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**In NSW, the Nation Building and Economic Stimulus Program (NBESP) is delivering 6,300 properties over an 18-month period. The scale and scope of the program is extremely ambitious and requires the coordination of complex planning between many stakeholders before a tenant can receive their property key.**

A routine property transfer under this program involves: several different divisions of Housing NSW, the Aboriginal Housing Office, Community Housing Division, the Project Management Office, the Community Housing Provider (CHP), specialist support providers and, of course, the new tenant and his or her family who eagerly await their move into a brand new property.

As the recipient of the largest number of Nation Building (NB) properties in NSW, *HousingWORKS* invited St George Community Housing (SGCH) to share our experience.

# Stock transfers

## Lessons from St George Community Housing

### Humble Beginnings...

SGCH's story is quite similar to that of many other community housing organisations. Twenty five years ago, a man named Frank Baker had a passion for providing housing and short term accommodation for people with low incomes who were awaiting Department of Housing properties. With less than 20 properties in the St George area, two staff and a local management committee, SGCH began its journey operating from the back veranda of the home of one of its founding members.

Today, SGCH has almost 90 staff, manages over 3,500 properties and houses more than 7,500 people in homes across 23 local government areas. The addition of the NBESP has accelerated the growth and capacity development of SGCH. Our vision is "Better lives, stronger communities through affordable, quality housing". Such additional capacity means that SGCH is able to delivery this to many more people.

### Nation Building and its impact upon SGCH

SGCH received 25 per cent of the total Nation Building portfolio available in NSW and, to date, has successfully taken delivery of over half of the 1,103 properties across 84 sites in Sydney's south and south-west.

The Nation Building Program will increase the portfolio by 30 per cent. Over the next three to five years,

### SGCH NBESP achievements as of January 2011:

- Delivered 635 properties across 52 sites
- Conducted 336 pre-inspections
- Signed up 589 tenancies of which 194 were Homeless, 46 were Aboriginal and 327 were Seniors
- Housed 864 individuals
- Housed 8 people as part of the Homelessness Action Plan partnership
- Achieved an average vacancy period of 10.6 days

this will result in the procurement or construction of a further 400 new properties encompassing urban renewal, reconfiguration and community redevelopment.

Nation Building has provided us the opportunity to:

- build greater organisational efficiency when it comes to managing capital works and development
- consolidate portfolios, allowing for better tenant access via well-located satellite offices
- more effectively address under-occupancy and over-crowding





Ministerial handover of Nation Building properties at Matraville on 9 March 2010. The Hon. Michael Daley MP (2nd from right) hands over keys to SGCH's John Engeler, General Manager - Property Services (3rd from right), as the architect, builder and project manager watch on.

- strengthen partnerships with Aboriginal communities and respective support organisations
- further build on current 'Housing Plus' services and place-based employment and training programs
- strengthen our balance sheet and cash flow, allowing SGCH to structure and resource appropriately to effectively implement on strategy and commitments.

### Key challenges

Whilst change to SGCH has been remarkably exciting, it has also brought with it numerous challenges, some of which include:

- property allocation and the impact that the new Housing Pathways system has had on business operations
- relationships with developers, and the fact that CHPs have had no contractual relationship with the builders of the NB properties. This means SGCH has needed to work closely with Housing NSW to ensure that the properties are delivered not only on time but to appropriate standards
- managing the defects process with Housing New South Wales and the builders, which has proved more complex than anticipated
- the rate of property transfers. Up until September, SGCH had a steady rollout of approximately

10 dwellings per week. In November and December, "the tsunami" of NB properties increased to approximately 150 per month. This resulted in significant resource implications for the organisation.

### How SGCH managed growth

Growth is a choice, and we recognise that we made the choice to grow. The NBESP essentially will allow us to fulfil our vision and purpose – by providing more people with quality homes and making a greater difference in the community. In saying this, growth in the external world has meant huge implications for the organisation from within, and we needed to be sure that we had prepared ourselves to face the challenges and issues that arose.

So, how did we do this?

Firstly, SGCH undertook a very detailed strategic planning process which cascaded from an operational level to that of individual plans. This enabled us to ensure that all staff were on the same page and working toward the same goals. Additionally, we spent a considerable amount of time developing a growth and consolidation strategy which gave a clear purpose and understanding of related risks.

Much of the success of SGCH can also be attributed to our strong governance structure and adherence to respective protocols. These delegations and governing procedures serve to protect

and strengthen the organisation. Without them, we would have struggled to cope with such incremental growth and the scale of such a large project as Nation Building.

Along with this focus on control is the importance of having tight financial management controls to ensure sustainable revenues and cash flow, while at the same being able to strike a balance between conservatism and calculated risk. SGCH believes that the focus always needs to be on sustainable growth and development.

By gearing assets and finances in a strategic way, CHPs have the opportunity to expand their portfolio considerably, and thus deliver more quality homes to those in need. As management expert Peter Drucker has said, "the question that faces the strategic decision-maker is not what his/her organisation should be tomorrow. It is what do we have to do today to be ready for an uncertain tomorrow?"

This theory not only applies to financial management and strategy, it also applies to organisational structure. In order for SGCH to achieve its desired outcome, the organisation was restructured to establish new teams to effectively manage the growth. In doing so, key 'service' positions were established to support the business including roles in compliance, human resources, communications, policy and procedures, service improvement





SGCH's CEO Nazha Saad (3rd from the right) celebrates the opening of a Matraville Nation Building property alongside SGCH tenants and official dignitaries, Tanya Plibersek and Peter Garrett.

and a dedicated Access and Demand team. SGCH understands that success is about having the right people, in the right place at the right time.

Furthermore, success also requires one to have the right systems and processes in place to ensure that staff can effectively do their job. We recognised that as a result of NB and implementation of the likes of Pathways and HOMES software, new protocols and processes needed to be established internally. The systems that had served well in the past would no longer be effective in managing the future because of the growth.

SGCH selected Technology One software in order to provide an enterprise-wide solution for the business. We are presently in the implementation and training phase for the new software and expect it to be operational in May 2011. It is anticipated that it will have a major impact on efficiency and tenant relationship management.

As SGCH began to experience rapid change, we also quickly learned the importance of internal communication. In the past we tended to assume that staff "just knew" what was going on in the business, but now understand that it is imperative to make deliberate efforts to keep people informed so as to minimise frustration and a lack of

engagement. We are now reinforcing existing communication channels (such as one-on-one communications, team meetings and all-staff meetings) with new channels including regular CEO updates, internal newsletters, an intranet and various workshops.

SGCH has also structured an individual performance planning and review process and committed to the ongoing growth and development of its staff through leadership programs. Specifically, to deal with change, internal workshops on 'Change Management' have been run to assist people in managing new demands, and their reactions to these. Through this experience, SGCH has learned the importance of focusing on leadership at all levels and appreciating the enormous pressure put on our staff.

By providing a supportive environment, embracing SGCH's core values of Support, Accountability, Respect and Integrity, and helping staff to understand the meaningful contribution that they make, we have established a culture where staff are motivated to achieve. Additionally, by helping staff to see how each of their roles fits into the bigger picture, staff naturally take initiative and become passionate about responding to the needs of tenants.

SGCH has commenced an enquiry into its service delivery model to identify

what is working and what could be altered or improved. The objective is improved service to tenants, with greater efficiency and less cost. Furthermore, by embracing innovation and partnering with a range of support providers and community organisations, SGCH is continually looking to improve our service offering by delivering more holistic services to our tenants.

This holistic approach aligns with SGCH's vision to expand in the Community Regeneration and Development area. SGCH is looking at enhancing the 'Housing Plus' services, which presently encompass an education bursary scheme, a whitegoods loan scheme and tenant social activities, to include additional services such as a computer loan scheme and employment in common area maintenance.

Whilst we recognise that we still have a lot to learn, we believe we are growing because of a commitment to lifelong learning and better understanding the needs of those we serve. We are very cognisant of the fact that we never lose sight of what we do, why we do it, who we do it for and how each person plays a part.

### Key learnings

When reflecting on personal learnings about managing growth I believe it is essential to go back to basics:

1. Never assume anything – in particular, don't assume that people are ok just because they don't say anything.
2. Ask questions and be responsive – even when under enormous time pressures.
3. Empower people wherever possible to take responsibility for themselves.
4. Change your own leadership style to adapt to new situations.
5. Never underestimate the impact of change on people – even on those who you think are most resilient.

Finally, it is most important to be thankful and never lose sight of who you are and why you have chosen to grow.