



## Co-operation in Yorkshire, UK: Sheffield Co-operative Development Group (SCDG)

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This short paper provides an introduction and short overview of co-operative development and activity in South Yorkshire, UK by looking at the history and work of Sheffield Co-operative Development Group.

Sheffield — known as the “Steel City” — is located to the east of the Pennines and adjacent to the Peak District National Park, around 170 miles from London, at the confluence of rivers Don and Sheaf. As a city region, comprising nine local authorities, its combined population is around 1.8 million people (Office for National Statistics, 2011). As such, it is the fourth largest city in England. It still retains an engineering base and has two large universities. It is:

primarily a small and medium enterprise (SME) economy, ensuring that the city’s start-ups and small businesses grow is an important factor in employment creation for local people’ (Sheffield First Partnership, 2014: 31).

In the 1970s and 1980s, Sheffield was the fifth largest city with a population of around 450,000. It was, however, hard hit by the 1974 oil crisis followed by many factory closures into the 1980s (Winkler, 2007). In 1981, the unemployment rate for the city was, for the first time, above the national average and the “manufacturing industry which had employed almost 50% of the city’s workforce in 1971, employed just 24% by 1984” (Sheffield City Council, 1993 cited by Winkler, 2007: 13). The strong labour and co-operative movement in the City was resolved to find ways of saving jobs and creating employment opportunities through co-operatives. The Labour manifesto of 1981, for example, committed the council (under the council’s Labour Party leader David Blunkett) to a new way of approaching the local economy with a focus on both economic and social development, part of which was to explore opportunities and support for democratic forms of organisation and co-operative control and management of work.

The Labour Government in the 1970s set up the National Co-operative Development Agency with the purpose of promoting the interests of the co-operative sector with government, local government and others. The Sheffield Co-operative Development Group (SCDG) was born out of the national movement and Sheffield City Council — along with the Co-operative Party, Sheffield Trades Council, the Sheffield branch of the Co-operative Bank, and two city co-operative societies — played a major part in its establishment in late 1980.

In the early days, SCDG had three paid workers, one of whom was Mike Bower, an experienced council leader. The main focus at that time was to rescue closing factories by supporting the employees to form workers co-operatives and to encourage the development of new worker co-operatives. Its mission was (and still is)

to promote the development of co-operatives and other enterprises which offer people opportunities to increase their control over their working lives (SCDG, nd).

Trades union membership was a central requirement in the new co-operatives. Examples of new co-operatives at that time include Procon — a co-operative working with concrete products — with 12 worker members and later, Traffic Systems Co-operative — a worker co-operative specialising in traffic systems engineering and maintenance. Some attempts were also made to transform failing industries into co-operatives but generally these were unsuccessful.

The SCDG was also keen to increase knowledge of and interest in co-operation and co-operative principles in worker co-operatives, employee led businesses and social and

community enterprises. Between 30 January 1981 and 29 May 1981 SCDG organised five public meetings where the following matters were discussed:

- Financing a New Co-operative
- Starting an Industrial Co-operative.
- Co-operative and Municipal Housing
- Inventors and Innovators' Co-operatives
- Community Co-operatives.

In 1985 SCDG itself became a co-operative; owned by the co-operatives that it helped to set up.

During this time, the political climate was becoming very challenging with job losses as labour intensive industry was closing down. Also, the City Council was becoming less able to continue giving financial support to co-operative development. SCDG had to find a way of becoming financially self-supporting. It was at this point that Aizlewood's Mill came to the attention of SCDG employee Mike Bower, when passing the building on his way to work.

Built over 150 years ago on the site of the former nursery gardens of Sheffield Castle, Aizlewood's Mill — designed by William Flockton — was one of the few buildings to survive the first Sheffield Flood of 1864 and became an iconic landmark of the Sheffield skyline. John Aizlewood was a miller from Rotherham and later a Sheffield city councilor. The mill milled grain from the Lincolnshire cornfields for over 100 years before eventually being sold twice in the 1960s and unfortunately reaching a state of dereliction in the 1980s. An offer of £1 was made for the property which, after a short period of concern when another potential buyer surfaced with a substantially higher offer, was accepted.

Mike Bower formulated the idea of developing Aizlewood's Mill into managed workspace as a central hub for the development and support of worker co-operatives in the local area. Just over £2 million pounds was raised to pay for the renovations, from a variety of sources including grants and loans, and work began in 1988. Aizlewood's Mill was officially opened in 1990 by the then opposition spokesman for Trade and Industry, Gordon Brown MP.

The first tenants — Traffic Systems Co-operative — joined Sheffield Co-operative Development Group and the management company, Accountability Northern Limited who moved into Aizlewood's Mill at the beginning of 1990. This was shortly followed by a host of other organisations, some co-operatives, who recognised the benefits of sharing workspace. Whilst co-operatives had preferential terms, the occupants were increasingly non-co-operative businesses. While the income from the tenants has made SCDG financially sustainable, membership is declining. This poses questions of the future of SCDG and there is a need for co-operatives to join SCDG, and other member co-operatives like it, and to take an active part in ensuring that they continue to support the co-operative sector into the future.

## The Author

Steve Thompson is membership secretary of Yorkshire Co-operative Resource Centre — Principle 5 (ICA principle — education, training and information), which is based at Aizlewood's Mill. Its purpose is to provide information and educational support to both existing and proposed co-operatives. The East of England Co-operative society has support principle 5 to develop a substantial library for the use of members and researchers, and the resource centre holds current and back issues of the Co-operative News.

In 2017, Principle 5 will undertake three major projects bringing together principles 5, 6 (co-operation among co-operatives) and 7 (concern for community).

For more information about Aizlewood's Mill — see [www.aizlewoodsmill.co.uk](http://www.aizlewoodsmill.co.uk)

SCDG continues to provide information, support, training and business advice to co-operatives, social enterprise, voluntary sector organisations and small businesses. For more information — see [www.scdg.org](http://www.scdg.org)

For more information about these projects and the work of Principle 5, visit the website at: [www.principle5.coop](http://www.principle5.coop)

## References

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