

We raised stones together: building the confidence to co-operate

Commentary from a Co-operatives Wales perspective

Chris Bolton's reflection on raising standing stones offers a powerful image of co-operation: people combining effort, knowledge and determination to achieve something beyond their individual capabilities. The stone remains visible afterwards, but another achievement matters just as much: the relationships built through doing something together. https://www.linkedin.com/posts/chris-bolton-86329013_we-raised-stones-together-heres-the-final-share-7520049601270255616-g-6o/

Whatever the varied purposes of ancient monuments, Chris's contemporary proposition deserves attention. Shared practical activity can create opportunities to discover one another's strengths, negotiate differences and experience collective achievement. In a society where many people feel isolated or powerless, those opportunities have considerable value.

For the co-operative movement, this is familiar territory. Co-operation grows when people recognise a shared need and organise to meet it. A community shop, worker-owned business, housing co-operative or community energy enterprise begins with people asking what they could accomplish by combining their resources and exercising ownership together.

Chris also points towards something that formal strategies can overlook: the importance of enjoyment and celebration. Preparing food, sharing stories and recognising everyone's contribution help make collective endeavour worth repeating. Co-operative life needs these human connections alongside constitutions, accounts and business plans. People need to feel that they belong.

However, the invitation to work together must extend beyond those able to lift, pull or undertake strenuous activity. Planning, researching, welcoming newcomers, documenting events, making refreshments and offering encouragement are valuable contributions. Accessible participation means recognising different abilities, providing reasonable adjustments and ensuring that children, older people and disabled people can help shape the activity.

That principle applies equally to co-operative enterprise. Democratic ownership should enable people with different experiences and resources to exercise meaningful influence. Confidence, professional knowledge or financial contribution must not become the basis for an informal hierarchy that leaves others unheard.

A shared task also offers an opportunity to practise democracy. Who chooses the stone? Who decides where it belongs? Whose history does it represent? How are disagreements resolved? These questions connect practical collaboration with the co-operative principles of democratic member control, education and concern for community.

Chris's reference to an uncertain future gives the idea wider significance. Relationships formed through enjoyable activity may provide foundations for responding to hardship or unexpected challenges. People who have learned to communicate, share responsibility and solve problems together have something valuable to draw upon when circumstances change.

Yet community resilience requires resources as well as goodwill. Collective effort deserves investment, accessible meeting places, skilled support and time. We would urge a comprehensive approach to co-operative education.

Public institutions and businesses can help create these conditions, while respecting communities' independence and avoiding expectations that unpaid effort will compensate for inadequate services.

For Co-operatives Wales the opportunity is to connect these experiences of collective achievement with lasting democratic enterprise. Development advice, co-operative education and supportive networks can help a group move from one successful activity towards ownership of something that meets an enduring need.

A standing stone can mark what people achieved together. A co-operative can carry that achievement into everyday life through shared decisions, livelihoods and assets. Chris's invitation therefore opens a larger possibility: discovering our collective capabilities, then creating the democratic structures that allow them to flourish.