

The Co-operative Movement Today

“There is a whole world of co-ops out there that people have never heard of – and they have never heard of it because there is no education about co-ops in schools, and the communities that used to exist around co-ops don’t exist any more, so the word of mouth and mainstream media coverage isn’t there either. This all needs to change.”

Rebecca Harvey, speaking at The Co-op Congress 2021

This has to change indeed. Gone are many of the co-operative auxiliaries such as the Co-operative Women’s Guild, The National Guild of Co-operator’s and the British Federation of Young Co-operators. And gone are most of the independent co-operative retail societies which had local co-op education activities. Fortunately there are still some excellent retail/consumer co-operative societies (see list below).

Retail Co-operative Societies

[Midcounties Co-operative](#) is the largest retail co-operative Society in the UK. These are the services which it offers:

[Broadband](#)

[Childcare](#)

[Energy](#)

[Food](#)

[Funeralcare](#)

[Pharmacy](#)

[Mobile](#)

[Travel](#)

Other Retail Co-operative Societies

[East of England](#)

[Heart of England](#)

[Central England](#)

[Lincolnshire Co-op](#)

[Allendale Co-op](#)

[Chelmsford Star Co-op](#)

[Channel Islands Co-op](#)

[Clydebank Co-op](#)

Coniston Co-operative Society

[Grosmont Co-operative Society](#)

[Radstock Co-op](#)

Langdale Co-op

[Scotmid Co-op](#)

[Tamworth Co-op](#)

[Revolver](#) (a co-operative of producers and consumers)

The [Co-operative Group](#) post 2014 has made it clear that it is no longer interested in the co-operative movement and what it stands for, and is reluctant to continue to maintain the traditional link with the Movement. Because of historic commitments it is a major funder of many (though not all) co-operative support organisations. The continuation of this funding cannot be relied upon. This means that serious thought should be given to the ongoing financial stability of the Movement.

There is, of course, no guarantee that the [Co-operative Group](#) will survive as a business. Like many other big businesses it has an 'ethical' element as can be seen in the reports of the business and the rule book.

Co-operative Group reports, governance reviews, and modern slavery statements:

<https://www.co-operative.coop/investors/reports>

[RULES OF CO-OPERATIVE GROUP LIMITED](#)

After a number of disastrous decisions at the Co-operative Group which led to the loss of the Bank, Farms, Pharmacy, Travel, and half of the accumulated assets inherited from the CWS, the future of the Co-operative Group looked uncertain. The situation arose because a policy of increasing the scale of the business was pursued with blind persistence. Contributing factors to the downfall included the purchase of Somerfield which resulted in big losses for

the Group. The takeover of Britannia Building Society brought with it toxic debts which could not be mitigated. An overbearing Chief Executive and his team made co-operative democracy and due care virtually impossible. The result was the crisis of 2013.

Two reports were commissioned into the crisis:

- [The Kelly review](#) published 30 April 2014
- [The Myners report](#) was published 7 May 2014

In May 2014, a special member's meeting agreed to a new constitution based on Lord Myner's recommendations. From this time on, The Co-operative Group became a completely different organisation. It was decided by the new management that in order to survive as a business and to save the jobs of the executives and employees, it would have to dispense with its 'co-operative' nature and purpose and become a supermarket and funeral chain on purely commercial terms in order to compete with the other big businesses. Moreover, it set its image as a 'mainstream business', not wishing to distract the public with *co-operative add-on's*. It was considered that being a 'co-operative' was an expensive distraction from the purpose of surviving as a commercial business. This disenfranchised the members who's loyalty was based on the 'co-operative' nature of the organisation. A decision was taken to follow the policy of the big supermarket chains and support 'Charity' and abandon 'Co-operation'. [Charity and Co-operation are opposites](#).

For a time, however, profitability started to increase.

Unfortunately, The Co-operative Group has no Unique Selling Proposition (USP) and no natural customer base. It's shops and offer to customers provide no particular advantage over its competitors. As a business, it is inadequate. It is not surprising, then, that as the economy is under pressure, the Co-operative Group is again going into crisis. This time, probably terminal crisis.

The Co-operative name which the Group (like the Bank) still carries brings everything that The Co-operative Movement stands for into disrepute. Co-operative does not mean, overpriced, inferior, inconvenient and un-co operative. But this is the image that the Co-operative Group conveys to the public. And this is the reason why, in the main, people only shop at the Co-op when there is nowhere else convenient.

Steve Thompson