YPO, based at 41 Industrial Park, Wakefield, is the largest public sector buying organisation in the UK. The business is 100% publicly owned; all profits are reinvested in the public sector – with a total of £105 million returned to date.

The organisation marked its Ruby Anniversary in 2014.

Tracing its roots back to 1915, YPO began life at Heath Common as West Riding County Supplies. Later moving to Cliff Lane, the enterprise was reborn in 1974 as the Yorkshire Purchasing Organisation. The original members were West Yorkshire County Council, North Yorkshire County Council, Barnsley, Rotherham, Bradford, Calderdale, Doncaster, Kirklees and Wakefield.

In 1974, the workforce comprised 185 warehouse staff and 147 office staff. They concentrated on delivering items to schools and local government establishments; goods were held in the warehouse at Balne Lane. These included food and text books. Larger items, including furniture, could be delivered to the customer straight from the supplier. An Essential Clothing section at Balne Lane and several outlets across Yorkshire supplied school clothing. The customer base grew from 6,000 in April 1974 to over 8,000 by November of that year.

In addition, the organisation was making contractual arrangements which allowed customers to order goods and services directly from manufacturers. In fact, this was seen as the main area for expansion with heating fuels, building materials and transport requirements playing a big part. When the first annual accounts were published in 1975, a total £14m turnover was reported.

In 1980, Cliff Lane closed down and all the office staff moved to a new headquarters at Park Lodge Lane, in Wakefield. In the early 1980s, the Food section of the business was re-located to its present warehouse at Flanshaw. In 1985, a new warehouse opened at 41 Industrial Estate. Office-based staff re-located there in 1993.

Today, the organisation is known simply as YPO following a rebrand in 2012.

Top left: YPO’s former headquarters at Park Lodge Lane. Centre and below: Old and modern YPO catalogues.
In April 2014, the full board and senior management were in attendance at the 40th anniversary celebrations. They particularly acknowledged three members of staff who had been with the organisation for the full 40 years; Christine Preston, Alan Roe and John Goldthorpe.

Christine Preston said: “YPO is a fantastic place to work. Times have certainly changed over the years. When I first started in 1974, all orders were processed manually and we took calls with just two phones! I’ve seen people come and go, and sometimes come back again! It’s been my only job since leaving school; it’s been a pleasure to come to work every day and I’ve met some great people along the way. I haven’t regretted a single moment.”

Simon Hill, Managing Director of YPO said: “YPO employees through the decades have worked tirelessly to help our public sector customers make best use of their ever squeezed budgets, whether it’s schools, local authorities, charities, the NHS or the emergency services. They are a talented and highly skilled group and we wanted to applaud their achievements. They have helped us go from strength to strength as an organisation.”

Each year YPO sells: more than 1.5 million eggs, 140 million Post-It Notes, 30 million exercise books, 230 tons of glue sticks, 5 million pom-poms, enough electricity to power one million street lights, and more than 1.25 million hours of temporary labour.

How times have changed. A flick through the 1974 catalogue gives a good indication of those changes. Items available to buy that year included ink wells and ink well fillers, sealing wax, typewriter ribbons, carbon paper – and most surprisingly petticoats.

Today, with over 500 employees, and offering a range of 27,000 products and 100 service contracts, YPO continues to be a leader in its field. In 2014, YPO won Supplier of the Year at the Education Resources Awards, and Best Public Procurement Project at the CIPS Supply Management Awards alongside partner procurement organisations.

YPO continues to be focused on growth, with a strategy to improve online ordering after the successful launch of a new e-commerce website in February 2014. In September, the YPO member authorities also established a new limited company, enabling YPO to trade with new markets and bringing even more growth to the organisation.