



# Co-op & Co-op Foundation Green Opportunities Fund

## Guidance notes for applicants

Our three-year, £2.2m **Green Opportunities Fund** is a partnership between The Co-op Foundation and Co-op. It's funded through the sale of compostable carrier bags at our Co-op stores.

### About the Co-op Foundation

We're the Co-op's charity and we're co-operating for a fairer world. We believe co-operation is at the heart of strong communities and this makes us a different kind of funder. We work closely with communities, we listen and we learn. We unlock communities' power by focusing on those who have most at stake. We asked young people to shape our vision, and now we're co-operating with them and others to turn this into reality.

Let's build communities of the future together.

### About Co-op

At Co-op, we have long been deeply committed to addressing the urgent reality of climate change. This is not a new area of focus for us, having lobbied for the introduction of the Climate Change Act back in 2008.

We've been taking action since then to reduce our environmental impact as a business, alongside increasing the sustainability of the products and services that we sell, because it remains an absolute top priority for us and our members.

And since 2021 we have been campaigning for a faster, fairer transformation to a greener, cleaner world. At Co-op we believe we owe it to future generations to act now to protect our environment and restore nature. For the sake of the planet and the people in the communities we serve and those we source from, we all have a part to play.

### About the Green Opportunities Fund

Co-op and the Co-op Foundation have long recognised the scale and challenge that climate change poses to society, and the role that young people can play in the transition to a sustainable economy.

In 2023 we published our [Gen Z\(ero\) report](#), which explored young people's views about the impact of the journey to Net Zero on their lives and how we deliver a greener, cleaner, fairer future. This research found that young people are keen to learn more about the transition to a sustainable economy, including what green job opportunities exist for them.

We understand that whilst talent is spread across the UK, opportunities are not, and we're committed to tackling this issue. This, alongside the green skills gap in the UK, and learnings

from this report, inspired us to consider a new fund that supported young people into green skills and jobs.

Early desk-based research suggested that there is a lack of desire among young people to pursue a green job. We wanted to know more about this issue to ensure our fund would be grounded in the latest evidence. As a result, we commissioned [The Social Agency](#) to carry out a deep-dive research report, about the barriers and enablers for young people, as well as best funding practices and gaps in the UK. The report was launched at our Fund announcement event in Westminster on 28<sup>th</sup> January 2026. The full report is available [here](#).

The research demonstrated that perceptions around green jobs among young people are broadly negative due to multiple factors, including:

- A lack of knowledge that green jobs are an option
- Social barriers
- Identity and beliefs
- Financial barriers
- A lack of role models from underrepresented groups

In response to these findings, **the Co-op Foundation and Co-op are launching the Green Opportunities Fund. The £2.2 million fund will support initiatives across the UK to influence young people aged 14-20 to develop green skills and understand that green jobs can be for everyone.** See below for what we mean by 'green jobs'

While many projects will work directly with young people, we also recognise the vital role that **parents, carers, and youthwork professionals** play in shaping young people's choices and aspirations. **We are keen to receive applications from projects that engage these key influencer groups as part of their approach to supporting young people.**

### **Aims and outcomes of the fund**

The aim of the fund is to influence the behaviour and perceptions of young people from under-represented backgrounds around green skills and careers, to help them realise that green jobs are interesting, viable and secure pathways for the future. Co-op and the Co-op Foundation hope to do this by funding work including:

- Inspirational workshops
- Programmes
- Campaigns
- Mentoring
- Social media initiatives and digital storytelling
- Awareness raising activities
- Volunteering / hands-on experiences

As a result of funding projects that influence perceptions among young people, our **long-term** outcomes for the Green Opportunities Fund include:

- Increased awareness of green jobs, their meaning and value
- Green skills training opportunities taken up
- Relevant vocational pathways taken up
- Green job work experience opportunities taken up
- Green skills become integrated into informal and formal education pathways

Co-op and the Co-op Foundation have worked with a group of eight young people (the 'Environmental Collective') who have acted as advisors to the fund development and will continue to support key decision making until the completion of this funding programme.

Based on the Environmental Collective's feedback we renamed the 'Theory of Change' to become the 'Theory of Development' to acknowledge the positive growth we aspire to achieve with our fund.

Our [Theory of Development](#) explains the short-term outcomes, long term outcomes and impact we aspire to achieve with our funding programme.

### **How many rounds of the Green Opportunities Fund will there be?**

The fund will run for three years, the first of which will be a pilot year to test approaches. We will launch in Spring 2026, followed by another opportunity in 2027, and a final in 2028. Naturally we expect the fund to evolve each year, based on learning and experiences.

### **What do we mean by green jobs?**

While we understand that all jobs can (and should) be green jobs, it is important for us to create some guidelines to prioritise the skills needed most to contribute to a low-carbon society.

Green jobs are jobs that support the shift to a more sustainable economy. They include both new roles created by the green transition and existing jobs that change significantly in tasks, skills, or knowledge to meet environmental demands. For the purposes of this fund, we can support projects that support sectors such as agriculture, aquaculture, carbon capture and storage, energy efficiency, energy trading, environmental protection, forestry, construction, governmental and policy roles, manufacturing, recycling and waste reduction, renewable energy and transport. This definition is inspired by a NESTA evidence review; see [our report](#) for more details.

### **What do we mean by underrepresented young people?**

The fund aims to influence young people aged 14-20 from groups who, based on our research, are underrepresented in green jobs and would otherwise be unlikely to consider a green career. Underrepresentation can differ based on location and career path, but overall, this can be defined as:

- Women
- People of the global majority
- People with disabilities
- People from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

### **How many grants can we award, and how much is each grant?**

Applicants can apply for between £50,000 and £100,000 for their project. This grant is **restricted** to your work on Green Opportunities, however, we encourage applications on a 'full cost recovery' basis, i.e. including all associated core and overhead costs within the

project budget. Projects must start within six months of the grant being awarded but thereafter can be spent over the course of 3 years.

We plan to fund 5-12 organisations from across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Applications will be assessed and shortlisted with others from the same nation/region. Often the England shortlist is the most competitive due to a higher number of applicants.

Co-op is firmly committed to backing British farming, and through the first round of the Green Opportunities Fund we will therefore allocate at least one grant specifically to a project in the food, farming, or aquaculture green jobs space. This allocation is dependent on receiving a strong, high scoring application aligned with these themes.

### **Who is eligible for funding?**

We welcome applications from a wide range of organisations, including:

- Charities
- Community Interest Companies (CICs)
- Co-operatives
- Community Benefit Societies

**Please note:** We cannot fund educational establishments, schools or government-funded bodies such as local authorities. We also cannot fund PLCs or Companies Limited by Shares. Individuals are also ineligible for funding from the Green Opportunities Fund.

### **Location and size of organisations**

- There is **no income or turnover limit** for this fund. We aim to fund a blend of organisation sizes, however, please consider the proportionality of your grant request in line with your organisation's income over the duration of your project.
- Your project delivery must be based **exclusively in the UK**, in line with the Foundation's charitable objects
- Most organisations of any size, provided they are UK-based, are welcome to apply.

### **Partnerships with other organisations**

We welcome applications from organisations working in partnership, including collaborations with statutory organisations and projects involving voluntary, public, and private sectors. One organisation must act as the **lead applicant** and the legal recipient of the grant.

### **Eligibility Requirements**

To be funded, your organisation must:

- Show evidence that your work does not lead to private financial gain.
- Commit to open-source sharing of information, processes, and learnings.
- Be legally constituted, have a bank account in the organisation's legal name, and have at least one set of published accounts.
- Be based in the UK (registered address in the UK) and carry out your proposed project in the UK.
- Have at least **two unconnected people** on your board or management committee.

- *Unconnected* means individuals who are not related, married, or live together.
- *Board or management committee* refers to directors or trustees as listed with your governing body (e.g. Companies House, Charity Commission, FCA).

## **Application process**

The Green Opportunities Fund is a two-stage application process.

The first stage of the process will require applicants to fill out our online application form. At least two members of the team will score each application. These applications will be grouped by region (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) and the highest scoring applications from each region will create our shortlist. We aim for at least 50% of the shortlisted organisations to be successfully funded.

Shortlisted organisations will be asked for a full project plan, budget, outputs and outcomes. They will then be invited to an assessment call which will be conducted by the Co-op Foundation team and a member of the Environmental Collective (a maximum of three people). This call is an opportunity to hear more about your project, meet your team members and for you to ask us any questions, too.

Finally, all information gathered about each shortlisted project will be presented to a final decision-making panel in July 2026. This panel will comprise a Co-op Foundation Trustee,

a Co-op business colleague, at least two young people and up to two additional decision makers with relevant experience.

## **Funding criteria**

Our funding criteria are divided into *essential* and *desirable*. Applicants must meet all the essential criteria to be considered for funding. We do not expect applicants to meet all the desirable criteria.

All criteria are scored. However, essential criteria carry double the weighting compared to desirable criteria.

### **Essential**

#### **Influence young people aged 14-20 to consider entering a green career**

The Green Opportunities Fund aims to change perceptions and behaviours towards the consideration of a green job. Applicants must demonstrate how their project will inspire and support young people aged between 14-20 to explore jobs that contribute to achieving a low-carbon society. Our definition of a *green job*, informed by Nesta and O\*NET, includes roles in agriculture, aquaculture, carbon capture and storage, energy efficiency, energy trading, environmental protection, forestry, construction, governmental and policy roles, manufacturing, recycling and waste reduction, renewable energy and transport. This definition is inspired by a NESTA evidence review; see [our report](#) for more details.

#### **Engage underrepresented young people aged 14-20 in green careers**

Projects should specifically target young people aged 14-20, from groups who are underrepresented in green jobs and who may otherwise be unlikely to consider a green career. The Green Opportunities Fund seeks to change perceptions of what a green job is

and who can pursue one. While underrepresentation may vary by location and career path, it is broadly defined as including women, individuals from global majority backgrounds, people living with disabilities, and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Applicants should explain what their plan is, i.e. how they will reach these groups and provide evidence or rationale for why their approach will be effective.

If applicable, we would like to know if your organisation or project has successfully engaged and/or influenced underrepresented young people in the past, how this was achieved, and how any learning has been applied to this project.

If your project works with parents, carers or youthwork professionals, we will ask how it specifically engages those supporting underrepresented young people.

### **Create pathways for progression**

Applicants must demonstrate clear pathways for young people to follow after engaging with the project. This could include training opportunities, work experience, mentoring, or other forms of support that enable participants to take practical next steps toward securing a green career. You may have built partnerships with other organisations in order to create strong pathways.

### **Measure impact**

Applicants should be able to demonstrate that they have some capability to measure the impact of their project activities with young people. At this stage, please share with us at least three project outcomes, indicators of success and methods you will use to track progress. Please also indicate how you may disseminate learning using your networks and communications. We are open to using creative methods to assess the impact of your work. You may wish to refer to the programme's [Theory of Development](#) to inform your answer.

### **Desirable**

#### **Centre youth voice in your organisation/project**

We know that embedding youth voice and leadership into our own work means that we can make better decisions as a Foundation focused on young people. We welcome applications that actively centre young people in the design, development, and delivery of their work. This could range from designing with young people to being a youth-led organisation. You should include the costs of working in this way in your application, including payments for young people.

#### **Scalability or Replicability**

We would like to understand your future vision for your project. This might be to scale and increase the reach of your project **or** to ensure your project has been set up as best practice, so that others can easily replicate your work. Please tell us which is your priority and what your short and/or long-term plans are to achieve this vision.

#### **Match funders**

In the event that a grant is awarded within the Buckinghamshire region, the Co-op Foundation has agreed a partnership with the [Heart of Bucks Community Foundation](#). Under this arrangement, Heart of Bucks will contribute fifty percent of the cost of the grant.

Additionally, in the event that a project aimed at influencing young people to consider careers in low-carbon heating\* (such as heat pumps) is awarded, the Co-op Foundation has agreed a partnership with [MCS Foundation](#). Under this arrangement, MCS Foundation will contribute fifty percent of the cost of the grant.

\*Low-carbon heating refers to technologies and systems that provide warmth while emitting significantly lower levels of carbon pollution compared to conventional fossil fuel boilers. Typical technologies are biomass, heat pumps, solar PV, solar thermal but can also include utilisation of energy storage (battery or thermal).

All applicants, regardless of theme and location, will be assessed through the same competitive process. Any successful applicant must agree to work with both Co-op Foundation and the relevant match funder for the duration of the grant. We commit to working together with match funders to reduce burden on our partners.

### **Project evaluation**

We will commission a funding programme evaluation and learning consultant to work with projects and the Co-op Foundation to co-create an evaluation framework, gather consistent, proportional data and evidence. They will conduct a yearly evaluation to explore programme delivery and impact. Our funded partners will work closely with the evaluation and learning expert to co-design how we measure impact so that the evidence and learning are useful for our funded partners and the Fund as a whole. We expect funded partners, with the support of the evaluation and learning consultant, to conduct data collection and be involved in the analysis and production of learning. The outcomes to measure and appropriate methods will be co-designed with funded partners. **We recommend allocating 5-10% of your project spend to evaluation and learning activities.**

### **Diversity, Equity and Inclusion**

Co-op Foundation is committed to funding in a fair and equitable way. As members of the UK Funders' [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion \(DEI\) Data Standard working group](#), we collect DEI data from all our applicants via an online form. Your completion of this form will strengthen our understanding of DEI in communities and help us shape our approach for our future strategy. Please follow the link from the fund application form, which will take you to new questionnaire and associated guidance.

We will not use the information you share in this form to assess your application for eligibility for this programme. However, should we need to prioritise one organisation over another (e.g. if two organisations receive the same 'score'), we may use your data to make this decision. We appreciate your co-operation in completing this form and helping us with our inclusivity practices. Don't forget to complete your application after you have completed the questionnaire - and please remember to click 'submit' when you are finished.

### **Prioritisation**

When the final shortlist is created, sometimes two or more applications receive the same 'score', meaning we need to implement additional tools for prioritisation. We will consider factors such as the presence of underrepresented groups and geographical location when making decisions.

### **Use of AI**

To read Co-op Foundation's stance on using AI, please [click here](#).

### **Timeline**

Below is our expected timeline for the Green Opportunities Fund. However, should we become over-subscribed, we may need to extend timelines to allow for fair assessment of all applications.

<b>Outcome of stage one applications shared; shortlisted applicants invited to share additional information &amp; complete due diligence survey ahead of their assessment calls</b>	5th June
<b>Deadline to share additional information</b>	19th June
<b>Co-op Foundation team to perform due diligence checks</b>	5th - 22nd June
<b>Assessment calls with shortlisted applicants</b>	22nd June - 10th July
<b>Funding panel</b>	22nd July
<b>Funding decisions shared with shortlist</b>	w/c 27 <sup>th</sup> July
<b>Grant agreements sent to successful partners</b>	August
<b>Public announcement of funded partners</b>	September