

Steve's colleague Q&A on 'community' (July 2017) - transcript

Serena Smallman, Campaign Manager, Community Engagement Team

Hello, I'm Serena Smallman from the Community Team. I'm here today with Steve and he's going to answer questions that our colleagues have been putting forward about our community. Hi

Steve Murrells, CEO, Co-op Group

Hi Serena

Serena

Hello, thank you so much again for taking some of your time to answer the questions.

So the most popular question that we've had is around eligibility for the Local Community Fund, and it's been about: why do you have to be a charity to apply for funds?

Steve

Well, they're all good causes aren't they and this is an interesting question because it came up at the early incubator stage of how we were going to run the programme and I think our colleagues will be glad to know that there is work already underway, led by Rebecca [*Birkbeck*] and Rufus [*Olins*], to see if we can extend out giving funds away to good causes that don't necessarily register as a charity.

The reason why we haven't leapt to this yet is that we're very mindful there are some less scrupulous people out there that are very keen to get hold of members' money.

But the trials should come to conclusion by, I think the end of October, and then we're hoping that we'll be able to open this up wider and do exactly what the colleagues are asking us for, trying to get to causes that really matter but not constrict it in the way that we may well have done in the past through a charity.

Serena

So, we've had a couple of colleagues that have asked us: if we want to be really at the heart of the community then we should be using local suppliers... shouldn't we actually be encouraging them to go to these local suppliers?

Steve

'Yes' is the simple answer, and interestingly Hazel Blears that sits on the Board has had a lot of energy around this area of local suppliers providing local needs.

There's probably context point which is where we've come from. So if you wind the clock back to 2013, the way our stores were serviced in the past was from five national providers. The work that Simon Wetherell introduced about 18 months ago moved us to about 149 local providers. Now, that's just the start if you really want to have a local service supply arrangement in place, but quite a big shift from where we were.

There is of course always the balance between the economics of scale and the niceties of localness and keeping the local economy running. And I think over time, I know Simon Wetherell's got a lot of energy here to see whether or not we can go again from the 149 today to another level and keep on increasing it so that we put more value back into the community, or leave it in the community rather than take it away. And that's something I'll, let me take that away and talk to Simon and David Roberts about.

Serena

That's brilliant, I think our colleagues be really happy with that so thank you.

With our next question is around our national charity partner: have you any thoughts about what we could do with this?

Steve

So this is another interesting question and there's been lots of debate going on between the stores, the funeral teams and the community team in the centre here, and, in truth, the pattern has been: raise a load of money - which the frontline colleagues have done brilliantly well... over £6 million as far as this latest cause has been - and then go on to something different.

One of the things that loneliness and isolation has really resonated with the Group is that it cascades across all ages, all lifestyles, and that actually we can do a lot more in this space before we leap to go to another national cause.

There's a lot of work now of how we spend the £6 million, working shoulder-to-shoulder with the British Red Cross, and therefore I think I'd want to pause, make sure that we're spending the money in the right way, make sure that we're still engaging in what is a very important national issue, before we then leap to another cause. And that also will give us a bit of time to rework the value of a national cause and the value of local causes and use colleagues to help us decide how we move forward in the future.

So, I hear it, I don't want to jump yet to the kind of normal routine because I can still see a lot more for us to do with loneliness and isolation.

Serena

Yes and obviously we've got the Community Connectors that will be also introduced shortly as well so that will really help use that money there and then we'll see the benefit of us on a local level.

As you know colleagues were vital to the success of round one cause celebration, but we've had a lot of questions around: can they get more funds and more hours to help support them and deliver this? What do you think about this?

Steve

Yeah, and I think a huge 'thank you' for thousands of colleagues that just do this as part of day job. They squeeze it in, they find the time, in many cases they do it in their own time, and I, you know, I applaud that... I think that's what makes Co-op colleagues really special.

There is no doubt that if this is going to be sustainable though that we need to find more funds to give the stores to invest the hours so that colleagues can do this type of thing.

We know that we've got the community champions coming - the Community Pioneers. There'll be 200 by the end of this year, moving up to 400 and then eventually getting to the 1,500 in the 1,500 locations - so that's coming.

But that's not going to be enough and we need to unlock more time in the working lives of our colleagues to do more good. Community is one of those leavers that we've got that we think describes our difference, and getting our people to volunteer and do things is really important - as important as actually giving money away. We need to therefore unlock that ability for them to do

more things because that's then when we really make a contribution in a community rather than just funding projects.

Serena

No, totally agree because I think without their hard work, them going the extra mile, we wouldn't have had such a successful celebration.

And finally, what do you think about a service giving money to causes through the 1% our members, customers and colleagues could give the opportunity to share skills with other causes in their local community?

Steve

Yes, if you think what we tried to do at Hamburg on world water poverty, that was about saying that we're doing this but it was a call to arms it was a call to countries around the world and governments and businesses to kind of step up and do some good.

In the same way, the same would apply here that said: if we can find ways to encourage others to come in and access through our stores, why not? If stores are aware of local businesses that can make a real difference in this space, use our assets, use our noticeboards.

The more good we can get people doing, as I've said in the past, the more we can achieve. This is actually the Co-op Way that says: encourage others to come on the journey and make a real difference.

So I would really encourage anybody that can access and encourage other partners through our assets to get known to the community about making a real difference and being involved.

Serena

Thank you so much for your time. It's been really great to hear your answers that our colleagues have put forward about community.

Steve

All down to colleagues and really exciting for the future.

Serena

If we haven't answered your question today then we will be coming back shortly with a response. But we're really grateful that everyone came forward with their questions.

Thank you

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