

Future College Information pack January 2026



Reflections of our CEO, Jacqui Thomassen

I want to thank everyone for their contributions to the membership meeting, held on 15 December 2025, and those who responded to our follow-up survey. Your feedback through these channels and in wider conversations is much appreciated and has prompted me to share my reflections on how we got to where we are today.

When I joined the College in October 2022 as Director of Business Development and Operations, it was apparent that there was a lack of market insight at the College, reflecting a historic assumption that demand would come to the College rather than being actively developed. In order to change this, we increased our presence at co-operative and education sector events, where we started to engage directly with learners, influencers and decision-makers. We also commissioned market research to improve our planning and offering.

The research identified two clear findings. First, higher education remains a priority for the movement, reinforcing the focus on the Dundee qualification. Second, while the College's organisational learning offer was seen as broadly appropriate, it required clearer progression pathways tailored to different levels of seniority and co-operative experience, alongside more flexible engagement models that did not rely on single organisations booking a full cohort.

To address this, we developed more structured pathways and more open-access courses to enable participation at lower cost. Despite sustained marketing over a two-year period, neither offer generated more uptake from the movement.

When I became CEO in July 2023, the College intensified the proactive contacts with leadership teams and HR teams across the sector. There was considerable goodwill, and several societies stated a clear intent to work with us. However, translating this into actual business for the College proved extremely difficult.

While such challenges are not uncommon in business development, they had some distinctive features in this context. Societies were often clear about their learning needs but less clear about available budgets. The College was frequently asked to develop multiple options across a range of price points and to produce bespoke, comprehensive proposals without sight of financial parameters. The College consistently sought budget guidance in order to propose appropriate and affordable solutions.

As a result, significant staff time was invested in meetings and proposal development. However, despite verbal indications of interest, this work did not convert into delivered activity or income for the College.

There are a number of reasons for this, mostly, outside of our own (and usually our partner's) control. We fully understand the increasing and changing pressures societies are under. But I share this to highlight that the cost to a small organisation of working with the larger societies is extremely high. Also, the operational impact of positive feedback and delayed decision making from societies led us to be overly optimistic in budgets and forecasts.

Reflections of our CEO continued

I am genuinely grateful for the warmth and support shown, but the core issue remains: the movement needs to be clear about what it wants from the College and be willing fund this accordingly.

We adapted. We responded. We delivered what the movement told us it wanted. We produced proposals, costings, and revised offers - but unfortunately this did not convert into sustainable business.

The College's position today is a result of a range of factors, including market pressures and global events. While we acknowledge that there may have been some internal failings - no organisation is perfect, it is also the result of a lack of sustained buy-in from the movement.

The true cost and viability of the College's operating model may have been masked by the endowment fund, but from my review of College performance, at no point has the College stopped innovating, or stopped trying to find the best way to meet its beneficiaries and the movement's needs. As highlighted by an attendee at our recent member event, while £4 million appears substantial, it represents a relatively modest sum when spread over more than a decade of sustaining an organisation of the College's scale.

Finally, I would like to reiterate that the College Board's decision to transition to an unstaffed model was taken after full consideration of all available options. While I fully understand the concerns and disappointment of members as to what this means for UK co-operative education, I need to be clear that the suggestion that we "...fold the College

into Co-ops UK ASAP" is simply not an option. The College cannot afford the terms under which Co-ops UK is able to take on the College.

My motivation for sharing this with you so frankly is to highlight that for any future provider of co-operative education in the UK, I hope that the movement will learn from this experience as much as the College has. Without clarity of purpose, commitment and support, simply recreating the status quo risks setting the next provider up to fail.

Looking forward, the College has the opportunity to fulfil its charitable objectives another way through the new model: leaving society a lasting learning legacy, running grants programmes to advance co-operative education and working with partners to build a more co-operative world. We hope you and your societies will join us on this journey and we thank you for your continued support.

I hope that this overview and the following collated Q&A will provide you with the information you need at this time, but I would encourage you to continue to raise questions and thoughts, to me, the Board and the wider team as they arise. We will send a further update when we have more information to share on the three areas of future activity.

Jacqui Thomasen
Co-operative College CEO
January 2026

Future College - your questions answered

Thank you to everyone who submitted question prior to and during our member event, and those who completed our member survey. Here are the Board's responses to those questions, incorporating some key findings from the survey.

What happened to the endowment fund?

At the point when the College become a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) in 2015, the endowment funds stood at £4 million. During the entirety of the College's time as a CIO it has been running with operational deficits, and each iteration of leadership has had to use endowment funds to support operational costs while trying various options to diversify workstreams in an effort to become financially sustainable. As an unrestricted fund this usage is in line with a typical endowment fund.

What was the reasoning behind breaking off talks with Co-operatives UK?

Please be assured that there was no 'breaking off' of talks with Co-operatives UK. The process was thorough and lengthy, involving senior management and Board members from the College and Co-ops UK, and both organisations were wholeheartedly committed to the process of scoping the potential partnership. However, despite our shared desire to create a new partnership operating model, there were key structural, regulatory, and financial differences that meant that we were unable to achieve this.

What is the procedure for overturning this decision?

The Board of Trustees' decision on this is final, and we are now looking to the future to ensure that the new model College can still positively impact co-operative education. The model that we are now working towards is the most viable means of delivering the College's objective with the funds available.

How will the un-staffed version of the College work in practice?

In the new model, the College will not undertake any work which requires staff, for example learning delivery. All retained or new streams of work will be managed by the Board in a voluntary capacity, with partners or associates contracted to carry out any specialist work required, such as governance and grant administration and finance.

Future College - your questions answered

What are the current staffing levels at the College (numbers and roles)?

The College currently employs seven staff members at 0.8 FTE in the following roles:

- CEO
- Finance and Operations Manager
- Head of Engagement
- Engagement Assistant
- Quality and Project Co-ordinator
- Learning Delivery Manager
- Education Events Manager

Going into 2026, it is anticipated that there will be six individuals on 0.8 FTE contracts to complete the work required for transition to the new model.

To note: As of 31 December 2025, the Head of International Partnerships role at the College came to an end. This was following the outcome of an earlier, internal operational consultation. From January 2026, the future of ICD work which the College has delivered historically will largely sit within The Fund for International Co-operative Development, and Central Co-operative's Our Malawi Partnership.

Will staff be made redundant and when?

Yes. All staff will be made redundant. This is expected to take place on 31 July 2026, dependent on the operational transition being complete.

What is the timeframe for this new model - is it set to continue into the future?

The College has historically worked on a three-year strategic cycle and we anticipate this being the case for this new model as it provides the time to both bed in, assess performance and understand the income flows. The Board of Trustees will undertake an annual review and development of the next three-year strategy will commence in 2028.

Future College - your questions answered

Will the College continue to have an office?

No, the College won't continue to have a dedicated office but will have a registered address with a strategic partner and will work with New Era Partners to access space if/when this is required.

What do you mean by 'the College will support other areas of learning through a partnership model'? What kinds of learning and partnering with who?

Study tours would be an example of this type of work. These tours have been hugely successful in bringing co-operative communities together and showcasing the UK movement and heritage on a global stage, and we would be keen engage with partners, such as the New Era members, to help this work continue.

We hope that through our continued membership and stakeholder engagement, we will be able to identify other areas of learning and partnerships that can be facilitated within a non-staffed model.

Learning legacy: will the College continue to develop and put materials on to the Open University on OpenLearn Create, or only what current exists?

The College is currently preparing its existing self-led courses to be hosted on OpenLearn and adapting some of the more popular taught courses to be self-led. For the initial three-year strategy, these will be quality assured but will not necessarily grow in number.

What happened to youth projects?

During the last strategic cycle, the Youth Empowerment theme was incorporated into the wider Co-operative Learning theme following a review prompted by a sustained decline in demand and funding for this area of work. Despite multiple grant applications and direct approaches to co-operatives, no sustainable funding stream emerged to support youth-specific provision at scale.

Future College - your questions answered

Have you concluded that there is no longer any serious demand for co-operative education and research, and if so why?

There is still undoubtably a strong desire from within the UK movement for co-operative education at all stages, however, for this to translate into demand there needs to be a clarity of purpose and most importantly, funding. Under our new model, the College will be able to advance co-operative education and learning through our grant giving programme.

Who and what will the grants be for, and what will the process be?

The scope and mechanics of this programme are still to be defined, however the Board is keen that it takes a 'member-first' approach, and, as with all areas of work within the new model, our charitable objective will be a key driver behind all decisions. We are in the initial stages of sourcing a grant-giving partner to work with the Board on the ongoing administration, governance and reporting that will be required.

Findings from our survey indicate that secondary school-age children and those in either further or higher education are the communities that members would like to see benefit from any co-operative education projects that we support.

What is the source of funds for the grant-giving programme?

The Pioneers Memorial Fund will be used for the grant-giving programme. This fund will continue to grow through investment gains and interest, however we intend to proactively seek additional funds to grow this once the new model is established.

Under the new model, how will the College's work be publicised and marketed?

This is one of the areas of work where we will be seeking a partnership, ideally through the New Era model.

Future College - your questions answered

Will the College change its name?

This will be discussed as part of the transition into our new model as it is important that stakeholders understand what the new College proposition is. The Board fully understands the importance of safeguarding our legacy, which is clearly tied to the Co-operative College name, but we also appreciate that there may be new entrants who wish to move into this space and we encourage anyone who may be interested in this space to make contact with the College at the earliest opportunity.

Have you investigated partnering with other, smaller relevant organisations e.g. Workers Coop, education providers, or European co-operative intermediaries, like EURICSE?

We are actively looking at partnerships to help us fulfil our charitable objective. We have already received messages of support from our partners in HE and within the movement, and many are facing similar financial challenges. As the timeline shows, the College has always tried to diversify our work streams, including working with other organisations such as HE providers and other co-operative learning providers. Unfortunately, and for many different reasons, none of these avenues have been able to turn around the fortunes of the College.

The College has received an enquiry around possible support from an international partner and because of our commitment to the UK and international movement we will be exploring this to see if there is any potential here.

What will the role of members be?

Members will continue to form the basis of the Board of Trustees and to participate in annual elections at the AGM. Members will also be consulted on the grant-giving programme and will help shape the priorities and delivery of the College's charitable objectives. In addition, we hope that members will be active in recommending and endorsing resources that the College will signpost to and/or host on its website.

This membership model reflects the insight gathered in 2024, which identified influencing the future of co-operative education as the primary motivation for membership.

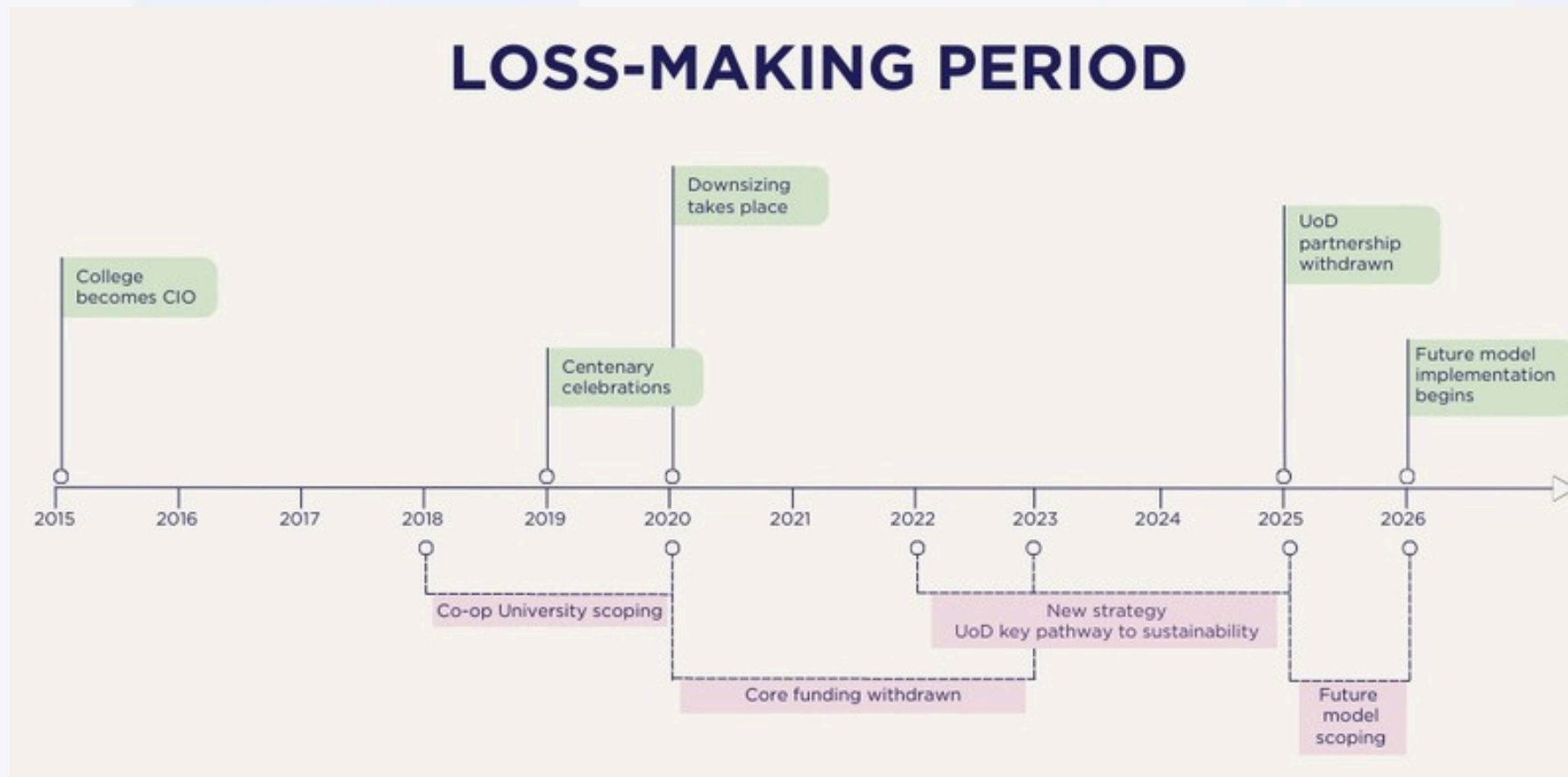
Welcome

Co-operative College Members meeting
Monday 15 December 2025

Our Charitable Object

"To promote the education of the public, in particular, but not exclusively by the provision and conduct of the College for the education of people in a manner consistent with the values and principles of the co-operative movement."

Background and context



Current status

- The College's operating model is not sustainable in its current form or in a supported partnership form.
- The College's mission and charitable objects remain relevant and important, and in order to meet them we will move to a different model which optimises remaining funds.
- We envisage three workstreams to meet the charitable objects:
 - Grant giving
 - Learning legacy
 - Partnership delivery
- The College's international co-operative development work will complete at the end of this year, with its legacy continuing through Dr Sarah Alldred's work at the Fund for ICD and the Our Malawi Partnership at Central Co-op. We want to take this opportunity to thank Sarah for 13 fantastic years at the College and wish her, the Fund for ICD and the Our Malawi Partnership well for the future.
- The College will cease current operations on 31 July 2026; all contracts until this date will be delivered and the College will continue to respond to enquiries deliverable within this timeframe.

Strategic priorities: Grant giving

- The College will deploy the majority of its remaining financial resources into a grant-giving programme with two key components.
- Initial launch of a larger grants programme, which will seek to support those who can make a demonstrable contribution to our mission and vision through co-operative education.
- This will be followed with an annual scholarship programme, which may support the growth of future leaders who will be able to take the co-operative message to new audiences, areas or sectors and reach those who may not have had access to a traditional higher-education pathway.
- The College is seeking to operate a member-first approach to informing the priorities and ambitions of grants available. Members will also be eligible to apply for grants as individuals or organisations.
- The College will appoint a grant partner to support the administration of the fund.

Strategic priorities: Learning legacy

- The College will provide education of the public in a manner consistent with the values and principles of the co-operative movement through a partnership with the Open University.
- Our current learning portfolio for individuals will be freely available on the University's OpenLearn Create Platform and will be released under Creative Commons Licensing to maximise the range of settings that these courses can be employed in.



Strategic priorities: Learning legacy

- We will be seeking member input to prioritise learning content and specific audiences for learning related to co-operator professional development.
- We will be creating a bank of co-operative case studies for the UK and international higher education sectors to incorporate into business, international development, sustainability and other qualifications as a long-term output of our Co-ops on the Curriculum campaign.



Strategic priorities: Partnership delivery

- The College has a long and proud history of welcoming international co-operators to the UK to facilitate relationships, exchange of experience and learning and showcasing the UK movement and heritage.
- Through our close relationships with New Era partners, we hope to be able to enable continuation of these and possibly wider areas of work, where there is a strategic alignment with other infrastructure bodies' priorities.
- We hope to continue to deliver against Co-ops on the Curriculum by building on the partnership with key stakeholders in the citizenship education space. The College itself will not deliver any learning itself beyond July 2026.
- We will consult separately with our Associates to explore how we might be able to continue to support these highly experienced and skilled independent specialists in co-operative education and learning.

Next steps

- A short pulse survey will be sent to members after this event to gather key insights on areas to progress outlined here. Please complete or email hello@co-op.ac.uk
- A written update will follow in January collating all further Q&A and insights, and regular progress updates will be provided via the newsletter.
- Colleagues will commence the process of establishing the conditions for the new College model from January 2026.
- The College will continue to contract and deliver current learning commitments until July 2026.
- The College will be seeking to appoint a new member of its Audit and Risk Committee and an additional Trustee to expand its skills to support this new model in January 2026.
- The College will be administered by the Trustees and flexible administrative support from 1 August 2026.

Thank you

Please keep in touch: hello@co-op.ac.uk