

Expert Advice Exchange

Helping the Newtown Neighbour Centre better service the community

Every day the Newtown Neighbourhood Centre (NNC) makes life a little easier for people who are at risk of homelessness or socially isolated in Sydney's inner west. NNC gives them information, support and referrals to community and housing services to help them get back on their feet. The centre also provides a range of services and programs so people can remain active in the community while continuing to live independently.

As well as providing direct services, the centre plays a vital role in building and maintaining a sense of community through their annual Newtown Festival, weekly markets and events that celebrate the inner west's diverse culture.

In 2015 the Newtown Neighbourhood Centre applied to be part of the Expert Advice Exchange (EAX), an initiative of the NSW Government's Office of Social Impact Investment.

The EAX connects non-government organisations and social enterprises with leading legal and professional services firms, financial institutions and other major corporations who provide pro bono advice. This advice helps organisations like NNC improve critical issues, such as governance, management and budgeting, helping them to grow and increase their impact.

Liz Yeo, CEO of the NNC, said they were not very specific when they made their application to the EAX.

"We had a long list of things we were interested in getting support on," Liz said. "We were able to get some pro bono legal advice to review our constitution and to ensure we had the right governance arrangement for our organisation."

That legal advice was provided by Allen and Overy. Linda Sweeney, a Senior Associate in the corporate team, took on the job.

"Our pro bono team approached me," she said. "They had received a corporate-based referral and asked if I could help with it, and I said yes".

Following an initial meeting between the NNC and Allen and Overy, the law firm agreed to review the Centre's governance structure and constitution. There were a few phone conversations following that initial conversation and emails back and forth, before Linda got to work.

"We knew we needed to review our governance structure and constitution," Liz explained. "But it was something that we just never got to. We also didn't have the specialist legal knowledge that was needed to do the work."

"The advice from Allen and Overy was great," Liz said. "They reviewed our documents, rewrote the constitution, gave advice on our governance structure and followed up with us after our annual general meeting to make sure the changes were adopted."

Liz believes the Centre is now more capable of meeting its compliance requirements because of the advice they received from Allen and Overy. "We learnt more about our compliance and legislative obligations and have been able to ensure these tasks are completed on time and any documentation is submitted with the relevant body."

When asked to describe the EAX, Liz said it was helpful, professional and "got stuff done". Linda found the program to be satisfying, efficient and rewarding.

"It was exciting to see what the Newtown Neighbourhood Centre was doing in the local community," Linda said.

"And it is really rewarding to help a client like Newtown Neighbourhood Centre, who are giving back to the community and doing great things".



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