**Acting Manager’s Report**

**Annual General Meeting 2021**

This year has been such a challenging year with the real possibility at the start of the year that Alfalfa House may have to close, and with the COVID Delta variant entering Australia in June, and the Sydney-wide lockdown that ensued.

It was such a relief that so many of our members campaigned for the Co-op to remain open. A new Members’ Council quickly formed, focusing on how the Co-op could best serve member needs. A survey and several workshops were conducted to identify priorities, and review the values, vision and purpose of the Co-op. With members’ resounding support we have been able to keep the Co-op open.

**Budget & Finances**

From the last AGM in December 2020, a new budgeting system was implemented to ensure that the Co-op spent within its means, to avoid our past experience of falling short of funds to pay our bills. This system has brought some challenges though, such as the potential for our groceries budget to be spent before the end of the month. However, our Stock Co-ordinators have work tirelessly to ensure that the budget is used carefully, while keeping the Co-op as well stocked as possible. We have also been very careful with outgoings and expenses, not spending unnecessarily on any item.

**Sales**

Our sales stabilised by the end of the 1st Quarter this year. But when travel limits were announced during the latest COVID lockdown, they took a big hit. We still have not seen some members return to shop after the lockdown, and we now need to focus on member engagement to encourage their return, and boost our profile in the community at large.

**COVID pandemic**

COVID affected several of our suppliers with supply chain issues. Like us, they also had to develop protocols around COVID Safety Plans. We also had to look for new supply sources when previous ones became unavailable. And the level of complication and care running the Co-op increased with extra cleaning, customer limits, mask wearing, and ensuring check-ins via the NSW Service app.

Consumer habits have changed too with many more people ordering online and working from home. We introduced online shopping in the form of veggie boxes and other staples, which had a strong demand during the lockdown, and a personal shopping option for delivery, or collection at the shop or rear lane.

**Bulk products**

This year we introduced bulk tofu and plant-based mylk. We continue to sell bulk milk, butter, oils, sauces, detergents, cereals, flour, dried fruit, spices, teas, nut butter, and much more. Our buying strategy continues to guide us in sourcing bulk products without packaging, as much as possible.

**Farmer Direct**

We also endeavour to source groceries and produce which can be delivered to the Co-op directly, thus avoiding the ‘middle man’. This has its challenges as every supplier and grower has had to grapple with their own COVID issues, and sometimes the weather!

**Repairs & Maintenance**

We continue to maintain our fridges and air-conditioning units regularly. Recently, we had to replace one of our Point of Sale terminals at a significant outlay, and with at least 2-weeks’ downtime. It is now installed, but we are unable at present to email sales receipts from it. Food safety inspections have taken place regularly, and we have been given their thumbs up for what we do in the Co-op.

**Operations Manuals**

We have documented all our operational procedures and continue to update them. This is a great resource for staff, and helps maintain high standards at the Co-op. These documents also provide continuity for future staff, and the MC. All operational manuals and templates are available on Confluence, our digital platform or ‘wiki’.

**Member Engagement**

We have struggled to retain our pre-COVID member engagement levels. Our marketing team, together with staff, have played a wonderful role, releasing positive and interesting messages to our membership via social media posts and newsletters. Unfortunately, a number of our planned workshops had to be put on hold due to the COVID lockdown. Activities like the Vegan Baking workshop and the Plant & Bake sale prior to the lockdown were well received, with good participation levels and feedback. Workshops and membership promotions to drive community engagement will return soon.

**Staffing**

Our strategy to reduce our wages costs has continued this year. We remain open every day, but our opening hours have been trimmed. Weekday shop opening times changed to 11am (previously 10am). On Sundays volunteers assist our one rostered staff member. Rosters were reviewed and adjusted accordingly, and all job descriptions redrafted, in consultation with the MC’s Staffing Sub-Committee.

Due to the government’s COVID retail mask-wearing mandate, there were moments where staff had to deal with highly stressed members and customers in the shop. A training course was conducted on handling difficult situations. Staff dealt well with the issues that arose.

Staff performance reviews will be conducted in the near future. This will be another useful process for feedback, setting goals and determining the need for further staff training and development.

I must commend the courage and resilience of our staff who continue to perform their shifts at their own personal risk. Without their dedication, and sometimes tears, we would not have been able to keep the Co-op open consistently during these challenging times. We have to acknowledge and be grateful for their hard work.

**Volunteer members**

As always, we have been supported by a wonderful group of shop volunteers, without whom we would not be able to maintain the Co-op’s high standards.

Our MC have been absolute ‘gems’, working tirelessly to keep the Co-op operating: reviewing policy, staffing, marketing, organising workshops, and much more, even standing in on a shift or two when most needed!

In conclusion, I want to once again thank staff, volunteers and our Members Council for helping keep the Co-op going. Also the wonderful community of members who we see at the Co-op regularly – we are very grateful for your encouragement and support. It is such a privilege to be part of this great community. Having been able to safely survive this year, we should now work on strengthening and improving our position, increase our membership base and improve our offerings to members, to further support and achieve Alfalfa House’s vision and purpose.

Ran de Silva

Acting Manager