

3rd Talkin' Co-op

The Front Space

17th September 2009

Participation: Dave Dunn (facilitating), Joe Dunne, Wanda Janiak, Tim Cookson, John De Courcy, Marie Bouret, Valerie O'Brien, Kevin Gallagher, Mark Malin, Marc Moissard, Dave Moore, Pauric Cannon, Aodhagan O'Broin, Alison Whelan, Reini Bock.

This third Talkin' Co-op session used the format of a consultation session with the CB looking for feedback and input into the planned re-arrangement of the core produce offering to the front space.

The meeting participants held expectations to hear clear and accurate information regarding the CB's plans for the front space. The facilitator notes that this expectation was realised by the end of the session. Additionally, a number of concerns harbored by the meeting participants were addressed.

Overview Main points:

1. Landlord offered new space beside the meeting room (extending towards the front wall of the premises) at same sqm rate as the rest of the premises.
2. Additional rental costs are €500 per month.
3. The space was identified (including meeting room and part of the current office) as suitable to accommodate the core produce with some storage area.
4. The proposed re-arrangement of the core produce area intends to offer a better user and staff experience in terms of security, accessibility of products and check-out tills.
5. It is projected that this improved layout would afford an increase in tills turnover, thus paying for the investments required.
6. The re-arrangement also allows for a better use of the space in the main market hall and the side room (aka the store room) – thus providing an opportunity for an enhanced community experience and development of educational, activity-space and a resource centre offering.
7. The concluding feedback from the meeting to the CB was a request to see clear plans for the Phase 2 development of layout within the premises, in particular regard to nurturing community development, services for the membership, educational and awareness raising capacities and social events.
8. Architect plans are to be offered for viewing on the Co-op notice board in the entrance corridor.

Detailed notes of the meeting's discussion points are offered here below:

Architect plans for the proposal were circulated and, for clarity, facilitator **Dave Dunn** outlined terms with regard to the area under discussion. What is being referred to as the 'front space' comprises the present office and meeting room plus a newly rented area at the very front of the premises. The proposal being consulted on is that this whole area be totally reconfigured as the new location for the sale of the co-op's 'dry goods' - better described as our core products of packaged foods, personal care and household products. A smaller office space would be retained in this area but the main DFC office would be located upstairs, along with a new meeting space. Dave then introduced John De Courcy, chair of the CB, to briefly explain how the proposal had emerged and the logic behind it, before the group took a tour to familiarise themselves with the space.

John De Courcy said that soon after the new board came into effect in April, an opportunity was offered by the landlord for DFC to rent the area between the street and the meeting room. This would give DFC use of the entire building, front and back, for an additional €500 per month. After investigation and discussion by the CB, it was concluded that this offered the chance to create a new area more conducive for shopping and a decision was taken to accept the arrangement.

Additionally, it was offered by the landlord to rent area upstairs for €60 a week to be used as an administrative office and a meeting room / therapy space.

Draft plans were drawn up for the creation of a coherent and comfortable shopping space able to accommodate all present goods along with a storage area and provide much improved arrangements for checkout and queuing. This switch would then create new possibilities for the use of the lower level space, currently utilised partly for storage and partly for display of some core goods. Discussions of proposals on how best to use this area remain ongoing within the CB.

As well as offering a better experience for Thursday and Saturday opening, the new sales space could better capitalise on the extra Sunday use of the premises - now due to take place three times of month for the Flea Market, Crafty Market and Newmarket Brocante. Whilst DFC core produce are also offered for sale on Sundays, under the present configuration it is not truly practical to do so.

The additional upstairs space would provide a more secure location for the co-op's admin functions and would also include a meeting room with the add-on dimension of offering a practitioner space for consultations and therapy.

Prior to the group visiting the spaces in question, **Pauric** put forward some concerns that he felt should be in everyone's mind as they viewed and reflected on the use of space. He outlined three issues:

- that the stated pursuit of a 'comfortable shopping space' would extinguish a valuable meeting space, which might not be adequately replaced elsewhere, putting the community dimension of the co-op at risk
- that the logistics of moving goods into the proposed space from the storage area would be very demanding on volunteers
- that a different vision should be considered for the newly acquired space, one that would both raise spirits and raise awareness as people enter the building, with displays, an internet café and more social space. This would represent a

move away from DFC's drift toward a market identity and back toward a more serious entity with more focus on wider goals as a co-operative.

Joe then led a tour, starting with the current core produce area. He pointed out that core produce is currently divided between an area of the main hall and part of the lower level space, which is also used for storage. It had been the original intention at Newmarket to locate all co-op produce downstairs and create an area that could be fully secured. However, fire regulations had prevented this configuration. Joe said that possible uses for this area following a switch would include the creation of more producer space for stallholders, a display and information centre, more meeting space. The floor could be brought level with the main area, using recycled support materials, to make things uniform throughout. Moving toward the front space area, Joe also indicated plans to provide coverage of the entrance corridor to make it more usable and welcoming.

Within the front space, it was clarified that the proposal provided for all necessary storage being self contained within this area, rather than requiring the shuttling of goods between areas. Clarification was also sought over the remaining duration of the lease and security of tenure. **John** said the present lease has 2 years 9 months to run and that the landlord - who also owns the rest of the block - is sympathetic both to the co-op and a vision of regenerating the area as a market area.

Paoric observed that the front space represents the first impression for visitors. Its use offers the chance to inject a strong social and community aspect rather than going for retail. People come for a co-operative *experience*, not just food buying.

John emphasised that while the initial focus has been on mapping a vision of a new a core produce area, it is part of a rethink of the entire space and the creation of a resource centre is very much in the mix, along with sustainability. The big vision is one of getting the community back together and holding it by shaping things better. The core business of the co-op is food and there is a need to get revenue out of the space to service the much higher overheads than at Pearse Street, but also a need to remember that in 2 years 9 months the co-op might relocate. Any changes should be done on a modest budget with strong use of volunteer help.

Those at the meeting then returned from viewing the space to an open discussion, starting out with questions.

Mark expressed concern that it was a big change to make for a short period on the lease and asked for more information on costs.

John responded that this is a much smaller change than making the move from Pearse Street and that there is no intention to spend very large sums of money on it. Volunteer labour and recycled materials will be central to the works development, significantly reducing costs.

Marie asked what the expectation is for increased revenue.

John said that obviously the goal would include an additional €500 per month to cover additional rent but that the new space would offer a platform for additional opening, as per the 2005 business plan.

Wanda observed that the cost is the estimated €10,000 plus €500 per month and asked what is the cost if we don't do anything?

John said that obviously the €500 has already been committed to rent the additional space and that the goal is to increase membership and revenue with an improved shopping space. He confirmed that the initial outlay of up to €10,000 is readily available from reserves without jeopardising co-op finances.

Dave M said that the potential of the space was clear in terms of creating a good sales area but that he was concerned that the physical location of the core produce away from the stallholders might break up some of the present conviviality of the space by isolating the two areas from each other. He asked what consideration had been given to that issue.

Aodhagan said that the board had been very aware of this. The plan for the front space sales area to stretch all the way through to the back of the present office is about giving a strong visual link via the window through to the market area, allowing people to see right through. There would also be folding doors in and out of the new area to create a big opening from the corridor to allow easy percolation through the whole of the space. The corridor would also be optimised to create a good flow and integrate the space.

Joe added that the residual small office within the front retail space would also have the benefit of a window looking out across the main area.

Reini asked if the estimate of €10,000 included all building works and whether a quote has already been obtained.

John said that Joe has already done a considerable amount of work for free in preparing the upstairs space and would be continuing to do so downstairs. There has been free architectural input and the wiring has been done for free. More specialist skills would be sought to keep costs to a minimum.

Joe added that costs for clearing rubble would also be quite small.

Wanda asked if fire regulations would continue to limit use of the lower level space, currently used for storage.

Joe explained that those issues were particular to it being a shopping space that could be enclosed by doors. Within the regulations, the area is suited to a variety of uses, especially when the floor is raised level. It could be sub-divided to accommodate various ideas and uses. This development of the premises is partly an exercise in the co-op finding what space it needs going into the future. Newmarket has been an experiment, not somewhere we have signed to as our home for life.

Aodhagan said that with regard to the front space, the door onto the street is an important fire exit and must be openable as a push out emergency door, even if not used as an entrance.

Alison said she didn't see why it couldn't be used as an entry point and asked whether that might be more welcoming.

John responded that to keep a strong membership dynamic around entry, and continue a welcome desk, access to the co-op needs to remain as now.

The meeting then moved from questions to open discussion.

Tim observed that the switch to the front space for core products would give the co-op scope to part-open the building on occasion as a fully independent area and save on heat and light.

Dave M said that being able to view the upstairs space, which hadn't been possible during the evening, would have given a more complete sense of the plans to change use of the space. However, the fact that an upstairs meeting space was being created would inevitably render it inaccessible to wheelchair users. He said that thought should be given to ensuring that there is also a good ground level meeting space available to maximise access to events at the co-op.

Mark said that he wants to see plans for developing a community room come forward as an urgent matter and not get relegated by a focus on the sales space.

Pauric said that he had felt that conviviality was at risk and was pleased to hear that the question of how to connect the two spaces was clearly part of the CB's thinking.

John responded that present arrangements with high dividing shelves already leave stallholders quite isolated rather than creating a good model of conviviality. If the big space can be rearranged and become more open, it will be much better for people to mingle, meet and be able to see one another.

He concluded by saying that the plans are part of a period of reinvention to get the co-op community back in good working order and help build membership. This is just Phase 1.

Plans will be posted in the Co-op foyer and a suggestion box will be available on Saturdays (as always) to carry forward the consultation. There will also be an effort to seek volunteers since realising these plans requires an effort to mobilise members.

An item of discussion, relating to a debate on the organisations policy and attitude towards membership, was parked for future discussion.

The meeting concluded with the hope expressed that Talkin' Co-op sessions can continue in future months. If so, a 7pm start was agreed.