

Students for Co-operation, Exploratory meetup & Founding, 16th June 2013

Present:

Leeds Green Action: Joey Talbot, Luke Tilley, Joy Howard, Sole Scuderi, Naomi Harriott-Brown

Northumbria SU: Hamish Yewdall

Sheffield Student Housing Co-op: Rosie Evered, Roy Clutterbuck, Jamie Risner

Birmingham co-op activist: Richard Bickle

Edinburgh Student Housing Co-op & SHRUB: Francesco Benvenuti, Jaye Renold

Birmingham Student Housing Co-op: Simon Furse, Sylvia Behrendt

Co-op Business Consultants (Leeds): Cath Muller

Present by skype: Sean Farmelo (Birmingham Student Housing Co-op, Green Bike Project)

Apologies: Tom Wragg (Birmingham Student Housing Co-op), Alice Shipsey, Celia Ashman, Vale Ricciola (Leeds Green Action), Mike Shaw (Edinburgh Student Housing Co-op), Martin Meteyard (Edinburgh, Co-op Business Consultants), Rhiannon Colvin (Generation for an Alternative Future, London)

Introductions

Green Action, Leeds University – a student society, part of Leeds Uni Union. Got a food co-op/shop front inside the union for over 15 years, got two allotments, are a platform for campaigning. Focus recently on food ethics.

Birmingham Student Housing Co-op – about to be incorporated, hoping to buy houses and move in by end of September, 2 houses with 5/6 people, still working on the financing. Initially they'll be management co-ops, owned by Birmingham Co-op Housing Services, but will then be bought by BSHC ideally within 4 years. Intending to buy services (maintenance, finance, admin, etc) from Brum Housing Co-op Services, and renegotiate contract each year, depending what that year's membership think they can handle and want to pay for.

Green Bike project (Birmingham) – has been incorporated. Grant-funded so far, but looking to be financially self-sustaining. Tool club, cheap parts for members, volunteer-run bike shop.

SHRUB (Swap & Re-use Hub), Edinburgh – incorporated 2 months ago. gathering up stuff that students throw out when they move and giving it away in freshers week. Turned into a more permanent thing with premises and thinking about the exchange aspect. Have

got the place, cleaning it up, looking at getting equipment. Student-led, educates people about waste so they don't keep throwing it away. Trying to integrate community members and want to run workshops on clothes repair, bike repair, equipment repair, etc. Grant-funded so far, but looking to be financially sustainable. There are 5 directors so far, but we want to be horizontal – working out how to integrate skills and enthusiasm from students, while managing the continuity and thinking about employing someone with skills. Started informally, working with student services a few years ago. Gave stuff to 2500 students at last freshers week. A small number of people were organising, no one wanted to stay on to take on the organisation, so we wanted to create a structure that is sustainable even if individuals leave. Took a business plan to the university, who are giving us free rent on a space for the first year, growing to £6,000 pa in a few years – uni supportive because it wants to develop student enterprise. Union is not directly involved. Looked at becoming a society, but then wouldn't be allowed to employ anyone and SHRUB wanted the autonomy. Reference to what happened to Green Streets equivalent project in Leeds, taken over by union and turned into a charity shop instead of free shop. SHRUB looking to retain annual free shop, but generate an income from selling good quality stuff and swap/exchanging lower quality stuff.

Edinburgh housing co-op – not a student housing co-op? (sorry if I've got that wrong), but being set up by some SHRUB people and some others.

Northumbria – looking at setting up a food co-op and other kinds of co-ops, Hamish is an elected officer, whose job is to co-operativise the union, or maybe the university (sorry, I didn't get all of that).

Sheffield student housing co-op – 3 of us have graduated now. We're expecting to own the property ourselves (as 3 individuals plus Student Union as directors of a Company Ltd by Guarantee) and rent the property to a student housing co-op (perhaps set up as a multi-stakeholder), but may run into same problems that Birmingham have had. Trying to set up for the last 18 months, got a property in mind, hoping to incorporate in the next couple of months.

Decided to be students only, gets as many people through as possible. Push people to other co-ops when they leave. The challenge is to offer continuity and dependability to lenders (hence property owned by separate company), stability and institutional memory within the co-op and still maintain a level of autonomy for the tenants, ie not manage it for them, but make sure they're doing it well.

Co-operative Business Consultants – a network of co-op advisors across the country who deliver through the Co-operative Enterprise Hub (as Alan Dootson/Sheffield Co-op

Development Group does in Sheffield for Sheffield Student Housing Co-op). We have been allocated Birmingham Student Housing Co-op and Students for Co-operation to advise through CEH. Cath in Leeds, Jo Bird in Manchester, Kevin Wan & John McGuigan in Liverpool/North West Housing Services and Martin Meteyard in Edinburgh are also CBC advisors. Martin has been helping SHRUB and is co-ordinating the CBC work with Students for Co-operation.

Cath is also a member of Cornerstone Housing Co-op and Footprint Workers Co-op, which are both members of Radical Routes.

Richard – long-time co-op activist in Birmingham, supporting Birmingham student housing co-op & green bike project, helping to get support and funding. He's also a working member of Revolver Co-op (supplying fairtrade coffee & clothing), Jemima Narrowboat co-op, and secretary of UK Society for Co-op Studies (linking theory & practice), which has a conference in October.

What do we want (didn't capture all the comments, sorry)

Simon hopes to see something like a NASCO-style organisation (North American Student Co-operatives Organisation)

Want there to be accessible information for students setting up stuff and a way to share knowledge and skills, so students can find out about co-ops regardless of how much local co-op scene or support there is.

Inspiration – want the details, the big ideas and everything in between. Be able to learn from each other's mistakes and not re-invent the same things every time.

Would like to come to an understanding that a network is a good thing. Would be great to capture and share stories on a website that anyone can find.

Having this network provides independent support for the individual co-ops which unions can't provide and to support co-ops where unions clearly have a different agenda

Want to work out how will it be incorporated, who's going to run it.

Background to Students for Co-operation

The idea for a housing co-op came through links with Radical Routes co-ops (Gung Ho Housing Co-op & Birmingham Bike Foundry) and Richard Bickle.

The network idea developed as it became clear that BCHS prob wouldn't be part of Rad

Routes, but Sean also has friends involved in NASCO (North American Student Co-operatives Organisation) and felt there should be something similar in the UK. In conversation with Richard over why previous attempts haven't worked, it became apparent that the others were all other people thinking students should have a network, rather than being student-led initiatives, so this was more likely to work.

After the Guardian article appeared, they were inundated with groups and uni staff wanting more information or to get involved or to replicate the housing co-op model – there is a huge demand for information and support.

Richard & Cath outlined the appetite within the co-op movement for a student network and emphasised that there's likely to be huge amounts of support from all quarters – this has been borne out by the experience of Birmingham and Edinburgh groups.

Sean applied to the Co-op Enterprise Hub and the application was assessed by Cath and Jo, who awarded 2 days (14 hours) of work (which will include non-contact work as well as advice time) with a further 2 days likely to be given subsequently.

What would it do?

- Co-op development support tailored to students
- Promotion of co-op ideas to students – we'd be more listed to by students than the rest of the co-op movement
- Co-ordination between member co-ops
- Services to members – training, conferences, skillshares.
- NASCO has really accessible resources on their website – contact details essential
- Possible financial support eventually.
- Campaigning and lobbying

Thoughts about creating a culture of commitment to projects and places – students sometimes treated as people who need to be kept entertained rather than responsible for keeping something going, worried that there should be some emphasis on connection to local communities/commitments to co-ops to avoid this tendency.

Educate people about co-op ideas, eg with a journal

Consider why it's 'students' rather than 'young people', or people approaching education in a non-university way. People at uni usually the wealthiest. Distinctions between student & non-student are going to break down with increasing numbers of part-time students and so on. World is changing.

Students for cooperation would want as many people from FE and part time courses involved, but as it is being planned as federated we would need to work out co-op forms that work for those sectors. Supporting young people – co-op movement networks already exist. This initiative focuses on the experience and situation of people in FE/HE – operating in colleges, unis, etc.

Each individual member co-op has autonomy to decide how they want to run, ie who can be a member. What about people who want to stay in their co-op or want to continue being involved with SfC? This is a pretty valid point - NASCO has an alumni membership-type, which is paid for on a yearly basis; people who have been really involved get a chance to stay involved and also contribute to the continuation of the project, but not on the same level as students. Basically, they just get a hardcore of really involved people who have moved in to the student co-op movement contributing financially - a little like the people and planet fan club.

Being a co-op is based on two things:

- a) meeting your particular needs in your particular circumstances
- b) changing the world – always a risk that co-ops focusing on their own shit lose sight of being part of a bigger movement. Being part of a movement is part of experiential learning – link to the wider movement and the wider world.

Sheff – One of the hard things about forming sheff co-op was not knowing that Birmingham, Edinburgh or the food co-op network existed – peer support and advice is as good as (Cath says – maybe better than) co-op advisers.

There are skills we can share as co-operative students, as well as more specifically housing co-ops or food co-ops.

Sheff uni has a social enterprise advisor, but we had to tell them we wanted to be a co-op, then they found people who could help us.

Leeds for Life – funding students to do things. Every uni has a pot of money for enterprise for its students. At birmingham it wasn't possible – careers service was totally useless – almost anti-co-op.

Possible Structures

original not-good plan – try to fund it from an annual membership fee from housing co-ops. Each co-op's business plan would include an affiliation fee to SfC. This is risky, because initially amount of money each co-op giving to SfC would be big – would possibly get cut if co-op was poor, putting SfC at risk. Autonomous co-ops can just decide to leave, you

see...

NASCO – when you join as a member of a co-op, part of your deposit when you move in goes to NASCO. You can get it back if you want to when you move out – or not, you stay a lifelong NASCO member if not. Non-students don't get a vote, members of member co-ops vote through their co-ops.

We need to decide how the voting system would work – eg 100 members of food co-op different to 100 members of housing co-op, also 10 member co-op different to 100 member co-op.

Richard suggests, no need to work this out now, or even before registering. Have a go for a year with one system and if it doesn't work try something else. The obvious short-term solution is one co-op one vote, as all co-ops here are roughly the same size.

Decisions that need to be made

- who will be the founding members?

We would like all the groups who are represented here to be members of Students for Co-operation.

We unanimously decided to found Students for Co-operation, with the incorporated co-ops signing the form: Green Bike Project, Birmingham Student Housing Co-op, SHRUB, maybe Sheffield Student Housing Co-op if they incorporate in time.

- who'll be on a working group to meet with CBC, where will the meetings be?
decided all can attend Skype meetings, but work out beforehand who'll be talking in the meetings, while there can be listeners also. Dates to be circulated when set.
- incorporated & non-incorporated members?
we'll have to work this out, but it's what we want
- is there a time-scale?

Not as such. However, there are events:

- Co-operatives Congress, Cardiff, 28-30th June
- People & Planet Summer Camp: 1-5th July
- Confederation of Co-op Housing Conference – 20th July
- (not mentioned in the meeting, sorry I forgot) Co-op Enterprise Hub Conference, 1st & 2nd October, Manchester

- Should we have a launch event?

We agreed to hold a conference in the autumn, which Tom Wragg (Birmingham) is already planning to do

- Who's going to do what, esp marketing? See discussion later
- How will we communicate and make decisions?
Organise through the email list and make decisions through the email list, plus have Skype meetings. **Simon** to set up email list.

We want to make decisions by consensus, at least in the short term.

Other things to think about

Pathway to membership – how do we know officially who the members are?

Rules & Incorporation:

Cath or Richard to circulate the Co-ops UK multi-stakeholder model rules

Options:

- don't incorporate for ages, but stay as an unincorporated association
- incorporate with model rules and change them later

We can only incorporate once we have 3 incorporated founder members

Reasons to incorporate

- to open a bank account just once, because getting the ID together is a pain
- to employ staff
- to enter into other contracts

money coming from various large co-op societies – would be good to have a bank account sooner rather than later.

Who's doing what?

Luke - Facebook admin, event write-ups, networking

Sylvia – networking, logistics, publicity materials

Sole – networking, events – **Sole** look into getting funding to go from supervisor (masters is on housing co-ops)

Naomi - logistical stuff (event organising?), funding bids

Jaye – promotional materials, networking

Hamish – promotional stuff, proof-reading advice from a not-yet co-op point of view

Simon - business plan, structures

Francesco – networking, rules

Jamie – collect resources on facebook page – become an admin

Cath – question answering and referring

Richard – ditto

Rosie – rules, incorporation, legal stuff, all the other stuff too.

Roy – promotional materials, design books/leaflets (Jamie says he's really good)

Mike Shaw – Wordpress and add all the emails here to have access – Jaye, Francesco & Simon to chase

Sean – NASCO liaison, publicity materials, channelling press reports to bloggers/tweeters

Congress

Names of people going to Cardiff, so we can get passes – **Richard & Cath & Martin M** to sort this out.

- Sole Scuderi, Luke Tilley – **Sole** to co-ordinate travel from yorkshire
- Francesco Benvenuti (depending on his mum), maybe another from the housing co-op
- Jamie Risner
- bunch from Birmingham, inc Richard. **Simon** get names to Martin/Richard/Cath

Team prep skype meeting – Wed 26th June 7pm, to work out

- who's doing the talk, what the content is
- where and when to meet and camp together
- **Sole** to draft an idea for interactive session and circulate it in time for the skype
- which sessions need targetting and how and by whom

Cath circulate link to Congress programme

Sean – draft leaflet within a week – who you are and how they can help. Pledges for help on a tear-off strip, all SfC contact info & website, logo is great if it's legit.

Team – bring a box to put pledges in, if you decide to.

People and Planet Summer camp 1-5 July, Oxfordshire, £50

Sean & Tom definitely going.

Confederation of Co-operative Housing – 20th July, Warwick

2 from Brum have tickets, **Richard** to try to get a ticket for Sole, although she may be able to get it funded through her course.

I didn't get who else might go from Sheff or Edinburgh.

Communicating & Meetings

Debrief from Congress and Shared Planet, prep for CCH, etc: skype meeting Sunday 7th, 5.30pm

Simon to type up contacts and send to Cath ASAP, to include in these minutes.

We mentioned the idea of working groups, but didn't really pursue it:

- publicity group
 - interventions at events
 - promotional printed material
 - online marketing
- business planning group