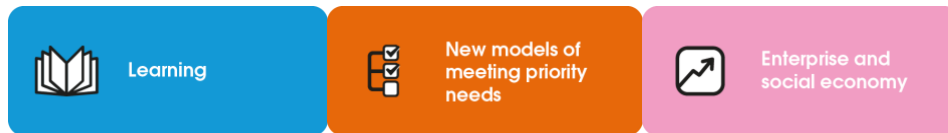




COMMUNITY WEALTH BUILDING



Preston City Council

A cooperative model to support self-employed and freelance workers

Preston City Council is exploring how cooperative approaches could support the growing number of self-employed and freelance workers in the UK economy. Across many sectors - including professional services, creative industries, digital work and training - increasing numbers of people now work independently. While self-employment offers flexibility and autonomy, it can also bring challenges such as unstable income, difficulty accessing larger contracts, limited administrative support and lack of protection during gaps in work or illness.

To explore these issues, Preston City Council has commissioned a feasibility study into establishing a cooperative structure that could support freelance and self-employed workers. The study is being led by Community Broadband Network (CBN), an associate member of CCIN, working with specialist cooperative advisers.

The project is exploring models from other countries where cooperative approaches already support independent workers. The most well-known example is the SMART cooperative in Belgium, which offers administrative services and elements of mutual protection for tens of thousands of freelance members. Other European and US initiatives have created similar platforms to help freelancers share infrastructure, access work, and manage risks associated with independent employment. There are also smaller-scale examples in the UK. Freelancer cooperatives have formed in sectors such as the creative industries and music, showing how independent workers can collaborate through shared structures while maintaining their autonomy. The Preston study is examining how a cooperative platform could work alongside trade unions, combining collective representation with practical services and mutual support for freelancers.

The feasibility study has identified three principal service models that could form part of a cooperative offering to self-employed workers. One is a collective “bid bigger” approach, enabling freelancers to come together through a cooperative structure to access larger contracts and opportunities that might be difficult for individuals to secure alone. A second is shared “back-office” support - such as invoicing systems and other shared IT, insurance arrangements, compliance support, and shared web presence and branding - all of which could reduce administrative burdens and costs for members. A third service model could provide a mutual support framework to help address income volatility and gaps in work, potentially working in cooperation with a partner trade union.

Through this feasibility study, Preston is examining whether cooperative approaches could help boost local economies while supporting new forms of independent work.

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