

Membership of a Community Benefit Society

Community Benefit Societies are member owned organisations that seek to provide benefits for their community. The benefits of a larger membership include:

- Having a larger number of people who have a financial interest in the running of the enterprise and who are more likely to use it regularly.
- A greater number of people who attend AGMs and committee meetings and positively contribute to the overall direction of the business.
- A more accessible pool of people to draw on when committee numbers are falling, or when more volunteers are needed to help run the business.

The Plunkett Model Rules require Community Benefit Societies to have their own membership strategy to ensure 'membership' remains at the heart of the enterprise, whereby the society continues to grow membership and engage its members.

When developing your membership strategy, Community Benefit Societies may like to consider the following areas:

Community

- How do you let your community know you are community owned?

It is a good idea to include the community at every stage of developing and running a community enterprise. At the set up stage, your potential members are all stakeholders in the enterprise and every opportunity should be made to reach them and invite them to be involved. Following this, membership should continue to be sought by using every means possible to ensure no sector of the community is excluded. Membership should be voluntary and open to ensure it is a truly democratically controlled member owned organisation.

Customers

- How are customers and potential customers invited into membership?

The best way to attract customers to become members is to encourage staff and volunteers to promote membership when using the enterprise. This may be by having an information leaflet available at the checkout and posters around the premises. The committee may want to consider a way in which new residents can be approached. A community co-operative is a unique entity and customer service is often at the heart of the operation. Customers will soon see the difference the enterprise makes to the community.

Benefits

- What are the benefits of membership?

Membership allows local people to have a say in how the enterprise is run and to benefit from its success. It allows a vote at the AGM where the shop management committee is elected and members help decide how profits are distributed which may include investing in the enterprise, donating to other community projects and to pay a modest sum to shareholders as trading profits and the rules allow.

Communication

- How do you communicate with members?

In a community organisation, good communication can ensure that information, skills, experience and knowledge can be shared.

You can communicate with members through word of mouth, advertising in the premises, Face Book, Twitter, a website, parish magazines, holding events etc; and through invites to the AGM. It can be a good idea to combine the AGM with a member event such as a tasting session or a cheese and wine evening to encourage them to come along and get involved.

Minutes must be made of all members' meetings, management committee meetings and any other sub-committee meetings and these should be available to members on request along with access to a complaints procedure and information on how a member can call a special members' meeting.

Activities

- What opportunities do members have to interact with you?

There may be times when a member wishes to speak to a member of the management committee and the procedure for doing this must be made available. This may be through the website if you have one, or by training staff and volunteers to give this information if asked. It is also encouraged to find opportunities for the management committee to interact with members by attending events and activities that the enterprise may hold such as seasonal events. If the AGM is considered to be too formal, some groups have an open meeting where all members of the community can hear about the progress of the enterprise and a chance to sample some of what's on offer!

Volunteering

- How do you encourage and reward volunteers for donating their skills and time?

A vibrant volunteer workforce can bring an enterprise to life as many volunteers care passionately about the cause they are engaged in and convey that passion to current and potential enterprise users. Strong volunteer teams share the workload and enable the enterprise to build its capacity to operate and develop.

A manual for volunteers will help manage expectations and clarify their role and yours. The management committee must prioritise encouraging, motivating and looking after volunteers and many shops reward them by awarding certificates, holding supper events or occasional trips.

Resources on recruiting and managing volunteers can be found on www.plunkett.co.uk/preparing-to-trade

Training

- How do members understand the organisation and the role they can play in it?

This could be done at the same time as the AGM. Providing education and training for members allows them to contribute effectively to the development of the enterprise and to be informed about the nature and benefits of co-operatives and the wider co-operative movement.

Engagement

- How are members encouraged to play an active role in the democratic activities, such as elections and the AGM?

Engaged members will want to be active in the decision making of the enterprise and the AGM allows them to stand for election and to elect the new management committee as well as receiving financial accounts and reports from the management committee and having a say on the treatment of profits. The rules of a Society will explain the procedure for holding members' meetings and when members' meetings are to be held.

Governance

- How do you refresh your democratic structure by encouraging new participants and supporting the development of existing participants?

Good governance is critical to the success of a member owned enterprise and it is essential that members are included in decision making through the election of the management committee at the AGM. A membership enterprise needs to ensure that new membership is encouraged and that systems and processes around governance and membership are in place. More information can be found on www.plunkett.co.uk

Monitoring membership / How do you know that your membership strategy is working?

The AGM is a good time to review the state of your organisation's membership. This might be a review of a number of measurables including;

- Number of members
- Number of new members recruited during the year
- Value of share capital

Template Membership Strategy

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- Distribution of profit to the community
- Methods of communicating with members and non-members
- Number of members of the management committee
- Number of volunteers and/or volunteer hours put in by members

Resources are available on the Plunkett Foundation website. Click on the how we help section of our website - www.plunkett.co.uk/