

THE CO-OPERATIVE DAIRY COW WELFARE PROJECT

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The **co-operative**

BACKGROUND

The Co-operative Group is the UK's fifth largest food retailer, one of the largest commercial farmers, third largest pharmacy chain, largest funeral provider, largest independent travel business and a leading provider of banking and financial services. The Group, owned by its 7.2 million members, generates an annual turnover of £13.3bn, employs more than 102,000 people and operates over 5,000 retail trading outlets serving more than 21 million customers per week.

The Co-operative Values and Principles, which were set out over 160 years ago, are the tenets that drive the co-operative approach to business. Today, these values and principles resonate strongly with contemporary ideas of ethical retailing. For The Co-operative, improving animal welfare is not simply a short-term marketing platform, but part of a long-term commitment to a responsible retailing agenda.

WELFARE ISSUE

The Co-operative is well aware of the welfare issues being faced on a daily basis by today's dairy cows. It is determined to ensure that its contracted farmers are in the best position possible to deal with these issues and to have the best resources available to keep them at the forefront of dairy farming.

A project to develop a long-term programme to assist its contracted dairy farmers was presented to and signed off by the Society board in 2011.

The main focuses for initiatives, as well as the known problems of mastitis and lameness, were cow nutrition, herd health, fertility and genetics, cow longevity and calf utilisation, thereby tackling many of the criteria addressed by Compassion's [Good Dairy Award](#). Other non-welfare-related issues such as grassland management, forage crops, energy usage, carbon foot printing and milking systems, were also included as these have a direct impact on the farm viability and therefore an indirect impact on cow welfare.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Kite Consulting are industry experts that understand the issues dairy and other farmers are facing, and they have the knowledge and tools to pass that expertise onto farmers. The Co-operative recognised that involving professional consultants was important in order for them to fully understand the issues, to decide the priority in which they could best be addressed and to provide its farmers with what they needed.

Kite was able to advise The Co-operative on the very latest research being carried out on dairy cow welfare and the associated findings. This information formed the basis of a three year development plan. It also helped them to identify how The Co-operative Group could assist its farmers in other ways, for example, to combat non welfare-related issues such as rising energy and feed costs.

IMPLEMENTATION

It is a requirement for all the dairy farmers supplying The Co-operative to attend a number of business group meetings each year. These meetings, facilitated by Kite Consulting, are carried out on-farm and focus on delivering specific training to the dairy farmers on a wide range of targetted welfare and health topics. Other industry experts are also brought in to advise farmers and to deliver the latest expertise on the issues raised on farm. Topics covered so far include nutrition and feed efficiency, cow comfort, foot health, mastitis and herd health.

As part of The Co-operative Dairy Group membership, a farmer agrees to a number of these visits which must include a complete body condition assessment for their herd. The results of this, together with other key welfare indicators required by Compassion's [Good Dairy Award](#), are recorded on a database against each specific farmer. This information is then provided back to the farmer and his contracted vet, as well as the consultant from Kite Consulting, who uses it to assist the individual farmers in the business groups.

In addition to providing training and advice, The Co-operative has further assisted its farmers by:

- Providing additional opportunities for them to sell unwanted black and white male calves into the British beef rearing system (90% of all black and white male calves are now utilised for beef production in the UK, whilst non are exported).
- Providing an annual energy usage audit, designed to help farmers reduce their carbon foot print.
- Providing farmers with the opportunity to reduce their electricity bill and at the same time purchase renewable green energy, through The Co-operative's energy buying contract.

COMMUNICATION

This project was initiated with a joint press statement with the NFU in 2011, in which The Co-operative's Chief Executive, Tim Hurrell highlighted "*The need for compliance with our Food Ethical Policy and the DEFRA 'dairy roadmap'*", with the focus on animal welfare, environmental stewardship and carbon footprint reduction.

This was followed by meetings with farmers around the country to introduce the project and to ensure that they were clearly aware of the vision and expected outcomes. The farmers also receive a quarterly newsletter and additional regional meetings, three times a year, to be kept up-to-date on any project developments.

The Co-operative communicates with its customers and the wider public through its statement on all fresh milk packaging: "*We support our dedicated dairy farmers with a price premium to maintain high standards in animal welfare and environmental conservation*"; and a dedicated page on The Co-operative Food website (<http://www.co-operativefood.co.uk/ethics/Ethical-trading/milk-supply-policy/>) detailing the project's aims. The company also advertises on the sides of milk tankers operated by its dedicated supplier Müller-Wiseman Dairies.

Further information is provided publically through its annual Sustainability Report and in The Co-operative Group's Ethical Operating Plan.

RESULTS

The farmers themselves have seen the benefit of being part of this project, as it allows them to focus on what needs to be done on their individual farms and to implement welfare improvements, as well as having the knowledge, tools and resources to actually carry out the changes.

They have also benefitted from significantly reduced electricity costs and a better focus on their energy usage, following the energy use audit and a renewed confidence in investing in their farms.

The total number of British dairy farms included in this project is standing at 224, with just under 38,000 cows (total cows at milk and dry cows) between them.

This unique project started winning awards even before it was fully up and running - The Co-operative won Compassion's [Good Dairy Award](#) in 2011, and the dairy project was a major part of it being awarded the most improved retailer at the RSPCA Good Business Awards.

The Co-operative has also won [Supermarket Awards](#) in both 2005 and 2011 for being the retailer with the biggest improvements to welfare, according to Compassion's [Supermarket Survey](#). By introducing higher welfare practices into other areas of its business, The Co-operative has also received Compassion's [Good Egg Award](#) for using free-range eggs in its own-brand products and a [Good Chicken Award](#) for committing to higher welfare standards for all its fresh and frozen chicken.

Through its welfare initiatives such as the Dairy Cow Welfare Project, The Co-operative is clearly demonstrating that improving animal welfare is part of a long-term commitment to its responsible retailing agenda.