

## [Work without bosses, housing without landlords, and nothing about us without us: researching disabled people's involvement in co-operatives in the UK](#)

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*NOTE: The Independent Scholar Fellowship application form has been updated since this proposal was submitted.*

### **Abstract**

The proposed research aims to investigate the involvement of disabled people in co-operatives in the UK. Disabled people are among those most severely impacted by the austerity economics and cuts to state social provisions of the past decade, while co-operatives have been proposed as a non-state solution to many of the social impacts of austerity politics and of capitalism more generally (e.g. Restakis 2010). There are also significant similarities between the philosophies and practices of co-operatives and of disabled people's movement organisations (Beresford 2016). However, disabled people's involvement in co-operatives has not yet been systematically studied or analysed.

This research will build on directions for further study suggested by the findings of my previous doctoral research on disabled people and personal assistance, which highlighted co-operative models of employment of assistants, already well-established in the Scandinavian countries (Westberg 2010), as having potential to address many difficulties experienced by disabled people as individual employers. However, personal assistance is one among many areas of daily life (housing and employment being other prominent examples), in which co-operatives may be powerful tools for overcoming barriers that disabled people experience to full and equal social participation.

Mixed qualitative and quantitative methods will be used to investigate the extent of disabled people's involvement in cooperatives within the UK and their experiences, including the impact of co-operatives on disabled people's lived experiences and social positions, as well as barriers that disabled people may face within co-operatives and the co-operative movement. Outputs from this research will include written publications and a conference intended to bring together scholars from disability studies and co-operative studies and actors from disabled people's and co-operative movements. A longer-term aim, beyond the funded research period, will be the establishment of new

co-operative organisations involving disabled people to directly address the issues highlighted by the research.

### **The Research Idea** *The innovative thesis of the project*

This research would explore the experiences of disabled people (defined according to the social model of disability (Oliver 2009) as people with impairments or differences from perceived physical, sensory and/or cognitive norms who experience barriers to full participation in society, including but not limited to people with mobility impairments, autistic or otherwise neurodivergent people, visually impaired people, d/Deaf people, people with learning difficulties, people with chronic illnesses, and people experiencing mental or emotional distress or who have been labelled with mental health conditions) within co-operatives (defined as businesses that are collectively owned and controlled by their members for their mutual benefit (Restakis 2010) and including, though not limited to, workers' co-operatives, housing and other consumer co-operatives, and multi-stakeholder co-operatives) in the UK.

This research is intended to bring together the hitherto largely separate fields of disability studies and co-operative studies, with the intent both to contribute new theoretical analysis and to have practical benefits. It would have three main components: firstly, to investigate the similarities and potential interconnections between the aims, values and practices of the Disabled People's movement and the co-operative movement; secondly, to examine the positive and negative experiences of disabled people in co-operatives in order to determine the advantages and disadvantages of co-operative forms of organisation for disabled people; and thirdly, to bring the Disabled People's and co-operative movements into active dialogue with one another, with the aim of developing innovative co-operative solutions to disabling barriers.

### **Background** *Current research reference points and their limitations*

The background to this proposed research is my previous doctoral research on personal assistance, which pointed towards co-operatives, as already established in the field of personal assistance in countries including Norway and Sweden (Askheim et al 2014; Westberg 2010), having the potential to overcome many disabling barriers experienced by people with personal assistance needs in the UK. Other authors (e.g. Beresford 2016; Roulstone and Hwang 2015) have pointed out that there are significant similarities and potential connections between the Disabled People's and co-operative movements,

including shared values such as centring self-determination but viewing it as collective rather than individual, and opposing both corporate capitalism and paternalistic models of state welfare.

Extensive research has been conducted on personal assistance co-operatives in the Scandinavian countries by authors working within the broad field of Disability Studies (see e.g. Andersen et al 2014; Askheim et al 2014; Westberg 2010), and some research reports have been produced on particular disability-focused co-operatives in the UK (Fisher et al 2011; Roulstone and Hwang 2015); however there has not previously been a comprehensive overview of disabled people's involvement in co-operatives more generally, despite anecdotal evidence that many disabled people are involved in co-operatives of various types (including housing, consumer, workers' and multi-stakeholder co-operatives). These seem to have provided supportive and enabling structures for many, but there have also been conflicts and difficulties caused by unintentional ableism and failure to accommodate divergent needs within co-operatives and associated movements, such as environmental sustainability activism (Fenney 2017).

**The Focus** *How the research provides a fresh approach to real-life problems*

Disabled people in the UK are living increasingly precarious lives within an increasingly hostile state shaped by a decade of neoliberal austerity (Bates et al 2017; Dodd 2016), and many are now facing further long-term social exclusion caused by the direct and indirect effects of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic (Albert 2020). Particular issues acutely affecting many disabled people include inadequate provision of accessible housing, personal assistance and other social services, and increasing exclusion from paid employment exacerbated by general precarisation of labour markets.

Co-operative organisational forms arguably have potential to mitigate these disabling barriers. This research is therefore intended to lead to practical solutions to them that can be implemented directly by the people and communities who they most severely affect, within the co-operative tradition of collective self-help (Somerville 2007) and in line with the Disabled People's movement principle of 'nothing about us without us' (Charlton 1998).

I thus intend to investigate:

- ways that co-operatives may be helpful for disabled people in overcoming disabling barriers in wider society (e.g. to finding and retaining paid work, to meeting personal assistance needs, and/or to finding affordable and accessible housing);
- barriers that disabled people may face within co-operatives they are or were involved in;
- the views of disabled people who are involved in co-operatives on the commonalities and potential divergences between the politics and principles of the Disabled People's movement and the co-operative movement, and on ways that those movements could inform and collaborate with one another for mutual gain.

**Theoretical Novelty** *What conceptual innovation the research is aiming at*

This will be the first research project in the UK focused on disabled people's involvement in co-operatives overall, as opposed to sub-sectors such as the social care co-operatives examined by Fisher et al (2011) and Roulstone & Hwang (2015). Research on co-operatives as an organisational form (e.g. Restakis 2010; Sandoval 2016; Somerville 2007) has highlighted the potential benefits to society of their increased recognition and proliferation, but has not yet focused on the specific potential impacts for disabled people and the social marginalisation they experience.

This is arguably because disability studies and co-operative studies are both relatively small and 'niche', but also innovative and interdisciplinary, academic fields, each with close connections to a corresponding social movement, but thus far have not interacted extensively with one another, despite shared values and influences between their associated movements in the UK (Beresford 2016; Roulstone & Hwang 2015), and more direct organisational connections elsewhere (see e.g. Westberg 2010). Bringing these two fields together would thus be a new contribution to studies of social movements and organisation, which will be valuable to future researchers within disability studies, co-operative studies, and the social sciences more generally.

By exploring the interconnections between core concepts of the Disabled People's movement, such as the social model of disability and 'independent living' (Oliver 2009), and the philosophy and practice of the co-operative movement, this research could lead to new theoretical insights on concepts such as self-determination, mutual aid, interdependence and the economic and social value of divergent embodiments and perspectives.

**Methodology** *How different disciplinary inputs will interact in empirical inquiry – specific methodological examples are often helpful for non-specialist readers*

This project will use mixed qualitative and quantitative research methods, including a general survey of co-operatives in the UK to ascertain the extent to which disabled people are involved in them, and semi-structured qualitative interviews with a smaller sample (approximately 20-30 interviewees) of disabled individuals who are members of, or otherwise involved in, co-operatives about their experiences of co-operative work, living and organisation. Sampling will be purposive, aiming to cover a diverse sample of disabled people including as wide a range as possible of impairment types and other demographic categories, and varied experiences of involvement in diverse types of co-operatives.

Case studies may be carried out of specific co-operatives which were either founded by or actively and intentionally involve disabled people. These could include housing and/or workers' co-operatives founded by disabled people to provide for their access needs, workers' co-operatives formed from former sheltered workshops (such as Enabled Works in Leeds), disability equality training co-operatives (such as Barod CIC in Wales), and/or personal assistance co-operatives (such as Equal Care Co-op in Calderdale and North West Care Co-operatives in Chester). The case studies may involve interviews with key informants (such as founders or long-standing members of the co-operatives) and/or observations of the co-operatives' working practices. Archival materials (such as governing documents and advertising or promotional materials from co-operatives) may also be collected.

Data generated by this primary research will be thematically analysed in combination with relevant literature and previous research on disabled people's involvement in co-operatives in the UK and elsewhere.

**Work Plan** *How the work will be organised over the award period and what outputs are intended*

The approximate time plan for this research is as follows:

Months 1-2: review literature

Months 1-2: get ethical approval for research Months 2-4: recruit participants

Months 3-5: interview participants

Months 6-7: transcribe and code interviews

Months 7-9: analyse data

Months 7-10: organise conference

Months 8-10: write research report and papers for journals  
Months 10-11: submit papers to journals

Month 11: hold conference

Months 11-12: set up first stages of post-research projects (e.g. new co-operatives)

Month 12: publish conference proceedings

Month 12: distribute all published outputs

The intended outputs of this research include a conference and publications. The conference (potentially online rather than physical if necessary) would bring together researchers, activists and co-operators to present theoretical and practical perspectives on disabled people and co-operatives. It would include both practical workshops (e.g. on how to set up a co-operative) and academic presentations. There would ideally be one or more international speakers, such as representatives of Swedish and/or Norwegian personal assistance co-operatives. This could be done in partnership with the Co-operative College in Manchester and its Co-operative Early Career Researchers' Network, and/or existing co-operatives involving disabled people (such as Enabled Works in Leeds, which provides conference facilities).

The conference proceedings would be published as a free online document. Other publications would include an open access research report, papers submitted to thematically appropriate open access journals (such as the Journal of Co-operative Studies and the Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research), and a guide to setting up co-operatives aimed at disabled people in the UK.

**Outcome** *What further steps and what longer-term outcome are envisaged*

This research project is intended to open up dialogue between the co-operative movement and disabled people's organisations and scholars in disability studies, which will hopefully have the impacts of enabling co-operatives to become more inclusive of disabled people, and of suggesting new co-operative strategies for overcoming disabling barriers in areas of life such as housing, employment and personal assistance.

A longer-term, more concrete aim of this research project would be to support the establishment of one or more co-operatives involving disabled people, which would

continue to exist beyond the end of the project. These could include a personal assistance co-operative on a similar model to those already established elsewhere, a housing co-operative focused on disabled people's housing access needs, and/or other possibilities suggested by research participants. Following the example of North West Care Co-operatives, an emerging personal assistance co-operative based in Cheshire and established with the aid of research funding (DRILL 2019), this could also involve collaborative working with existing disabled people's organisations and/or organisations which provide funding and other infrastructure for new co-operatives, such as Co-operatives UK.

The establishment of these new co-operatives could also potentially involve further participatory action research, which would continue and build on the research outlined in this application, but which would be funded from other sources, including potentially any financial surplus made by the co-operatives themselves. These co-operatives would have direct impact both on the lives of the disabled people involved in them and on wider communities in the areas where they are established.

**Ethics Statement** *Any measures required for ethical conduct of the research*

This research will follow the ethics policy of the University of Leeds, the Social Policy Association Code of Ethics and any other ethical codes mandated by the Independent Social Research Foundation. I also intend, to the extent possible within the methodological framework of this research project, to act according to the principles of participatory and emancipatory research (Oliver 1997; Stone & Priestley 1996). Therefore, my aim is to give participants as much control as is reasonably possible over the research process, and to conduct research which not only does not cause harm, but which actively 'does good'.

This research will be carried out with the informed consent of all participants, with information being provided in all available accessible formats to ensure that as wide as possible a range of disabled people are able to participate. Disabled people may be considered 'vulnerable' according to some research ethics guidelines, although Disability Studies scholars and disabled activists have critiqued this construction as disempowering and infantilising (Albert 2020; Hollomotz 2011). There is a possibility that interviews may cover emotive topics, such as personal experiences of disabling barriers

and social exclusion or marginalisation. Participants will be free to withdraw if they experience any distress, and will be offered appropriate support services.

All data collected will be stored securely according to University guidance.

Dissemination of research outputs will aim to maximise the positive impact of this research, both on its stakeholders (disabled people, disabled people's organisations, and co-operatives) and more broadly. Thus, all publications will be open access, the conference will be free to attend and include practical workshops as well as academic presentations, and the further steps planned after this project will be guided by the desires of, and potential benefits to, the research participants, as well as by emancipatory and co-operative principles.