

Please see below the one page summary of notes from the September 2025 Social Economy ROUNDTABLE meeting focused on Employment:

## Introduction

Many social economy organisations are deeply engaged with employment creation, but their approaches vary — from direct job creation to training, skills development, and supporting access to opportunities within external companies. Most social businesses employ staff, yet their approach to access to employment is shaped by their social, economic, and environmental objectives and the difference they aim to make.

This Roundtable explored the question:

“How can social economy organisations create meaningful pathways to work in the West Midlands?”

The discussion also considered:

1. The role of procurement and social value in creating meaningful employment.
2. The role of local authorities and economic development in supporting access to employment.
3. How the ecosystem can support training and personal development for both social economy staff and jobseekers, recognising the associated costs.

Over 25 participants attended, contributing to a stimulating and wide-ranging discussion.

**Background: Employment in the West Midlands Poor data regionally and nationally.**

The regional employment landscape is challenging, shaped by both structural and short-term economic pressures:

- Sector contraction: Retail, hospitality, and leisure sectors continue to face significant cutbacks. Rising taxes and operating costs have forced many to close or downsize.
- Youth unemployment: The region's youth unemployment rate exceeds 14%—over three times the national average (Commons Library Youth Unemployment Briefing, 10 June 2025).
- Regional disparities: The West Midlands unemployment rate has risen to 5.8%—the highest outside London. Recent ONS data (August 2025) reported around 182,000 people out of work, with 21.9% of working-age adults economically inactive.
- Workforce pressures: Even traditionally stable sectors such as finance, healthcare, and technology have faced redundancies. Medical graduates are struggling to access training placements, highlighting long-term workforce planning issues.
- Skills mismatch: Some sectors, like logistics (e.g., HGV drivers), face ongoing vacancies due to poor working conditions, long hours, and low pay relative to responsibilities.

These challenges are compounded by:

- Rising business taxes, including increased employer National Insurance contributions.
- High interest rates and borrowing costs are reducing investment and hiring.
- Global uncertainty and supply chain disruption.

This “perfect storm” of rising costs, weak investment, and workforce misalignment is reshaping the region's labour market.

**The Role of the Social Economy**

Employment-focused social economy businesses (ESEBs) play a vital role in addressing unemployment and supporting people facing barriers to work. Beneficiaries often include individuals with limited qualifications or work experience, care leavers, people with disabilities or long-term health conditions, ex-offenders, and those experiencing homelessness or relocation.

ESEBs support people through:

- Coaching, mentoring, and work experience
- Skills development and ESOL
- Mental health and wellbeing support
- Childcare access
- Job brokerage and housing connections

Funding sources include local authority or DWP contracts, social value commitments, sales of goods and services, private sector partnerships, and grants for new employment models. However, much of this work remains project-based, limiting long-term sustainability and shared learning. Competition for contracts can also inhibit collaboration.

Examples of strong regional ESEBs include Miss Macaroon, Jericho Foundation, Loconomy, Bounce Back, Standing Tall, Inside Job, Nuneaton Signs, Timpson Group, and the Good Shepherd Project.

### **Key Contributions and Case Studies**

- Conrad Parke (CLES) – Community Learning Hubs

Conrad highlighted how Anchor Organisations and social enterprises can create employment pathways through community-based learning. He gave the example of 'Loconomy', a mutual working with the NHS, which ran the ICAN programme, by bridging local skills development and NHS employment. He also cited two housing associations that have established Neighbourhood Learning Hubs that link functional skills training to purposeful work. Both examples highlight new methodologies designed by ESEB's enabling local people to access jobs.

Conrad emphasised the importance of focusing on people's potential: "We should be considering what people can do, rather than the obstacles to employment." He called for investment in partnership working between social enterprises, adult education providers, colleges, and DWP.

- Tim Landreth (Nuneaton Signs) – Employment Through Enterprise

Nuneaton Signs demonstrates how trading can directly fund social employment. Partnering with construction firms and local authorities, they generate income to employ people with disabilities. Despite a turnover of £7 million, challenges persist, particularly around accessing meaningful public sector contracts via dynamic purchasing systems. Tim stressed: "We want contracts, not grants."

Their growth strategy focuses on what people can do, aligning with inclusive employment principles.

- Tara Verrell (Birmingham City Council) – Commissioning and Collaboration

As East Birmingham Programme Manager for Employment and Skills, Tara outlined Birmingham City Council's ambition to raise employment rates from 61% to 67%, contributing to the National Get Britain Working target of 80%.

BCC recognises the need to partner with the social economy to reach these goals. Priorities include:

- Strengthening commissioning and validation frameworks
- Building sector capacity and staff skills
- Supporting pilot projects and innovation
- Encouraging local collaboration and networking
- Developing access to social investment through their own Impact Fund

Emerging opportunities include retrofit projects, place-based employment demonstrators, and partnerships with DWP, Jobcentre Plus, and the National Careers Pathfinder.

## **Regional Perspectives and Discussion**

WMCA representatives reaffirmed their commitment to long-term sustainability and collaboration with the social economy. The new WMCA Procurement Framework is expected to open opportunities for social enterprises, particularly around local employment.

Roundtable participants discussed:

- Emerging business opportunities: circular economy, retrofit, technology, housing, and place-based work.
- Collaboration and scale: the need for smaller organisations to partner to deliver at scale.
- Innovation and learning: adopting and adapting models that work elsewhere.
- The impact of AI: recognising that automation and AI are reshaping job markets, requiring new approaches to career support and service delivery.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Action for WMCA and the sector:

- Establish a Think Tank to explore how to strengthen and scale existing employment and skills-focused social enterprises. This should be formally resourced and meet three times, producing a final report.
- Harness social investment to promote collaboration and reduce competition for contracts.
- Focus on skills development and employment opportunities in sectors resilient to AI and automation.



**HOW CAN SOCIAL ECONOMY  
ORGANISATIONS CREATE  
MEANINGFUL PATHWAYS TO  
WORK IN THE WEST MIDLANDS?**  
*(17<sup>th</sup> September 2025, online)*

*Many thanks to our speakers and all who attended. It was a great session!*