

# NUNDAH COMMUNITY ENTERPRISE COOPERATIVE (NCEC)

## We can create work together

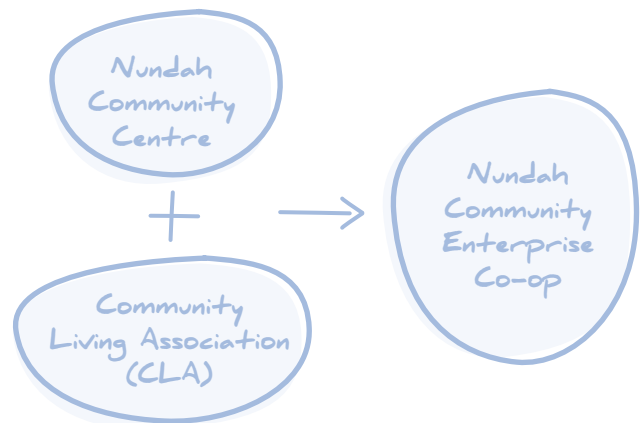
It's exciting to be telling the story of a 25-year-old cooperative. To have lasted 25 years means there are some lessons that come from the tenacity of lasting the distance. Not a quick burst of social enterprise energy and then puff, gone, finished. No, instead a story of innovative work, that has consolidated, adapted, flourished.

NCEC is a non-profit workers co-operative. Its **social purpose** is to create sustainable and socially inclusive employment and training opportunities for people with cognitive and/or psycho-social disabilities with profits re-invested in the business to benefit members. Established in 1998, it currently employs more than 35 people through a range of small enterprise **trading activities** such as **Espresso Train Café and Catering**, the **Good Food Project** and **Parks and Property Crews**.

Linking the social purpose to the first trading activity, we love the sign at NCEC that says, 'we make coffee to employ people, not employ people to make coffee'.

NCEC works with **significant partnerships** and relationships. For example, the cooperative works alongside the Community Living Association (CLA), a non-profit community organisation that provides ongoing social work support to members and employees, and the Nundah Community Centre (now Northside Connect). The first organisation is crucial

as it plays a key part of the social support work for members of the cooperative who have disabilities.



The three organisations were crucial during the establishment of the Co-op, and they continue to play differentiated roles. NCEC would not exist without the other partners yet is governed and owned as a separate legal entity.

With the support of these partners' contributions, NCEC not only provides economic remuneration, but also enables avenues for social inclusion, belonging and identity for its workers. This collaborative approach balances respect, care and autonomy with the aim of creating an empowering work environment to enable workers to gain confidence in their skills and abilities which make them feel proud and part of society. NCEC also delivers shared value to its members by enabling people with disability to participate in decision making at all levels of the organisation (including board membership). This approach that is based on mutuality, care and solidarity has led to a high employee retention

rate, with 80 per cent of its original worker members remaining part of NCEC today.

NCEC uses a triple bottom line business model whereby performance and success are measured on social, environmental and financial indicators.

## **HISTORY AND METHODOLOGICAL LESSONS**

### **FIRST: The relationship building issue identification**

The NCEC story started with classic community development methodology. Workers at CLA were hearing from a group of eight young people their desire for meaningful employment. The workers built relationships, listened to their stories and asked those people if they would like to come together to share their stories with one another, identifying the key issues. A first meeting was held at the local Community Centre, Northside Connect.

### **SECOND: Mutual aid and experimentation with activities**

With those relationships and issue identified, a small group started experimenting with micro business activities borrowing local resources. A mower was found, a ute borrowed. People started doing small cleaning jobs and yard maintenance work. The CLA workers also recognised that support would be needed from community members as volunteers, so they approached Nundah Community Centre to support in recruiting assistance from the community. Two volunteers were identified – who were crucial in the start-up and experimentation phase.

### **THIRD: Moving towards a structure – choosing the cooperative legal option**

In late 1998, NCEC was formalised and started on a shoestring: with a few hundred dollars in membership fees, donated space, administrative support from CLA, and a couple of borrowed lawn mowers. Establishing an employee-owned co-operative was seen as the most appropriate model for people with learning difficulties, enabling them to participate in decision making and undertake meaningful work. Importantly, in a cooperative model people can be both 'owners' and 'workers'.

### **FOURTH: Levering finance and resources**

CLA provided assistance through funding a coordinator position out of its own reserves for one year, and also provided several small start-up loans. In-kind support was provided by [the then] Forester's Community Finance, housing the parks and maintenance crew in its offices. A range of small grants and donations were provided by local community organisations. The relationship with CLA was symbiotic; CLA's constituents were given preference for membership and employment opportunities in NCEC in return for CLA's contribution.

### **FIFTH: Securing a social procurement 'anchor contract'**

A key turning point in the development of NCEC was a Brisbane City Council contract with NCEC for the maintenance of three small city parks – a contract won in the early days of 'social procurement' (before the term really existed). In these case studies we often refer to this initial contract as an 'anchor contract' as it anchors the fledgling business in secure cash flow and income. This also gave the co-operative a steady supply of meaningful work, along with an excellent source of revenue and a profile in the community. The income generated by long-term park maintenance contracts provided sustainable revenues in those vital first years of establishing NCEC and significantly reduced the workload of its coordinator.

### **SIXTH: Growing and diversifying the social business**

After NCEC was established and operating, CLA identified many members who were unable to undertake the work required in the parks and maintenance but who were interested in pursuing opportunities in hospitality. This became the next growth area for NCEC, opening a café and catering business with further support from CLA, funders, small loans and donations. Espresso Train Café and Catering was opened in 2003 to provide employment opportunities to a broader set of worker members.

The success of the NCEC over time has increased the scope of their activities. In recent years partnership opportunities with individuals, social enterprises and refugee groups have shared NCEC's valuable experience through 'peer to peer' enterprise development.

# KEY FRAMEWORKS AND APPROACH

## 1. Using community development methodology to get it going!

This long-standing organisation was built on a community development approach, whereby a group of people came together to make sense of their private concern (i.e. 'I can't get employment, what's wrong with me') and through collective action created structured public work ('we can create work together'). NCEC workers can now engage with people as contributing equals, where previously they saw themselves as recipients of 'services'.

Through the cooperative model, members now combine their resources, talents and commitment to benefit themselves and each other. People work collectively to provide what individually they cannot.

## 2. Balancing participation and production

A significant framework that has emerged from 20+ years of reflection by NCEC workers and members is how to balance both worker/member participation with production. In many ways this is also about how to hit the sweet spot of matching social purpose (participation) and commercial viability (productivity). Swing too far in one of those two directions and the social enterprise might fail to be socially purposeful, or successfully enterprising. By participation, NCEC refers to worker and member participation in decision-making as to how the social business is run and people's sense of connection and inclusion. By productivity, NCEC refers to the necessity to make a surplus, to not run the social businesses at loss, or at least to break even.

## 3. Moving from experimental and informal to formal

As the story above foregrounds, NCEC didn't start as a cooperative. It started as an informal mutual aid

group. Often this is how businesses start. A few people get together and try something, reducing the risk (formality comes with risks as it requires more start-up investment). In the NCEC story there were a few other small mutual aid experiments that didn't work (in terms of the enterprise element). However, once an idea and action worked, then that initiative was invested in and formalised.

## 4. Identifying a business opportunity through the 'leaky bucket' metaphor

The 'leaky bucket' metaphor refers to all the money spent in a community and identifying where it leaves the community. To plug up the leaky bucket describes the process of trying to keep some of that money circulating locally.

When the NCEC crew started thinking about possible business opportunities. They noticed two things: first, some of the local smaller parks were being neglected; and second, the contractor that was mowing and maintaining all BCC parks was a New Zealand based multinational. Out of those two observations, an analysis emerged. Brisbane City Council was spending a lot of Brisbane rate payers' money in the hiring of a New Zealand based company, but that money would leak out of the community - mostly back to the company owners. Hence, NCEC approached BCC suggesting that some of the contract be directed to them. NCEC also made the case that the large NZ based multinational did a good job of large parks but was not doing so well on the small ones and asked if NCEC could take on those.

### MORE INFORMATION

**Nundah Community Enterprise Cooperative (NCEC)**

[ncec.com.au](http://ncec.com.au)

**Neighbourhood Centres Queensland**

[ncq.org.au](http://ncq.org.au)

## PROJECT SUMMARY







▲ Kirsty (Hospitality Operations Manager) and Danny (Founding NCEC Member) working in Espresso Train Cafe



NCEC Parks and Maintenance Crew (pictured are supervisor Ian and worker/member Stephen)



NCEC Trainer (Greg) and Coordinator (Richard) and Members of the Bhustanse Community, including Shree and Bhakta (front) who started the 'Mountain Mowing Men' property maintenance business



NCEC mows its first park for Brisbane City Council in 2002 (pictured are staff of NCEC, Foresters Community Finance and Community Living Association)

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 NCEC in March 2023.