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**CONFERENCE LETTER**

# Fostering Dialogue, Shared Learning, and Collaboration around the Future of Cooperation: The 57<sup>th</sup> UK Society for Co-operative Studies Conference

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## 1. Introduction

The 57th annual conference of the UK Society for Co-operative Studies was held on 8-9 May 2026 in Birmingham, hosted by Birmingham Business School at the University of Birmingham. Under the broad theme “Fostering Dialogue, Shared Learning, and Collaboration around the Future of Cooperation”, the conference brought together scholars, practitioners, cooperative developers, policy actors, and members of cooperative organisations at a moment of renewed political attention.

The timing was significant. The 2025 International Year of Cooperatives had strengthened the visibility of cooperatives, while in the UK the Labour government’s commitment to double the size of the cooperative and mutual economy by 2035 provided a concrete political horizon. Yet the conference repeatedly showed that recognition does not automatically become institutional capacity. Participants returned to a common set of questions: what kind of growth should the movement pursue, which infrastructures are required to sustain it, and how can cooperation become visible to those who may benefit from it?

Rather than reproducing the programme chronologically, this conference letter reconstructs the principal tensions that emerged across the two days: the gap between political ambition and institutional fragility; democracy as a practice rather than a structure; education and visibility as conditions for renewal; the tension between identity and flexibility; and the need to understand cooperative growth ecologically, as the development of a diverse organisational landscape rather than the expansion of a few large organisations.

## **2. Institutional recognition and organisational diversity**

The opening keynote by Giuseppe Guerini, President of Cooperatives Europe, offered the conference a broad normative overture. Guerini presented cooperatives as organisations capable of challenging what he called a paradigm of “technology over thought”, in which technological systems and market logics risk taking precedence over human judgement, democratic deliberation, and social relations. Against this tendency, he emphasised three foundations of cooperation: its relational character, its capacity to connect people and generate social impact, and the central role of education in reproducing cooperative identity and practice.

Guerini acknowledged that the recent period had been favourable to the recognition of cooperatives, with renewed attention from international organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the United Nations (UN). At the same time, he warned that recognition remains insufficient if it is not accompanied by infrastructures for policy implementation and democratic renewal. Cooperative systems also face concentration processes: larger cooperatives tend to become larger, while smaller ones struggle, merge, or disappear. The issue, therefore, is not only how to make cooperatives grow, but how to avoid reproducing the concentration dynamics of investor-owned capitalism.

A central part of the keynote was organised around what Guerini described as key sectors, but which can be read as societal missions: feeding the planet, giving home, trading goods, taking care, sharing energy, and democratising the digital economy. These missions connected cooperation to agriculture, housing, welfare, energy, and data governance, while presenting cooperatives as institutions capable of linking economic activity to democratic control and social impact. The keynote also called for a regulatory reform agenda on areas crucial for cooperative development, such as public procurement, competition law, state aid rules, and taxation. The rationale is that if procurement remains dominated by lowest-price criteria, or if public support is interpreted too narrowly as market-distorting aid, the social and democratic contributions of cooperatives could remain institutionally invisible. One memorable statement from the keynote suggests that organisational diversity is to a healthy economic system what biodiversity is to a forest. In this regard, the presence of a lively cooperative sector makes the economy healthier and regulators should thus set the conditions for its sustainability and development.

James Wright's policy session on the British government's doubling agenda shifted the discussion from desirability to implementation. The presenter, commenting on the doubling agenda, found access to finance to be a primary implementation constraint. In addition, he stressed the need for cooperative development support, secondary cooperation, legal reform, and taxation capable of supporting start-up, scale-up, and consolidation. The opportunity areas he identified—community ownership, local power generation, the right to buy, local credit for local development, and pride in place—suggest that the doubling agenda should be implemented territorially and socially rather than merely numerically, with attention to employment, housing, care, food, energy, and public services. While the doubling agenda carries symbolic force, Wright's assessment of its implementation so far is that it remains fragmented, with some funding streams being insufficient and others suffering from inadequate guidance in allocation criteria, clear eligibility conditions, and strong mechanisms for measuring impact. Local and national inertia, fiscal constraints, and shifting political priorities were presented as significant obstacles. Wright argued that bold action on finance and law would need to be put in place "now" in order to observe meaningful change starting from 2029. Without such action, the agenda risks remaining an aspirational statement rather than a transformative policy programme.

This problem was sharpened by the repeated observation that UK law lacks a stable statutory definition of a cooperative. This provides an opportunity for the cooperative movement to set the vocabulary, as exemplified by Nick Matthews' presentation and by the fact that the British government itself relied on a definition offered by the cooperative movement. In addition, several speakers highlighted that the absence of a legal definition may provide much needed flexibility, retaining in the cooperative movement all actors willing to do so. However, the lack of a statutory definition also makes cooperative-specific policy harder to design. If public authorities cannot clearly identify what a cooperative is, it becomes difficult to target finance, procurement, tax relief, or regulatory reform toward cooperative organisations without extending the same measures to firms whose governance and ownership structures remain fundamentally different.

The biodiversity analogy resounded in Garry Cronan's presentation, which questioned whether growth should be imagined primarily as the expansion of already large organisations or, rather, as setting the ecosystem in which new cooperatives can flourish. The forest analogy he used echoed Guerini's reflections on biodiversity: a healthy cooperative economy should not resemble a paddock with a few dominant organisations and little else, but a diverse ecosystem in which new, small, and medium-sized cooperatives can emerge and survive. The lesson for the policymaker is that the focus should shift from supporting the growth of large cooperatives to creating an institutional ecosystem in which new cooperatives can thrive. Heterogeneity was also key in the presentation by Giulio Galdi and Chiara Carini on economic performance drivers in Italian cooperatives. Their econometric analysis showed that treating cooperatives as a homogeneous form obscures differences between worker, agricultural, consumer, and social cooperatives. Each cooperative type has a distinctive business model and thus relies on different drivers for

its economic performance. In particular, investment effects depend on both business model and capitalisation. This suggests that the cooperative sector is itself very diverse, and that accounting for these different characteristics can give a more truthful representation of cooperatives.

### **3. Democracy as practice, not merely structure**

A second major theme was the idea that democracy in cooperatives cannot be reduced to formal ownership or voting rules. This point emerged in the roundtable chaired by Caroline Moraes, in the platform cooperative session, in Tiziana O'Hara's reflections on Northern Ireland, and in presentations on resilience, disability, and sustainability. Across these contributions, democracy appeared as something that must be learned, practised, repaired, and institutionally supported.

In the opening roundtable, Nick Rowbottom connected democratic fragility to the legacy of the global financial crisis and the risk of demutualisation. Cooperatives may gradually shift attention from member benefit toward organisational survival, especially when exposed to pressures similar to those faced by conventional firms. Anita Mangan observed that workplace democracy still surprises many students, including those studying human resource management. Martin Parker argued that market culture is often treated as a natural law rather than a social construction, and that cooperative education should challenge this resignation. Francesca Gagliardi broadened the meaning of democracy beyond internal governance, emphasising workers' capacity to organise collectively and engage public institutions.

The platform cooperative session gave this discussion a technological angle. Omoniyi Edward's presentation on cooperative regeneration in multi-stakeholder platform cooperatives began from the observation that digital platforms are often used to control, monitor, and extract value from workers. Her study of two platform cooperatives—one in e-cargo last-mile delivery and one in care—showed how multi-stakeholder membership can create relational resources that help resist degeneration. Edward identified bonding capital, or dense relational ties among members, as essential for preserving democratic practice. Peer-to-peer communication, in-person meetings, and shared events were presented as safeguards against the risk that technology becomes a tool of surveillance rather than cooperation.

Shuyang Li and Jun Zhang's study complemented this discussion by distinguishing democratic ownership from democratic governability. Platform cooperatives may be member-owned, but ownership does not guarantee that democracy remains workable under market pressure, technological complexity, and demands for speed. Their research on platform cooperatives, with attention to sociocracy, suggested that democracy requires governance infrastructures: defined domains, consent-based decisions, linking roles, facilitation, training, and transparent accountability. One of the most important insights was that democracy is not merely invited by governance structures; it is learned, practised, and repaired. Democratic drift may occur gradually through the concentration of expertise, informal hierarchies, or delegation to those with technical knowledge.

O'Hara's presentation reinforced this view from the standpoint of cooperative development practice. Drawing on the experience of Co-operative Alternatives in Northern Ireland, she described the evolution of the practitioner from enterprise advisor to democratic facilitator and systemic interpreter. Cooperative development requires business planning, but also conflict mediation, governance design, theory of change, policy literacy, and ecosystem building. Her account also showed that cooperation among cooperatives cannot be assumed. In Northern Ireland, political and cultural divisions shape the possibilities for collaboration. Local identity may be a resource, but it may also become an obstacle when historical polarisation makes trust difficult. This links with the general impression among conference participants that cooperation between cooperatives is not common, and at times it could be more effective to coordinate with other types of value-aligned organisations.

The same idea was visible in presentations on inclusion, resilience, and sustainability. Mangan conceptualised resilience as part of the craft of cooperation; Steve Graby showed how worker cooperatives can adapt tasks and expectations to disabled members' capacities; and Luis Oyarzun and Christopher Rees warned, through Chilean cases, that cooperative status can be adopted instrumentally rather than as a shared democratic project. These presentations echoed a recurring warning: formal status is not enough.

#### **4. Education, visibility, and cultural relevance**

If democracy must be practised, it must also be taught, communicated, and made visible. Education was perhaps the most recurrent theme of the conference. It appeared in Guerini's keynote, the opening roundtable, the session on cooperative education and digital futures, the discussion of community-based learning, and the LET'S COOPERATE! workshop. The shared diagnosis was that cooperatives remain culturally and educationally marginal despite their economic, historical, and political relevance.

In the roundtable, Moraes framed this problem as one of invisibility. The general public often does not know what a cooperative is, what membership entails, or how democratic ownership can generate transformative power. Parker identified business schools as strategic pressure points: large numbers of students study business and economics, yet most encounter only investor-owned firms as the implicit organisational benchmark. He noted three barriers: cooperative courses are often considered too niche; cooperative research is weakly rewarded in high-impact academic publishing; and the movement itself invests too little in educational outreach. His proposal was not only to create specialist courses, but to contaminate mainstream modules by inserting cooperative examples into the places where future managers, economists, and policymakers are trained.

Mangan made a similar point, observing that cooperative education is often fenced off in optional modules with small audiences. Gagliardi added that research should be more accessible: translated across languages, written in ways that practitioners and policymakers can use, and focused

on salient issues rather than only on internal academic debates. The audience discussion reinforced the importance of storytelling, community spaces, festivals, local events, job-placement pathways, and narratives capable of explaining membership as lived experience rather than as a dry legal status.

The idea of community-based cooperative education was particularly important. Rather than beginning with abstract values, participants suggested beginning from problems: housing insecurity, energy costs, precarious work, care needs, food systems, digital extraction, or local disinvestment. Cooperative values can then be introduced as ways of addressing these problems. This implies a shift from preaching and conversion to translation and collaboration.

The session on cooperative education, knowledge, and digital futures extended this discussion. Contributions addressed the limited presence of cooperation in British universities, campus cooperatives as prefigurative spaces, cooperative publishing, and ethical digital infrastructures. Together, they suggested that education is not ancillary to cooperation. It is part of the infrastructure of the movement.

## **5. Identity, flexibility, and the boundaries of co-operation**

One of the most debated issues throughout the conference concerned the boundaries of the cooperative movement itself. Several presentations returned, explicitly or implicitly, to a fundamental question: should cooperatives prioritise a strong and clearly recognisable organisational identity, or should they instead adopt a more flexible and open approach centred on shared values and collaboration with external actors?

This tension emerged most clearly during Dominic Kendal-Ward's keynote contribution. Framing his intervention as a provocation, Kendal-Ward argued that the cooperative movement risks becoming insular if it focuses excessively on organisational purity and internal gatekeeping. In his view, cooperatives should move away from "preaching and conversion" and focus instead on collaboration with value-aligned organisations, including actors outside the cooperative movement itself. He suggested that flexibility should be regarded as a strength rather than as a weakness, particularly in a period characterised by widespread distrust towards traditional political and economic models. According to this perspective, cooperatives should communicate less through technical or ideological language and more through concrete responses to salient social problems. Kendal-Ward also reflected on the absence of a statutory definition of cooperatives in the United Kingdom, interpreting it not only as a limitation but also as an opportunity. A more flexible understanding of the cooperative form, he argued, could facilitate experimentation, partnerships, and broader forms of mobilisation around shared social and economic goals. This position, however, generated strong reactions among conference participants. Several attendees stressed that excessive flexibility risks diluting the specificity of cooperative governance and opening the door to forms of "co-op washing", in which organisations adopt the language of cooperation and social impact without embracing democratic ownership and participation in substantive terms.

The debate resurfaced repeatedly in other sessions. Matthews argued that the cooperative movement should take the lead in defining itself and how it is perceived externally. In the absence of a statutory definition, he suggested that cooperative scholars and organisations should actively shape the public vocabulary surrounding cooperation and become a reference point for understanding what a cooperative is. At the same time, Matthews stressed that agreement on purposes and values may in some cases be more important than rigid organisational forms. Similar concerns emerged during discussions on education and visibility, where several participants emphasised the need to communicate cooperative values through accessible language, narratives, and practical problem-solving rather than through abstract ideological categories.

The panel on large-scale community-led housing cooperatives, with contributions from Dylan Dunnett, Sean Farmelo, and David McEwan, showed how these tensions materialise in practice. Housing cooperatives face planning, mortgage, construction, and regulatory hurdles that are routine for large developers but highly demanding for groups of citizens attempting to organise collectively. The panel repeatedly stressed the importance of institutional and public support, particularly from local administrations and political representatives capable of facilitating access to buildings, planning procedures, and financing mechanisms. At the same time, participants highlighted a tension between the need for ad hoc legislation recognising the distinctive features of housing cooperatives and a broader reluctance within parts of the cooperative movement to conform to rigid legal definitions.

In this respect, the housing sector emerged as a particularly clear example of the broader dilemma discussed throughout the conference. Without formal recognition and institutional clarity, it becomes difficult to design support mechanisms tailored to the organisational and social specificities of cooperatives. Yet stronger legal definitions may also impose standardisation and reduce the organisational flexibility that many cooperative initiatives consider essential. The conference did not resolve this tension. Rather, it repeatedly returned to the question of how open and flexible the cooperative category can become before it risks losing the organisational distinctiveness and democratic substance that justify its existence as an alternative economic model.

## **6. Sustainability, finance, ecology, and historical memory**

Several sessions broadened the discussion beyond UK policy and organisational identity. The session on cooperatives and the 2030 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda addressed the relation between cooperatives, commons, and sustainability measurement. Gagliardi conceptualised cooperatives as commons institutions and argued that institutional complementarities and polycentric governance can help make their contribution to sustainable development more visible<sup>1</sup>. Daphne Rixon and Fiona Duguid examined the use of participatory action research to

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<sup>1</sup> This perspective aligns with JEOD's vision, particularly as articulated in a recent editorial. See Vatiery (2025): [https://jeodonline.com/jeod\\_articles/editorial-2/](https://jeodonline.com/jeod_articles/editorial-2/) [Accessed: 15 June 2026].

develop indicators for measuring cooperative performance in relation to the cooperative principles and the SDGs. Their work raised an important methodological issue: performance measurement can be co-created with the sector, but the problem of measurement may be initially identified by researchers rather than by cooperatives themselves.

The credit union session added a financial dimension. Andrea Fejős addressed the relationship between responsible lending and responsible borrowing in the British credit union sector. Credit unions provide affordable credit to people who may otherwise rely on high-cost or illegal lending, but they must also assess affordability in ways that preserve financial sustainability and member welfare. Pål Vik's comparative review of policy and regulation examined how policymakers might promote credit union growth, considering common bond reforms, product and market diversification, support for financially excluded communities, and capital requirements. These presentations connected directly to the broader conference concern with finance: growth requires access to capital, but financial regulation is often designed with conventional institutions in mind.

The final session on food, ecology, and cooperative histories placed contemporary debates in longer perspective. Yanfeng Wang's presentation on the São Tomé cocoa boycott showed how consumer cooperatives could exercise political power beyond their boundaries by challenging supply chains connected to colonial labour exploitation. Janette Hurst recovered earlier ecological influences in cooperative traditions, while Patrick Doyle connected food, activism, and moral economy, stressing that scale is not always the appropriate objective for food cooperatives.

Across the conference, methodological diversity was notable. Contributions included econometric panel analysis, oral history, archival research, case studies, semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, participatory action research, policy analysis, and practitioner reflection. This diversity reflected the object of study itself. Cooperatives are simultaneously firms, associations, democratic institutions, social movements, local infrastructures, and policy actors. No single method can fully capture this plurality.

## **7. Conclusion**

The Birmingham conference showed a movement at a moment of opportunity and uncertainty. Cooperatives are increasingly recognised as relevant to sustainability, democratic participation, community ownership, care, energy, finance, food systems, and digital governance. The UK doubling agenda has created a political opening, and international recognition has strengthened the legitimacy of the model. Yet the conference also made clear that recognition is not enough. Without finance, law, taxation, education, development support, and public visibility, political ambition may remain symbolic.

A central lesson was that cooperative democracy cannot be assumed. It is not guaranteed by legal form, one-member-one-vote rules, or historical identity. Democracy must be learned, practised, repaired, and supported by institutions, facilitators, educators, and members themselves. Another

lesson concerned growth. Participants repeatedly questioned whether growth should be understood in terms of turnover, employment, membership, organisational size, social impact, democratic capacity, or ecosystem diversity. Cooperatives do need resources, capital, and institutional support. But the goal should be progress for people, not growth as an end in itself.

Finally, the conference left unresolved, but productively so, the question of identity. Cooperatives need to collaborate beyond themselves; they cannot afford insularity. At the same time, the movement risks losing meaning if cooperative language becomes detached from democratic ownership and member control. The future of cooperation may therefore depend on holding together two requirements that are often treated as opposites: openness to alliances and clarity of institutional form. The challenge is not only to double the size of the cooperative economy, but to deepen the democratic capacities that make cooperation worth expanding.