

6 Suma Wholefoods



Suma Wholefoods Limited is one of the largest, and most successful worker co-operatives in the United Kingdom. As a worker co-operative, Suma Wholefoods has developed a number of innovative participatory approaches to governance, including an organisational structure which enables decisions to be shared and owned by the workers.

What it Does

Suma Wholefoods is an independent wholesaler and distributor of fair trade, organic and vegetarian foods. Operating across the UK, Suma supplies and distributes over 7,000 product lines to a range of independent shops, supermarkets, community groups, hospitals and schools.

How it Came About

Suma was started by one man in 1974 who set up an informal food distribution business from his front room in Leeds. Before then, supplies of wholefoods were only available in London. Demand was so high that Suma grew rapidly into a seven employee business.

These people became the founder members and Suma was registered in 1977 as a common ownership worker co-operative Industrial & Provident Society. Common ownership means that the members cannot wind it up and distribute the assets among themselves. The co-operative and common ownership model has protected their enterprise from outside buy-in or buy-out. It has ensured that it has baffled attempts at outside interference and enabled the members to continue to something that belongs to them and them alone and which is their own responsibility owned and democratically controlled enterprise.

In the early years, Suma was a lifestyle concept, rather than just a business with worker members also sharing the same

housing – like many co-operatives in the seventies and eighties, Suma was a way of life!

The co-operative and business operations continued to grow in a profitable wholefoods climate, and through trial and error it managed to develop and change its ways of working and decision-making processes to adapt to its circumstances.

From heated weekly general meetings making decisions by consensus to elected management structures to speed the decision-making process, Suma has demonstrated its ability to rise to the challenge of running a successful business in a democratic and co-operative way - and 25 years on, the Co-operative is growing from strength to strength.

Governance Structure

The organisation has a two tier structure for governance, with the members electing a Management Committee at the Annual General Meetings (AGM). The Management Committee consists of six members, with at least two places reserved for women, to ensure the Committee is representative of the broader worker membership. Half the Committee is re-elected each year. The Chair is termed a 'functional' chair – that is conducting the roles of a Chair, without having any decision-making powers on the Committee. In addition to the six members and the functional Chair, the Committee also has a Finance officer, Personnel officer and Operations Co-ordinator – all of whom are advisory roles in a non-voting capacity on the Committee.

The Management Committee meets weekly, and has delegated decision-making powers that have been agreed internally, and which are not described in the governing document. The general meeting, involving all members meets six times during the year and agrees strategies, business plans and major policy decisions. The Management

Facts & Figures

- Organisational Type – Representative worker co-operative with common ownership.
- Legal Form – Industrial & Provident Society
- Date Established – Registered in 1977
- Location – Elland, West Yorkshire
- Number of Members – 64 members, 12 training to become worker members
- Number of Workers – 85 full time equivalents



Suma Wholefoods celebrating their 25th Birthday in September 2002, with an open day at their warehouse in West Yorkshire.

Committee is then given delegated decision-making to implement the plans and make recommendations to the general membership for future direction. Beyond the general meetings and the Management Committee, there are also Functional Area Co-ordinator meetings. Functional Area Co-ordinators meet daily to discuss and agree issues in distinct operational areas of the organisation. Minutes are taken at these meetings and forwarded to the Management Committee, as part of the Operations Co-ordinators' report. These Functional Area Co-ordinator meetings ensure decisions are shared amongst as many worker members as possible, and provide another opportunity for decision-making involving worker members.

The governance structure of the Co-operative enables the full worker membership to have control and ownership of decisions of the co-operative.

The Management Committee has delegated powers within agreed limits, although it must report back to the general membership over variations to the business plan, finances or personnel issues. The Co-operative states that the Management Committee is there to monitor progress, not to direct or enforce decisions.

Participatory Practice

The nature of the Co-operative and the agreed protocols stimulate and encourage member involvement in the governance of the organisation, and the fact that all members are Directors implies a sense of

ownership and shared responsibility in the successes and failures of the business.

Of the 85 full time equivalent workers, 64 are Directors of the Co-operative, with a further twelve currently in training for membership of the Co-operative.

Incentives for becoming members include pension contributions from the Co-operative. Such initiatives encourage membership, although the Co-operative recognises there is room for further development in this area.

Members are kept fully informed of decisions made, and are able to observe the decision-making process to ensure transparency, openness and encourage involvement. Minutes of all management committee meetings are published for review and comment for all members. Each management committee meeting begins with an open forum, open to all members to raise issues or concerns with the committee. Any member is able to make proposals and raise issues at the general meetings, and the management committee meetings.

In addition, the routes to participation are broadened with Functional Area meetings, and issues based team meetings including a cash-flow team, a brand co-ordination team and a health & safety team. All of these meet as and when needed to facilitate and accelerate the flow of information and decision-making processes, which include as many worker members as possible, without the need for long-drawn out committee meetings.

Measures of Success

Suma achieved Investors in People accreditation in 1998, and was the first worker's co-operative to be able to prove the quality of its organisation to customers, suppliers and the public.

Key to Success

"We recognise that Suma the co-operative, as the general membership, own the business functions, and that the business itself is not the core of the organisation, but the members."