

Governance at Suma Wholefoods

Suma is the UK's largest independent wholefood wholesaler/distributor, specialising in vegetarian, fairly traded, organic, ethical and natural products. We are a workers' co-operative committed to ethical business.

Workers co-operative

Unlike most UK companies, Suma operates a thoroughly democratic system of management that isn't bound by the conventional notions of hierarchy. As a workers' co-operative the business is jointly owned and managed by all of us. Everyone is paid the same and we collectively do all the jobs that need doing, whatever they happen to be.

Suma is a fully democratic workers cooperative. All cooperative members and employees receive the same net hourly rate of pay, no matter what their job or responsibilities. All members have input into the direction and policy of the Cooperative.

The Cooperative's policy and direction is decided by [general meeting](#) of the members. The Coordinators direct the business within a flat management structure. An elected management committee oversees the fulfillment of the democratically agreed business plan.



Suma has a 30-year history of working to be an equal opportunities employer. It encourages its members and employees to learn new skills, take on new responsibilities and make improvements in working practices. It appreciates the benefits of diversity in the workplace and strives to encourage it.

Since Suma was established it has only stocked [vegetarian food](#), and has a zero tolerance policy to any goods containing animal products or derivatives. Over 30 years

later it still sells exclusively vegetarian products and is committed to promoting vegetarianism as an ethical lifestyle choice. Its premises are a meat-free zone, and workers benefit from a vegetarian canteen. Not everyone who works at Suma is a vegetarian.

Co-operative Governance

So what's it all about? Unlike most UK companies, Suma operates a truly democratic system of management that isn't bound by the conventional notions of hierarchy that often hinder progress and stand in the way of fairness. While we do use an elected Management Committee to implement decisions and business plans, the decisions themselves are made at regular General Meetings with the consent of every cooperative member – there's no chief executive, no managing director and no company chairman. In practice, this means that our day-to-day work is carried out by self-managing teams of employees who are all paid the

same wage, and who all enjoy an equal voice and an equal stake in the success of the business.

Another key feature of our structure and working practice is multi-skilling. At Suma we encourage members to get involved in more than one area of business, so individuals will always perform more than one role within the cooperative. This helps to broaden our skills base and give every member an invaluable insight into the bigger picture. It also helps us to play to each member's various different strengths while enabling us to think 'outside the box' when it comes to creativity and problem solving. And as for job satisfaction and staff morale – just ask yourself when was the last time you heard someone complain that their job involved too much variety? It is the spice of life, after all.

This all sounds great, but does it work? In a word, yes. Here in the UK we're often sceptical about workers' cooperatives, but that's largely because of our more conventional business culture and the fact that the vast majority of UK companies are purely profit-driven. Workers' cooperatives are far more common in many advanced European countries and developing world economies. Of course it's not all plain sailing, but if you look at Suma's growth over its 30-year history, we think you'll agree that we must be doing something right.