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**YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 358. A toolkit to help you meet your neighbours**

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**Intro:** Welcome to Your Strata Property, the podcast for property owners looking for reliable, accurate, and bite-sized information from an experienced and authoritative source.

**Amanda Farmer:** Hello and welcome to this week's podcast episode. I'm your host strata lawyer, Amanda Farmer and my guests this week are Ada Wong and Susan Chen.

Ada is the resilience coordinator at Lane Cove Council in Sydney. A trained professional engineer in the UK and Australia, Ada had a career change to the sustainability and resilience field 5 years ago. She has local government experience in Sydney and Perth in building community resilience, reducing council and community vulnerability to climate change and undertaking community development opportunities.

Susan Chen is a community projects officer at Willoughby City Council, also in Sydney. Susan holds a Master of development practice, community development and a Master of Research in Human Geography. Susan is interested in all the ways that spaces and places can facilitate thriving communities.

In this chat, Susan and Ada are sharing the results of their recent community well-being survey, including the specific finding that led them to produce a *Meet Your Neighbours* toolkit for apartment residents. I'll take you over now to my chat with Ada Wong and Susan Chen. Enjoy.

**Amanda Farmer:** Susan Chen and Ada Wong, welcome to the show.

**Susan Chen:** Hi Amanda, happy to be here.

**Ada Wong:** Hi Amanda, I'm Ada from Lane Cove.

**Amanda Farmer:** Ada, I'll go to you first. How did the idea for a *Meet Your Neighbours* toolkit come about?

**Ada Wong:** So we didn't actually just started on the toolkit. Its actually came from the *Meet Your Neighbours Project* that was funded by the Department of Premier and Cabinet and is the joint project between Lane Cove Council and Willoughby City Council and also in partnership with the Red Cross as well.

Both of our councils actually look at any challenges that we had in our LGA like look at from an area. Both of us actually have quite a lot of residents living in high-density area like apartments and while we're looking at the well-being survey, both of our council did, we find that people living in apartments doesn't know their neighbour that well. They don't actually call their neighbour for help that often compared to people living in houses. They volunteer less. They are less connected to the community.

So we thought that this would be an opportunity to do a pilot project. So this is a first of its kind like in the urban area that we're doing. To connect with high-density living neighbours to improve social cohesion and resilience. So the social cohesion side we mentioned about like people don't know their neighbour well, the resilience bit is mostly due with the a lot, we're getting a lot of extreme weather events. People doesn't really necessarily think about that it will affect apartment buildings at all or in a city area

But it doesn't mean that disaster or emergency doesn't happen in apartments and that's why it comes about of the project both on both sides social cohesion and also the resilience side. And at the moment, the government actually focus about 97% of the funding on recovery, the aftermath of any disaster emergencies. Only 3% is actually done in terms of building resilience. That's why both of our council thinks that it's very important that we engage our residents, especially in our identity, in building resilience.

**Amanda Farmer:** You mentioned there Ada, a well-being survey. Is that something that you did across the entire council area for all

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residents? And it was the results you were getting back from the apartment residents that triggered this idea?

**Ada Wong:** Yes. We do it every two years so that we can see the trend of like now how residents actually like do they actually love living in the area so actually it's from the survey as well actually it's through discussion with Red Cross.

So Lane Cove was actually doing a Get Prepared workshop with like a series of them with Red Cross and we were Red Cross in the rural area, they called something called the community resilience teams that actually neighbours get together and they direct contact with SES, with the recovery agents or the comeback agents at the time of the disaster and then they decide like on how do they want to improve on to reduce the impact when disaster happens. So this is something the pilot project that we're doing something in the urban setting as well.

**Amanda Farmer:** Excellent. Do you want to jump in with anything to add there Susan?

**Susan Chen:** Yes, so as Ada mentioned, we wanted neighbours to get connected with each other, to help them prepare for and respond to these challenges that we face in the community. And so having meaningful, trusting connections with your neighbours is really important because if something goes wrong, who are the people you turn to? It's actually the people closest to you, your friends, your family, and your neighbours. So we wanted to build those connections between neighbours and in order to do that we ran this project and we delivered this toolkit.

**Amanda Farmer:** And we're going to get stuck into exactly what's in the toolkit and how our listeners can get their hands on it. But I'm really interested to hear that it's sounding to me like it was the apartment residents in particular who were saying to you that they felt disconnected from their neighbours.

And am I right that you weren't really seeing that in the survey results for people who were living in freestanding homes? They felt more connected, or they at least weren't telling you that they were disconnected in any way. And this was something that was really the case for apartment residents. And I find that interesting because as apartment residents, we're so close to our neighbours and we have so many of them and it's easy for us to just knock on the door. But that's not happening your residents are telling you.

**Susan Chen:** Exactly. So we could see in the survey results, this disparity of outcomes. So we had that evidence. So things like if you live in an apartment, you're less likely to be connected to local community groups and less likely to volunteer in your community, you're less likely to be turning to your neighbours for help or offering help to your neighbours. These were things we could measure in the survey and we could the difference between people who lived in apartments compared to people living in houses.

**Ada Wong:** I would say, it's about 10% difference.

**Amanda Farmer:** Right, okay.

**Ada Wong:** It's not like a 50% difference like that much, but there's still a gap.

**Amanda Farmer:** And were there any conclusions drawn as to why that might be the case? Just different demographics or maybe a high proportion of renters? Any ideas about why you might have been seeing that difference?

**Ada Wong:** I don't think, we didn't do a study like, you know, to deal with the reason why, but from our observation, like, the statistics show that people living in apartments are more socially diverse compared to people living in houses. There are definitely more renters, so they probably think that, no, no, this is not something where I'm going to grow into. They might not be more invested in where they live.

And also that, and actually I live in an apartment myself. it hard to talk to neighbours is because like I think people living in houses they got the front yard you don't necessarily knock on your neighbours' door but you know, you see them in the gardens and then you see them enough and then start talking to them.

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But in the hallway, I only see my neighbours when I press the lift on the same floor but it only happened in that one minute if we got in the same time in that one minute. Otherwise, I don't really see any of my neighbours at all.

**Amanda Farmer:** True. So we have the *Meet Your Neighbours* toolkit, which has come about through the *Meet Your Neighbours* project. This is a guide to creating friendly and resilient communities in apartment buildings in particular. I can see when I open up that guide and I look at the acknowledgements, there were a number of strata communities directly involved in putting the kit together, a number of building managers. How did you get these people on board? Did you handpick them out of the survey or how did they come to be involved in putting the kit together with you?

**Susan Chen:** So we ran the pilot to trial it in a few buildings, so two buildings in the Willoughby Council area and three in the Lane Cove area. So we approached a few buildings. We wanted to get building managers and strata committees that were enthusiastic and happy to get on board with this project.

And we knew that they would be key stakeholders as part of this project. So we knew the success of the project relied on having them on board. So I did also approach some buildings that said no, that they weren't interested. So for me, it was a matter of just finding buildings that were able to see the benefits of what this project could bring.

**Ada Wong:** For Lane Cove, of the three buildings how we choose actually we choose those buildings too and the three buildings that we wanted to engage with all of them said yes.

So the first one was Sevana apartments at Lane Cove North actually I engaged with the building manager first because that's where the contact is. Like the council and the waste team actually have contact with the building manager to deal with another way stream.

And that building manager was very community minded and that was about post-COVID times. He sees the need that his resident needed. And then he helped us to convince the strata as well. And then the other building we connected with Elena, actually, is they have the same building management. So that's how we got onto the second building.

And the third building, Landmark, that's really like a landmark building, more than 50 floor, very high density living at St. Leonard's, 420 units. And both, Elena and Landmark, because they are very new building, less than two years old. Both of the strata see the need that their residents really wanted to connect. So that's why they wanted to work with us as well. And it's council sponsored project so why not!

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes, good on them. And what did they have to do to be involved in the pilot? What were you needing from them?

**Susan Chen:** So we got residents to get involved with planning and delivering their own neighbour initiatives. So we got a group of residents together, they met regularly, worked together and put on different events and initiatives. They did neighbour barbecues, movie nights, cultural celebrations, and anything to get neighbours together to get them meeting with each other, chatting and connecting. So some of these people were involved in their strata committee but also others including owners and non-owners the idea was to make it as inclusive as possible.

**Amanda Farmer:** So they were in essence practising the activities that have now been put in the toolkit as recommendations for people to get to know their neighbours. And what was the feedback that you're getting from the communities? These were things that they hadn't done before, hadn't thought of before. What were the results when they started to give them a go?

**Susan Chen:** Yes, it was all fairly new to those residents. So a lot of them had been looking for opportunities to get to know their neighbours and they saw it as a great opportunity. And a lot of them have now made friendships and connections with people who they've probably been living with for years but hadn't talked to before. We're hearing stories about people who are now more comfortable to say hi to each other in the lifts because there's just a different atmosphere in the building. They know that it's a thing that's okay to do and they can see a familiar face and say, "hi" and it just changes the general vibe in the building. good outcomes

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and little stories like that from having these activities and initiatives.

**Ada Wong:** So on the Lane Cove side is more council-guided because it's more to a resilience focus. So as well as having like, you know, those social connected gatherings, there are activities that's guided residents to identify any hazards, safety risks, resilience risks, either physical infrastructure or they see I'm on the social infrastructure as well, that they identified as a community.

And then we then help them to do a survey, and then they send out to everyone to prioritise those issues. And then the residents come back to go together for another social gathering. And then they develop solutions for those poverty resilience issues.

And then now actually it's the stage that the strata committee is looking at those solutions. And with the grant funding from the department, how they are actually mitigating those resilience issues.

Well, for example, resilience issues that some of the residents identified are vulnerable residents. They don't know about who they are like if there's an evacuation like incident when the fire brigade comes do I still need to notify the fire brigade of who in my building that needs help.

So apart from fire brigade it will also be good to know that on the same floor with your neighbour that this gentleman that I need to help because he's like on the wheelchair or that lady that couldn't hear very well should have hear the fire alarm maybe from her bathroom. Or this lady actually got pregnant just like a few months ago. Normally she's not vulnerable, but then being pregnant makes you vulnerable going down the stairs too. And all the pets that's been left alone in the building that people really care about.

What happen if there's an evacuation during the day like people know that their pets are actually in there that needs rescue. So those are the vulnerable we talk about. But different buildings could have different issues. It could be in the swimming pool. One of the buildings said that there's no safety guards, like a filter guard. And then some of the kids actually caught their hand in the swimming pool filter and then it could be like defibrillator like at the gym on the swimming pool so those are some like safety issues that people identified as well that I will actually bring to the strata and how could it improve

**Amanda Farmer:** Nice one. And these buildings that are part of the pilot, did I hear you say that they're continuing to receive some funding to help them to put in place in their communities ways of dealing with these issues?

**Ada Wong:** Yes, so for example, identifying vulnerable, those are non-cost funding issues. People can, like you need to do a poster, maybe communications with your building, it's self-identified to your building manager, then you have the list. But funding issue could be infrastructure that actually install, it could be a defibrillator, and then there's the landmark building actually identified that they want fire warden training residents. So and then differentiated training as well because they got one at the pool it would be good to know what to use. So this kind of training is some social gathering as well as building your skills.

And then they wanted to do like you know meet your strata day going to do like maybe like five floors at a time mini social gathering so that it's more intimate to know neighbours on your same floor. So a lot of the buildings do have a lot of focus on meeting your neighbours. Maybe half of them are meeting your neighbours and the other half is more infrastructure.

**Susan Chen:** Our councils are looking at offering some small amounts of funding for buildings as well. To get them started with their journey in building friendly and more resilient communities. So right now we are offering a small funding program, but we are also asking residents to think about different ways that they can themselves.

So one of our trial buildings is now looking at putting some allocation from their strata budget into a regular social event for example. So while we do want to as council support strata communities in working on neighbour initiatives with some funding and we are looking at current and future rounds of funding available from council. We also want residents in strata to think about other ways that they can fund these initiatives.

**Amanda Farmer:** And with the project, you've had a number of buildings blaze that trail and develop some examples of things that

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communities might be doing to increase engagement, increase resilience, assist vulnerable people. And that's all here in the toolkit, which is great. Now this toolkit, am I right that it's available to everyone? It's on the website, it's accessible. And even if you're not a Willoughby or Lane Cove Council and take a peek at the toolkit and get some ideas from it for your community.

**Susan Chen:** Yes, absolutely. So it's downloadable from both Willoughby and Lane Cove Council websites and hopefully, the resources and the advice and templates will still be useful to anyone who's looking at starting this in their own building.

**Ada Wong:** Susan mentioned that both of our local government is giving out small grants to host their neighbour party. So we're promoting this toolkit as part of the grant as well. So here's the grant to get you started. But at the same time, how about look at the toolkit? I know these are some of the ideas that will get you going maybe after having your initial party. So the toolkit has organising a barbecue. There's a barbecue checklist. There's a project plan. There is also like *Meet Your Neighbour* card as well that they can actually use like bingo cards to actually use during the event. So that's we're hoping that it's going to make it easy for people like it's you know There's a lot of things on the internet right now that you can download easily. But these are like some of the examples that we thought that people are easily accessible to.

**Amanda Farmer:** It's a really good point because I do often hear about councils having opportunities for strata communities to access funding to do various things. And a good example in recent years has been sustainability infrastructure and greening up your building. But you do need to have before you can make that decision to access that kind of funding and get stuck into that kind of project, you do need to have that community already built and you need to know what everybody wants and what is a priority for the community.

So what I'm hearing is this is really that first step in that process. Yes, we want to do great things for our building or perhaps one person or a couple of people want to do great things for their building. How do they connect with others in the community to get their ideas and come together to choose which project you focus on and then work together to achieve that project. So that's been identified in this gap that's being filled by the toolkit.

**Susan Chen:** Exactly. And we, part of this project has been about building the capacity of these communities to work together and a lot of the buildings that I worked with, they kind of went on this journey of learning how to work together as a team to put on an event.

They've built on all these little skills like how to create a poster, how to promote something within their building and then they've they might now have an email list or a Facebook group or something that they didn't have before and all of these things are really valuable regardless of what project you want to do in your building.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes, definitely. So the toolkit is available to all and I will make sure that we have links in the show notes under this episode to both the Lane Cove Council website and the Willoughby Council website to access the toolkit.

And then also Susan and Ada, I might get you to share with us any relevant links for residents in your particular areas where they may be able to access specific tools or grant applications that the council has going at the moment. And we'll make sure that those are shared. Any future plans for our apartment residents? What's next on the agenda for each of your councils?

**Ada Wong:** So after these small grants given to the, you know, hosting the first party, then it's actually the first step of paving the council's way into talking to keen residents in strata. And how can we, using the toolkit to do more, like in the toolkit mentioned about setting up your hobby groups, activating like a communal space, looking at resilience issue. So those are the, like the first initial gathering, those are the way we wanted to talk to those keen residents and strata on how we can do this together.

So the next the first stage is a lot of the buildings that the three buildings that we're working with is a lot is council doing for them so the next stage will be how can council assist the strata to do it for themselves.

**Susan Chen:** Yes, so we're really in the early stages of this work. I feel like right now we're building relationships with some of the

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strata communities. We're also building relationships with different stakeholders and organisations that are interested in this space as well.

So we're also looking at working with specific groups like our multicultural or non-English speaking communities. We're looking at working with community housing providers so that we can kind of grow the work in this space as well. So there's plenty more to come in the future.

**Amanda Farmer:** Nice. Now, if we have strata managers, building managers, and committee members who are in or working with buildings that are in the Lane Cove Council or the Willoughby City Council area, and they want to connect with each of you and just make sure that they're on a mailing list, on a database. You want to know who's in your local area. Where's the best place that they can go to get on that list or get on your radar?

**Susan Chen:** So for Willoughby Council on the Willoughby Council website, if you look up the High Neighbours Programme, that's like HI, like H-I, like Hi Neighbour, if you search for that, you'll find all the information on our programme, including the toolkit. And there's also my contact information on that page. So please reach out and we're happy to chat to residents in apartment buildings.

**Ada Wong:** For Lane Cove Council, similarly search on the website for different titles like Love Where You Live, that's where the project *Meet Your Neighbour* project comes under, so you will have similar information as per Willoughby.

**Amanda Farmer:** Excellent. We'll make sure that we have those links in the show notes. Jump in Ada, you're going to say something else.

**Ada Wong:** And both of us actually did a webinar on explaining what we just told you about both of our projects as well as talking about the toolkit a bit. So the webinar is actually half an hour like Lane Cove is actually on the webpage as well if those wanted to know more about the project.

**Amanda Farmer:** Excellent. We'll make sure that's all available. Thank you, Susan Chen and Ada Wong, both for your hard work in putting this project together, delivering it, working with our strata communities and not forgetting about those of us who live and work and serve our strata communities, recognising that difference in the survey results, recognising that there's something going on here in apartment buildings that needs more attention. And putting the time and the energy into producing the toolkit. So thank you, and I'm looking forward to what's coming next.

**Ada Wong:** Thank you, Amanda.

**Susan Chen:** Thanks so much, Amanda.

**Outro:** Thank you for listening to Your Strata Property. The podcast which consistently delivers to property owners reliable and accurate information about their strata property. You can access all the information below this episode via the show notes at [www.yourstrataproperty.com.au](http://www.yourstrataproperty.com.au). You can also ask questions in the comments section which Amanda will answer. How can Amanda help you today?