



Conference report

5 November 2009
Manchester

The rapidly growing network of co-operative trust schools has been boosted by the creation of the new Co-operatives Schools Network, which was officially launched on 5 November.

The Co-operative Schools Network will be run as a co-operative by its members, co-operative trust schools. It will enable existing and prospective co-operative trust schools to share experiences and best practice, and develop ideas and services for member schools.

A packed day at the Co-operatives Head Office in Manchester saw well over 100 delegates, including head teachers, staff and governors from schools across the county, discuss the exciting potential of the network during group brainstorming sessions.

Delegates also heard inspirational words of advice from the head teachers of existing Co-operative Trust schools, including Cassie Ellins of Upper Shirley High in Southampton, Steve Baker of Lipson Community College in Plymouth, Devon and Andy Sprakes of Campsmount School in Doncaster. Pupils from Reddish Vale Technology College, which became the first co-operative Trust school in the country 18 months ago, also offered insights into what trust status has meant to them.

Many of the schools in attendance are already in the process of becoming Trusts, with more expected to join. 26 schools have already formed 15 trusts and a further 120 schools are committed to the idea. The DCSF has set the Co-operative College the target of converting 200 schools to

Co-operative Trust status by September 2010.

The conference was opened by Moira Lees, Group Secretary of The Co-operative Group and addressed by Steve Munby, Chief Executive of the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services.

Mervyn Wilson, Principal of the Co-operative College, told delegates: "One of the most exciting things over the past 12 months has been seeing the energy and vision of schools working towards trust status using the co-operative model. The network will provide a unique opportunity for everyone involved to start sharing some of that experience and provide a voice for the growing number of co-operative trusts."

John Chowcat from the Association of Professionals in Education and Children's Trust, Phil Revell from the National Governors Association and Karen Mort from the Foundation and Aided Schools National Association also spoke about how the Network could relate to the 21st century schools agenda, and were quizzed by members of the audience afterwards.

Russell Gill, Head of Membership at The Co-operative Group, said: "The original co-operative societies formed in the mid 19th Century formed the federal Co-operative Wholesale

Society (CWS) which meant co-operatives could work together for benefit of their members. Therefore, it is most appropriate that we should again be using that same model for this new network.

"The co-operative trusts offer schools an ethos which we believe can lead to higher standards, aspirations and achievements."

The conference also relayed the good news that the Department for Children, Schools and Families is to offer £25,000 of funding to kick-start the network.

Ed Balls MP, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, who was unfortunately unable to attend, sent a statement saying: "This is really exciting news as it shows that the co-operative model isn't just a niche model.

Co-operative school trusts put power in the hands of those who know best what is needed in their area, by allowing local communities to come together and have direct power over the running of their local schools. They mean that everybody with a stake in the school's success – parents, teachers, support staff, and even pupils – can all get involved in the running of their school."