

A partnership for growth must be a partnership with the people of Wales

By Co-operatives Wales

The First Minister's proposed economic partnership with the UK Government opens an important debate about Wales's future. Greater co-operation, respect for devolved responsibilities and less duplication are welcome ambitions but the fundamental question is: who will own, shape and benefit from the growth that follows?

From a co-operative perspective, success must mean more than increased investment or higher productivity. It must mean decent livelihoods, stronger communities, reduced inequality and greater democratic control over the decisions affecting everyday life.

The opportunities identified in the announcement, including offshore wind, steel, ports and digital industries, could help transform Wales. Their lasting value will depend on how they are developed. Investment should build Welsh skills, strengthen local supply chains and create opportunities for worker, community and co-operative ownership.

Community energy offers a clear example. Communities should have practical opportunities to own a stake in renewable generation, influence decisions and retain income locally. Public investment should help create shared assets whose benefits continue across generations.

The same principle applies to business development. Support for worker co-operatives, employee buyouts and community enterprises should sit within mainstream economic policy. When a business owner retires, workers should have access to advice and finance to explore collective ownership. When a valued local service faces closure, communities should have meaningful opportunities to secure its future.

The proposed Green Paper on local and regional powers also matters. Moving responsibilities closer to communities can improve accountability, but changing administrative boundaries alone will not deliver democratic renewal. People need the resources, accessible information and continuing opportunities to exercise influence.

Co-operatives Wales would encourage a process rooted in co-operation and co-production, involving residents, workers, trade unions, co-operatives, community organisations and public services from the outset. Participation must include people whose voices are too often overlooked: disabled people, unpaid carers, people experiencing poverty, and children and young people.

"Nothing About Us Without Us" should guide both the consultation and the arrangements that emerge. Children and young people must have a meaningful say in shaping the communities, workplaces and public institutions they will inherit.

That requires investment in co-operative education. The approach championed through the Co-operatives Wales Education Manifesto, beginning in the early years and continuing throughout life, can help people experience democracy, practise shared responsibility and develop the confidence to organise collectively. Co-operation must be modelled and enabled in everyday settings.

A credible partnership should therefore connect economic development with community wealth building: using purchasing, land, finance and public assets to strengthen local economies and keep more value circulating within them. Procurement should open doors to co-operatives and community enterprises, supported by proportionate requirements and practical development assistance.

Welsh and UK ministers should establish clear commitments, funding and public measures of progress. Those measures should assess ownership, job quality, equality, environmental benefit and community influence alongside economic output.

Wales has an opportunity to demonstrate that prosperity grows stronger when people share power and ownership. A partnership between governments will achieve far more if it becomes a partnership with communities, enabling people across Wales to build an economy they can genuinely call their own.