

Transcript – Steve Murrells on Sky News – 23 July 2018

Ian King – Sky News interviewer

A new scheme supported by business is helping victims of modern slavery into jobs. Big names from John Lewis to Dixon's Carphone and The Body Shop have signed up to offer paid work placements leading to an interview and a potential permanent job.

Hundreds of survivors are expected to have secured roles over the next two years. Well earlier I spoke to Steve Murrells who's Chief Executive of the Co-op which devised the scheme.

Steve Murrells – CEO, Co-op

It's been something that our members have been talking to us about for about a year now. Latest figures would suggest there's 130,000 people who were victims to modern slavery. That's the same size as Blackpool. And for the last year we've created a program called 'Bright Future' and that's acted as a pathway for these victims to get back into full-time employment within the Co-op.

It makes a real difference for their lives and I've seen that with my own eyes. People that have been subjected to beatings, threats, forced to set up illegal bank accounts - we've now been able to help those individuals, give them full-time employment in the Co-op. They get their lives back and this is one of the things that's really important to the Co-op.

We want to be commercially successful but we also want to be socially responsible. And this morning I've been in the Houses of Parliament with the Minister and other business leaders just talking about how we can do more in this place. We're persuading other businesses to join the scheme and the programme and we hope to be able to make a difference for 300 people by 2020. So really important social issue for us and one I think people think is a thing of the past, but it's a real-life issue today.

Ian King

What sort of roles are you finding for these people to do - is this just in the grocery part of the business or in the wider Co-op group?

Steve Murrells

We've put them in our logistics business - so in our distribution centres. We've clearly focused in our stores - that's probably the most easiest place for them to start. And I think there would be an ambition at the right point to possibly bring them into the support centre as long as their confidence is good enough and they've actually been able to get through the program.

Ian King

I mean, it sounds a harsh question, but are some of these people actually able to work? I mean they've obviously been through terrible experiences - are they fit for work?

Steve Murrells

Well there is a delicate side to all of this and we will have had some individuals that haven't been able to go through the program. One individual effectively gave them reflections on the past - bad memories - and it wasn't appropriate to continue to try and help them.

But for the 80% that do come on the program we're seeing a real movement to full-time employment which is important and we hope that we'll be able to see that strike rate go up over time.

Ian King

What about the business generally - how's it trading at the moment? You've just, obviously, completed the Nisa takeover - is that a settling in nicely?

Steve Murrells

Well our food business has been strong for the last four years. We've had positive like for like growth - faster than the major four and just behind the discounters. So the Nisa acquisition was on the back of strong growth and good progress. And so our food business is very healthy. We're in the right place at the right time, we're in local communities, we're just around the corner. And the way people are shopping is convenient and that's actually how we are going to market.

Our funeral business and our probate legal business is all growing and is very strong.

Ian King

I mean there's obviously a fierce price war going on right now in the funeral sector. Some say you started it.

Steve Murrells

Well we did. You know for some while I've watched funeral prices moving in a northerly direction and I thought that was wrong. And so we've put a lot of effort in to stabilise funeral inflation, and in many places bring it down. We thought that was the right thing to do when people needed our help and actually it's proving to be the right thing.

And we just launched a new product called 'cremation without ceremony.' This is where people are now seeing death as a celebration of life rather than as a sad moment. And I think there's a real social change in how people are viewing death. And so as we bring new products to the market in funerals, it's growing our business again.

And we're market leading so price is important for people - they need our help. It's important that the Co-op does it first and then hopefully others will follow.

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