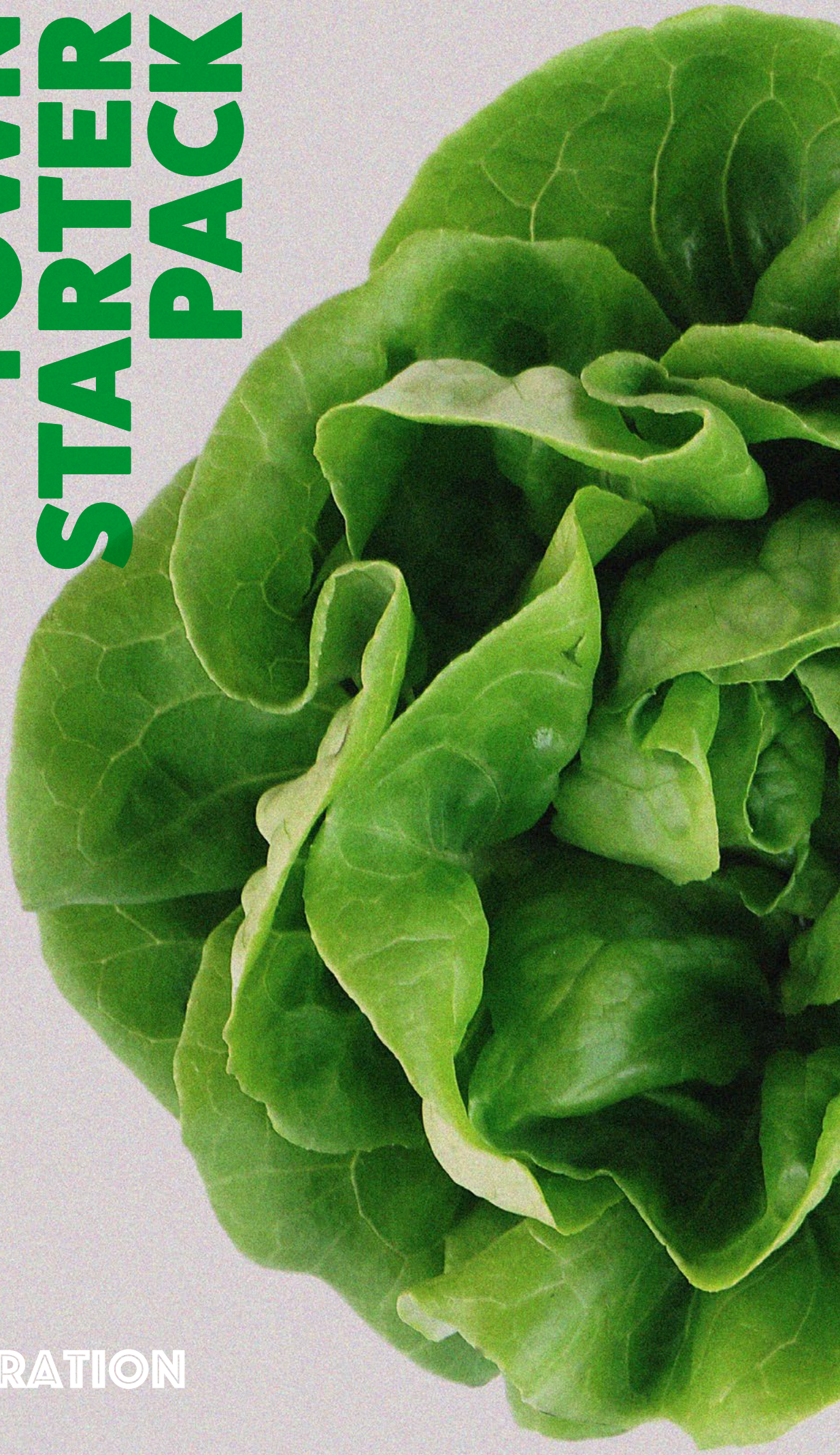


# COOPERATION TOWN STARTER PACK

COOPERATION  
TOWN





**COOPERATION  
TOWN**

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# **INTRODUCTION**

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## Who is this pack for?

We've made this guide for people wanting to start a Cooperation Town food co-op in their neighbourhood or on their estate. It explains how to start a local co-op in a simple and accessible way, contains templates your group can use and provides information on what support is available.

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## Why should I organise in my neighbourhood, on my street or my estate?

Our communities have been hit hard by years of austerity and, most recently, Covid-19. This ongoing crisis left many of us poorer, with no access to public services and isolated in our struggles.

Decisions about our housing, education, jobs and health are made by strangers, who don't know us, ignore our needs and disregard our experience. Often, businesses have more say about how our communities are organised, than the people we live with. They make decisions about us – without us.

But there is another way!

When we work together with neighbours and colleagues we can take control over our lives. From food to housing, jobs to public spaces – we share the problems and the solutions! The co-op structure is just one way in which we can organise around our needs.

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## What is a food co-op?

Co-ops are based on the simple idea that organising together makes us stronger and more resilient – and saves us money!

There are different types of food co-ops, some of them are shops, some are growers co-ops and some are consumer clubs. In this pack, we refer to food co-ops as small buying groups, which provide their members with affordable food (and other household products) bought in bulk and re-distributed at a very low price. They are the most affordable – and sociable – way to get food!

### A food co-op is also not a...

- × Mutual aid group
- × Lunch club
- × Free school meals service
- × Veg box scheme
- × Organic / vegan / wholefood buying group
- × Meals on wheels

Unlike a food bank, where recipients are means tested and have no say in how the service is run, Cooperation Town co-ops are owned by their members, who decide together what to buy and how to run the co-op. They are not-for-profit groups, set up to meet members' needs and are controlled by the people who join them. They are based on solidarity, not charity.

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## **What is Cooperation Town?**

Cooperation Town is a network of independent food co-ops. It was set up in 2019 to develop a new co-op model and support a new generation of food co-ops across the UK. While Cooperation Town co-ops are independently organised by their members, the network is designed to share resources and support across the movement.

Our vision is for a community-led food co-op on every street in every town!

The Cooperation Town network is coordinated by a not-for-profit workers co-op (with the same name), which is responsible for helping groups to start and run new co-ops. Find out about what help is available on page 21.

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## **How are Cooperation Town co-ops different from other co-ops?**

The Cooperation Town model is based on a combination of free supplies and food bought cheaply in bulk. Members pay a small amount every week and contribute up to one hour a week to run the co-op.

Cooperation Town co-ops only serve their members, they are not shops open to the public. In order to benefit from co-op food, people have to join as members.



**HOW DOES IT  
ACTUALLY WORK?**

**Your co-op will be distributing food to members on a regular basis. The model we developed at Cooperation Town means that most of the food you get will be free, with any extra food and supplies purchased collectively by the co-op in bulk. That way, everyone gets much more for their money!**

**Below are some suggestions for how to organise your co-op. You can use as much or as little as you want and adapt them to fit your own group.**

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### **Where does the free stuff come from?**

Cooperation Town has a relationship with a few major free food distributors, such as the Felix Project (in London) and FareShare (across the UK). These organisations get huge quantities of surplus food from supermarkets, recipe box companies and producers and distribute them to charities, food banks and Cooperation Town co-ops. We also have an agreement with Co-op supermarkets (the high street stores) about providing free food to Cooperation Town co-ops.

Each co-op will have its own 'account' with those suppliers and arrange deliveries individually, based on how often members meet and how much food they need.

In areas with high concentration of co-ops, we aim to organise local 'hubs', in order to make ordering and distribution more efficient.

You can't send a specific shopping list to the free food providers; they send you whatever they sourced that week. However, deliveries usually include fresh fruit and veg, bread, snacks, meat (if you want it) and some dairy products. You are also likely to get some pre-packed food bags, which you can unpack and re-distribute, as well as some ready-cooked meals. There are usually a few nice surprises in each delivery, such as posh tea or expensive desserts!

Please note: some of the food provided by these organisations is near its sell-by date, but many products have a much longer shelf life.



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## **What kind of stuff does the co-op buy?**

The items you buy are food staples, such as pasta, rice, tinned tomatoes and cooking oil (you can also add nappies and cleaning products or whatever else your co-op needs).

You might decide to add special items, such as seasonal treats or food for special events.

You can use the co-op shopping list to decide on the items the majority of members want. Members select from a regular list, which can be updated regularly. You might not always get every item each member wants, but you will get most of what everyone needs.



See the resources section for an example of a shopping list

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## **Where to buy extra food?**

A local cash & carry would be a good place for large bags of rice and pasta; the high street Co-Op supermarket have small budgets to support neighbourhood co-ops (find your local Co-Op Pioneer to learn more); wholesalers such as Costco or Bookers are good for bulk purchases (you will need to set up an account); a local greengrocer might offer you a good deal on big quantities and, sometimes, online retailers are the cheapest option.

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## **Buying, receiving, packing and distributing the food**

Members of the co-op will be responsible for researching suppliers and ordering food, booking deliveries, collecting, receiving and unpacking products, re-packing, bagging and distributing the food to members.

Some of those jobs can be done by individuals (for example, researching suppliers), some in pairs (collecting from suppliers) and some in small groups (packing boxes). The co-op will decide in its monthly meeting who's doing what each time.

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### **How do we share the food?**

The Cooperation Town model is based on 'need, not transaction' which means that, while all members pay the same, everyone gets what they need.

How do we do that? Everyone receives the same shopping bag, containing a share of the free supplies, all the staples and any additional items the co-op purchased. When collecting your shopping, members who received more than they need, can return their surplus by putting it back into a common basket, where members with a greater need can help themselves to the extra items.

We suggest this is something you discuss as a group and agree early on, so that no one feels lacking or cheated. You can also agree on a different system of distribution.

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### **How do we decide how to use the money?**

Your co-op will have to accumulate some money before you can start buying supplies. This will be members' investment in the co-op. Once you have enough to make your first purchase, you will decide on the shopping list (see above) and the quantities to buy. If you have regular storage space, it might be cost effective to buy more than you need right now and distribute it at a later date.

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### **How do we manage our accounts?**

The co-op will be collecting money (membership fees or subs) from members, in order to pay for the food it purchases. You will need to keep an account, which is managed by the elected treasurer (or co-treasurers).

We recommend using Open Collective as an alternative to a bank account. Open Collective is an online financial service used by co-ops and social groups, which makes all transactions transparent and allows groups to collect donations, in addition to members' subs. Cooperation Town will help your co-op to set up an Open Collective account and can advise you on how to manage it.

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## How big is a Cooperation Town co-op?

Keep it small and keep it local!

We suggest each co-op has no more than 20 members, who all live within 15 minutes walk (or a short bus ride) from your meeting place. A small group means that everyone has a role, that meetings are kept short and that all members are neighbours.

When your co-op gets to 20 members — split up! Start a new co-op down the road and continue to cooperate as part of the Cooperation Town network.

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## Working with the wider community

Cooperatives principles 6 and 7 are 'Cooperation among Cooperatives' and 'Concern for Community'. That means that, while your co-op is autonomous (i.e. making decisions independently), it is part of a wider ecology of cooperatives, community groups, voluntary organisations, faith groups and other associations working together to make the community stronger and more active.

Local groups will have resources you might need (like a space, access to storage, etc) and existing members who would be interested in your co-op. Reach out to them!



Are members happy with the food they get from the co-op? Is my co-op good value for money? Do I know how my money is spent? Is my co-op part of the wider community?

Social events, such as a Free Food Larder or a shared meal, which are open to both members and non-members, are a great way to link up with the wider community, spreading the word and meeting new members. Being in a co-op ought to be fun!

The image features a solid green background. In the center, the letters 'R' and 'E' are rendered in a large, white, rounded, sans-serif font. The letter 'R' is on the left and the letter 'E' is on the right. The text 'GETTING STARTED' is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font, centered horizontally and partially overlapping the white letters.

**GETTING STARTED**

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## How do I start organising in my area?

A lot of us already organise in our communities, without thinking of what we do as 'organising' — we help at the local school, share childcare with our neighbours or we are part of a tenants association. We all have valuable skills and experiences.

Starting a food co-op can bring up lots of questions. You don't have to answer them all at once! Below are some of the things that you might want to consider before you get going.

### Who is in my community?

- Are we a single social group or a mix of different ones?
- What is our common interest?

### What are the needs in my community?

- How many people struggle financially? What help is available to them?
- Are the households in my community mostly single people, small or large families?
- Will my neighbours be interested in joining a food co-op? Do they know about the benefits?

### What resources do you have?

- Who are the 'community anchors' — the neighbours who know the community well and are trusted and valued by local people? How do I connect with them?
- What other groups are active in the community and could support the co-op with their resources?
- Do I have access to a free and accessible organising space? Who can help me find one?

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## Reaching out to people

You will have to tell people about your idea to start a food co-op and let them know how they could find out more and get involved.

The best way to get people's attention is to speak to them directly. From experience, people who don't already know about co-ops are unlikely to come to a public meeting, so we suggest going to them.

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## Reaching out to people (continued)



See [cooperation.town/](https://cooperation.town/) resources for a leaflet template you could use



See the resources section for an 'elevator pitch'



Which methods of communication am I comfortable using? Who might these methods leave out? How can I make sure I reach these other groups?

Organise a small crew of 2–3 people, print a leaflet and go door knocking on your estate or your street. Time it to make sure people are around (evenings are best) and practice what you want to say so you feel confident when speaking to neighbours.

A conversation on the doorstep is the most effective way to generate interest in the co-op. It might be time consuming but remember, there are no shortcuts in community organising!

In addition to door knocking, you can distribute flyers and put up posters (for example on community noticeboards, in local shops, at the post-office or the GP practice), write for the school newsletters or the local paper, post on the neighbourhood social media or whatsapp groups, contact your local Mutual Aid group...

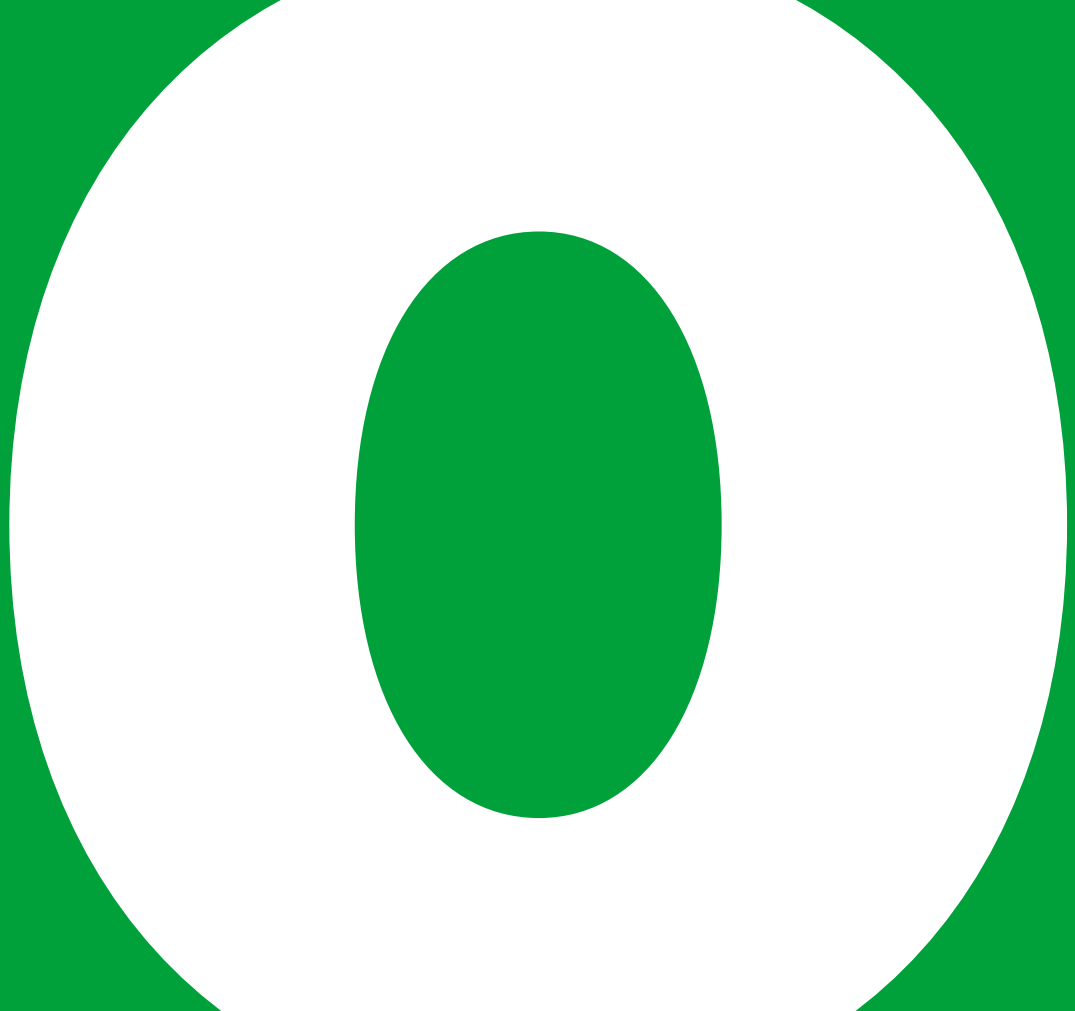
Public events are also a great way for people to find out about the co-op. A Free Food Larder ahead of the school holidays can make a real difference to parents and is fun to organise (ask us how!).

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## Finding a space

Your co-op will need a space to meet, organise and distribute food. This should, ideally, be a free and accessible local space, such as a community centre, a tenants hall or a place of worship. If you haven't got access to a free space, you could consider holding your founding meeting in a local library or a private home (or at the pub!) and make looking for a space your first task.

It's useful to have some storage space for your co-op, but you can also decide to distribute your deliveries on the same day and avoid storing anything.



**YOUR CO-OP  
FOUNDING MEETING**





See the resources section for a suggested agenda for a founding meeting. Your co-op can obviously decide to do it differently and, for example, elect different roles.

**Once you have gained some contacts and interest, start organising the group. Don't worry if you start small – as long as you have 10 people, you are good to go.**

**The co-op founding meeting is where the initial group of members agrees on the co-op principles, structure and roles. It will set the tone for the rest of the project, so it's crucial that you get it right (no pressure here!).**

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## Making your meetings engaging

Boring meetings are the worst! To make sure everyone feels welcome and engaged you might want to:

- Elect a facilitator who will introduce the agenda and make sure you stick to the time. The facilitator will also ensure everyone gets a chance to speak (but not for too long!)
- Agree in advance on the duration of the meeting – most people lose concentration after about 90 minutes.
- Nominate a note taker, who will share the minutes after the meeting.
- Provide food – you can ask people to bring a dish or, if you have the space, cook together ahead of the meeting. That means people don't have to rush home for dinner.
- Organise childcare. Parents can't join meetings if no one takes care of their children! Ask someone without caring responsibilities (clue: not a mum) to help keep children safe and engaged. They are, of course, welcome to join your dinner!

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## Making decisions about decision making



See the resources section for information and examples.

The founding meeting will agree on the way you will be making decisions as a group, so it is important that everyone understands and approves of the method you choose.

We recommend 'consent' decision making' as the most inclusive and fair method (with a fallback majority vote option, if you are truly stuck). Consent is achieved when, those not in agreement with a proposal, agree not to maintain an objection.



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## Co-op Roles

The co-op is managed by its members and the founding meeting is when you discuss and elect the different roles.

We recommend that people take on roles for a limited time (initially, three months) and collaborate where possible. It is useful to clarify the time commitment — no more than one hour a week. Some jobs (for example, packing food) can be done in small groups.



See the resources section for a list of suggested roles and what they involve.

The co-op founders will have to elect, at a minimum, a membership coordinator and a treasurer, so you can list your members and start collecting membership fees (subs).

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## Frequency of meetings & time commitment

Your co-op will have to meet regularly to make collective decisions. We suggest a short monthly meeting to go through the accounts, share updates and complete the shopping list.

Holding a meeting on your food distribution day saves organising another session that month. You can cook and eat together some of the food you received that day!

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## How much do we wanna pay?

The co-op will get much of its supplies for free and purchase the rest in bulk. That means that a small weekly membership fee (subs) goes a long way!

We recommend starting from £3 a week, which is affordable to most people. You can decide to increase or decrease this amount at any point.

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## Next step



Do members feel excited about starting a co-op?  
Are people confident about the structure and their role?  
Do we know where to find the resources and support we need?

Before ending the meeting, make sure to set up a date for the next organising and food distribution session (These can be on the same date to avoid meeting fatigue!)

Remember to circulate the co-op shopping list, so members can start adding their preferences before the next meeting.



**MAINTAINING  
THE ENERGY**

**Keeping a community group active and engaged over time takes some effort and thinking. It is crucial that your co-op makes time to reflect on how things are going and addressing issues as they arise.**

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- Introduce a 'check-in' (asking members to quickly say how they feel) at the beginning and the end of each meeting.
- Make sure the co-op meets its members' needs by updating your shopping list regularly and ensuring that everyone gets a chance to add what they need.
- Long, messy meetings are boring! Keep your meetings short and practical. Make sure you have an agenda and stick to it. Rotate the facilitator and note taker regularly and take breaks if people start to flag.
- Make your meetings social and fun — share food and go for drinks after!
- Are members leaving? Ask them why and what can be done to make the co-op more relevant to them and their needs. But don't panic — people leave projects and new people join.
- Organise public events to make sure everyone in your community knows about the co-op (and attract more members!).
- Dealing with tensions — the co-op is a collective project, but it doesn't mean that members have to agree on everything. Remember — not everyone is used to working in a collaborative way. It is, therefore, hugely important to establish a respectful environment, where no one feels excluded or silenced and where dominant voices or harmful comments are challenged.
- Link up with other co-ops, community projects, tenant groups, trade unions, local campaigns and the wider Cooperation Town network — there is so much we can do together beyond food distribution!



Check the website for more tips and ideas on how to keep your group engaged



Do most members come to all our meetings? Are people active in their roles? Is it fun being part of my co-op?



**WHAT SUPPORT IS  
AVAILABLE FROM  
COOPERATION  
TOWN?**

**Cooperation Town is the network organisation for our community of co-ops. Its workers are there to help start new co-ops, support individual groups, organise training, coordinate resources and create opportunities for mutual aid and collaboration between co-ops, locally and nationally.**

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**Other ways  
Cooperation  
Town supports  
new co-ops**

- Link individual co-ops with free food suppliers
- Provide a small budget for initial shopping, room hire and printing costs
- Share templates for membership database, shopping lists, promo flyers, etc
- Lend cookware for events (in London)
- Help set up an Open Collective account
- Provide website space and online forum on [cooperation.town](https://cooperation.town)

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# **RESOURCES**

# COOPERATION TOWN NEW CO-OP FOUNDING MEETING

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## Facilitator introduction

Today's agenda  
What is a Cooperation Town food co-op?

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## Members introductions

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### Making decisions about decision making

How do we make big and small decisions?  
(majority vote / consensus / consent)  
What can working groups decide on?

---

## Co-op roles

There is a list of proposed roles on page 26.  
Quickly present each one so members can start thinking what they would like to do.  
People have hidden skills and surprising life experiences!

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## Sharing responsibilities

How do we allocate roles and responsibilities?  
How often do we swap jobs? Can some jobs be shared e.g. pairs or working groups?

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## Electing an interim membership officer and treasurer

Deciding on other roles, if possible at this meeting

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## Money questions

How much money should members pay every week?  
When do we want to reevaluate this amount?  
How much money should the co-op accumulate before we make our first purchase?  
How are we going to pay for a launch event?

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## Frequency

How often do we want to distribute food?  
How often should working groups meet?  
How often do we want to have bigger planning meetings?

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## Recruitment

How do we recruit new members?  
Where can we promote the co-op locally?  
What kind of public events will appeal to our neighbours (for example a Free Food Larder or a school holiday event)

---

## Admin going forward

Sharing template documents in a public folder  
Date to start collecting subs (via an Open Collective account)  
Date, time and facilitator for next meeting





# COOPERATION

INSERT YOUR CO-OP NAME

# MEMBERS SUBS

Quarter 1 2 3 4

	Name	Week												
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
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## CO-OP ROLES

### **Membership coordinators**

Keep the members list up to date

### **Treasurers**

Collect and keep a record of all members subs

### **Researchers / Bargain Hunters**

Look for good deals on products on the co-op's shopping list

### **Logistics coordinators**

Organise the co-op's food deliveries and collections

### **Drivers, cyclists and walkers**

Pick up supplies from shops and the local hub

### **Packers and unpackers**

Arrange and bag the food for members to collect

### **Distributors**

Deliver food to members who can't pick up

### **Meetings administrators**

Schedule meetings, chairing and taking notes (on rotation), sharing minutes and other documents

### **Childcarers and cooks**

Make sure meetings are accessible and fun (everyone on rotation)

### **Promoters**

Telling people about the co-op and promoting its activities

### **Events coordinators**

Organise Free Food Larders and other events for members and the community

### **Network coordinators**

Maintain contact with the wider Cooperation Town network

## ELEVATOR PITCH

An elevator pitch is a very quick introduction to a project. Use it when you only have a few seconds to grab someone's attention, for example, when you first tell people about the co-op. Once you got them listening, you can go into more detail.

.....

### **What**

We're starting a food co-op here on our estate / on our street and want to invite everyone to get involved

.....

### **Why**

We all need to eat and feed our children, but we're sick of relying on expensive supermarkets or, when times are hard, on food banks. We want to have control over how much we pay for basic products and get to know our neighbours in the process.

.....

### **How**

Join us at this event we organised (there will be lots of delicious food!) / read this leaflet / visit [cooperation.town](http://cooperation.town) / sign up here...

Remember to ask people for their contact details, so you could get in touch with them later on.

## CONSENT DECISION MAKING

Consent means there are no objections to a particular proposal or suggestion. Similar to consensus, consent decision making encourages all the participants to take an active part in the process.

Unlike consensus, the aim is not to achieve a compromise based on everyone's ideas, but to reach a collective agreement that is "good enough for now" and "safe enough to try" – a decision that no one has a strong objection to and that the group is happy and confident to implement.

### The basic process is:

- A member makes a clear and specific proposal (for example, that the co-op holds a public event ahead of Christmas).
- Everyone gets a chance to ask for clarifications on this idea.
- Each member gives feedback on the initial proposal.
- The person who brought the idea listens to the feedback and decides if they want to make changes. If so, they present an amended proposal.
- Members can then respond with either agreement, objection or a pass (not having a strong opinion either way). Everyone gets a chance to respond.
- Objections should only be made if members feel strongly that the proposal will disrupt or damage the co-op. These are called "paramount objections". Otherwise, people should follow the "good enough for now" and "safe enough to try" rule.
- Objectors explain their strong reservations (in this case, for example, because they feel that organising the event will be a very big job).
- The meeting discusses possible solutions and can propose an amendment (for example, calling on more people or planning fewer activities on the day).
- The person who brought the idea presents it again with any amendments and everyone gets to respond again (agree, object or pass)
- A decision is reached when there are no more objections.

Consent decision making means that everyone gets to have a say and, unlike voting, no one feels like their ideas didn't matter in the end.

It is a tried and tested decision making process used by organisations as diverse as activist groups and tech companies. Once everyone gets the hang of it, it will help make meetings more productive, efficient and, mostly, more inclusive.

Check out [cooperation.town/resources](https://cooperation.town/resources) for more information, tips and videos about consent decision making.



**“Through joining the food co-op I connected with neighbours I never knew. Organising together has been a godsend — we get lots of food for free, buy the rest in bulk, split the cost and collectively get more for our money. There is a place for everyone, no matter what your skills are and you learn some new ones along the way. Everyone takes on a small role, so no one person is left holding the beans!”**

Follow us



@CooperationTown

This pack was developed and published by Cooperation Town. A digital version of the pack and all the resources are available on [cooperation.town](https://cooperation.town) For further information or to order copies of the pack email [info@cooperation.town](mailto:info@cooperation.town)  
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