



# Building communities of the future together

Co-op Foundation strategy 2022 - 2027



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Foundation

# About the Co-op Foundation

**We're the Co-op's charity and we're co-operating for a fairer world.**

We believe co-operation is at the heart of strong communities and this makes us a different kind of funder. We work closely with communities, we listen and we learn. We unlock communities' power by focusing on those who have most at stake. That's why we asked young people to shape our vision for fairer, more co-operative communities. They're the next generation of leaders and pioneers.

We make it easy for organisations and individuals to access our funds, work with us and campaign alongside us. We're always ready to share what we've learned and we're proud to be part of the Co-op.

Co-operate with us, and let's build communities of the future together.



# Foreword

**The Co-op Foundation we see today is very different to the one I joined as Chair in 2016.**

Six years ago, our team numbered just 1.5 full-time equivalent roles. We were facilitating the deployment of skills and time for local communities donated by Co-op colleagues and finishing a project that had aimed to challenge youth media stereotypes. But we were only just starting our journey towards building broader giving and social investment programmes that would complement the Co-op's wider community strategy.

The first stage of this was our 2017-2019 strategy, which saw us achieve some incredible milestones:

- We awarded more than £6.5m in grants to community projects tackling youth loneliness. This built on Co-op's loneliness campaign with the British Red Cross. By 2019, we were the leading funder tackling youth loneliness anywhere in the UK.
- We strengthened communities by awarding £2.2m in interest-free loans and grants to boost the financial sustainability of local spaces.
- We built our reputation as a trusted charity with a co-operative difference, leveraging £6.8m of match-funding and grant commitments to expand and extend our work.

We developed further over the coronavirus pandemic, learning from our partners about a better way of funding, reporting and learning, and listening to young people about a fairer future.

Today, we bring our learning and impact together to present something that I believe is truly special. A new strategy that is bold and exciting. A direction that will power us towards a fairer and more co-operative future. A vision that is youth-led, and co-operatively owned.

## Building communities of the future together 2022-27

We started work on our strategy in mid-2021. We committed to building it co-operatively and invited Co-op colleagues and Members, civil society organisations, other funders, funded partners and young people to imagine what it could become.

It is formed of three parts:

- A vision of fairer communities in 10 years' time built on co-operative values. We co-created this with today's young people who will inherit the communities we aim to build. They've identified six strategic priorities that our funding, campaigns and support must focus on in order to build a fairer future. [Read more from page 6.](#)
- A pioneering approach to co-operative funding that will see us support organisations and young people working towards our shared vision, and help out when things go wrong, too. Flexible, accessible and unrestricted funding rooted in learning about what works - rather than focusing on traditional reporting - will be at the heart of our new ways of working.

- A commitment to co-operate with others to increase our reach and impact, and ensure that Co-op Member donations go further than ever.

I am excited that work can now begin to bring this trailblazing new strategy to life. As Co-op's charity, we have always strived to demonstrate the values and commitment to community that we both share. This strategy will enable us to do so much more, building on our close relationship as we work together on 'Co-operating for a Fairer World' and forging a path to a better future for us all.

Thank you to everyone who has inputted into this incredible piece of work. It is now in our hands to bring it to life.

**Let's build communities of the future together.**

**Jamie Ward-Smith**  
Chair of the Co-op  
Foundation





# Our purpose, vision and mission

Our overall purpose is:  
**Co-operating for a fairer world**

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Our vision is of:  
**Future communities that are fair and built on co-operative values**

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Our mission is:  
**To co-operate with and fund others to help build these communities in the UK**

# Our 2022-27 strategy

Over the course of this strategy, we will:

## Work

with 100 young people to create a clear, compelling and detailed vision of future communities in 10 years' time that are fair and built on co-operative values. We undertook this work in May/June 2022 as part of the development of this strategy.

[Learn more about our Future Communities Vision from page 6.](#)

## Pioneer

a distinctly co-operative way of funding. We'll provide flexible and unrestricted funds to people working to build the fairer, more co-operative communities of the future imagined by young people. We'll listen to, invest in and learn from:

- A diverse range of young people who'll be the leaders, co-operators, organisers and activists of our future communities.
- Organisations working to bring future, fair communities to life.
- Organisations that need support when unpredictable events in the 'here and now' threaten their ability to build fair communities of the future.

We'll bring people together to learn from and celebrate the progress being made in building future, fair communities.

[Read more from page 10.](#)

## Co-operate

with others from across the co-operative movement, social change and philanthropy sectors to bring our vision of future communities to life through funding and campaigning. We'll advocate for our co-operative way of funding, and we'll encourage other funders to join in.

[Skip to page 16 for details.](#)



# Working with young people to create our vision

**Young people have a big stake in the future of our communities. They are the next generation of community leaders, pioneers and members. But issues like climate change and the cost of living crisis make it hard for many young people to look ahead with positivity to the next 10 years.**

That's why, in May/June 2022, we co-operated with young people to develop our Future Communities Vision, so they could have a direct role in our future direction, funding and campaigning priorities. As we roll out this strategy, we will find and fund more young people able to unlock the potential in communities.

Co-operating with young people on this vision has been an important step for the Co-op Foundation, and shows our co-operative values of democracy, equality and equity in action.

The vision young people have shaped outlines a story of positive change over the next 10 years, resulting in fairer, more inclusive, and more co-operative communities. You can read it in full on [page 8](#).

## How did we bring this to life?

We ran an inclusive participatory process, involving a diverse group of young people aged from 11 to 25 years old. Young people volunteered to help from all over the UK, including young Co-op Members, young Co-op colleagues and Co-op Academy students.

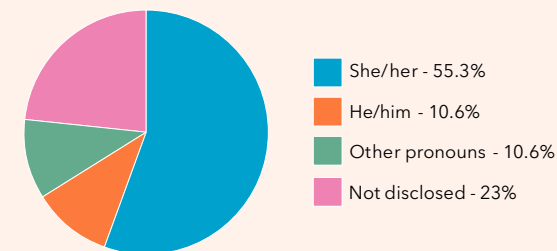
The Foundation and wider Co-op already have a strong track record in working with young people.

Our process was able to draw on that experience, including the youth-led research on violence currently being rolled out as part of the [Peer Action Collective](#); Co-op's [The Ghosted Generation](#) research with young people; and the [joint research](#) with Mind on resilient communities.

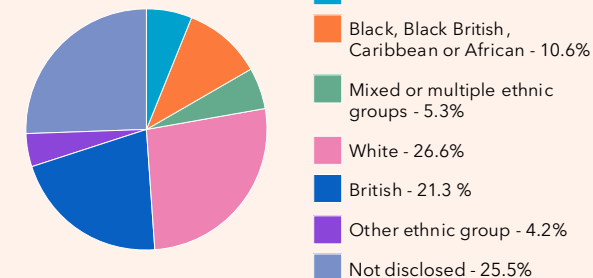


## Participant background

### Gender, based on their preferred pronoun

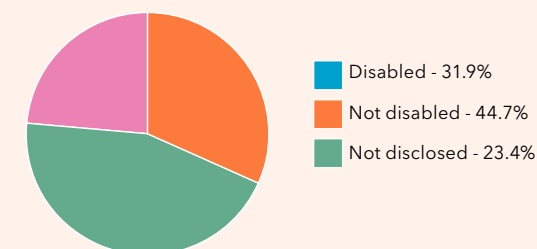


### Ethnicity



Please note, there may be an overlap in ethnicity categorisation because it reflects how participants chose to describe themselves.

### Disability



Our participatory design process incorporated 'futures' methodologies and an imaginative and asset-based approach.

### We hosted 10 in-person and virtual focus groups

Our first four focus groups were exploratory and run virtually. Working online allowed us to reach young people more widely, including those from rural areas, young people who had limited time available and disabled participants.

Sessions focused on exploring young people's interpretation of co-operative values and discussing how they would envisage their future, fair communities built on these values. Based on the exploratory sessions, six themes emerged that represented key aspects of the future, fair communities young people imagined. Young people looked at these key themes in the next focus groups, two of which were held in person at our partners, Off The Record (Bristol) and Youth Focus: North East, in Gateshead.

### We sent four WhatsApp diary prompts

In addition to focus groups, 10 young people took part in WhatsApp messaging diaries. WhatsApp diaries allowed us to capture data differently. Data is more considered and thought about, as participants can respond in their own environment and space.

Participants were sent four prompts to answer across four dates. They were encouraged to respond to each prompt with at least 600 words. Prompts focused on four out of the six themes chosen in the exploratory focus groups.

### The results

On the next page, you can read the vision shaped by these young people of fair communities in 10 years' time, built on co-operative values.

Our 'Future Communities Vision' sets out a series of strategic priorities that need action for such communities to exist; and the more detailed steps required for long-term, systemic change.

These three elements - the vision, the strategic priorities and the steps provide the scaffolding for the design of our future funds and campaigns.

The positive changes described in the vision will also act as targets for funded partners to work towards. Together, they tell a powerful story about how we can all work together to build communities of the future.

And finally, this vision sets out an agenda for future advocacy by the Foundation and wider Co-op. Where we are not able to solve issues ourselves, we will inspire others to contribute to, or bring about, change.

This Future Communities Vision has set the tone for the Foundation's work, capturing optimism and hope for the future in a post-Covid world.



*"I feel that the only way to achieve my community [of the future] is to refresh the system in place and give people the power they deserve."*

*"Real change starts from the ground up, from the roots to the flower. Little changes within communities today can easily add up and create a huge impact on our communities in the future."*

Quotes from two young people who helped to shape our Future Communities Vision.

# Our Future Communities Vision

Created by young people

**This is our vision of what we believe communities should be like in 10 years' time. Young people like us are ready to help build them, and to inherit them.**

In 10 years' time our communities are fair. They are stronger because people come together to co-operate.

In 10 years' time, we all have opportunities to learn and thrive, incomes that are secure, and affordable homes, whatever our background.

We feel safe and respected wherever we go. And even if we've made mistakes, we feel welcomed.

In 10 years' time, our communities are equitable. We celebrate our diversity and we educate each other so we can all feel included, appreciated and involved.

We prioritise our health and wellbeing. Everyone has the opportunity to get involved in physical activity, and we work together to strengthen our mental wellbeing.

In 10 years' time, we've made real strides to tackle the impact of climate change. And we're finding ways to live more sustainably, too.

With every passing day, our young voices have grown stronger. Power is shared more equally, and people act on what we say.

Ten years from now, we live in communities based on fairness, unity and co-operation.



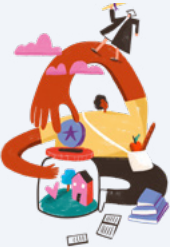



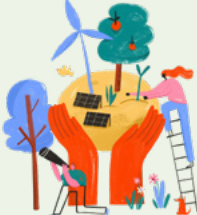

Illustration commissioned by Beatfreeks  
Created by Lauren (25) and Liv (25)

**Pickle**



# Our strategic priorities

We will work with our partners, campaigners, match-funders and the Co-op to turn young people's vision into reality.

<p><b>We will help to create:</b></p>	<p><b>Prosperous communities with access to opportunity</b></p> 	<p><b>Safe communities</b></p> 	<p><b>Diverse, equitable and inclusive communities</b></p> 	<p><b>Healthy communities</b></p> 	<p><b>Sustainable communities</b></p> 	<p><b>Communities that prioritise youth activism, shared power and transparent governance</b></p> 
<p><b>By supporting organisations and individuals that...</b></p>	<p>Enable people to have meaningful opportunities to learn and work.</p> <p>Provide access to affordable and adequate places to live, and affordable and healthy food.</p> <p>Ensure people are paid fairly for the work they do and can afford to live decent and sustainable lives.</p>	<p>Enable us all to feel safe and respected.</p> <p>Rehabilitate people when they make mistakes, and welcome them back into communities.</p> <p>Work in youth centres or community centres to keep people away from crime, support them to share their challenges, and enable them to collaborate.</p>	<p>Celebrate, raise awareness of, and advocate for diversity and inclusion in all sectors of society.</p> <p>Provide accessible and welcoming spaces in the community that cater for different needs and for people with different backgrounds.</p> <p>Enable people to have fair opportunities for education and work, regardless of their background.</p>	<p>Support people to have good mental health through access to services and education.</p> <p>Enable us all to work together to protect and strengthen wellbeing.</p> <p>Support people to have good physical health and enable everyone to have the time and opportunity to exercise.</p>	<p>Know about sustainable solutions, raise awareness of them, and put them into practice for a just transition.</p> <p>Come together to preserve and nurture local green spaces for the benefit of communities.</p>	<p>Educate young people from diverse backgrounds in leadership and politics, and enable them to be involved in decision-making.</p> <p>Enable young people to self-organise, find resources and get into positions of power to co-create solutions to issues that matter to them.</p>

# Pioneering a co-operative way of funding

## How we'll do it

**Now we have our Future Communities Vision, we are developing a series of funds to bring it to life.**

We will invest in:

- A diverse range of young people who'll be the leaders, co-operators, organisers and activists in these future communities.
- Organisations working to bring future communities to life.
- Organisations that need support when unpredictable events in the 'here and now' threaten their ability to build communities of the future.

We're Co-op's charity, so our new funds will put into practice our intention to be a co-operative funder. Co-operative values will be reflected throughout our funding, from applications and grant-making, to learning and celebrating. This builds on work we've already started to become a more [flexible funder](#), and to develop more equal and trusting partnerships.

These following seven principles will direct how we fund during the course of this strategy:

### 1. Participatory

We will involve people from the communities we work with in decisions about how to use our funds. We'll draw on the co-operative values of democracy, self-help and self-responsibility to help address the power imbalance present in traditional grant-making.

Becoming a truly participatory grant-maker will be a journey. It is not something that happens overnight, and requires careful and conscious work to address power dynamics.

We aim to complete our journey towards becoming a participatory grant-maker by the end of this strategic period.

### 2. Unrestricted

We want to invest in organisations that can bring our Future Communities Vision to life. We will make unrestricted funding available, giving organisations the power to decide how best to use these funds to build their communities' future.



### 3. Looking to the long-term

Building the communities that young people want to be part of will take time. As such, and where appropriate, we would invest in organisations over longer timeframes. Long-term funding is a way we can demonstrate the co-operative value of solidarity with our partners and communities, and help encourage social responsibility. Our funds may vary in the length of grants we make, but all would be designed to support long-term work to build communities of the future.

### 4. Trusting

We're already known for building relationships with partners based on honesty and openness, rather than traditional, top-down power dynamics. We will build on this, focusing on understanding partners and their work in a positive, transparent and trusting way. We will be as flexible as possible with our funding, creating maximum freedom and control for the funded partner, so they can choose how best to ensure their community is ready for the future.

### 5. Accessible

The size, background or leadership of an organisation should not be a barrier to accessing funding. If we are to bring co-operative values of equity and equality to our funding, then we should not exclude anyone based on how we ask them to apply, how they report back to us or how they evaluate their work. We will proactively encourage applications from small and traditionally less funded groups, particularly those that face systemic barriers. We will also find creative approaches to enable organisations to access funding, for example, video applications via smartphones.

### 6. Supportive and strengthening

In addition to funding, we will provide partners with other kinds of support. Over time, we will develop a funder-plus model that provides partners with access to an enhanced range of support, such as organisational development opportunities. We will work in partnership with and co-operate with others who hold a range of skills that will benefit organisations and communities.

### 7. Facilitate co-operation

No person or organisation can build their community's future alone. Where we see opportunities for organisations and people to build together, we'll do what we can to foster co-operation. We will actively support new partnerships, encouraging local connections and collaborations, and links between local and national organisations.



# Pioneering a co-operative way of funding

## Investing in young people

**Young people are the leaders, innovators, co-operators, activists, entrepreneurs and organisers of the future. They will be crucial in creating future communities that are fair and built on co-operative values.**

We will seek to find these young people, get to know them, and back them with funding to bring their ideas to life.

These young people may already be leaders of youth-led organisations, or they may be acting alone. But all of them will be able to show how they are helping to build fairer communities of the future. They might be addressing racism, fighting inequality, transforming education models, creating radical new employment opportunities, helping people improve their mental health, setting up co-operatives, or tackling climate change. They may be community leaders who are working collaboratively, while claiming their power and space within society. Or they may be campaigners, raising the profile of societal issues and solutions at national or international level.

We will support these young people throughout the life of our grant to them, providing organisational development support, mentoring or training where appropriate. We will build strong, open and trusting relationships with all the young people we fund, and give them the opportunity to come together and learn from each other, too. That way, we'll be nurturing a diverse community of young leaders.

This is a new way of funding for us. We will seek to learn from, and co-operate with, other funders that also invest in individuals. Our experiences will help the wider Co-op and funding sector learn more about the value that comes from funding individual leaders, and how to do this in a co-operative way.



# Pioneering a co-operative way of funding

## Investing in organisations building the future - The Future Communities Fund

**We will invest in a range of organisations from across the UK to bring about change at a local level and build the fair and co-operative communities of the future, as set out in our Future Communities Vision.**

To do this, we will launch a Future Communities Fund, and organisations applying for funding will need to:

1. Demonstrate how they are working towards one or more of the strategic priorities within our Future Communities Vision. Once we launch the fund, we will set out clearly how to do this.
2. Explain how they are building their community's future co-operatively, in partnership with others.
3. Show how they are taking seriously the need for power to sit with people who have lived experience and are able to represent the communities they're part of.

We will prioritise organisations that include young people in their governance and participatory mechanisms.

We will focus on unlocking potential within communities themselves, and expect there to be an important role to play for small, community organisations.

Our funding mechanisms will be designed to be inclusive, proportionate and accessible to smaller organisations.

Finally, our funding will actively support the formation of partnerships, encouraging local connections and collaborations.

We will post in our blog and on social media to promote the launch of our Future Communities Fund.



# Pioneering a co-operative way of funding

Investing in organisations when unpredictable events threaten their ability to build communities of the future

**Our strategy is about building communities of the future. But we know things will happen that may make this harder to do.**

The world is changing fast, and many of the upheavals we're facing will test the bonds that hold communities together. We know only too well from the Covid-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis that unpredictable events can happen at any time, and that they have the potential to make our Future Communities Vision more difficult to be realised.

In times of disruption and sudden change, we want to be proactive, agile and responsive. We want to invest in a way that builds resilience for our Future Communities Vision, so that unprecedented events don't derail the possibility of future, fairer communities.

We will seek to fund organisations that work to solve emerging societal problems, and those who help others when a co-operative response is critically needed. Our recent funding of Refugee Action in response to the dramatic and sudden crisis in Afghanistan in 2021 is a good example of the responsive approach we want to foster.



# Pioneering a co-operative way of funding

## Learning and celebrating together

**Our approach to learning, monitoring and evaluation will be underpinned by our co-operative values of equality, equity, solidarity and self-responsibility. We aim to be world-class in this field: testing, iterating and sharing new approaches.**

Our expectations of partners will be proportionate and set in the context of transparent and trusting relationships. We will ensure our processes are culturally appropriate to the groups we are working with and manage power dynamics. We want partners to feel open and share their learning when things don't turn out as expected.

Measuring impact and learning are in the early stages of development in participatory and unrestricted grantmaking. We will contribute to building new knowledge in this field by sharing our approaches and adaptations.

### Why we want to learn

[The funding sector is shifting](#) on what it sees as the purpose of learning, from seeking to prove success to improving practice. The purpose of our learning could be:

- To achieve continuous improvement in how we fund.
- To understand the impact of our funding and inform decisions.
- To support our funded partners in learning from their practices, learning from others and achieving continuous improvement.

- To contribute to new knowledge in our priorities and use it to advocate for change.

For our different funding strands, we will be clear about the purpose of the learning and we will aim to strike a balance between prioritising our own learning needs with supporting funded partners to learn.

### How we want to learn

'How we want to learn' is as important as 'what we learn'. Learning should be a power-shifting, participatory and co-operative experience. We will endeavour to involve our partners right from the start to co-design learning goals, set learning questions and develop reporting processes.

#### [Learning should involve:](#)

- Transparency and openness.
- Active listening and responsive decision making.
- Meaningful participation at all levels.
- Continuous dialogue and building relationships.

Through learning festivals, we will also create opportunities for wider sharing of our learning in the sector.

### What we want to learn

There is often a '[measurement mismatch](#)' between what people working at the local level perceive as important and what funders want to hear is happening. We will let people delivering the work define what matters to them and we will co-design measuring

impact systems based on the following [principles](#):

- It will be useful, and it will be used.
- It will be easily adaptable to different contexts and interests.
- It will be accountable and empowering to the people and communities we aim to serve.

### Incorporating DEI in learning and evaluation

We will ground our learning and evaluation in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI), making it equity-focused, culturally responsive and participatory. Moreover, we need to have better insights into where we could improve our reach or impact. We are in the process of joining other funders to implement the [DEI Data Standard](#), a common approach to capturing DEI data from our funded partners. This data will be shared alongside the rest of our [360Giving](#) data.





## Co-operating with others

Bringing to life our Future Communities Vision can only be done through co-operation. For the Co-op Foundation, this means co-operating with others from across the Co-op and wider co-operative movement, and the social change and philanthropy sectors. We will actively seek opportunities to share, collaborate on and advocate for our co-operative approach to funding, and bring our voices together to campaign on shared priorities.

### Working with the Co-op and wider co-operative movement

There is a compelling story to be told about how our focus on building communities of the future adds value to the wider Co-op and co-operative movement. This strategy provides greater focus than we've had before, and clearly articulates a vision for co-operative communities of the future that everyone can get behind and help to build. It demonstrates a role for co-operative funding approaches and collective campaigning.

The Foundation's role needs to be clearly articulated, carefully communicated, and closely held by both the Foundation team and colleagues across the business and movement. It is vital that the way we talk about our role feels logical, convincing and owned by all of us.

The logic for this strategy, and its value within the Co-op, is as follows:

- The purpose of the Co-op Foundation is completely aligned with the values of the Co-op. All future Foundation funding will be contributing to the Co-op's overall vision of 'Co-operating for a Fairer World'.

- This strategy puts Co-op values into practice, allowing the Foundation to build communities of the future with others in a democratic way, and to fund in a more co-operative way.
- This strategy links with and supports Co-op academies to bring about local change.
- It provides a way of linking Foundation activity with Co-op membership. This is particularly the case for young members, some of whom helped develop our Future Communities Vision.
- It is a powerful way to use the voice of the Co-op brand for social justice. And it provides a route to joining wider Co-op campaigns and using the campaign machinery of the Co-op to build a stronger collective voice.



## Working with other funders and philanthropists

**Our Future Communities Vision provides a strong base from which we can collaborate with other funders and philanthropists. Our invitation is clear: let's build future communities together.**

We will explore co-funds that have a geographical focus, a focus on one or more of the strategic priorities in the vision or a focus on a specific sector. Small or large philanthropists and businesses could also contribute to these funds, or they could be opened up to Co-op Members, giving them greater visibility of the impact of our funding.

We'll also consider who we partner with to promote a systems-change approach - working with those most likely to bring about bigger changes that lead to a brighter future for communities.

We want to champion a co-operative way of funding. We will participate in funding networks and proactively invite other funders to come on the journey with us by co-funding, learning together and intentionally giving up the power that comes with holding wealth.

We aspire to work with other funders to simplify the reporting and monitoring requirements of the organisations we and they fund. The duplication of applications and reports places a huge burden on organisations, and is a problem that co-operation could solve.



# Conclusion

## This is an important moment for the Co-op Foundation.

Our new strategy can help us be bold, future-facing, radical and collaborative. It shows the co-operative values that are at our heart. It fully aligns with the Co-op and wider co-operative movement, while showing our distinctive value to both.

Implemented well, it will be a ground-breaking attempt by a UK funder to listen deeply, and bring to life, a vision of future communities developed and articulated by young people.

Putting our resources behind this Future Communities Vision marks us out as a truly co-operative funder.

But in the end, our strategy is not about us. It's about the communities that we get to know, learn from and learn with. It's through co-operating with communities and individuals that, together, we'll ensure we can all face the future with optimism.

None of us can do this alone, and we need to start now.

**Let's build communities of the future together.**



## Part of the Co-op family

### Allan Leighton, Co-op Chair

The Co-op Foundation has built a reputation as a bold and innovative funder and campaigner. It tackles the difficult issues that communities face and it places co-operation and long-term impact at the heart of its response.

I'm proud that its 'Building communities of the future together' strategy directs the team to go even further. Over the next few years, our charity commits to working with young people, community groups and other funders to create a better way of funding, a philanthropy sector inspired by co-operation, and a fairer future for us all. This is what the Co-op Foundation does best and it's a momentous time for the team as they trailblaze alongside Co-op to build fairer communities whatever the odds.



### Shirine Khoury-Haq, Co-op CEO

The Co-op is an organisation like no other. Co-operation is deeply embedded at the heart of our business model and it directs us to think, act and support communities like few others can. Our world-class community and campaigning work aligns under our vision of 'Co-operating for a Fairer World' and it makes a difference locally and nationally.

The Co-op Foundation is a key component of this already incredible output. Its work with young people over the past few years has built on, inspired and amplified the Co-op's own community focus, and this alignment is further strengthened within this new strategy. 'Building communities of the future together' is a bold statement of intent that will strengthen the Foundation's ties with the Co-op, create tangible, lasting and positive change for young people and communities, and deliver on our vision. I look forward to working with our charity to build a fairer and more co-operative future.



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Foundation

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