

## Talkin' Co-op – A Vision for the Co-op

A series of three Talkin' Co-op sessions used open space technology to bring out key themes, allowing any participant to nominate and host a themed workshop to progress the overall vision. Participants could move freely between workshops during the course of each session.

### Session 1 – 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2010

#### Vision exercise – In The Headlines

As a starting point, participants were invited to envision possible 'headlines' – either for the 'Newmarket newsletter' or the Irish Times - to capture part of where they would like to see the Co-op (or co-operatives in general) between 1 and 5 years into the future.

Contributions:

- Co-op plants organic roots in local community
- Local growers find ready markets for produce in member-owned co-operative
- Co-op sets up Community Supported Agriculture Scheme
- DFC sends trade mission to link with fairtrade co-operative tea and coffee producers in Africa
- Co-op fast becoming one-stop-shop for local produce, social events, community vibe and money-saving initiatives in Dublin
- Biggest bike park outside Netherlands at Newmarket
- Co-op keeps aware of food miles
- Dublin Food Co-op – an old idea finds new relevance
- Co-op is a centre for friendship
- Covered and secure bike stands unveiled at Dublin Food Co-op
- Co-op is the hub of a vibrant community in Dublin 8
- Local co-ops provide affordable alternative for grocery shopping – supermarkets feeling the pressure
- Co-op cuts power consumption by 15%
- Four food co-operatives set up in Greater Dublin area based on successful 30-year-old model
- Co-op breaks out of niche to embrace mainstream market
- Cash-strapped families get through hard times with Co-op volunteering
- Co-op gives power back to Irish producers and Irish buyers
- Food Security in your hands!
- Alternative energy, foods, births and burials at the Dublin Food Co-op
- Co-op goes vegan
- Majority of Co-op shoppers walk or cycle

#### Workshops

- Products
- Premises
- Promotions

## Themes from Products workshop

**Food miles:** the Co-op needs a strategy to link up with more producers based closer to the Co-op; it should strive to source the maximum proportion of dry goods, if not from Ireland, then at least from within the EU. Co-op should explore investing in Community Supported Agriculture.

**Human rights:** Co-op needs to be pro-active regarding our responsibilities to people in the countries we import from

**Brands and suppliers:** Co-op should aim to be pro-active in avoiding dealing with large corporate entities, many of which outsize the GDP of developing countries.

**Packaging:** the Co-op should strive to further reduce packing to a minimum for all products

## Themes from Premises workshop

**Bike racks:** this has been a recurring issue at Newmarket. There have been some promising discussions with DCC regarding the question of siting of racks at Co-op. It's possible they will fund some, the Co-op will be able to fund additional outdoor racks and then add more inside. Needs to be progressed.

**Minimising travel footprint:** The bikes issue links with a wider issues of facilitating members leaving their cars at home and, if not walking or cycling, taking public transport. May also be scope to explore a delivery service.

**Events:** there's a need for a group of members to work on events. Evening events are especially important to make the place hum and raise revenue to help with rent costs. Ideas included English language exchange, Irish language classes, table tennis. The Co-op is notable in being one of the very few social locations in Dublin 8 operating after 8pm and not centred on drink.

**Becoming a local community resource:** The Co-op can do more to establish itself as more than a local outlet for wholefoods by building wider links with the local community. To emphasise this, the Co-op should work toward holding and publicising an open day with cookery demonstrations, nutrition information, etc.

## Themes from the Promotion workshop

Newer members felt unclear about structures within the Co-op and the workshop spent time developing an organigram both for immediate benefit and for possible uptake by the Co-op. This mapping exercise explored the different and overlapping clusters of people active in running DFC and noted discrepancies between the structures operating and those ratified for working groups by previous AGMs.

Four priority areas were identified:

**Communication:** of vital importance, both with new members and on an ongoing basis. It was felt that this was an area in which the Co-op was falling down, with a desperate need for a welcome pack. A new system of electronic newsletters could offer partial support in reaching out to members but overall communication needs specific attention. Signage and display areas need to be improved.

**Welcome and Membership:** concerns were raised that the welcome and membership desk was trying to do too much in one and that its role would be better served by two desks, one greeting those arriving (and fulfilling a security role) and one dealing with memberships inside when people are more relaxed and amenable to discussing joining (and have sampled a little of the Co-op). The workshop felt that the 'welcome desk' could be none too welcoming at times and could be softened as a physical barrier by angling it. A dedicated membership desk was envisioned in a prominent spot, possibly in the café, with those staffing this desk also mingling, offering brief explanations and information to visitors and also chatting with members.

**Atmosphere:** much can be done to build the Co-op as a social space with a stronger community atmosphere, including music, drama, film screenings, etc. The café should be developed as a more social area with bigger joined tables and possibly a 'conversation club' with varying topics. Music with an open mic could be considered for Saturdays, the use of the space for theatre and gigs should be looked at. There could also be a Co-op fancy dress day.

**Community engagement:** the Co-op should take steps to reach out to the local community and, in particular, look at working with the community in lobbying for and establishing a community garden in the vicinity of DFC.

## **Session 2 – 14<sup>th</sup> October 2010**

### **Workshops**

- Outreach
- Communications

### **Themes from Outreach workshop**

The focus on moving to and developing new premises has pointed the Co-op in a somewhat inward looking direction such that it could do with paying particular attention to the area of outreach and networking. The workshop looked to identify natural allies and other possible linkages, including those of mutual support.

**Natural allies:** Cultivate, Voice, Irish Seed Savers, Sonairte, Seomra Spraoi, Community Gardens, IOFGA, Vegetarian Society of Ireland, Vegan Society of Ireland, community gardens, Grow It Yourself Ireland, Cork Food Web, Transition Towns initiatives, The Celt (Kilkenny), Organic Centre (Leitrim), other co-operatives and especially food co-ops internationally.... etc, etc...

**Other possible linkages:** Dublin Community Forum, The Wheel (network of non-profits), universities and colleges (students' unions, sympathetic intellectuals working around food policy),

**Mutual support:** supporting growers (existing and possible future producer members), supporting the set up of food co-ops and buying groups

**Action ideas:**

- Invite natural allies to do stalls, workshops and presentations
- Hold an open day
- Stage something specifically to connect with pensioners and older people
- Encourage more visits from organisations and local schools
- Organise more visits to organisations
- Co-op to join Dublin Community Forum (platform for non-profits in the city)
- Host a forum or series, e.g. 'The state of food' on national/international future of organic food
- Outreach team getting out there with promotional flyers and posters, including getting our info into libraries
- More support for small grassroots groups, especially via our premises (facilities, kitchen, food, storage, mail hosting?)
- Develop web resources on setting up buying groups and food co-ops to empower others
- Explore a form of affiliation for sympathetic non-profit organisations that also provides for discounts (e.g. a development charity that wants to support the Co-op and source fairtrade tea and coffee from us).

**Themes from Communications workshop**

Picking up from last time's Promotions workshop, this group began by doing more work on a visual map of how the Co-op works, acknowledging there is sometimes a difficulty for members in getting stuff done within DFC because it's not clear who can progress an issue.

**Issues:**

Co-op needs to operate on and demonstrate the principle of transparency.

Minutes of the Co-ordinating Body (CB) – appropriately 'streamlined' – should be available to all members

New members should get an e-welcome pack

Welcome desk should be physically re-oriented (less of a barrier) and have a stronger 'welcome' focus, with a distinct membership desk downstairs.

CB members and other key volunteers wearing name badges within the Co-op would give new members the chance to know who to speak to.

There needs to be an overall strengthening of the Co-op's 'welcome dynamic' – a mix of the welcome desk, new member information, Failte and transparent structures

There should be more frequent open and general meetings, using consensus decision-making – at least four times per year. All meetings for the year should be scheduled and publicised in advance so that there are no postage costs around fulfilling notification requirements.

Skills sharing around communications and consensus decision-making skills need to be offered

The Co-op needs new promotional posters and flyers and a communications team to get them out there. These should include poster stock with fill-in blanks.

A communications policy should be developed to help streamline communication and ease the flow to and from the centre.

The layout of the café should be changed to encourage communication and community with arrangement as big, long tables. Would it be possible to project key information? Could there be a speaker's corner as a way of communicating issues people are involved in within the Co-op family?

### **Working Groups**

From explorations of structures, the Co-op's working groups emerged as a key issue, including addressing the gap between what's constituted on paper and what exists in practice. The Work Rota Monitoring Group should be key to many aspects of the Co-op and needs to be established as a priority.

Venue co-ordination would fit logically as a sub-group of premises with the role falling to a group rather than an individual to help build more events and activities.

With a notable decline in member activity in recent years, including departures for Cloughjordan, it was felt there was a need to regenerate energy amongst the working groups and volunteers in general.

### **Theme for final session**

It was agreed to reconvene the Talkin' Co-op for a third and final session two weeks later with a workshop strand of re-energising the Working Groups being agreed as the focus of publicity to members.

## **Session 3 – 28<sup>th</sup> October 2010**

### **Workshops**

- Strengthening the Co-op Ethos
- Activating the Work Rota Monitoring Group

### **Themes from Strengthening the Co-op Ethos workshop**

This workshop noted that the Co-op's rules (constitution) formally set out some aspects of our overall ethos. Other dimensions come out of our history or are widely understood. However, the danger of 'mission creep' is ever present and the Co-op needs to regularly take stock and pull

what's really happening back toward its ethos and aspirations. It was felt that this challenge was particularly true of – but not limited to – the food on our shelves.

## **Issues**

During the founding years of the Co-op, between 1983 and 1984, it was argued that there was almost continuous debate regarding the products stocked and strong ethical orientation, whereas, later, a degree of 'Mission drift' set in. The workshop identified a 'famine' of Irish products in the co-op and asked why we couldn't have an Irish made soap out of a dozen or more imported brands. It also questioned the logic of importing oatflakes (jumbo and fine) alongside stocking Irish-sourced Ballybrado, even acknowledging a price difference between the two. The workshop recommended a) that the co-op consider ways of giving preference to Irish products, for example: approach Ballybrado directly with a view to trying to get a discount on a pallet load; b) Buy in 25k sacks and pack ourselves like the Co-op did in the early days; c) put a green sticker on all Irish products so that members can identify them easily; d) give 'eye-level is buy-level' positioning to Irish products. It was agreed that the workshop's ideas were in tune with and should go forward to the Products Group to try and progress.

## **Themes from Activating the Work Rota Monitoring Group workshop**

The workshop noted that the Work Rota Monitoring Group is an AGM-approved working group with a clear written brief but which has never been brought into being.

Seven of those at the workshop – Dot, Javier, John, Katarina, Marita, Rachael and Rena – were willing to volunteer as ordinary members of the group.

The initial task was therefore to move toward staging an inaugural meeting, with CB and staff input, to bring the group into being. Rachael undertook to contact the CB on this.

## **Issues and actions identified for the Work Rota Monitoring Group:**

- Aim to increase productivity and improve efficiency to reduce prices at the tills
- Work audit required of tasks needing to be done within the Co-op – all the work, including that undertaken by staff, the CB, volunteers and groups to get a complete picture
- Audit required of the membership in terms of possible volunteering (skills, availability, etc).
- Emphasise the importance of volunteering and commitment to maintain the Co-op when communicating with members
- Encourage volunteering more than once every five weeks
- Establish training for volunteers
- Seek to establish full monthly stocktake, not partial
- Integration of Help Rota Monitoring Group

<p><b>ENDNOTE:</b> The first official meeting of the Work Rota Monitoring Group was held on 30/10/10 and it is now seeking to move ahead with its brief. Key ideas from the Talkin' Co-op sessions are also being taken forward by the Products and Premises Working Groups.</p>
--