

## Annual Conference 2013

### Young People Policy Paper



**More than anything else we want to engage and inspire young people. We want them to appreciate and understand the values, principles and practice of co-operation. We want to promote the participation of young people in determining their own future and building a society based on common purpose and mutuality. And we want to make them welcome in the Co-operative Party and the wider co-operative movement. We will seek to make it simpler for young people to join in and we will simplify our language, avoiding initials acronyms and jargon.**

Policies on education and the inclusion of co-operatives in the curriculum and in school enterprise programmes such as Young Co-operatives are included in the Co-operative Party's Education Policy Brief.

"Young people have long been, and increasingly are, disproportionately affected by unemployment, underemployment, disempowerment and disengagement. Through effective involvement with cooperatives, young people can work together with governments, civil society and other stakeholders, to overcome these challenges. We thus strongly encourage the engagement of young people with cooperatives as a viable and promising option for their transition to full economic, social and civic participation.

**International Co-operative Youth Statement 2012**

# Youth services

Co-operative Trust Schools have transformed the relationships of many schools with their parents, staff, pupils and other stakeholders, but what is possibly even more important is that they have demonstrated the power of mutuality. They have also fostered a framework for co-operation between a number of different schools in the same area. They have given their pupils a chance to participate in co-operative governance. And as we move towards a more integrated service for young people, from early years through to further education, we must develop structures that encourage collaborative working across different institutions.

In Wales, a different model of Co-operative School is being developed within the different tradition of education in Wales. One of the strengths of devolution is that each part of the United Kingdom can apply the principles of co-operation and mutuality in its own combination of culture, history and choice – and we can learn from each other.

In England we recommend the creation of social co-operatives which could act as the local delivery agent for the Children's Plan. These could be commissioned locally or by Children and Young Person's Trusts to provide a range of services within their own communities, with children or young people fully involved in the governance of these bodies. The Government should ensure that the regulations and guidance to emerging Trusts allow the development of pilot 'mini' co-operative Trust models, working across defined geographical localities and neighbourhoods to a locally developed Children's Plan.

Young people should be trusted to take democratic decisions at as early an age as possible. School councils, youth councils, youth mayors and voting at general elections are four opportunities for introducing young people into the practical aspects of democracy. That should happen as young as possible and be real rather than token opportunities, with real outcomes from casting a vote. We support reducing the voting age to 16 and some would go further, reducing the voting age to 14 would enable all young people to vote in a general election at least once before they leave full-time education and know how to go about voting. Too many people in their thirties and forties have never voted and don't even know how to go about it.

The success of Youth Offending Teams – a co-operative initiative in the justice system – has shown that many people who were drawn into crime in the past didn't need to become career criminals provided they are offered better alternatives at an early stage. We recommend a similar integrated approach to those in the 18-25 age group who are going through the transition to independence and adult life. So many social pressures press in at this stage that it is not surprising that there is a spike in offending in this age group. Empowering young people to take a place in society is a powerful way of avoiding the risk of them ruining their own lives and the lives of others.

### Case Study – The Young Lambeth Co-operative

Local adults and young people have joined forces with Lambeth's Co-operative Council to get the Young Lambeth Co-operative off the ground as a completely independent, community owned organisation which once in place will see its members deciding what play and youth services are provided in this London borough.

In early 2012 the Council began conversations with a whole range of service users/providers, local partners and other community members about different ways to manage youth and play services previously run by the council. The shared view was that local people want more say in how money is spent and how services are run in Lambeth. From this the Young Lambeth Co-operative was born, providing an alternative to managing, commissioning and planning youth services in the borough and ever since young people and the community have played a crucial role in working with the council to take the concept forward.

The Young Lambeth Co-operative will mean local people of all ages will come together to have more power and involvement in decisions previously taken by the council about the running of play and youth services in the borough e.g. one o'clock clubs, adventure playgrounds and youth clubs. The change in how these decisions are made will drastically improve the lives of children and young people because young people and the community know what they need better than anyone!

Source: Young Lambeth Co-operative  
[www.younglambeth.org](http://www.younglambeth.org)

## Students' Unions

Over forty percent of all young people now participate in higher education before they reach the age of thirty. They will also find themselves becoming members of a students' union, though many will not realise it.

Students' unions are unusual organisations. They are, without exception, charities - following certain legal rulings in the 1980s and legislation passed since that has reinforced this. Unusually for a charity the members are also the main beneficiaries of the organisation's activities, and control the organisation democratically through elections and other structures. Those activities run right across a spectrum of advocacy and campaigning, social and sporting clubs, and commercial trading – all driven by the members. To make the situation even more complicated, the bulk of students' union income is derived from public sources, via the block grant to universities; and they play an increasingly important role in supporting public policy, in terms of assuring academic quality. There is nothing wrong in any of this but it does mean that they are almost unique in the landscape of civil society.

It is worth re-visiting the suggestion of applying the principles of Co-operative Governance to students' unions. To view them as 'publicly-supported charitable mutuals' may sound like a recipe for an identity crisis, but in reality it is a definition that helps to resolve a great deal of complexity. The key principles of member control, member participation and member

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benefit are put at the centre of the organisation. It is both the principles of governance and the activities that they carry out that justifies both charitable status and public funding.

In the Co-operative Party's 2009 pamphlet, *[Co-operatives on campus: A mutual approach for students' unions](#)*, we outlined the ways in which students' unions have a great deal in common with the co-operative movement, and discussed how their commitment to mutualism could be extended and enhanced through future development.

Students' unions could engage in co-operative activity in ten areas:

1. **Rebalance the union's finances to distribute trading surpluses to the members**, through selective discounting of key household goods and staple foods; this would make the benefits of active membership and participation more real to students and benefit them directly with money in their pockets.
2. Work with universities, local communities and private accommodation providers to **establish joint boards of management for halls of residence and 'student villages'**; this would give more control to students over their living conditions and develop local responsibility and accountability for behaviour and good relations with the community.
3. Work with academic and service staff trades unions to **establish university credit unions**, enabling student members to access more emergency hardship loans from pooled resources; this would provide a crucial financial service and develop a renewed compact with university staff.
4. **Act as the front line for access to the wider co-operative movement** by providing preferential marketing opportunities to co-operative businesses, especially local co-operatives and co-operatives in growth areas such as telecoms, in return for student-only deals; this would give more students access to the advantages of the co-operative trading model, and in turn supply co-operatives with a new generation of members.
5. Jointly with other students' unions, higher education institutions and local organisations, **form energy co-operatives to reduce expenditure on energy and establish better environmental practice**. This would begin as collective purchasing from energy suppliers and in time would allow greater preference to be given to suppliers with a good environmental record; in the future, these energy co-operatives could begin to develop their own sustainable micro-generation activities.
6. **Stimulate the development of micro-enterprises run by students**, enabling them to gain business experience in a low risk environment and potentially avoid doing low-paid shift work that might detract from their studies. It could also make consumer choice for students more diverse. The union would invite open bids from student groups to run a small-scale commercial project within guidelines that the union sets out, and it would then give small start-up grants and loans to support the projects as

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they get started; the model already works in many cases for clubs and societies, but the idea has never been extended to commercial enterprise.

7. Work with local colleges and schools to **support adult and community education through voluntary action by union members**; helping to found 'community learning co-operatives' where some of the knowledge and skills possessed by students can be accessed by adults in the local community, to build their capability and also build good community relations.
8. **Start new subject-based clubs and societies** which would be run by student volunteers but would have membership and involvement across several institutions and include academic staff, to help open out the curriculum, enable students to consider issues and knowledge beyond their own subject, and put student leadership at the heart of the learning experience. With rising pressures on institutional budgets and on issues like contact time, there is a gap for new thinking on how to extend opportunities for learning and get better value for students.
9. **Create more opportunities for students to make active 'membership' decisions**, in all areas except core representative activity; students should not only join clubs and societies, but could also 'join' the union's social programme, trading operations, campaigning groups and so on. This would build loyalty to the co-operative and the sense of shared ownership and control.
10. **Support food co-operatives and community food growing.** By pooling their buying power and ordering food in bulk direct from suppliers, students can buy good food at a more affordable price. Small food co-ops or buying groups work by collecting together everyone's orders in advance, whereas other models operate more like other food businesses in that they order the produce from suppliers and then sell it to their customers via stalls, bag or box schemes, mobile stores, shops or other types of outlet.

The Co-operative Party supports the formation of Students for Co-operation, aiming to be a national representative body for student cooperatives. It will provide support and training to members of student co-ops in the UK and assist in forming new co-op groups and expanding those already existing. This is a democratic and co-operative policy approach and would be based on the successful model of student co-ops in North America – see [www.nasco.coop](http://www.nasco.coop)

# Innovators and creators for the future

Organisations like the Prince's Trust have demonstrated the extent to which young people can be responsible and creative entrepreneurs – if they are given the chance to prove themselves. Where initiatives within a school or youth centre are operated on mutual principles, with the “profits” ploughed back into the organisation, the consequent learning promotes the virtues of collaboration and mutual support as well as promoting entrepreneurship and demonstrating that those values are not inevitably in conflict with each other. This has the benefit of promoting entrepreneurship while also encouraging collaboration and the wider public benefit.

Young people are also very creative. Participation in music within ensembles, small and large, both promotes musicality and the benefit of working as a collaborative group. This approach – and channelling energy through other arts media – is a vital part of enabling a new generation to experience the benefits of collaboration and co-operation. The sooner that young people are introduced to such concepts the more likely they are to be successful co-operative entrepreneurs in due course.

We also want to promote opportunity for young people. Clearly, it is ideal for jobs to be created and offered to young people, but for those who are trapped in a difficult vicious circle – unable to win a job because they have no experience – a period as a volunteer or as an intern can provide the experience that can make all the difference. The key point about such internships is not so much about payment as about tilting the balance in the direction of disadvantaged and low-performing youngsters who may otherwise not have such opportunities to develop their interests and potential. We commend those who advertise an internship opportunity openly and make it available primarily to more disadvantaged applicants and propose the development of an “ethical internship policy” rather than trying to ban internships. Public support or maintenance to enable those with limited means to take up such opportunities would help to make them fairer and open to all. Discouraging employers from offering internships will help nobody, but ensuring that they are offered fairly and openly on the basis of equal opportunity and widening access to experience would make a positive contribution. And we want to see a greater use of practical-based apprenticeships for our young people.- which again could be linked to co-operative ventures and public services.

## Student and youth housing co-operatives

The average cost of renting as a student in the UK is now £68.70 a week. Soaring rents are not just the hallmark of the private rented sector; the average cost of student accommodation within university halls of residence has doubled in the last 10 years, rising from £59.77 to £117.67 a week. Despite these high costs students are often in substandard or dangerous housing.

Student housing co-operatives not only allow students to have a real home, protected from rogue landlords and lettings agents, but can also make substantial savings on rent levels. We believe that the experience and success of student co-operatives can offer a model for wider youth housing co-operatives. Housing is a key factor in the stability of young people as they leave home to carve out their own life. All too often they are at the mercy of a fragmented private sector market. Housing Associations have often been surprisingly poor at engaging their tenants, but there is plenty of evidence that the co-operative approach works. Social housing providers should be given financial incentives to see the whole person through providing training opportunities for young people on their building and regeneration projects and enabling those young people to become residents in tenant-managed properties. Applied to young people, the co-operative model offers all the benefits of mutuality plus the experiential benefit which can help to transform society over time. The sooner they are introduced to co-operative principles the better – with the Woodcraft Folk providing a vehicle for such initial education and engagement.

### Case Study – Birmingham Student Housing Co-operative

A group of students at Birmingham University are forming the UK's first student housing co-operative for many years. They have secured £550,000 in finance from Birmingham Co-operative Housing Services (BCHS) that will go towards purchasing two five-bedroom houses in Selly Oak which will remain permanently available to student members of the co-operative.

With the help of a computer program provided by BCHS, they calculated how much rent they would need to pay each week. The figure has not been finalised yet, but they are looking at around £40 a week, which includes management fees, a maintenance allowance and accounts for a full refurbishment every 15 years. This compares to an average rent in Birmingham of approximately £61, rising to £80 or £90 closer to campus. With more than 18,000 students paying between £60 and £160 a week to live close to the university, there is plenty of potential for growth.

The savings the co-op will bring could not come at a better time. With the battle over tuition fees lost, extortionate housing prices could be the next target for those tired of seeing the cost of a higher education in England increase every year.

Source: *The Guardian*

[www.guardian.co.uk/housing-network/2013/mar/13/student-housing-cooperative-cuts-rent](http://www.guardian.co.uk/housing-network/2013/mar/13/student-housing-cooperative-cuts-rent)

## The Co-operative Party

The Co-operative Party is the Party of social justice.

**We believe** that people will achieve more by working together than they can by working alone. We support the efforts of those who seek success through that co-operative endeavour.

**We believe** that the only way to create a just and fair society is through power being spread evenly throughout society, and not arbitrarily based on wealth, class, gender or race.

**We work** to promote co-operatives and all forms of mutual organisation.

**We work** in partnership with the Labour Party as its sister party to achieve these ends.

In addition to hundreds of Labour and Co-operative Councillors across England, Scotland and Wales, there are currently 32 Labour/Co-operative MPs, and members in the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and the House of Lords.