

Royal Borough of Greenwich – Co-operative Council Journey

Introduction

The Royal Borough of Greenwich has a long and rich history of co-operative development, dating back to the 1700s with the reported founding of the first co-operative corn mill in Woolwich. Today, it proudly hosts a vibrant array of organisations committed to fostering community, environmental and social impact. This unique position enables us to take a leading role in growing the local co-operative economy across a range of sectors.



Cooperative Entrepreneurship in Royal Greenwich

This tradition of co-operative entrepreneurship continues to grow in Royal Greenwich today. The borough boasts a thriving ecosystem of over 600 generative businesses – organisations that prioritise creating community, environmental and social impact. Generative businesses represent 2.9% of the borough's business base (compared to 1.6% average for London) and provide over 8,200 jobs. While only about 20 of these are formally recognised as co-operatives in the Co-operative UK directory, the existing infrastructure provides fertile ground for growth.

Greenwich Co-operative Development Agency

Among the most notable of these is the Greenwich Co-operative Development Agency (GCDA), one of the few local cooperative development agencies in the country. Established in 1982, GCDA is a charitable cooperative dedicated to nurturing community owned, democratically run local services.

Since forming, they have supported the establishment of over 400 businesses, including the Local Credit Union, Greenwich Leisure Ltd (GLL-Better), South East London Community Energy (SELCE), and the Ferrier Food Co-op. Notably, GLL-Better which originated in Royal Greenwich, now manages over 250 sports and leisure facilities and 115 libraries across the UK.

Our Cooperative Council Journey

As at February 2025, 41 of the 51 Labour Councillors in the Royal Borough of Greenwich stood as Labour and Cooperative Party Members. This demonstrates the scale of ambition that our elected members have to integrate cooperative principles into everyday decision-making within the organisation. It also aligns with the government's commitment to double the size of the cooperative and mutual sector, culminating in the strategy document **Together for Greenwich: Co-operation for the Future** published in February 2025.

2016: Becoming a Cooperative Council and CCIN Member

Since becoming a co-operative council in 2016, the Royal Borough of Greenwich has been on a transformative journey, significantly influencing our strategic thinking and policy development. The membership reaffirmed our commitment to co-operative principles and values, focusing on collaboration with residents and community groups in shaping services informing decision-making.

This approach aims to enhance transparency and ensure services reflect community needs, fostering stronger, more resilient communities through partnerships. This has been key amidst challenges such as austerity, Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the cost-of-living crisis. These economic shocks have significantly influenced how councils operate, necessitating more co-operative and collaborative approaches with communities, residents and businesses, underscoring the importance of co-operative principles and practice. By working in this way, the council has become more agile, responsive, and inclusive in their approaches and is building stronger, more resilient borough capable of navigating complex and evolving challenges.

2022: Community Wealth Building (CWB) and Anchored in Greenwich Initiative (AIG)

The Royal Borough of Greenwich's Community Wealth Building Strategy is a progressive approach to local economic development, leveraging the borough's unique history, assets, and partnerships to create an inclusive, resilient economy. Building on a rich history dating back to the Royal Arsenal Cooperative Society of the 19th century.

The Greenwich model aims to create an inclusive, sustainable local economy by leveraging the borough's unique assets and challenges. Key recommendations include:

- **Building a generative green economy:** Focus on local businesses in sectors like food supply, home retrofitting, and health and care, with targeted business support and anchor supply chain development.
- **Progressive procurement:** Develop a strategy prioritising ethical employment standards and local supply chains to improve pay, skills, and conditions for low-paid workers.
- **Creating a fair and just local labour market:** Implement inclusive practices, recruit from lower-income areas, and build progression routes to stimulate the local economy and improve social conditions.
- **Addressing racial and gendered wealth gaps:** Support the growth of businesses owned by women and people from ethnic minority backgrounds and implement targeted recruitment and progression programmes within anchor institutions.
- **Harnessing the power of anchor institutions:** Encourage institutions to use their spending power, employment, and assets to achieve community wealth building goals.

The potential outcomes include stronger local businesses, better conditions for low-paid workers, and increased community control of wealth. By embracing these principles, the borough aims to build a resilient, inclusive economy that benefits all residents and is better equipped to tackle future challenges.

Anchored in Greenwich Partnership (2022-24) - Evaluation and Impact

Over the past two years, the Anchored in Greenwich Partnership has grown, focusing on retaining and circulating wealth within the community.

Partnership members have taken action across pledge areas, both individually and collectively. Key achievements include:

- The number of Living Wage accredited businesses in Greenwich increased to 131 by January 2025, a 51% rise since 2022.
- The Greener Greenwich Summit gathered over 160 business representatives from the borough to identify collective priorities and projects for decarbonisation.
- A subset of AIG partners spent £3.309 billion during the provided periods, with 6.9% (£228 million) spent with Greenwich-based suppliers and 49.3% (£1.631 billion) with London-based suppliers.

2023: Our Greenwich Plan

The Royal Borough of Greenwich has approved a new corporate plan in 2023, entitled Our Greenwich. This plan aims to create a fairer, healthier, and greener community over the next four years. It addresses various issues such as the climate emergency, child food poverty, and also aims to strengthen the voluntary, community, and socially motivated sectors in Greenwich, enabling them to offer more support to those most in need.

The plan was developed after extensive engagement with residents, including an online survey and meetings with key partners. Leader of the Council Councillor Anthony Okereke has emphasised the importance of this collaborative approach in shaping the future of the borough.

Our Greenwich serves as the framework for decision making, especially during the current cost of living crisis. The Council's priorities and actions are guided by this document, with a focus on achieving the outlined missions by the end of the plan's cycle.

2024: Inclusive Economy Strategy

The strategy outlines collaborative efforts between the Council and local partners over the next decade to foster a borough where everyone can achieve their potential. It aims to ensure fair distribution of wealth and opportunities across the borough. This new strategy is part of a broader inclusive economy movement, focusing on not just growth but also the benefits for people and places.

Vision for 2033

By 2033, the goal is to be a model of sustainable and inclusive economic growth, driven by cooperative values. The strategy's goals include:

- Reducing inequality and sharing economic growth.
- Building partnerships with businesses, partners, and residents.
- Encouraging employers to adopt Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) agenda and leveraging support through community wealth building approaches to procurement and social value.

Themes

People

- Ensuring children and young people reach their full potential.
- Providing opportunities for everyone to secure good jobs.
- Retaining and realising local talent to drive productive and inclusive growth.
- Improving life chances and quality of life.

Place

- Delivering inclusive, sustainable neighbourhoods with affordable homes and quality social and community infrastructure.
- Connecting communities and businesses through effective transport and digital infrastructure.
- Creating attractive, sustainable, and diverse employment spaces for business growth.
- Enhancing quality of life with thriving town centres and a vibrant cultural and visitor offer.

Prosperity

- Creating quality, secure, productive jobs in a supportive business environment.
- Attracting high-value businesses to diversify the economy and nurture existing sector strengths.
- Strengthening the everyday and generative economy to meet population needs.
- Developing an entrepreneurial, innovative ecosystem to support business start-ups, scaling up, and growth.

Crosscutting Themes

- Tackling inequality: promoting diversity and benefiting local residents and businesses.
- Green economy: achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2030.
- Building an inclusive economy that enhances community wealth and respects natural capital.
- Economic growth that reduces carbon emissions, increases biodiversity, and builds climate resilience.
- Supporting the Council's ambition to reach a sustainable future.

Collaborative Efforts and Institutional Support

- The strategy involves leveraging local institutions for economic development, including the use of local talent and research to support cooperatives, promoting ethical employment, and creating high-value jobs that pay the real living wage.

2025: Cooperative Commission

In early 2024, the Co-operative Party invited a dedicated group of individuals with expertise in the co-operative movement to form the Commission “Together for Greenwich”: Co-operation for the Future. Under the leadership of The Rt Hon. the Lord Bassam of Brighton, the Commission was tasked with developing a long-term vision for the future of co-operative collaboration within the borough. The team of independent commissioners has spent over a year crafting a set of recommendations aimed at growing collaboration and co-operative businesses.

The driving mission is to empower our communities, and foster community-led, co-operative solutions to the significant challenges facing our residents and businesses. The Commission’s focus has been on implementing co-operative principles in three key areas:

Co-operative business support

Social care

Community energy

Some of the key recommendations

- The council should integrate democratic business and co-operative models into business management courses and expand collaboration with local universities and education providers.
- Work with universities to host graduate paid internships and apprenticeships in co-operatives and social businesses and develop an annual awareness programme to showcase co-operative businesses.
- Opportunities for knowledge exchange and an annual ‘Co-operative Hackathon’ should be explored, along with the development of new co-operative businesses within local networks.
- The council should create a communication strategy to signpost available support for co-operative businesses and review existing programmes to inform future initiatives.
- Training and capacity building for officers, along with appointing Co-op Champions, is essential to embed a co-operative mindset. The council

should utilise specialist training and explore establishing a London co-operative network for cross-council collaboration.

- A Co-operative Care Compact should be created to embed co-operative principles in health and social care, and support for micro-businesses in this sector should be encouraged.
- Establish a local health and social care workforce board and network, and launch a Community Energy Fund to support community energy projects.
- The council should prepare for the implementation of the Great British Energy founding statement, create a Community Energy Partnership Board, and establish a Co-op Commission Board to oversee progress and ensure the embedding of co-operative principles within the borough.

Conclusion

As a co-operative council, Royal Greenwich embodies principles of collaboration, transparency, and community empowerment. Our initiatives aim to build resilient communities and ensure economic growth benefits all residents.

For more information or to get involved, please contact

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