



INTERVIEW WITH PETER WESTALL

CHIEF VALUES OFFICER AT MIDCOUNTRIES CO-OPERATIVE

Midcounties Co-operative is a UK consumer cooperative in the retail sector. Peter Westall is also leading the ICETT Working Group 3 focused on the World Cooperative Monitor and SDG 13.

How does being a cooperative influence Midcounties' actions on climate change?

Coop Midcounties is one of the largest consumer co-operatives in the UK. In line with all co-operatives across the world, we are owned and controlled by our members. Our Board is made up of elected members, with responsibilities including setting the Society's objectives and strategy, monitoring delivery of that strategy by management and ensuring that the Society adheres to Co-operative values and principles. Our Executive team, led by our Chief Executive Phil Ponsonby, report into that Board. That Governance structure, and my Executive role as Chief Values Officer, is there to ensure that every aspect of the Society – from commercial decisions to culture and ethos – has members and member voices always at the forefront of thinking and co-operative values fully integrated. We launched the "Your Co-op Voice" programme two years ago to improve the feedback we get from our members. Since then we have actioned nearly 100 surveys, receiving almost 40,000 responses from members on a range of issues central to the development of our plans.

Our member-owners have told us that climate action is a real priority to them, and that they want to be able to work with us to understand what they can do, what we can do and what we can all do together to take action on Climate Change. In response, we launched our "1 Change" campaign.

What are the key aspects and results of your 1 Change campaign?

Our 1 Change programme focuses on working with our members, colleagues and communities to drive transformational change to support climate action. Many of the over 1,000 '1 Change' pledges made by our members was around re-using waste plastics in some way. Members created "eco-bricks", which were used by one of our community partners, Fairy Tale Farm in Oxfordshire, to build animal houses. That simple example helped educate local school children, as well as their parents, of practical uses of waste plastic rather than disposal. In addition, we worked with members to set up collaborative community tidy up activities, enabling over 700 volunteers to tidy up 380 bags of litter from the natural environment.

Our members also told us of the '1 change' they would like Midcounties to make to take climate action. We used that feedback to shape our environmental commitments. This has resulted in a range of positive impacts including reducing over 2 tonnes of plastic from our operations per year, and replacing single use plastic carrier bags with compostable bags across all of our Food Stores, reducing 8 million plastic bags per year.

What are the future prospects for the initiative?

Our 1 Change programme will be a catalyst to further engage our members and communities in helping to achieve the UN

Sustainable Development Goals by driving behaviours around issues such as climate action, responsible consumption, and helping to build sustainable communities.

Increasingly, we are using member insight to influence the development of values led products and services. Our members have told us that they want us to support community renewable energy, and to help increase the amount of community energy generated in the UK. In response, our Co-op Energy trading group have launched our Community Power tariff – at the time of writing, the UK's only consumer product providing 100% community-generated green energy. This forms part of our wider Co-op Community energy initiative, which sees us working with over 90 community energy groups across the UK to provide a route to market for unsubsidized community energy generation.

We also aim to inspire our younger members and indeed the next generation of co-operators by working with our 50 partner schools to educate around climate action, helping to develop and showcase Co-operative solutions to the UN Global Goals.

What is the value in sharing best practices like this one within the cooperative movement?

The International Cooperative Alliance Statement on the Cooperative Identity notes as Principle 6 that Cooperatives

serve their members most effectively and strengthen the cooperative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures. The sharing of best practice amongst all of us is fundamental to ensuring co-ops remain relevant and effective for all our members.

Our membership of ICETT has benefited us through learning from other co-ops around the world, and this best practice sharing has helped us develop our own climate change projects.

We have also enjoyed hosting visits from other co-ops to share our activity, including hosting a visit from Rabobank last year to share best practice around our approach to climate action and how we are helping develop sustainable communities. We were delighted to be asked to share our '1 Change' Climate Action programme earlier this year at a joint webinar between the ICA and UN, to share how we have engaged members to take collective action to help tackle this issue.

The sheer scale and size of the global co-operative movement, and of the social and economic impact it has, is demonstrated in this, the World Cooperative Monitor. That collective impact places our movement and each and every co-operative in a unique position to raise member awareness & political influence on the importance of so many subjects, including the UN Sustainable Development Goals both today – and long into the future.