



An evaluation of a community co-operative for people with learning disabilities in the East End of Newcastle upon Tyne

Summary findings

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Introduction

This is a summary of an evaluation of a community co-op that was established in the East End of Newcastle upon Tyne to support people with learning disabilities. The evaluation was commissioned and funded by Northern Rock Foundation (NRF). KeyRing developed an innovative project: setting up a community living co-operative in the East End of Newcastle upon Tyne, in the wards of Walker, Byker and Heaton, which was intended to provide an alternative model of supported living.

NRF and the Newcastle Learning Disability Partnership Board provided funding to establish the co-op. Newcastle City Council Adult and Culture Services Learning Disability Team was involved in supporting the development of the co-op and referred people with learning disabilities to the co-op. KeyRing 'hosted' and managed the co-op.

Aims and objectives

The aims and objectives of the co-op that were agreed with the funders and stakeholders were:

- To provide 24-hour, paid live-in support through recruiting local people to share their lives with people with learning disabilities.
- The co-op was intended to connect its members with learning disabilities to life within their local communities.
- The organisation was modelled on co-operative principles and within three to five years was intended to establish itself as an independent co-operative.
- To operate only within the East End of Newcastle accepting referrals and recruiting from the communities of Walker, Byker and Heaton.
- To recruit local people as volunteers on the basis of sharing interests with people with learning disabilities in their neighbourhood.

What happened – key achievements and results

The East End community co-op was a highly innovative model; the co-op was aiming to test a number of different innovative ways of working at the same time: the use of individual budgets in a city where only limited piloting work had occurred; a model of live-in support for people with high support needs using their individual budgets to fund the support; a concentrated approach to community development work and connecting people with learning disabilities to local community life; and a model of organisation based on co-operative principles and equal membership for people with learning disabilities, staff and volunteers.

The community co-op was effective in creating opportunities for its members with learning disabilities in terms of access to housing options in the East End of Newcastle, individually

designed support and, in particular, the core focus of connecting individuals to activities, groups and relationships within their local communities. The key achievements were:

- The co-op was a radical approach to supporting individuals with complex support needs based on an approach to building sustainable connections into local community life. The approach to community development and building bridges into community life for people with experience of being excluded from local community life was highly effective.
- The co-op members interviewed as part of this evaluation had been able to maintain their involvement in local groups, activities and organisations in their local community on a long-term basis.
- The co-op supported members with learning disabilities to access good quality housing that was suitable for their requirements in the East End. Having the 'right' housing was a necessary requirement for making use of membership of the co-op in other ways, particularly building connections within the local community.
- The co-op undertook individualised support planning with its members encouraging people to describe themselves in terms of their skills, abilities and interests, as well as the support they needed.
- The co-op offered control to people with learning disabilities through the nature of the organisation, i.e. it was based on the principle of staff, members and volunteers being equal members.
- The work that the co-op did within the East End to secure support from, and build relationships with, a wide range of local community groups and organisations provides a model for building community connections that can be used by other organisations that are supporting people with learning disabilities and other people who are socially isolated.

However, the co-op was not successful in establishing live-in support arrangements and as a consequence was not financially viable.

Approach

The key questions that were used as a basis for evaluating the co-op were:

- Does the co-op have a positive impact on the lives of people with moderate and severe learning disabilities?
- Does the co-operative model work?
- Is the co-op using its money in a way that benefits people with learning disabilities and the wider community?

The evaluation of the co-op was undertaken during the period between September 2007 and July 2009. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected from the co-op staff and from the project partners during the period of operation of the co-op. Qualitative data was collected from five people with learning disabilities supported by the co-op. Structured interviews with these individuals took place during April 2008, November 2008 and July 2009.

The evidence from the evaluation is that:

- The co-op did have a positive impact on the lives of people with moderate and severe learning disabilities. It was able to do this principally through the comprehensive and sustained approach to connecting people to community life and a genuine approach to person-centred planning with individuals.
- The co-operative model worked partially. The model of live-in support funded through individual budgets was not successful, however the other work undertaken by the co-op, particularly the approaches to community development, has provided valuable learning that can be used and replicated in other areas.
- There was some evidence that the co-op used its money and its activities to benefit people with learning disabilities and the wider community, although the lack of success with live-in support and the limited number of people receiving individual budgets restricted these benefits.

The co-op closed in December 2008 before the planned end of the evaluation period in July 2009. The co-op closed because:

- It was not possible to recruit live-in supporters primarily because the commitment required by the live-in supporter was seen as too great.
- The financial model based on live-in support proved to be unrealistic.

Experiences of people with learning disabilities

A core element of the evaluation was to understand the experiences of people with learning disabilities who were members of the co-op. The following key themes emerged about why the co-op was important to them:

- **Planning for the future.** The planning process used by the co-op was viewed very positively by the co-op members. It provided a way of individuals describing in their own terms what they wanted to do and achieve. A co-op member said that it felt like it was about her and what she wanted, *"I have worked on this plan because I want my life to change. I am sitting on a lot of talent which could be used... I have taken a few steps back. I want to get back my drive... I would like more friends"*.
- **Getting a place to live.** For all of the co-op members interviewed getting a place to live of their own choosing was an important experience of being supported by the co-op. All had identified the type of housing they wanted and whether they wanted to live alone or with somebody else and they had been supported to achieve this.
- **Pursuing interests in the local community.** The co-op put into practice an approach to community development and connecting people with learning disabilities into local community life that meant that members had the opportunity to try out a wide array of individual interests. Many of these connections were maintained after the co-op closed.
- **Having a social life.** Co-op members were supported to take up opportunities to have more active social lives, which for some members had been very limited previously. This included making friendships and personal relationships with other co-op members, staff and other local people. One member said, *"I made new friends and carried on seeing them"* (after the co-op closed).
- **Being a part of the co-op.** The co-op aimed to be more than an organisation that provided support. The interviews with co-op members identified that being part of the co-op, being a 'member', was important and had significance. Having a visible local base, at Wor Hoose, was also important. When being interviewed after the closure of the co-op, one (former) member said, *"With the co-op I was a member; now I am a 'service user'; it's not as good"*. Another said, *"I was devastated when the co-op closed – I would love it to re-open"*.

Learning from the co-op

The evidence from the evaluation suggests the following learning from the co-op would be useful in relation to replicating this approach elsewhere:

- The importance of having a localised operation and focus within a defined geographic community.
- Actively pursuing community development as a basis for opening up opportunities for building connections into local community life for people with learning disabilities.
- The importance of employing a specific role to undertake community development work that will identify, develop and create community links and networks.
- Building alliances and strong relationships with other locally based community organisations that are rooted within local community life.
- Undertaking detailed person-centred planning alongside community development work.
- The importance of people with learning disabilities having a stake in the organisations that seek to support them. A type or model of organisation that is based on people having a sense of 'membership', such as being based on co-operative principles without needing necessarily to be formalised as a co-operative.

- Supporting individuals to build and maintain personal relationships and recognising that support gained from meaningful informal relationships, friendships and personal relationships is likely to be the most sustainable form of support.
- The importance of supporting social innovators and entrepreneurs and providing effective project and business management support. The co-op was driven by a clear set of ideas and a core of individuals who wanted to put them into practice; this would have benefited from stronger business management support from the co-op's stakeholders.
- The co-op identified that there is demand amongst some people with learning disabilities to have a live-in support model; however, the specific model pursued by the co-op didn't work. There is a need to test further how a wider range of live-in support models can work in practice.
- The need to test the viability of a proposed support model in the context of individual budgets. The concept of self-directed support and the allocation of individualised budgets fundamentally challenges more traditional approaches to financial planning and modelling of 'services'.

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