



## ***How to... create a plan to recruit and involved members in your co-operative and help them stay active***

### **Contents**

- [Introduction](#)
- [Part 1: Every successful co-operative needs involved and active members – here's why...](#)
- [Part 2: Attracting the right crowd – how to recruit members for your co-operative.](#)
- [Part 3: Keeping members involved and active – what do members want to do for the co-operative?](#)
- [Part 4: Lifelong involvement – how to stay in-touch with members.](#)

## Introduction

A co-operative is an organisation that is owned and controlled by a group of people for their own benefit. They are known as the 'members'

Thought and consideration must go into building involved and active members to guarantee the long-term success of your co-operative. In our four part "How to Guide", we will help you; -

- Create a plan to increase the membership of your co-operative,
- Involve members in the co-operative,
- And, plan how to keep members active in your co-operative.

There is not a 'one size fits all' approach to member recruitment, continued involvement and action. Rather there is a menu of approaches from which social co-operatives can select the best items for them.

This will depend on your social cause – it could be early prevention for children or adults, overall well-being, or personal care, etc. It will also depend on the location of your co-operative, the range of people wanting to be involved, and the skills and experiences of people using the service.

## ***Part 1: Part 1: Every successful co-operative needs involved and active members – here's why...***

A co-operative is created, owned and controlled by the same people who provide, or use, the service offered. The people, who create the co-operative, and those who join it, form its membership. The members are the group of people who personally benefit from the service offered, or gain a sense of well-being through involvement with the co-operative – however that may be.

### **Skills and experience**

Members are an invaluable part of a co-operative as they bring a wealth of skills, talents and contacts from their life experiences. The members may have academic and vocational qualifications, experience in organising people and events, expert proficiency with creative hobbies, knowledge of accounts and contracts, specialist driving licences, etc. All of which can be used to benefit your co-operative.

### **Financial investment**

To become a member of a co-operative, a one-off joining fee is normally required and sometimes a subscription fee, paid monthly or annually. A member may also pay additional costs to use the co-operative's service. Money raised from the members is often invested into the co-operative so that services can continue and grow.

With this in mind, it's evident that members are at the core of a co-operative. They share an ethos of purpose along with their skills and talents, and they sometimes make a financial investment to maintain the co-operative.

## **Decision makers**

Members will not only be the driving force of your co-operative, they are also the ultimate owners and make important decisions such as; -

- Democratically electing the Board Members, a small group of members who run the co-operative on the behalf of all members (also known as the Directors or Trustees),
- Appointing auditors who monitor the co-operative's financial activity,
- Approving the financial accounts,
- Developing strategy, and participating in decisions at general meetings.

Members can also have specific roles in a co-operative, such as a Secretary or Treasurer, or they can help provide the service, be supportive of it, or be a direct beneficiary. Regardless of their role, all members are equal and membership is based on the principle of 'one member, one vote'. This is how all the members equally control their co-operative.

## **Part 2: Attracting the right crowd – how to recruit members for your co-operative.**

People become members of a co-operative because of the social and financial benefits provided by it. But, how do you find the right people to become members, and how does your co-operative enable them to join? In Part 2 of the 'How to Guide', we will highlight what to think about when it comes to finding the right people to recruit as members. And, how to create a space in the co-operative so they can actively participate from the word go.

### **Agree your target area and community**

Your co-operative must look at the area it covers e.g. is it the local community or village, a town or a city, the county, or even nationwide? This is very important, as the location of the co-operative and the area it covers will decide how your co-operative reaches potential members, and how you stay in contact with them. If people live within walking distance of one another, say in a local community or village, it would be best to have face-to-face contact such as an open meeting in the local pub or cafe, or door-to-door leaflets, to make people aware of your co-operative.

### **Reach out**

In a small area, face-to-face contact is the quickest way to spread the word, plus having that 'human touch' fits in nicely with the co-operative ethos. In big areas such as a town (or larger), and rural areas, social media is a great way to communicate.

Face-to-face contact just isn't practical over large area because of the time needed to reach every person, but a social media post or even an email can be sent to a large number of people instantly. Your co-operative could create a blog to publish information, which can also be shared on Facebook or LinkedIn, or, you could send short messages via Twitter to reach people across a big geographical area.

Please be aware that social media is a flexible tool, that works just as well in smaller geographical areas. For guides on using social media to promote your co-operative, please [click here](#).

Once an area is set, and your co-operative now knows where its potential members are, then it's time to reach out to them. If a co-operative's service provides outdoor activities for children in urban communities, practical ways of reaching out could include; -

- Handing out leaflets at school gates,
- Putting adverts on local notice boards, in shops, community and leisure centres,
- Posting on social media platforms,
- Or, even asking Head Teachers if a co-operative member could give a talk during an assembly.

Also, you could create an advert on a social media platform for your co-operative, which will be hugely beneficial because adverts can be tailored e.g. certain locations, interests, ages, gender, etc. Again, for guides on using social media to promote your co-operative, please [click here](#).

How you communicate is pivotal to the success of your co-operative – it determines how you reach new people, how you stay in touch with current members, and how you involve them. Clear communication can help increase membership, member involvement, the quality of service, and the public image of your co-operative.

### **Open and inclusive co-operatives are the best!**

Successful co-operatives have members that want to be part of the co-operative. They want to play their part and feel the value of doing so. For this to happen a co-operative must be accessible to its members, and be able to demonstrate this when it recruits new members.

It's important that members can interact with the co-operative in a way that they find most comfortable. Different ways of communicating need to be available to connect to all members. Points to think about are; -

- **Age**

Younger people prefer electronic communication (email and certain social media platforms), whilst older people prefer face-to-face communication (in person or over the phone). This may mean that your co-operative will have to broaden its communication channels e.g. a social media page as well as local meetings.

- **Learning difficulties and mental health**

It's important that information is put across in a way that people understand. If people clearly understand the co-operative, then they can participate without fear of feeling uncomfortable. This may mean changing the way something is described or presented e.g. the 'easy read' version of an official document.

- **Physical disabilities**

Physical disabilities have to be taken into account to allow access in the simplest of terms e.g. wheelchair ramp access at venues, or a lift to higher floors. Members could be visually impaired and need information in large print or braille, or they could be deaf and need a British Sign Language Interpreter.

- **Confidence**

Some people may have life experiences that have affected their confidence. This influences their behaviour - they could be quiet and withdrawn, or loud and out-spoken. It is important to be mindful of this, and find ways that help all members to participate e.g. a quiet person may want another member to voice their thoughts, whilst a loud and out-spoken person may become less anxious if they are taken seriously.

## **Why members want to be members**

A co-operative needs to be mindful of what a person expects in return for their membership – what is motivating them to become a member? Generally speaking, members are motivated to join to improve their well-being. Often, this is achieved simply by being involved – having a voice and say in a decision affecting their lives. In addition, members may also want; -

- An opportunity to be directly involved in the co-operative in a specific role,
- Opportunities to make a difference to people's lives e.g. to help deliver the service,
- Friendships, new contacts and networks e.g. to be around like minded people.

Members need to be directly involved in your co-operative; after all, they are the ultimate owners. The co-operative can greatly benefit by making use of the skills, talents and knowledge of its members. This benefit will also be felt by the members, because they will be contributing to the service by simply being themselves. Always remember that member involvement is linked to how you communicate with them – be mindful of their needs, and communicate in a way that they understand.



## **New member recruitment process**

Now that you are certain of the co-operative's location and area, know the potential members and have secured their interest - it's time to sign them up as members! To do this you need to think about how to register members. An example could be;-

- Interested people complete a membership application form,
- Board members review applicants' suitability – can the applicant and co-operative be of mutual benefit to each other?
- Registration fee is taken from the person to become an official member,
- Service subscription fee is taken at the same time as registration (if applicable),
- New member receives a welcome pack e.g. guide to co-operative values and principles, introduction to board members and roles, overview of the service training and volunteering opportunities, password to a members website, etc.

In part 3, we look at how members can have direct involvement in the co-operative, and how this contributes to its long-term success.

### **Part 3: Keeping members involved and active – what do members want to do for the co-operative?**

A person is motivated to become a member by the sense of well-being achieved through their involvement in the co-operative. Well-being can be achieved by helping deliver a service that improves the lives of other members. Reasons for motivation do not stop there though – it's a beast that's always hungry.

If members become unmotivated or uninspired, they could leave your co-operative because its original 'pull' has gone. To keep members motivated, they need to be directly involved in the co-operative.

#### **Involved and active members – part of the co-operative culture**

Involved and active members are members that are motivated and inspired. Involved and active members need to be 'empowered', to have confidence that their skills are valued, and their contributions make a difference to the co-operative. The involvement of members has to be planned and organised as part of the culture of the co-operative; -

- Members should be seen as valuable to the co-operative and its service,
- Involving members should be easy to do,
- Activities for members are built into the day-to-day life of the co-operative.

A good straightforward guide for active members is for their co-operative to keep them informed, show how it appreciates their involvement, and include them in all areas of the co-operative. A successful co-operative would ideally maintain this culture through effective communication with its members.

New or potential members can be introduced to the co-operative culture by speaking to existing members, who have been active in their co-operative for a long time.

## **People, not positions**

Members can help drive your co-operative by being themselves, by undertaking roles or tasks suited to their own skills and experience, and feeling valued by doing so.

Direct involvement should be encouraged, and members should be given opportunities to contribute in a way they feel comfortable with. Whether that's standing for election to the Board of Members, or creating newsletters, each member's input is as valued as the next.

If members feel that they are contributing and making a difference, they will feel happy. Happy through being in control of their co-operative, and more appreciated for their efforts outside of the co-operative.

### **Here are some points to consider; -**

- **Personal motivators**

Some members may be motivated enough by having a say, a vote and use of a service, whilst others may also want a specific role or duty, both of which are fine.

- **Don't delegate**

Just because a member has experience of a certain role or task doesn't necessarily mean they want to carry that on. Also, some members may be too shy or anxious to say 'no' to a role or task.

- **Disabilities**

Look at how adjustments can be made for a member with a disability, remembering that a co-operative's membership base is built on accessibility.

- **Time**

Some members may have plenty of free time to invest in a co-operative, whilst others don't. Either way, it should not restrict a member's wish to be involved.

- **Change of circumstance**

Members could have a change in their personal lives which mean they can no longer do a role, or take responsibility. In this situation, it would be best to see how the member's skills and abilities can be involved in a different way, so the co-operative doesn't lose their talent, or cause them any upset.

Members need to feel valued - their contribution is based on the sense of well-being they receive in return. The more mindful a co-operative is to the thoughts, feelings and needs of its members, the better it is for your organisation and the service it provides.

## **Legal inclusion**

Depending on how your co-operative is set up, you may have to hold an Annual General Meeting (AGM). The AGM is a formal meeting that all members are invited to. Collectively, members make important decisions such as; -

- Democratically electing Board Members,
- Approving financial accounts,
- Reviewing the co-operative's constitution,
- Changes to service delivery.

An AGM or any other general meeting for members is also an opportunity to double-up as a celebration of the co-operative's achievements! After your AGM why not follow it with a party – for all the members!

## **Part 4: Lifelong involvement – how to stay in-touch with members.**

Ongoing involvement is achieved by keeping members at the pulsing heart of your co-operative. This can be done through ideas outlined in Parts 2 and 3, but let's look at the benefits of other options; -

### **Face-to-Face Discussions and General Meetings**

- Informal - perfect for talking about feelings,
- Can happen at the member's convenience,
- Minor issues can be raised,
- Common concerns can be highlighted.

### **Committees & Working Groups**

- Can focus on a specific issue or piece of work,
- Can involve members with specialist skills and interests, and help other members develop their skills and experience.

### **Community Action & Social Events**

- Brings people together to tackle an issue e.g. painting a community hall,
- Can involve members who dislike meetings, and builds positive feelings between members,
- Fun and good for well-being.

### **Social Media**

- Different platforms that appeal to different groups of people,
- Can be non-verbal e.g. videos and pictures,
- Video calling enables people to meet without being in the same room,
- Easy to post and send messages to a group or a single person,
- Can potentially be accessed anywhere, anytime through smart phones and the internet,

- People can respond to messages and posts through likes, comments or sharing,
- Great way of informally floating an idea and starting a discussion.

### **Online Collaborative Platforms**

- Can potentially be accessed anywhere, anytime through smart phones and the internet,
- Informal and can be used to make decisions.

### **Online Surveys**

- Can potentially be accessed anywhere, anytime through smart phones and the internet,
- Can gather opinions quickly,
- Higher response rate and lower cost than a paper survey.

### **Newsletters**

- Can be posted to members' homes,
- Can include more information than a social media post,
- Accessible to members who aren't digitally savvy.

### **E-mails, E-zines and Co-operative Member Website**

- Information can be shared more frequently than newsletters, and at a lower cost,
- Members can check at their convenience,
- A website can include resources for members and information on the service,
- Information and content can be incentives to become a member.

Ultimately, the success of a co-operative comes down to clear communication and involvement: members need to know what's going on, and they need to be part of it.