.

LEAD OR AMPLIFY

Sometimes it's right for your organisation to lead, sometimes it's better for your organisation to amplify the efforts of others.

READY TO REACT

Be ready to react and comment when opportunities arise, not everything can be planned in advance.

USEFUL INFORMATION

- [Social mobility employer index](#)
- [Social Mobility Commission For employers](#)
- [Co-op's report The Opportunity effect](#)
- [Co-op's Research Report](#)

COLLEAGUE INITIATIVES

As detailed in the previous sections, insight is key to creating meaningful change for social mobility in your organisation. Quantitative data helps you understand who your colleagues are, while qualitative data reveals what matters most to them. Together, these insights enable you to prioritise the initiatives that have the greatest impact on removing barriers and improving equity.

The right initiatives will vary between organisations, so this section focuses on examples most relevant to Co-op as a large retailer with a predominantly front-line workforce. If some ideas aren't applicable to your organisation, consider exploring examples from others - resources like the [Social Mobility Foundation Employer Index](#) is a great place to understand who you might want to talk to.



THIS INCLUDES:

**FINANCIAL
RESILIENCE**

RECRUITMENT

**DEVELOPMENT
AND LOOKING
AHEAD**

FINANCIAL RESILIENCE

Our colleagues have told us that financial resilience is a key concern, particularly in light of the cost-of-living crisis. A lack of savings and variable hours contracts (where colleagues work a minimum number of hours that can be flexed to meet business needs) were identified as key stressors in our 2023 research with Making the Leap.

To support colleagues' financial wellbeing, Co-op has partnered with [Wagestream](#), helping our colleagues to take control of their money. Accessed via a simple, easy to use app they can:

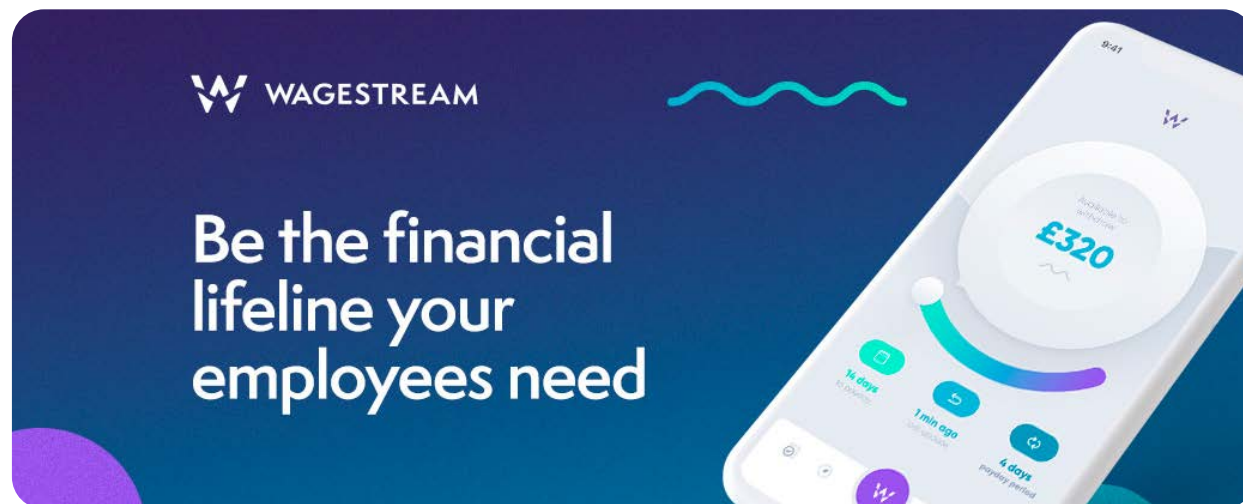
Build up a rainy-day fund by saving automatically from their pay. The interest rate at the time of writing is 5%.

Increase their financial knowledge through a range of resources, including a free financial health scoring assessment, budget planning and access to advisory organisations.

Access up to 40% of their contractual pay as it is earned during the current pay period up to a maximum of £400, reducing reliance on payday loans and other credit options with high interest rates. Colleagues can stream up to 4 times per pay period, with rapid payment straight into their bank account.

Co-op also supports colleagues via [GroceryAid](#) who provide financial guidance, advice and grants (depending on eligibility) for anyone who works or has worked in Grocery. This includes anyone who works for a supermarket, wholesaler, manufacturer, supplier, convenience store, independent grocer, petrol forecourt store or service provider to the grocery industry. They also support businesses in the foodservice wholesale sector.

We are currently exploring how we can offer more meaningful contracts for front-line colleagues that meet both their needs and operational requirements. This remains a key commitment in our social mobility strategy.



TOP TIPS

1.

FINANCIAL WELL-BEING SURVEYS

Conduct regular financial wellbeing surveys with colleagues to understand the challenges they are facing, particularly in the current economic climate. We have found these to be invaluable.

2.

WORKPLACE SAVING TRIAL

Trial auto-enrollment of workplace savings where colleagues need to opt-out rather than opt-in. Early indications from our colleagues has been overwhelmingly positive, even from those who chose to opt-out.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Remove any stigma or shame around financial wellbeing and be consistent and persistent with your messaging, particularly for remote or harder to reach colleagues.

DON'T MAKE ASSUMPTIONS

Financial worries and a lack of savings can be a problem at all levels of the organisation, not only the most junior roles.

RECRUITMENT

At Co-op, we aim to reflect the communities we serve by ensuring proportional representation across all facets of diversity, including socioeconomic background. Our inclusive hiring programme continues to evolve, but here are some initiatives we've successfully implemented:

SIMPLIFIED APPLICATIONS

Removed CV requirements for operational roles, replacing them with a small set of key questions and a behavioural assessment provided in advance.

REMOVED VIDEO INTERVIEWS

This ensures greater inclusion and eliminates potential barriers, such as travel costs or digital access issues.

QUALIFICATIONS ONLY WHEN NECESSARY

We only ask for qualifications when essential for the role, regardless of its seniority.

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS TRAINING

Unconscious bias training for all hiring managers, including how to mitigate it during interviews.

SUPPORT FOR BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

We partner with organisations that support individuals with barriers to employment, such as those with experience of the criminal justice system.

TOP TIPS

1.

BACKGROUND MONITORING QUESTIONS

Include the socioeconomic background monitoring question as referenced in the Data section of this guide in your recruitment process. Knowing who you are attracting into the organisation- or not- is as essential as understanding the demographics of your current workforce.

2.

AUDIT YOUR RECRUITMENT PROCESS

Audit your recruitment process to identify barriers and opportunities to improve, using diversity data when available.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

We launched our employability platform, the [career development hub](#) during the Covid Pandemic to support job seekers. Initially created to help individuals who had been unsuccessful in their application for a role at Co-op, we received feedback that it would have been of great help when applying for a vacancy. As a result, anybody can request free access for a month, even if they decide not to apply for a role at Co-op.

DUAL ACCOUNTABILITY

It's a dual accountability between your talent acquisition team and hiring manager to make inclusive hiring a reality.

DEVELOPMENT

Our 2023 research provided invaluable insights into how colleagues from lower socioeconomic backgrounds view career progression. Feedback ranged from personal challenges like imposter syndrome and lack of professional networks to systemic factors such as geographical distance from the Manchester support centre, flexible working needs, and access to training and development. Our pay gap report also gave some clear indicators of where to prioritise our activities.

LOOKING AHEAD

In 2025, Co-op will launch its first development programme specifically designed for colleagues from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, using insights from our research and our diversity data to shape the content and applicant pool.

In addition, we also offer a range of in person learning groups and online resources that support colleagues with the skills and behaviours they identified to be the biggest barriers for them in the workplace. These range from imposter syndrome and personal branding, to networking and influencing skills.





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