Business Support – start your co-op: Application guidance

Introduction

Start a co-op is a business support programme for people wanting to launch their own co-op. To be eligible for this programme you must fall into one of the following categories:

- A group of (at least two) people aiming to register a co-op in the UK within 12 months
- An existing co-op that incorporated in the UK less than 18 months ago and/or has not started trading yet (the co-op hasn't yet submitted any financial accounts)
- An existing organisation aiming to convert to a co-op in the next 12 months, that has been incorporated for less than 18 months and/or has not started trading

If you have started trading or have been incorporated for more than 18 months, and you have submitted financial accounts, this programme is not for you. Instead, you can contact Co-operatives UK's Advice Team for support or apply for the following programmes:

- If you are an established co-op you can apply for our business support programme for existing co-ops
- If you are an established organisation or business that is not a co-op you can apply for our business support programme to convert to a co-op

Before you start

Before you start your application, we recommend you read this application guidance carefully. It includes information about:

- The application process and how we assess your application
- The documents and information you need to gather before you apply
- A preview of all the questions you will be asked in the form.

We advise you to prepare as much as possible in advance. You can download a copy of this guidance as a pdf file by clicking on 'download pdf' button on the side menu.

Commitment fee

If you are awarded the support package, you will be asked to contribute a £100 commitment fee (inclusive of VAT) or £75 for Co-operatives UK members. The fee has proven to be the best approach to ensure the support is allocated to teams that are truly committed to participating in the programme. Co-operatives UK reinvests the funds into future support provision. If the fee is a barrier to your participation in the programme, please let us know in your application and we will

consider waiving the fee.

About the programme

Start a co-op offers

- Up to six days of one-to-one support with a co-op expert
- Half a day of peer-support with an existing co-op

One-to-one support from a co-op expert

You can receive up to six days of one-to-one support with a co-op expert tailored to your specific needs. It will usually involve a combination of some of the following types of support:

- Choosing the right legal form for your co-op
- Reviewing or developing your organisational strategy
- Testing your business's viability and feasibility
- Reviewing or developing your business plan
- Financial planning
- Market development strategy (user research, marketing and customer engagement)
- Reviewing or developing a membership strategy
- Defining your democratic processes
- Defining a fundraising strategy

Six days of support will not be able to cover all the topics above, so we will ask you to indicate your top three priorities.

The support will be delivered by a co-op expert that is part of our extensive network of advisors located across the UK. You may choose your own advisor from the network, or leave it to us to choose the most appropriate for your co-op. If your application is successful, we will make every effort to allocate you your preferred support advisor. However, we reserve the right to offer an alternative based on availability, geography, skills and experience.

Peer support from another co-op

Peer support is a great opportunity to learn from those that have been in your position before. They will have the lived experience of starting a co-op and getting it up and running and can offer you insight into the challenges you might encounter and how to overcome them. You can get into the details of running the business or simply visit their premises to get a sense of their day-to-day activities. Once we have assigned you a co-op for peer support, it will be up to you to define with your peer co-op how to best make use of this time.

In your application form you can suggest the co-op you would like to be paired with, or you can leave it to us to propose the most appropriate co-op. You can find other co-ops by exploring our directory of co-ops. If your application is successful, we will make every effort to allocate you your preferred co-op. However, we reserve the right to offer an alternative based on availability, geography, skills and experience.

Allocation of support

We aim to support as many applications as possible but unfortunately cannot support all. To make sure the support is as impactful as possible, we will award it to teams that can demonstrate they have already done some work towards setting up their co-op.

Before applying please consider doing some of the following:

- Assemble a founding team
- Watch a webinar to understand if a co-op is right for you
- Use Co-operatives UK's step-by-step tool
- Explore what legal form is right for you co-op and access Co-operatives UK's model rules for co-ops

The allocation of support will depend on the following criteria:

- The confidence you've given us that you will start your co-op within the next 12 months
- The confidence we have that you have a committed team able to keep the organisation going once it's set up and that can benefit from the support
- How impactful we think the support could be to help you get to the next stage
- If you have a valid business case and we think that the business model can realistically succeed
- If we see that the co-op model is a central aspect to your business model

The application form is designed to help you explain these aspects, so please provide the appropriate information when prompted.

Co-operatives UK is also keen to support organisations that are led by, employ or support people who identify with groups that are under-represented or discriminated against in the business and third sector, in the workplace or in their communities. Equity and solidarity are core values of the co-operative movement so we will consider these aspects when prioritising applications. The application questions related to these points are not compulsory but please consider them when applying and highlight them where appropriate in your application.

Finally, we will be prioritising applications that are aligned with Co-operatives UK's strategy. This is working to build a strong, sustainable and diverse UK co-operative movement that positions co-operatives as a better way to do business and transform people's lives. In particular, we might prioritise applications where one or more of the following points applies:

- Your co-op will be led by, employ or support young people (18-35 years old)
- Your co-op brings innovation to the co-op sector. You may be filling a gap in the market, responding to market failure or creating alternative solutions to specific issues
- Your co-op and the support you receive is a learning opportunity for the co-operative movement

However, these are not eligibility criteria, so please apply even if your co-op does not fit in this list of priorities.

Application process

To access this support, you must fill in an application form.

We accept applications on a rolling basis and assess them in regular assessment panel meetings which happen every 4-5 weeks.

Once we have received your application we will first check if it fits our eligibility criteria.

- If it does not, we will write to explain why and will provide you guidance on other steps you can take
- If it does, we will submit it to the panel for a full assessment and inform you of the next panel date

We may also arrange a call in advance of the panel to discuss your application in more in detail.

If you would like your application to be considered for the next panel session, please submit it at least 10 working days in advance. Below is a list of the panel dates and the deadline for submitting your application for that panel date. Applications need to be received by 5 pm on the deadline date. Please note, due to Summer holidays, there will be no panel meeting in August.

If you application has been submitted to the panel for full assessment, we will notify you of the result within 10 working days of the panel date. If your application is successful, we will then start co-ordinating the support package with you.

Application deadline	Panel date
30 November 2026	15 December 2026
12 January 2027	26 January 2027
9 February 2027	23 February 2027
8 March 2027	23 March 2027
7 April 2027	21 April 2027
5 May 2027	18 May 2027

How to apply

1. Make sure you are eligible for the programme
2. Prepare your questions in advance. You can read the form questions on the next page, where you can also download a document with all the questions
3. Gather in advance all the information you need to include in your application. In particular:

- You will be asked to include in your application a short biography and motivational statement by at least two team members
- If you are an organisation that is already incorporated, you will also need to provide your organisation's:
    - Registration number. This is the number your organisation is given when it registers with the relevant registration body, i.e. Companies House or the Financial Conduct Authority.
    - Incorporation date
    - Legal form
    - Turnover for the previous year

4. Fill in the application form. If you need to save your application at any stage, please follow the 'save my progress and resume later' instructions.
5. Review and submit your application

If you have any questions, please get in touch with us at support@uk.coop

We look forward to receiving your application.

Application form preview

Download a preview of the application form

PLEASE NOTE to apply for this programme you will need to fill in an ONLINE application. The downloadable templates will allow you to prepare your application in advance.

We have word and pdf versions available.

If you have any issues accessing this guidance, please email support@uk.coop

Word version

This will download to your computer and allow you to write your answers into the document to help you prepare in advance.

Word preview

Download

Pdf version

This will likely open within your browser. You can right click on the button below and select 'open link in new tab' so you don't navigate away from this page.

Pdf preview

Download

Start your application

Before you apply

1. Make sure you've read all of the guidance on these pages and you know you are eligible to apply

2. We strongly recommend preparing your answers in advance before starting your application

Ready to apply?

You can save your application at any stage – simply follow the 'Save my progress and resume later' instructions on the form.

Start your application

Next step

https://www.uk.coop/resources/business-support-start-your-co-op-application-guidance-bs

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