

Delivering more for Australians

Blueprint for an enterprising nation 2025

Australians need more opportunities to share in the wealth and prosperity that the nation creates.

At a time when the cost of living dominates the thoughts of many Australian consumers and small business owners, the next Federal Government has the opportunity to increase competition and make smaller businesses more profitable.

By promoting co-operatives and mutuals across the entire economy, the Government will help to create wealth and to spread it on a more equitable basis for a fairer, better value Australia.

Co-operatives and mutuals create wealth and spread fairness.

Tackling corporate dominance in key markets such as food retail and banking will encourage competition in the interests of consumers.

Action to encourage a diversity of business models will also address the supply, affordability and quality challenges in housing and social care.

Co-operatives help SMEs to compete in markets dominated by larger competitors by combining their forces through a range of shared services.

In this way, small businesses can grow, and medium sized firms are created that maintain industry, deliver essential services fairly to consumers and provide quality employment opportunities, often in regional locations.



Mutual banks:

Provide a customer-centric alternative to big banks, ensuring regional services are maintained, for example, [Newcastle Greater Mutual Group](#).



Retailer co-ops:

Enable independent shop owners to compete with corporate retailers by combining their buying power, for example, [Independent Liquor Group](#).



Agricultural co-ops:

Enable primary producers to effectively reach domestic and international markets, for example, [Geraldton Fishermen's Co-op](#).



Small business risk mutuals:

Provide long-term risk pooling solutions for groups of likeminded businesses, for example, [Capricorn Mutual](#).



Manufacturing cluster co-ops:

Encourage innovation, industry training and the development of export led manufacturers, for example, [HunterNet](#).



Professional services co-ops:

Enable freelance and SME professional services firms to provide cost effective services, for example, [ArchiTeam Co-operative](#).



Housing services co-ops:

Help individual affordable housing co-ops to operate sustainably through administrative and maintenance support. They develop new affordable housing so more Australians have a place to call home, for example, [Common Equity Housing Limited](#).



Social care co-ops:

Bring independent workers, care facilities, independent workers and communities together to provide cost effective aged care and disability services, for example, [Murrumbidgee Aged Care Network](#).

What the Federal Government can do

Australia needs a world leading business environment for co-ops and mutuals

The policy, legislative and regulatory environment plays a key role in deciding the success or otherwise of businesses. If we look around the world, it is these factors that have the biggest influence on the size and scope of the co-operative and mutual enterprise (CME) sectors in each country.

Some countries set a positive tone by including reference to the role of co-operative business in their Constitution. Others have government departments and ministers with responsibility for CME development. All recognise the valuable contribution that member owned businesses make.

Those countries with the most progressive and well-structured legislation reflect a coherent policy understanding of what CMEs can achieve, and how their potential can be unleashed. The framework for doing business enables them to play a full part in building strong economies.

Australia should focus on creating a world leading business environment for CMEs that reflects the best of the history and culture of Australian co-operative business.

Australia should have policy to promote co-operative business, alongside legislation and regulation that facilitates them.

Appoint a Federal Minister for co-operatives and mutuals

A Minister should be formally responsible for policy affecting co-operatives and mutuals across Australia. As Minister for CMEs, this would be an important cross-cutting responsibility and signal the significance that the Commonwealth places on the contribution of the CME sector and the fair treatment of collaborative enterprise.

Open an Australian Centre for Co-operative Business Growth

A Centre for Co-operative Business Growth would deliver consistent, world leading business services to support co-operative education and business development nation-wide. A partnership between Government and industry, its purpose is to grow the co-operative and mutual sector by facilitating collaboration between independent SMEs in a range of sectors to increase their productivity, profitability and their capacity to value-add and export.

Guarantee legacy assets for the purpose they were intended

Over generations, CMEs have invested and built assets for the benefit of their communities. Voluntary legislation can ensure that these legacy assets are preserved for the purpose they were intended and not the subject of asset raids.

Legislation would empower members to decide what should happen to assets on a solvent dissolution and prohibit capital distribution beyond what members have contributed.

In jurisdictions where legacy assets are not available for distribution, demutualisation is extremely rare and consequently, large CMEs maintain their member ownership, reflecting significant mass in a range of markets.

ASIC, APRA and the ACCC should have a statutory duty to promote corporate diversity

The history of Australian business shows that CMEs have been the true ‘challenger’ institutions to the largest corporate businesses. Often, CMEs “make the market” by delivering their purpose to providing affordable services to consumers in insurance and banking markets, as well as commodities. Regulators should be responsible for ensuring that a wide range of corporate providers is available to consumers: Legislation should introduce a statutory obligation on regulators to measure and promote corporate diversity in financial services and other industry sectors.

Modernise co-operatives regulation

The adoption of Co-operatives National Law by all states and territories since 2020 has improved the operating environment for co-operatives. However, the legislation has not been amended in over a decade and has inevitably fallen behind business practices and broader regulatory settings. Furthermore, under-resourcing and lack of co-ordination among registry offices means co-operatives face a range of barriers including slow registration times and a lack of guidance. Co-operatives regulation should be modernised under a principle of no disadvantage – adopting best practice from different jurisdictions and ensuring all types of co-operatives are treated equally and fairly.



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