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Foundation

# Co-op Foundation theory of change

June 2023

## Introduction

We're committed at the Co-op Foundation to continually improving our practice so we can support the organisations and individuals we fund to have a greater impact in their communities.

In 2022, we launched our five-year ['Building communities of the future together'](#) strategy and 10-year vision. Our journey to implement this strategy started with the development of a theory of change. We did this through a participatory process that helped us focus our activities in the next five years as well as reflect, learn from and improve our work.

This document presents our theory of change as both a diagram and narrative. It is our roadmap from 2022 to 2027, which will take us closer to achieving our strategic priorities. You can read more about these priorities, and how we chose them in partnership with young people, in the next section.

This document also sets out the external context in which we are currently operating, the changes we hope to see, our view on how those changes may happen, the contribution we can make as a Foundation, and some of the major assumptions that underpin our proposed approach. We understand these processes are non-linear, interconnected, interdependent, and occurring simultaneously or separately.

This is a living document that will evolve over time as we learn more about how to put into practice our funding approaches, how we progress in creating our future communities and our contribution to

these changes. We will review and refine our theory of change as we assess if our activities are bringing about change, and if the pathways of change are accurate and realistic.

## **About us**

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.

We want to co-operate with others to build communities of the future together.

## **Our strategy and vision**

Our five-year '[Building communities of the future together](#)' strategy directs us to pioneer a distinctly co-operative way of funding young people and organisations. This means our grant-giving will be flexible and unrestricted, and focus on helping funded partners work towards a vision of fair and co-operative communities in 10 years' time. A five-year strategy is helpful for this longer-term vision as it allows us to check on our progress at the midway point.

As young people will inherit the future communities we want to build, we asked them to create our vision and identify six strategic priorities that would turn it into reality. They asked us to direct our funding and campaigns to create:

- Prosperous communities with access to opportunity
- Safe communities

- Diverse, equitable and inclusive communities
- Healthy communities
- Sustainable communities
- Communities that prioritise youth activism, shared power and transparent governance.

Click to read our [vision of fair and co-operative communities](#) in 10 years' time developed by almost 100 diverse young people.

## **Our ambitions**

Over the five years of our strategy, we will:

- Adopt a 'different' approach to funding where we share power with our funded partners and individuals. We use the terms 'funded partners' or 'partners' to refer to the organisations we support with our funding.
- Work closely with young people. They are the experts in their own lives and we believe it's important to give them the power to build the future, fair communities they want to see.
- Work co-operatively with other funders, the voluntary sector and communities.
- Work with the Co-op business, which has strong pre-existing routes into communities.
- Adhere to the co-operative values that co-ops all over the world follow. These values are equity, equality, democracy, solidarity, self-help and self-responsibility.

## External and internal context - challenges

Our work as a Foundation and our ability to fulfil our strategic ambition for the next five years needs to be considered along with the internal and external context in which we operate. We've reviewed this context with desk-based research and discussions with our stakeholders, and identified a range of external and internal challenges and opportunities. We share these over the next two sections.

### External challenges:

**The repercussions of the covid pandemic:** These are still being felt and have had many devastating effects on people. For example, there are wide-ranging ways in which young people continue to suffer. These hardships include poorer mental and physical health, and extensive learning loss that will affect their futures.<sup>[i,ii](#)</sup>

**The cost-of-living crisis:** Prices rose steeply in 2022 and, at the time of writing in early 2023, continue to rise. This is causing a crisis for many people and has ripple effects for daily living and future prospects.<sup>[iii](#)</sup>

**Wider global issues:** The impact of climate change is now being felt in the UK and requires both mitigation and adaptation actions at national, local and household levels.<sup>[iv](#)</sup>

**Growing financial and service pressures on charities:** Many charities have struggled with rising demand for their services, falling levels of income and increasing operational costs<sup>[v](#)</sup> in recent years. There is data that small charities are disproportionately impacted and need more targeted support to ensure sustainability, resilience and continuity in their ability to offer services.<sup>[vi](#)</sup>

**Barriers to young people:** The influence and involvement of young people is important, but there may be walls that can't be broken and more systemic barriers. The factors that are outside of our control and influence, and outside young people's control, may mean some changes may not occur, and some leadership roles may not be taken up because of these factors.

## **Internal challenges:**

**Ambition:** There is a danger of us being overambitious, especially as we are piloting our new approaches, which will need refinement. There is also a danger of launching too many funds with limited internal capacity.

**Relationship building:** We will need to build more external relationships and understand the voluntary and community sector better so we can align our support to where the need is greatest. It is also important that we work even more collaboratively in the future. This could include working with other funders, which takes time and will need to be prioritised by our team.

**Power imbalance:** We are passionate about nurturing relationships between funded partners and between ourselves and funded partners. However, we acknowledge that 'true' partnerships may not be possible as we still hold the financial power.

**Our context:** As we increase our work with and for young people, we will need to understand where we sit as a Foundation in the ladder of participation. We need to understand who the decision-makers are, how diverse they are and how we can create diverse leadership of young people and adults who can have a role in the community.

**Funding drop:** The reduction of funding for youth work is a threat. As we start funding differently and move away from predominantly project funding, sectors and organisations that previously received our support in the past may be disappointed. These are important relationships that we will need to take care to maintain in, potentially, other co-operative formats.

There are also opportunities that have emerged over recent years, and that will continue to present themselves in the future.

## **External opportunities:**

**Local connections:** During the pandemic, communities came together more to tackle issues locally. As we embark on creating fairer

future communities, we can look to strengthen this community work and build on learning from what worked and what didn't.<sup>vii</sup>

**A new style of funding:** Trends in the funding sector during the pandemic also pointed towards a much-needed increase in unrestricted funding and collaborative funding.<sup>viii</sup> There is evidence that funders' interest and practice in unrestricted funding is continuing to grow.<sup>ix</sup>

**Campaign impact:** Finally, funders have also become more receptive to the idea of either engaging in or funding campaigning or influencing activity.<sup>x</sup> This is something that we've also taken on board at the Co-op Foundation through the success of our youth co-designed behaviour change campaign, Lonely Not Alone.

## **Internal opportunities:**

**The Co-op Group:** Co-op's business network is strong and rooted in local communities. We should aim to utilise this infrastructure more and focus on work that is complementary - not duplicative - to Co-op's own community output.

**Deeper impact:** As a funder, we're able to focus on issues for the long-term and create deeper and more meaningful impact. We recognise, however, that we do need to get better at defining and measuring outcomes from the work we fund.

**Funder flexibility:** Our funded partners told us that our flexibility as a funder was particularly helpful. Their own context can change frequently and they can also gain new insights that prompt changes to outputs that increase their final impact. We're proud that our way of working allows them to focus on achieving impacts that matter, rather than having to satisfy our own interests and reporting.

**Young people as change makers:** We're passionate about shifting power to young people, either through participatory grantmaking or our strategic priority that focuses on youth activism. Working with young people needs to be embedded into our ways of working, and we need to be ready to share what we learn so other funders are inspired to do the same. We will be looking out for these opportunities to further our output and the work of others.

## What is a theory of change and how do we use it?

A theory of change is an assumption about the relationship between the changes we want to see and the actions that may bring about those changes. Put differently: "If I do 'x', then I expect 'y' to occur for these reasons".<sup>[xi](#)</sup>

A theory of change defines long-term goals and then maps backwards to identify necessary pre-conditions, or what needs to happen first. It explains the process of change by outlining causal linkages in its short-term, medium-term and long-term outcomes.<sup>[xii](#)</sup>

We use the following terms in our theory of change:<sup>[xiii](#), [xiv](#), [xv](#), [xvi](#)</sup>

- **Impact:** This is the sustained change we would like to see in our communities, and that our work contributes towards.
- **Outcomes:** These are the specific, real-world changes that result from our activities.
- **Activities:** This is the work and activities we do to achieve the outcomes.
- **Assumptions:** These are the necessary conditions that need to be in place to make the theory work and for our organisation to achieve the outcomes and impact we want to see. They may also involve internal and external risks, opportunities, barriers and enablers.

We recognise the ambitious nature of our 10-year vision so we wanted to develop a theory of change for the next five years that would align to the time period of our strategy and help us identify midway outcomes.

We will use our theory of change to guide strategic choices, communicate what we're aiming to achieve and create an organisational evaluation framework to track change towards achieving our strategy.

## How we made it

We commissioned the National Council for Voluntary Organisations ([NCVO](#)) to facilitate a theory of change process for us.

NCVO is the largest membership community for charities, voluntary organisations and community groups in England. Theory of change development and training is a core part of its consultancy offer.

This theory of change was developed by NCVO in collaboration with our colleagues and trustees, Co-op colleagues, funded partners and young people in two phases:

- Consultation phase (December 2022 to January 2023)
- Workshop phase (January to February 2023)

The consultation phase involved 22 individuals through interviews - including four trustees and our chair - and four group discussions. These group discussions included one session with 11 Foundation colleagues, one with two Co-op colleagues, one with two funded partners, and one session with two young people. The purpose of the consultation phase was to gather perspectives from our team and closest stakeholders about the long-term impact we would like to have. It also allowed us to learn more about the different contexts and factors influencing our work, and to hear stakeholders' perspectives on what we do and should be doing, with whom and why.

Following the consultation phase, NCVO created a straw Theory of Change on the collaborative online whiteboard, Miro. This straw version was then revised according to the feedback captured during two follow-up workshops with the Foundation team and trustees.

Initially, NCVO created three streams of outcomes: for young people, for funded partners and for communities. It was then agreed we should concentrate on young people and funded partners only for the next five years to ensure our outcomes are achievable. We accept that change in the communities will happen beyond the five years covered by this theory of change and our '[Building communities of the future together](#)' strategy.



## **Our phases of work**

### **1. Consultation with stakeholders**

We held a workshop with the Co-op Foundation team and spoke with young people, Co-op colleagues, funded partners and Foundation trustees to develop a straw theory of change.

### **2. Review and refinement**

We hosted two online workshops with the Co-op Foundation team to review the straw theory of change, then refine it and identify assumptions. Foundation trustees joined our second workshop.

### **3. Finalising and narrative writing**

Our core project group held regular discussions and collaboration sessions with NCVO to develop this document and further refine our work.

### **4. Sharing our theory of change internally and with our stakeholders**

We hosted a virtual session for Co-op Foundation colleagues before posting externally on our blog and website.

# Impact and anticipated changes for and with young people (2022-27)

## Activities

- **Funding for individuals** (directly and through organisations)
- **Funder plus\* support for individuals:**
  - Sharing sessions (online)
  - In-person forums
  - Listening meetings
  - Training
  - Activity days
  - Mentoring
  - Peer networks
- **Future Communities Collective formation and training**
- **Research, learning, communications and campaigning on young people's issues and impacts**

\*Funder plus is any activity additional to grants for capacity building, organisational development, convening, networking and brokerage. Read more from [IVAR](#).

## Short-term outcomes

- Young people gain skills such as listening, communication, leadership, negotiation, facilitation, participation, activism/youth social action and grant making
- Young people have increased direct access to funding for their youth activism and youth leadership activities
- Increased engagement with diverse young people
- Young people can identify referral pathways and progression beyond initial opportunities
- Young people gain grant-making knowledge and understanding of the funding sector
- Young people have increased awareness of opportunities for activism and leadership in their communities
- Young peoples' voices are heard and better represented, including through our communications
- Young people are more involved in generating learning and impact
- Young people have increased knowledge on issues that matter to them

## **Medium-term outcomes**

- Young people have more self confidence, especially to take action
- More young people - and more diverse young people - are meaningfully involved in decision making/governance, including at the Foundation
- Funding decisions are more influenced by those people affected/people with lived experience
- More diverse young people understand why their voices matter
- Young people feel they are listened to
- Learning and impact that is more relevant and useful to young people is generated
- Young people see actions being taken, especially by the Foundation
- Young people share more knowledge and skills, inspiring their peers to get involved in communities
- More youth-led networks are built or existing networks are strengthened
- More young people have a say in how community issues are tackled

## **Long-term outcomes**

- More diverse young people get into leadership roles
- More young people want to improve the communities/structures that govern them
- Young people have more power
- Increased youth-led solutions in the community
- More young people become activists
- More services reflect actual needs of young people
- New evidence of the impact and learning on funding individual young people is generated, and this influences other funders

## **Impact**

### **Five-year impact**

By 2027, young people and organisations have more power to build fairer and more co-operative communities

### **10-year impact**

By 2032, communities are fairer and more co-operative. As envisaged, by young people, they are:

- Prosperous
- Safe
- Equitable, inclusive and diverse
- Healthy
- Sustainable
- Prioritising youth activism and shared power

## **Impact and anticipated changes for and with funded partners (2022-27)**

### **Activities**

- **Funding** (including capacity building, unrestricted)
- **Funder plus support**
  - In-person meetings
  - Events
  - Opportunities to connect, share insights, bring together perspectives and tell stories and learn
  - Visits
  - Open relationships/ touchpoints
- **Influencing activities/ events**
- **Research and learning, and producing 'how-to' resources**
- **Communications and campaigns**

### **Short-term outcomes**

- Partners have increased capacity and resources
- Partners recognise more the value of involving young people in decision-making
- Partners feel better supported
- Increased opportunities for partners to co-operate and collaborate
- Increased awareness about what other partners are doing
- Foundation better understands the needs and capacity of our partners
- Partners are included in decision making with the Foundation
- Partners better understand what communities need

- Partners are more involved in shaping and measuring impact of unrestricted funding
- More partners are engaged and represented in our communications
- Partners learn how to increase their impact
- Partners are more open with the Foundation

## **Medium-term outcomes**

- Partners work more flexibly and can adapt their work in a changing context
- Partners work more co-operatively
- Partners have better capacity to support people with lived experience to lead
- Funded partners work more equitably e.g. with representative boards
- Partners have a more trusting relationship with the Foundation
- Partners see the Foundation as an equal partner
- Partners improve their engagement with and inclusion of people with lived experience in structures/processes
- Evaluation and learning from unrestricted funding is more relevant and influences partners' practice
- More potential partners are confident to apply for funding
- Partners have increased confidence to fulfil their mission

## **Long-term outcomes**

- More partners are more sustainable and resilient financially
- Partners are better able to fulfil their own mission / achieve their own goals
- Partners are stronger
- Power is shifted from the Foundation to funded partners
- New evidence of the impact and learning from unrestricted funding to partners is generated and influences other funders

## **Impact**

### **Five-year impact**

By 2027, young people and organisations have more power to build fairer and more co-operative communities

### **10-year impact**

By 2032, communities are fairer and more co-operative. As envisaged, by young people, they are:

- Prosperous
- Safe
- Equitable, inclusive and diverse
- Healthy
- Sustainable
- Prioritising youth activism and shared power

## **Theory of change narrative**

Over the next five years of our strategy, we will work towards the following impact: **Young people and organisations have more power to build fairer and more co-operative communities.**

To achieve this impact, we anticipate a series of long, medium and short-term outcomes for and with young people and our funded partners. We hope these will be achieved through our activities. We will now detail the connection between these outcomes and activities.

## **Impact and anticipated changes for and with young people (2022-27)**

By 2027, we anticipate that:

### **Long-term outcome: More diverse young people will get into leadership roles**

As a result of more diverse young people being meaningfully involved in decision-making/ governance roles, including within the Foundation, and more diverse young people understanding why their voices matter. They will also have access to direct funding and more awareness of opportunities for activism and leadership in their communities. There will also be increased engagement of diverse young people by partners.

### **Long-term outcome: More young people will want to improve the communities and structures that govern them**

Because they will have shared their knowledge and skills, and more youth-led networks will have been built or existing networks strengthened. Young people will also have gained confidence to take action and skills such as listening, communication, social action and grant-making.

### **Long-term outcome: Young people will have more power**

As a result of our work to build new youth-led networks or strengthen existing ones. This will be due to the sharing of more knowledge and skills with one another, inspiring their peers to get involved in communities, increased self-confidence and skills to take action and access to funding for their activities. It will also be because we will meaningfully involve more diverse young people in decision-making/ governance roles, including within the Foundation. Young people will be prepared for this through being able to identify progression and pathways to power, gaining grant-making knowledge and having a better understanding of the funding sector.

### **Long-term outcome: Increased youth-led solutions in the community will emerge**

As a result of more young people becoming activists when they are more aware of the opportunities to lead and be activists, and when they have more self-confidence and skills to lead and take action. It will also happen as a result of young people having increased knowledge on issues that matter to them, when they feel listened to, and when they have increased direct access to funding for their youth activism and youth leadership activities.

### **Long-term outcome: More services will reflect the actual needs of young people**

When funding decisions are more influenced by young people, they feel they are listened to and their voices are heard/better represented, including in our communications.

### **Long-term outcome: There will be new evidence of the impact and learning on funding individual young people that influences other funders**

As a result of learning and impact being generated that is more relevant and useful to young people, and when young people are more involved in generating learning and impact.

### **We will achieve these outcomes through the following activities:**

- Providing funding to individuals directly and through our partners.
- Providing Funder plus support for individuals that will help them use funding more effectively.
- Forming and training our Future Communities Collective, a diverse group of young people recruited in 2022 to advise on our funding and strategy.
- Conducting research, generating learning, producing communications and running campaigns on young people's issues.

### **Impact and anticipated changes for and with funded partners (2022-27)**

By 2027, we anticipate that:



**Long-term outcome: Partners will be more sustainable and resilient financially**

Because they will work more flexibly and co-operatively and adapt their work in a changing context, enabled through increased capacity and resources as a result of our funding.

**Long-term outcome: Partners will be stronger and better able to fulfil their own mission and achieve their own goals**

As a result of improving their engagement with, and inclusion of, people with lived experience in their structures and processes, and because they better understand what communities need.

And because they will work more equitably, for example, with a representative board, and they will offer wider support to the community they serve in. They will also have more capacity to support people with lived experience to lead, recognise more the value of involving young people in decision-making and, overall, have increased capacity and resources.

And because they will have more confidence to fulfil their mission and will learn how to increase their impact.

**Long-term outcome: Power is shifted from the Co-op Foundation to our partners**

As a result of partners seeing the Foundation as an equal partner, they will have a more trusting relationship with us, be more open with us, be included in our decision-making and feel better supported. It will also be a result of the Foundation better understanding partners' needs and capacity.

**Long-term outcome: There will be new evidence of the impact and learning from unrestricted funding that influences other funders**

When evaluation and learning from unrestricted funding is more relevant and influences partners' practice, and when partners are more involved in shaping and measuring impact of unrestricted funding.

**We will achieve these outcomes through the following activities:**

- Providing unrestricted, capacity building funding.

- Providing Funder plus support.
- Visiting partners and having open relationships and touchpoints.
- Understanding the difference we make, doing research, sharing learning and producing how-to resources.
- Carrying out campaigns and communications.
- Holding influencing events and activities.

## **Assumptions: enablers and barriers**

Any theory of change has assumptions.<sup>xvi</sup> These could be:

- **Enablers:** the conditions that need to be in place to make the theory work.
- **Barriers:** what may cause our theory to fail.

Assumptions are often unstated but exploring and articulating them is important for:

- Helping to identify areas for evaluation or research, especially where the evidence is thin.
- Identifying weaknesses in the theory that an intervention can then mitigate.
- Identifying other organisations or stakeholders we could work with.
- Clarifying roles and responsibilities of those involved in delivering an initiative.

## **Enablers**

During our consultation, the organisational-wide enabling factors that emerged strongly were that the Foundation has:

- Good relationships with our funded partners.

- The right skills mix within the team.
- Funds to distribute.
- A good understanding of young people's perspectives.
- An understanding of good practice organisations who work locally and how to reach them.
- The willingness to adapt if there is a need to fund or support partners differently.
- Greater brand recognition through the Co-op that extends our reach into communities and opens doors to new partnerships.

## **Barriers**

We also identified barriers for the target audiences in our theory of change - young people and partners. Regarding our work with young people and supporting young people to have more power, we assume that:

- Young people want more power.
- Young people have the capacity physically and emotionally to engage with making decisions and taking actions.

And by wanting more diverse young people to get leadership roles, we assume that we:

- Have the right networks and partnerships in place to get diverse young people into leadership roles.

There are also assumptions about our work with young people and our internal ways of working, including that we:

- Have a shared understanding of what it means to meaningfully engage young people.
- Will be able to offer a range of leadership, decision making and activism opportunities that will allow young people to be involved based on their preferred level of participation, needs and capacity.
- Have the right partnerships, communications channels and networks in place to engage and support the young people.

For our work with partners, the potential barriers include that:

- Participatory grant making leads to better outcomes and greater impact - it may not.
- Partners want to share power - they may not.

- The transition from our former strategy to new strategy and priorities will be seamless. There may, in fact, be difficult conversations with long-term partners who no longer meet our priorities.
- We will have a greater influence in the creation of future communities than any other external factors that may hinder improving the communities.

## **In brief - our proposed theory of change**

The Co-op Foundation team is looking to build communities of the future together through its 2022-27 strategy.

This work centres on achieving a vision of fair communities built on co-operative values in 10 years' time. Our vision was created with a diverse group of young people who asked us to direct our future campaigns and funding on the following strategic priorities:

- Prosperous communities with access to opportunity
- Safe communities
- Diverse, equitable and inclusive communities
- Healthy communities
- Sustainable communities
- Communities that prioritise youth activism, shared power and transparent governance.

We are operating in a complex context that poses challenges. These include the long-term impacts of the pandemic, cost-of-living crisis, global issues like climate change, and the charity sector experiencing increasing demand for their services while also facing financial pressures from reduced income.

We want to contribute to alleviating pressing issues our society faces now in order to achieve our vision of future, fair and co-operative communities and deliver on our five-year strategy, 'Building communities of the future together'.

- **We will:**

Fund individuals and organisations with unrestricted and capacity building funding, through participatory grantmaking. We will also offer Funder plus support and influencing activities, conduct research, evidence impact, share learning and communicate and campaign.

- **So that:**

More partners are more sustainable and resilient financially, and better able to fulfil their own missions / achieve their own goals. Power will be shifted from the Foundation to funded partners, partners will be stronger and new evidence of the impact and learning from unrestricted funding will be generated that influences other funders.

- **And:**

More young people will want to improve the communities/structures that govern them. Young people will also have more power and increased youth-led solutions in the community will emerge. In addition, more services will reflect actual needs of young people, more young people will become activists and new evidence of the impact and learning of funding individual young people will be generated to influence other funders.

- **As a result:**

By 2027, young people and organisations will have more power to build fairer and more co-operative communities.

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**Co-op Foundation (2023) Co-op Foundation theory of change. Co-op Foundation, Manchester.**

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