

The Work of the UK Co-operative Council

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The UK Co-operative Council (UKCC) was established in 1991 as a replacement for the "Co-operative Forum" which operated under the state-funded Co-operative Development Agency (CDA). The CDA had, for more than a decade, worked to support co-operatives and the development of co-operative enterprise throughout the UK before it was wound up by the Government in 1990. The UKCC was set up to "promote and encourage the development of all forms of co-operation" but, unlike the CDA, was established by the various national co-operative federations themselves with the support of the Co-operative Parliamentary Group, the Society for Co-operative Studies and other key players in the co-operative sector.

I often hear people refer to the UK co-operative movement when in fact what they usually mean is the retail movement, ie 30 plus retail co-operative societies, or perhaps they mean the consumer movement, ie retail societies plus the Co-operative Insurance Society (CIS), Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) and The Co-operative Bank. The fact is that consumer co-operatives are only part of the total co-operative movement, or co-operative sector as we prefer to call it, in the United Kingdom. There are hundreds of agricultural co-operatives which, on a total turnover basis, are bigger than the consumer co-operatives, plus housing co-operatives, credit unions, community co-operatives, health & care co-operatives and worker or employee-owned co-operatives. Each of these different types of co-operative has its own national federation such as the Co-operative Union for consumer co-operatives, ICOM for workers' co-operatives or FAC for agricultural co-operatives. It is these national apex bodies representing the different types of co-operative that make up the membership of the UKCC and it is their representatives, 13 in all, who sit on the Council, decide on our priorities and provide the funds, either in cash or contributions-in-kind to enable the UKCC to carry out its work. The UKCC is therefore self-funding, non-political and independent of government and, for that matter, any other body.

The UKCC's role is basically threefold:

1. To promote the common interests of co-operative organisations of all kinds and the development of co-operative forms of enterprise throughout the UK.
2. To raise the profile and represent the interests of co-operatives to the Government, media, other key decision makers and the public in matters where a cross-sector view is relevant.
3. To make provision for discussion and debate within the total UK co-operative sector and to broaden the understanding and encourage collaboration between the different forms of co-operative enterprise.

Our role is therefore to promote and represent the interest of co-operative enterprise per se but only when a cross-sector view is relevant and it is certainly not to represent the interests of any one particular type of co-operative enterprise or take over the role of any of the various national co-operative federations. Clearly this point is not understood by some people in the retail sector who keep writing to the *Co-operative News* complaining that the UKCC is usurping the role of the Co-operative Union. On the other hand, perhaps I'm wrong, they do understand but they are just jealous of the success of the UKCC.

For success is undoubtedly what it is - in just five years we have established the UKCC as the one body that is recognised by Government, the Opposition, the European Commission and other influential bodies to speak on behalf of the total UK co-operative sector on matters of common interest. We have carried out a number of major projects on behalf of, and in partnership with, the UK Government and the European Commission. We have brought together the disparate parts of the total UK co-operative sector far more effectively than the old CDA ever achieved, with the effect that these different forms of co-operative enterprise now understand much better the role and aspirations of their colleagues in other types of co-operative enterprise which has led to many fruitful collaborative projects

Through the UKCC's Legal Working Group we have managed to get all the different parts of the co-operative sector to agree on one proposal for a new UK Co-operatives Act, which has the support of the Co-operative Party, and we have the commitment of the Labour Party to introduce new co-operative legislation when they come to power. We have also produced proposals for

a new European Co-operative Statute but again, perhaps we will have to await a Labour government to see any progress on that front. However, at the request of the present government, we have produced in partnership with ICOM a Resource Pack for Business Links, Training and Enterprise Councils, Enterprise Agencies etc which seeks to raise the awareness of the co-operation option, particularly employee-owned co-operatives, among business advisers. The pack has been so successful that the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) agreed to fund a reprint and we are still receiving on a daily basis requests for copies and further information from business advisers, solicitors, accountants, family businesses, academics and the media.

Another successful initiative was the publication of the UKCC's book, *The Co-operative Opportunity*, which has since been widely acknowledged as the most comprehensive account of the co-operative form of business enterprise, at national and international level, to be published for many years. In Europe, the UKCC joined forces with Department 23 of the European Commission to commission research into non-user investor members in co-operatives within the EU nations, resulting in the publication of another significant report which could have far reaching consequences for co-operative development in the longer term.

More recently we persuaded the Department of Health to fund a major research study into the role of co-operative principles and structures in *Health of the Nation* activities. The UKCC Chairman, Lord Carter, and myself were invited by the Department to join a Steering Group overseeing this project. The resulting report, "Co-operating for Health", is now published and includes many examples of health and care centres already operating either as co-operatives or following co-operative principles.

Another area that we have tackled on a cross-sector basis is that of the financing and taxation of co-operatives, an area where many people have argued that co-operatives are not allowed to operate on the same basis as other forms of enterprise - the search for the so-called "level playing field". The UKCC therefore commissioned the Plunkett Foundation to carry out research across the total co-operative sector in the UK and examine the practices in Europe and elsewhere.

One of the main functions of the UKCC is to promote

co-operative enterprise to influential bodies and individuals. There is no doubt that there is widespread ignorance of the diversity of the co-operative sector, how co-operative enterprise differs from other forms of business and what contribution co-operatives can make to the total economy of the UK. If one examines the teaching of co-operative enterprise in schools and colleges, it is perhaps not surprising that this ignorance exists.

Despite some sterling efforts in certain co-operative sectors and in a few geographical areas of the UK, there is no national resource material available to schools/colleges which seeks to explain the total co-operative sector from a business enterprise perspective. The UKCC is therefore seeking to persuade the government to support the provision of resource materials for all those throughout the UK studying Business Studies and Economics at GCE A and AS level, plus GNVQ and their equivalent in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Such material would explain why co-operatives are different from other businesses and the fact that all co-operatives, whether retail societies, agricultural co-ops or housing co-ops, are owned and controlled and should be run for the benefit of their members. In other words, they are in essence mutual organisations.

Early this year the UKCC produced a paper on mutuality which did not seek to argue the case for mutual status but simply outlined what was currently going on in the main sectors of the mutual family, ie building societies, co-operatives and mutual insurers. I think I dare say that it is one of the few papers produced that looks at what is currently happening across the whole mutual family. The UKCC Fifth Annual Forum will examine, under the title *The Future for Mutuality*, what mutual organisations can and should do to convince their members and the world at large that maintaining mutual status is in the long term interest of their members and the country as a whole.

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