

CO-OPERATIVE  
**alternatives**

ANNUAL REPORT  
2014 – 2015



# CHAIR'S REPORT

Co-operative Alternatives is the only body in Northern Ireland entirely devoted to developing successful co-operatives of all kinds. We offer a range of high quality services and advice on legal, financial, business and democratic governance. We provide tailored training and business support to all groups who want to do business in a co-operative way.

Co-operative Alternatives started trading in April 2013. Since then, we have provided more than one day of support to 8 cooperatives that started or continued trading. All but 1 are still trading as co-operative businesses – a survival rate of 87.5%. Three co-ops have been able to buy some services direct.

In the last year, Co-operative Alternatives has supported four Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies to launch community share offers. They have raised over £365,000 investment by recruiting 800 members.

Across the UK since 2009, there have been over 260 community share offers raising at least £61 million from 33,200 members (Co-operatives UK). In proportion, there have been fewer share offers in Northern Ireland, but they have raised more capital from more people.

Co-operative Alternatives has forged strong partnerships with many agencies including Development Trusts NI, Social Enterprises NI, Growing Together Project, the Plunkett Foundation, and the Society for Co-operative Studies Ireland. Co-operatives UK have licensed myself to award the Community Shares Standard Mark, in recognition of best practice.

None of this would have been possible without £235,000 three years of funding for 2013-2016 from the Building Change Trust, as well as the good work of our people and renewed Board.

I would particularly like to appreciate Tiziana O'Hara, Charlie Fisher, Anne Molloy and Teri Kelly.

**Jo Bird, Chair, June 2015**



**Tiziana O'Hara  
and Jo Bird**

# COMMUNITY SHARES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

<b>Society</b>	<b>Launched</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>Raised</b>	<b>Members</b>
Drumlin Wind Phase 1	2013	£2,800,000	£2,700,000	
Drumlin Wind Phase 2	2014	£1,200,000	£1,200,000	1,300
Lacada Brewery	2014	£60,000	£83,000	228
Boundary Brewing	2014	£70,000	£100,000	450
Down to Earth	2015	£40,000	£30,000	35
NI Community Energy	2015	£150,000	£150,000	76
<b>Total 6 offers from 5 Societes</b>		<b>£4,320,000</b>	<b>£4,263,000</b>	<b>2,089</b>

# PROJECT MANAGER'S OVERVIEW

In 2014-2015, Co-operative Alternatives have contributed to define the social economy sector in Northern Ireland. In this year of funding uncertainty and slow economy growth, co-operatives successfully raised finance to provide new services, creating new products and jobs with a social, economic impact and an environmental return.

We have been in contact with 39 interested organisations and groups and talked about co-operatives and community benefit societies at 22 public events. We have organised 2 masterclasses for intermediaries' organisations who are now helping us to spread the word. We worked with the Social Enterprise Hubs, the Ulster University, the National Irish University (Maynooth) in Kilkenny and provided workshops to their clients and students on co-ops and community shares. We published 4 blogs on our renewed website and distributed 4 e-news to more than 1,100 people who now hear regularly about co-operatives and community shares. More than 46 articles were published in local and community newspapers.

The Community Share, Ready project commissioned by the Building Change Trust has allowed us to support with specialist help two share offers. Each share offer was different and the package of support was tailored to the needs of their community of interest and the organisation's vision. Cooperative Alternatives have helped in a variety of ways from registration, project management and to writing up of the share offer and cope with some of their initial costs. This has been a journey for NICE and Down to Earth community co-operatives that ended with being investment ready.

**Tiziana O'Hara, Project Manager**



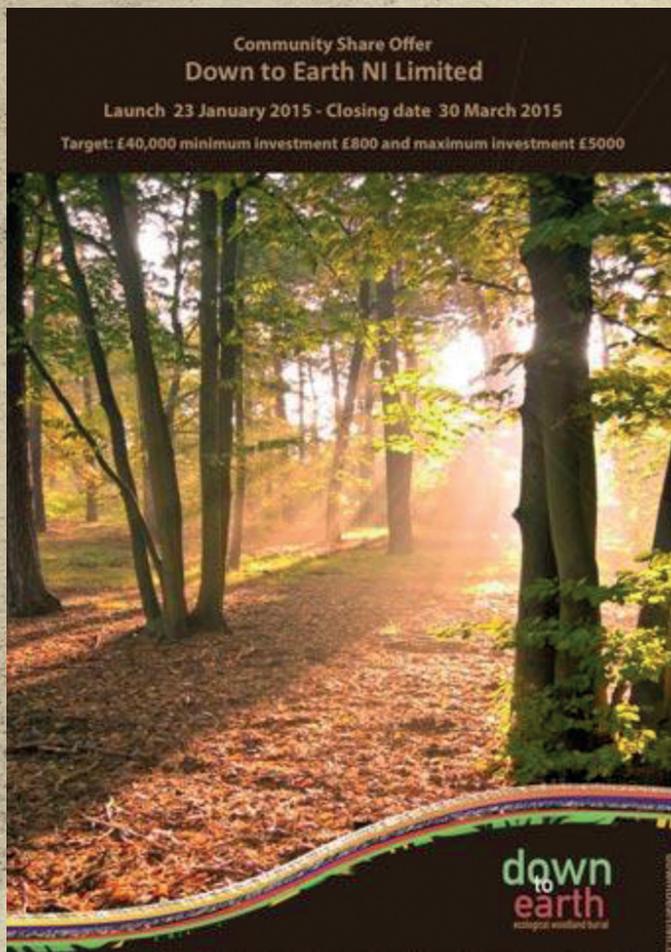
**Board of Directors 2014/2015**  
**Jo Bird Charlie Fisher, Anne Molloy,**  
**Phil Nicholls and Tiziana O'Hara**

**OUR THANKS TO**  
**Building Change Trust, Funders**  
**Kelly PR, Collaborators**

**In total 4 co-operatives were able to prepare attractive investment proposals to the public in 2014-2015.**

# DOWN TO EARTH NI

Northern Ireland's first Woodland Burial Site was fully supported by the Community Shares Ready project. Co-operative Alternatives assisted them with developing the society, organising pledges events and writing the share offer.



The share offer was launched on Jan 23, 2015. The aim was to raise £40,000 with shares sold at £1 each and a minimum investment of 800 shares. If desired, the withdrawable share can be cashed in to purchase a burial plot on the site, in due course.

## **The Opportunity**

Down to Earth identified an ideal site in the Lecale district of County Down and set up a Community Benefit Society with the aim of developing the first woodland burial site in Northern Ireland. There are more than 250 locations in England, Scotland and Wales offering woodland burials but none in Northern Ireland.

The organisation explains that this type of burial offers an alternative to traditional cemetery burials, which is respectful, peaceful and dignified. In addition, it will support the environment as the land is protected and additional native trees, such as oak, ash and willow, will be planted.

# WHY COMMUNITY SHARES?

## **Why Community Shares?**

The group applied for grant funding but was unsuccessful as it was a new start for a concept that was untested in Northern Ireland. "We had done our research and knew that people were interested in this idea. We formed the business as a Community Benefit Society because it is of the people, for the people. The Community Share offer will raise capital funding to be used for the planning and development of the site including intense survey work, ecology testing and eventually landscaping work to put in paths and tree planting. We will also be launching a crowd funding scheme and down the line, we will re-apply for grant funding as we will have a more highly developed proposition," explained Gill McNeill of Down to Earth.

## **Challenges**

"Time is a factor as the organisers and board members all work full-time. We've wanted to do this for the past 15 years as we feel it is such an amazing alternative to traditional burial – it's an environmentally sound celebration of life," said James Orr of Down to Earth.

## **Advantages**

"It's a highly feasible way to raise capital finance. We like the co-operative model as the community then has ownership and a strong Community Benefit Society is a democratic way to run a business," Gill said.

## **Advice**

"Surround yourself with a team of dedicated people who will pitch in and make it happen," James said.

# NORTHERN IRELAND COMMUNITY ENERGY (NICE) Ltd

## Northern Ireland's first community solar energy enterprise

The share offer was launched on March 3 at Stormont. The aim was to raise £150,000 with a minimum investment of £250 in shares.

The group estimates that return on investment will be in the region of 4% annually to members. In addition, tax payers will be eligible for a one-off 50% tax relief on their investment. The money raised from the share offer will allow NICE to put around 9 PV solar installations on community buildings such as community centres and charities.

## The Opportunity

While it may surprise some people, the power of the sun in Northern Ireland can produce substantial amounts of electricity. Many of the directors in NICE come from an environmentally sustainable energy background and not only have an expert knowledge of renewable resources but also a passion and commitment to the environment.

## Why Community Shares?

NICE is run by members of the local community – all volunteers – for the local community.

“A Community Share offer was the obvious choice because it is a fair and equitable way to run a business as each investor gets one vote, giving them a voice in how the project is run.” said NICE director Cye Bannon

## The process

NICE benefited from development support and expert advice with the Community Shares, Ready! project. Co-operative Alternatives helped NICE to strengthen their Board and established good governance practices, to register as a community benefit society and adopt a suitable governing document. Co-operative Alternatives wrote and published their community share offer and helped them with the launch. Under the Community Share, ready! project, we were also able to engage professional advice such as a barrister and a solicitor to assist NICE to develop the right proposal for the potential sites.

“The team at Co-Operative Alternatives gave us the assistance we needed at the time we needed it. They provided so much support and have gone far beyond the call of duty. They also have excellent contacts which have been really useful to help us progress to the share offer,” said director Karen Arbuckle.

## Challenges

All of the volunteer directors have other commitments so time has been a big issue. “The process has been rigorous – and this is completely right. If you are putting together a share offer and asking people to invest, everything has to be in order. A community owned solar energy company is a new concept to Northern Ireland and we have spent time ensuring we adhere to all planning legislation and other legalities,” said director Andrew McMurray



**COMMUNITY SHARES  
OFFER DOCUMENT**



4kW NICE solar panels installed on Mediation NI in February 2015  
With Tairasa O'Hara from Co-operative Alternatives, Karen Arbuckle from NICE and Robert Colwell from Mediation NI

**888 tonnes** The amount of carbon dioxide the planned solar panels will save during their lifetime, compared to burning fossil fuels  
**£150,000** The amount we seek to raise to pay for solar panels  
**At least 9** Community buildings with new solar panels, if all shares are raised  
**£250 and £20,000** Minimum and maximum investment per person

**Tuesday 3rd March 2015 - Launch date**  
**Monday 23rd March 2015 - Closing date**

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# COMMUNITY SHARES & BEER: A HEADY BREW FOR NI CO-OPS

Co-operative Alternatives set up Lacada Brewery in Portrush and Boundary Brewing in Belfast as co-operatives in 2013. This was possible thanks to the Co-operative Enterprise Hub programme which closed in May 2014.

Lacada and Boundary have taken advantage of the world-wide boom in craft beers by raising thousands of pounds to brew high quality beers to sell to the pub and restaurant trade in Northern Ireland.

Boundary Brewing has just ended its community share offer, raising an impressive £100,000 in just eight days. The co-operative has taken on its first full-time employee, Matthew Dick, said: "The board all have different reasons for wanting to be a cooperative. For me, Boundary was something that I wanted to share. It was also something that felt I had to share. You are fighting a lot of battles opening a brewery in Northern Ireland and offering beers which are different than what is available locally. As a cooperative, we now have 450 members, most of whom are local, who are thirsty to buy our beer!"

Laurie Davies is one of those driving the Lacada Brewery project and he says the North Coast area is ripe for a micro-brewery because of the strength of its hospitality industry. He said: "A community-run brewery pushes a lot of buttons. We have members with a lot of talent from people skilled in chemical engineering, brewery design, planning and transport and people who own pubs, cafes and restaurants. We chose to do a community share offer because it goes hand in hand with being a co-operative, giving the business a good membership base."



**Lacada Brewery Co-operative**



**Lacada Brewery Co-operative had also raised an impressive £83,000 in community shares from 228 local members.**

# CO-OPERATIVE ALTERNATIVES

Co-operative Alternatives is the only body in Northern Ireland entirely devoted to developing successful co-operatives of all kinds.

Co-operative Alternatives itself is a consortium co-operative. Membership is open to any person or organisations that wishes to use its services. Members co-own the co-operative and determine its direction.

## **The benefits of membership**

1. Support a local network of co-operators of all kinds
2. Connect to high quality advice on democratic decision making, business planning, financial, and registration/conversion
3. Promotion in regular newsletter, website and social media channels
4. A stronger voice to campaign for improvements for co-operatives, including with Northern Ireland media, regulators, and political parties
5. Members only news and information, certificate, special offers and events
6. One member, one vote at General Meetings, including Board elections
7. Opportunity to stand for election to the Board

**To join visit [www.coopalternatives.coop/about](http://www.coopalternatives.coop/about) and complete and return membership form to us.**



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