

SEED SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

Cultivating employment and connection in Sandgate

SANDBAG, (Sandgate & Bracken Ridge Action Group) has a long journey in social enterprise (SE) and an important one for us to learn from.

First, because SANDBAG is a long-time neighbourhood centre based in the Sandgate neighbourhood of Brisbane North/beachside. And second, because the journey has not been easy, with a painful and difficult decision to shut down one arm of the SE in 2022. Yet we can still learn significant lessons from a 20-year long journey.

HOW IT BEGAN: LISTENING TO STORIES

Community members in the area were constantly dropping into SANDBAG community centre with stories of unemployment. They were caught in the cycles of training, job placement, training – but not landing sustainable jobs. It was soul-destroying for those people who were starting to believe that it was their fault that they were unable to gain employment. Others were attending training programs, learning about CV writing, and getting ready for work - but again, with no actual lasting work outcomes.

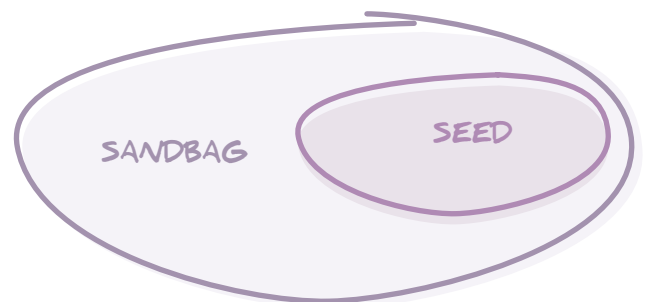
CRAFTING A RESPONSE

Venturing into the social enterprise space for community and social practitioners can feel fraught. SANDBAG workers asked, 'How can we start a business which will create ongoing employment for the people we support? With Brisbane City Council (BCC) support – they applied for social enterprise grants. SANDBAG explored three business options, piloting some initial enterprise initiatives that built on the community development work being done by SANDBAG in: A Tourist Information Centre; Catering; and, a Gardening and Nursery business.

During this time BCC, also engaged Social Ventures Australia (SVA) to provide business development support to those organisations that had received grant funding. This helped SANDBAG to review its pilots and consider a wider range of options in developing a business (including buying a business, securing social contracts, or franchising an existing business). They pivoted to Parks and Property Maintenance using the model and support of Nundah Community Enterprise Cooperative to enter the business and secure contracts from BCC.

GOVERNANCE

The social enterprise was always owned and governed from within, or as a part of SANDBAG Inc. – the community association. So, while named differently – as Sandgate Enterprise Economic Development (SEED) - the enterprise is fully owned by SANDBAG the community centre. The governance model consisted of a separate committee but sat under or within the normal governance obligations and responsibilities of SANDBAG.



LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

One of SEED's early struggles was a rapid turnover of workers in the leadership/management of the SE and finding the right leadership. Reflections indicate SEED can be split into two periods. Pre-2010 it was run by people with community development skills;

and post-2010 by people with business skills. Both proved to be difficult. What was crucial was that the right person came along – Steve Williams – who had BOTH community development and business skills - and this led to a period of flourishing. Critically Steve’s role was to step into ‘business manager’ in 2010 – working at the strategic level of the business and also nurturing the culture and behaviour of workers, ensuring it was a supportive workplace. SEED also employed an operational manager to maintain the day-to-day work. This is worth taking note of – recognising that community workers can be good at community building; leaders can lead and managers can manage (operations). A social enterprise needs a mix of all these skills.



Additionally, Maggie Shambrook as SANDBAG Director, gave Steve the freedom to run the business gave Steve the freedom to run the business within the parameters agreed by the SANDBAG Board. Good communication and accountability were key, with a clear line of reporting from the Steering Committee structure of SEED to the SANDBAG Board.

Foregrounding the issue of **culture and behaviour**, stories indicate that Steve successfully cultivated an open space office where people shared eating, there were free drinks, and lots of visuals reminding people of how to work respectfully and have fun.

SOCIAL PURPOSE AND SOCIAL IMPACT

Again, the business side of things is crucial – ensuring it is financially sustainable or, even profitable (so that surplus can be directed into social good) – but remember that key to a social enterprise is knowing your social purpose. For SEED it was creating long-term sustainable work for local people who were excluded. This included people with learning disabilities, but over time extended to the Sudanese refugee community, then the Ethiopian community – with an increased social purpose to include employment and support for refugees transitioning into the Australian work culture.

Steve was also adept in having both business data and social impact data ready and available to demonstrate effectiveness to funders and the local community. SANDBAG’s vision and Steve and Maggie’s leadership was recognised in 2014 when SEED won a national award for Australia’s best small social enterprise.

In 2023, SEED continues to provide inclusive employment to five employees through its commercial cleaning arm.

MORE INFORMATION

Sandbag Community Centres & Services
sandbag.org.au

SEED Social Enterprise
seedppm.com.au

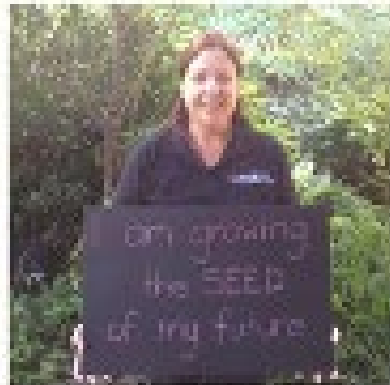
Neighbourhood Centres Queensland
ncq.org.au

PROJECT SUMMARY



This Social Enterprise Sector Development Grant project is proudly supported and funded by the Queensland Government.

This case study was developed by Community Praxis Co-Op and Nundah Community Enterprise Co-Op and has been endorsed by SEED in March 2023



Buddhika
Gardener



Meseret
Cleaner

Buddhika, a SEED gardening worker

Meseret, a SEED cleaning worker