

Publication Date: 22 August 2024
YSP Podcast Transcript: 420. Why Natalie Fitzgerald is running for SCA(NSW) Board

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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 our Strata podcast. This is the place where we do our best each week to help demystify the legal complexities of apartment living. I'm your host Strata lawyer, Amanda Farmer, and my guest this week is Natalie Fitzgerald.

With 23 years in the Strata sector, Natalie is the Licensing in Charge and Director at Genesis Strata Management. She is an advocate for mental wellbeing, equality and transparency. Her leadership style centres on honesty, vulnerable communications and a willingness to stand with her teammates, customers and Strata sector colleagues. Natalie is an award-winning manager and sought-after guest speaker and facilitator. She has presented for the City of Sydney Council, the University of New South Wales, Griffith University, Deakin University, as well as the Owners Corporation Network and Strata Community Association. She has been, she has definitely been a guest here previously on the podcast.

If you want to hear more from Natalie after tuning in today, you can head back to episode number 189. An episode in which Natalie and I talked about a few things that don't often get talked about in the context of strata living, including how residents might help a neighbour who is the victim of family violence and how to deal more compassionately with those suffering from mental illness.

In episode number 130 we talked about bullies and called out the difficulties faced by some owners when it comes to trying to get their view heard above the loud voices that prevail within their building or perhaps on their strata committee. Links to those ones in the show notes for this episode.

As a champion for equality, Natalie is a proud member of the Women in Strata Steering Committee, where she has spearheaded the mentoring program, contributes blogs and organizes events to both empower and educate. To hear what Natalie's up to next, I'll take you over now to my chat with Natalie Fitzgerald. Enjoy. Natalie Fitzgerald, welcome to the show.

Natalie Fitzgerald: Thanks, Amanda. It's always great to catch up and be on the podcast.

Amanda Farmer: Always lovely to have you here with us, Natalie. And your email popped into my inbox as I'm sure it did some other colleagues, friends, strata managers of yours. You're running for SCA New South Wales board. And I immediately said, let's talk about it. Let's get you on the show. I know that you don't shy away from controversy. You always have a unique point of view, important opinion in my view. Let's start here. What do you say is the single biggest challenge strata managers are facing right now?

Natalie Fitzgerald: I think it's a mental wellbeing, it's pressure, it's the roll-on effect of the ABC report, which I support and had to happen. It's the Watergate moment that had to happen and it's not over and it shouldn't be over. There's still loose ends and things that need to be discussed there. But at the end of the day, it's the boots-on-the-ground strata managers who need support.

That's what I haven't seen come out of SCA. And I think if you are going to criticise, and we're all entitled to do that, it's a paid membership, we're members, you also have to be willing to put your hand up, particularly when it's a volunteer role. So, you know, don't have to agree with what the board has done, but you also, in my mind, if you're going to criticise and say, I don't think it was enough, be willing to say, well, I'll put my hand up and try and do better. 4:56

And I say try, I'd like to think that I would have handled it differently, but you know, I'm not sitting in their seat right now, but I'm willing to put my hand up and say I will, with the view of wanting to really support the people on the ground every day who are dealing with the fallout of the reporting.

It's already a stressful job. We're already dealing with owners who don't really understand necessarily what they've purchased into.

And now they're hearing from a trusted source that, your strata manager might be ripping you off. We know, #NotAllStrataManagers, but the owners are understandably asking questions.

And what I feel we haven't seen from SCA, well, we haven't seen much from SCA, which is kind of the point, right? But what we especially haven't seen is advice to strata managers on the ground. Who are their members? What do I do? How do I manage this?

Yes, okay, disclosures, that's great. But that's not really a solution for the everyday that this kind of has caused a shift for everybody. So the biggest issue is definitely that mental health roll-on of what is already a difficult job and now this additional pressure.

And then, I mean, secondary to that is fees. There wouldn't be a need to seek integrated services - let's use the nicer term for it - to have integrated services if people were able to collect fees that reflected the type of work that was done. And unfortunately, strata management is a grudge service. It's not something that owners want to pay for or enjoy paying for. And that puts pressure as well on those fees.

But I had a conversation recently with some managers of bigger, companies saying, whenever I'm undercut, I'm undercut by one of these big companies. So everybody's out there talking about, let's not race to the bottom, but they're still racing to the bottom. Where is that going wrong? Where have we ended up in a situation where the only way to be profitable is through these integrated services, which are unfair on the customer? Nothing wrong with making money, just make an honest dollar. And what can we do to kind of make it a fair and transparent process?

Amanda Farmer: I'm going to dig into each of those. First of all, mental well-being. You're leading a team of strata managers, Natalie and support staff. What have you seen change, get worse, since the ABC reporting? What is actually happening on the ground, on the phones? What's this extra pressure that you say is being put on managers?

Natalie Fitzgerald: I think what we're finding is more questions, which is not a bad thing, always happy to answer questions. I open every AGM with the line that when everybody walks out of this room, I want them to feel confident in the decisions they made, that they know what they made, why they made it, where their money's going.

What the challenge is, is it's not the people that come to the meetings that don't understand what's going on, it's the ones that don't. And so we're having more and more owners who you would normally never hear from, who don't come to the meetings, who haven't taken the time to really understand getting kind of angry and almost getting on a high horse and trying to pull that backdown and give them the information and the education they need. But first you have to get past that kind of emotional blocker that happens when we're all kind of uptight and upset about something.

Strata is not immune to economic pressures. So costs that increase in our lives, increase in strata, electricity is one, trades expenses have gone up, you know, a job that maybe cost \$100 a year ago is costing 150 or maybe more and so on and so forth. And so you need the opportunity to kind of have that conversation with owners. They're not coming to the meeting, they're getting their levies, the levies have increased and straight away they're connecting ABC story to levy increase.

And so needing to kind of rewind that back, have those conversations, provide that information, but get past that initial emotional response, which is understandable. Like it's, their home, it's their money. Nobody's saying that that's an incorrect way to respond, but we still have to find a way to get through it. And that's where I feel we haven't had that support from SCA on how to do that. If you're not somebody - you could be the best technical strata manager in the world.

You could have a licensee who knows the act back to front, but does that mean they know how to deal with this kind of emotional responses that we're having from owners. You know, maybe not. And that's where I think there's a big gap in the support and the training that can be offered out there right now to make a big difference to people.

Amanda Farmer: And in terms of fees and this race to the bottom, what is it that you say SCA could do to improve that situation to position strata managers more strongly in the market so that they don't have to participate in that race? What are they missing there?

Natalie Fitzgerald: Look, I think it's changing the perception of what strata management is so that it is less of a grudge purchase for owners. You know, it's well and good to say the words we're professional, but you have to demonstrate that professionalism and we're not seeing that demonstration come through. It's a very circular kind of issue, right? So say strata managers are undertrained. I don't think I'm being controversial in saying that.

So you've got an undertrained Strata manager, they make a mistake, the owner's upset, the owner hates strata management, the owner doesn't want to pay for strata management because they make mistakes and you're back here with your under trained strata manager. So it's not that it's any particular person's fault or anything like that. There's a circular issue that needs to be addressed. And it starts with education.

And I hear let's say we've got to educate the owners. Should we be educating the 1.8 million strata owners or should we be focusing on educating the people who serve them in the first instance? And that education has to run beyond the technical. needs to run beyond a webinar where you're spoken to. We know, and Amanda, I'm happy to tell everyone that we use you to do our CPD training because you're not ahead on the screen talking at us. There's a back-and-forth interaction and my team walks away learning. And that's kind of the systems that I think are not working right now in terms of that education process.

You and I have discussed this and I know it's something that OCN have talked about as well and that's educating conveyances. The people at the sales point so that people have a better understanding of what they're buying into. So sure, we can say let's educate owners, 1.8 million people, or we can say let's better educate the people serving them to know how to get that information to the owners in a better way.

And I think that that's kind of a step forward to changing that as well. So more of that soft skill training is really important as well as obviously the technical stuff, but being able to communicate why Levies - not just, well, there was an AGM and everyone at the meeting approved the Levies and you didn't come, so that's your problem. That's not helping anybody. How do we get those messages across to owners in a way that brings them on the journey so that they understand what's going on? That's the training that we're all missing.

Amanda Farmer: Fair enough. So mental health and wellbeing, education, anything else that forms part of your platform as you stand for election?

Natalie Fitzgerald: The next big thing is definitely transparency and we're hearing this time and time again and look the board elections in and of themselves are an example of what appears to be a lack of transparency. For years now it's appeared and perception is often reality that boards have been elected due to a tap on the shoulder, not based on you know, a democratic process. Hopefully, I'm wrong. That's not what's happening, but that's the perception of what's happening.

Amanda Farmer: How does that happen? I mean, isn't it a democratic process where people nominate and the membership votes?

Natalie Fitzgerald: Well, the membership votes based on one vote per strata manager. So you don't need to do a lot of math to see that there's certain companies that would perhaps have more influence than individuals and how that might land. And again, I hope I'm wrong in that, but that's the perception and it's that lack of transparency. It's always a secret ballot. Why is it a secret ballot? To hold a secret ballot in a strata election, you have to jump through hoops. It's doable, but it's not easily doable. Yet our board is always elected through a secret election, but why? Why are we hiding who we're supporting? So that's one example.

Another is we had a large number of resignations from the board. We can contemplate why that may have happened, but that's okay. They're volunteers. They have the right to resign from their positions. So there are no casual vacancies on the board.

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Those casual vacancies have been filled to some point. I was told that my services weren't required. I volunteered to take on one of those vacancies. I was told it wasn't needed, but other people got a tap on the shoulder. So who made that decision? Who tapped those people on the shoulder? Who decided who should fill those vacancies? Why have they been filled? Another example is following the constitution change last year, there's now a nominations committee.

I've asked for the terms of reference. don't know how many times I suspect perhaps they haven't been completed yet, but what is their job? What's their terms of reference? How is that going to influence who the membership is voting for, for their board? So I don't believe it's deliberate. don't think it's a nefarious motivation behind what appears to be a lack of transparency, but there is a lack of transparency.

I saw someone from Victoria talking about the awards there and how they don't nominate because they feel that the process of who gets awarded the awards isn't transparent and suppliers shouldn't be involved in the process. Now I've been a judge for the Victorian Awards. I know it's not suppliers, it's other strata managers interstate who vote and select the award winners, but people don't know that.

So again, the process is a good one. It is one that deals with things like conflict, but people are not aware of it because it's not made public. I just think transparency is so important. And especially right now when there's literally a spotlight on our sector saying, Hey, you guys are not doing this right. Well, let's lead by example from the board and say we've got nothing to hide. This is how we're operating. And look again, this all comes from the outside. Maybe it's easy for me to sit here and say, things should be done differently. And perhaps if I am elected on the board and we have this conversation again in 12 months time, I'll have a completely different

viewpoint and opinion. But at this point as someone from the outside who cares about the industry, cares about the customers, cares about the people in there, these are the things that need improving for all of us.

Amanda Farmer: Look, none of it sounds easy and a lot of what you're talking about sounds to me like some very serious structural change, cultural change, maybe even changes to the constitution. I find it interesting that you've made this decision to put your hand up and say, I want to be part of that change. I want to perhaps instigate that change and try to do better from within because another approach could be or could have been. This is in the too-hard basket. It's been too bad for too long. We're not going to be able to change this either from within or without.

We're going to move on and do our own thing, not be part of SCA, not renew a membership, maybe start up something different for somebody like you who is so full of energy, so full of ideas, so committed, so dedicated to our space, our strata space. I find it an interesting decision that you'll put your hand up to be on the board rather than move on and try something new or something different. Can you speak a little bit to that decision?

Natalie Fitzgerald: I can and it wasn't an easy decision to come to. I have for the past lots of years now made the decision to sit with women in strata which is your baby project and one that I very much shared your passion for and we've been doing together for a long time. And my theory has always been I had more influence outside of the board than on it because I didn't have to conform to the SCA agenda. I didn't have to toe a line. I didn't have to be careful about what I said as women in strata. But I feel that now is an opportunity for SCA to rebrand and become something different. And if there was ever a chance to make that change, it's now.

So after much thought and contemplation, I decided it was time to move out of my comfort zone, which is Women in Strata, and try and be the change I want to see. Like I said at the start, it's really easy to criticise. It's another thing entirely to actually do the work. And as individuals, like I know lots of the SCA board members and they're there or have been there for the right reasons. None of them are bad people or anyone who's there for any other reason except to better the sector, but for whatever reason, it wasn't able to do what it needed to do in these circumstances. So, why not say, what can I do to fix that?

As for starting as something else, think brands rebrand and do better all the time. You know, we look at, at Qantas, we look, you know, any of those kind of large companies that go through periods of, I mean, any political party that go through periods of being,

you know, they're down in the polls, they're not doing what the people need. They regather, they rebrand and they fix it. And I think there's an opportunity for SCA to do that. It's come too far and done too much good to just disregard and say that's not the answer anymore. You know, I look at the PSS.

Amanda Farmer: And that's the professional standards scheme in New South Wales.

Natalie Fitzgerald: Yeah, that was a lot of work for SCA to achieve that. To be sitting in a scheme with engineers and lawyers and doctors who are covered by this, that's a huge deal and it was a lot of work. And there's a lot of benefits to strata managers in being part of that. There are good things that we shouldn't lose sight of or lose appreciation for, which is why I think let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater as the saying goes, this is all fixable, but you have to be willing to do the work and it is going to be work. And it would be really naive of anyone to think that you're going to get a new board and five minutes later, everything's going to be better. That's not going to be the case. It's going to take, you know, a good year, maybe even two to fix and remedy and get that confidence first back in SCA. We need the members to believe in SCA again, and then for SCA to bring the customers on that journey as well.

Amanda Farmer: How many positions are open for new board members?

Natalie Fitzgerald: I believe there are six positions, so because of changes in the constitution last year, I think all positions are open across the board. There are also supplier positions on the SCA board. That in and of itself is another controversial issue. That's for another time.

Amanda Farmer: So this is a board just for any listeners who are not familiar with the way that the SCA board is structured. There are positions for strata manager members. There are positions for non-strata manager members who are suppliers. So maybe they're lawyers, maybe they're contractors. And then together, the board is made up of people with different views, different interests, and what you have nominated for Natalie is a strata manager member position.

Natalie Fitzgerald: Correct. And I think what we need on the board more than anything is diversity. Before people come at me, yes, I am well aware that diversity is more than gender. Just because I'm pro-woman doesn't mean I'm anti-man. I shouldn't have to explain that, but it's men feel the need to tell me all the time that diversity is more than just gender. I'm very aware of that.

But what we need more now than ever is diversity. And when I say diversity, mean diverse voices of people who work in the sector from very different viewpoints. We need different levels of experience. We need regional representation, regional strata managers that are getting paid a pittance. And it's, it's not okay for that to be happening. So regional representation is really important. We need obviously, you know, different genders and ethnicities. What we don't need is an echo chamber.

And whether or not, again, that's the reality from the outside perspective, somewhere in the last kind of five-plus years. To me, SCA has become an echo chamber of, "Yes, we're great. Yes, we're doing everything wonderfully." And yes, they have done really great things. Again, we go back to the professional scheme. That's great. But there's things that are not great as well. And it would be naive of us to think that everything is perfect and not be willing to hear criticism and not be willing as a board to debate what should happen next. It should not be one voice with everyone agreeing.

What's the point in a board if we're going to do that? It needs to be diverse voices. They need to respect each other. Obviously, I mean, we see it at our women in strata meetings with our committee. I mean, very rarely do we all sit there and agree with everything. And I'm always the one with the crazy ideas and often I need a bit of a net that's not really going to work.

That's a good thing. That's what we need when we have a board that's operating to its optimum. And that's what I personally would love to see in SCA. I don't need another five people like me sitting on the board. That's not useful. That's not going to achieve anything. We need diversity. We need strong voices, but people who are also very good at listening because we're not going to change anything if we're not willing to stop and listen as well.

Amanda Farmer: Do you say the SCA board should be made up solely of strata managers and there shouldn't be seats for suppliers?

Natalie Fitzgerald: Controversial topic. I do ultimately think that's where it should be. Do I think that's an issue for here and now and right now? No. I think I understand why there are suppliers on the board and I do think that the suppliers would struggle to say, well, I'm servicing strata, I work in the sector as well. Where's my seat? Where do I fit in this? And I get that perspective. Amanda, as a lawyer, you'd understand this. There's no suppliers sitting at lawyers associations or doctors associations. You don't have pharma sitting at the doctors associations. It's just, it's not done in any other profession. For obvious potential conflicts of interest, again, whether perceived or real, that's where it is. I don't know that that's a priority.

Like I said, for right now, it's definitely something that needs addressing at some point in time when confidence, in general, has been discussed. And it's a discussion for the members as a whole as well. Like I can't remember the last time I as a member have been asked or was ever asked about anything except events.

Amanda Farmer: Right, in terms of being surveyed, what is it that you want, some feedback.

Natalie Fitzgerald: Exactly. So I get asked about events and I might get asked about, you know, what's a priority in my membership? Am I here for education? Am I here for events? But in terms of digging deeper than that, I don't know that I've seen that again, not to say it doesn't happen. Those conversations may have happened with people who aren't me, but it's a transparency once again and who are we asking? And strata managers suffer this as well.

Like we often tell our customers what we expect them to do. But when was the last time strata managers went and asked the customers what they want? And I think that's something SCA could be facilitating as well is, you know, we all share the same customer base. Let's be finding out what they need instead of assuming that we know that answer.

Amanda Farmer: Well, Natalie, for those who want to support you, whether they are owners even or managers or suppliers, what can they do to help?

Natalie Fitzgerald: Well, only SCA Strata Manager members can vote for the board. So if you are a Strata Manager, please do come along to the AGM. I think it's the 23rd of October, but I'm sure Amanda can confirm that. Come along to that meeting, vote. If you can't come, give a proxy to someone you trust, fill the proxy. I believe you'll be able to vote on your proxy for who you want to vote for. Get those proxy forms in on time.

Have a say. It's really about grounds for movement at the moment. It's about agitating from the membership and saying this is what we want. I've spoken to a few of the management team in the larger companies and so far they're saying that they will be directing their staff to vote how they think they should, which is amazing news. So the power is back with the people. So let's kind of use that to vote for who you think is going to best represent what you, as the membership need, who's gonna be supporting you on your boots on the ground.

As for owners, look, the best support we can get from owners is feedback. What do you as owners need from your Strata manager? What are you not getting? What are the consistent mistakes that you see may be happening? What is the training that you wanna see Strata managers have?

That type of information is, I think, perhaps lacking when it comes to prioritising what SCA can be doing for its membership. So that engagement, that feedback is super important to help. If I was to be on the board, I'd be using that information to prioritise what comes next.

Amanda Farmer: Well, Natalie Fitzgerald, I wish you all the best with your campaign and I'm looking forward to seeing what our new SCA, New South Wales Board might look like in a few months time. Thank you for taking time out to join me and share your enthusiasm and your ideas.

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Natalie Fitzgerald: Thanks, Amanda. I really appreciate your time and the platform and hopefully I'll be sitting here chatting to you next time as a board member and we'll see big changes that benefit obviously the strata managers, it is their organization, but by default with that also all the strata owners as well.

Amanda Farmer: I look forward to it. Thanks Nat.

Natalie Fitzgerald: Thank you.

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