

# Getting to the Heart of the Matter

## Interview with City West Housing

City West Housing is an award-winning affordable housing provider and developer. Its culture is to approach everything from the heart, with a genuine understanding of how fundamental a home is for people's health, wellbeing, resilience and opportunity.

Owning more than 900 quality apartments in prime locations, City West rents to some 1,600 residents and their families on very low to moderate incomes. By charging affordable rent, the objective is to enable residents to live near where they work, contributing to the economy and their local communities.

Our interview with Lisa Sorrentino, Head of Development, sheds some light on the journey of this organisation and what drives its purpose 'to build stronger communities and improve people's lives by providing affordable housing.'

**A hallmark of your focus at City West Housing is creating high quality, affordable homes and**

**communities where everyone can feel they belong, something that has become even more important to people post the pandemic. How has this influenced the design of your projects and the amenities?**

Inclusion has been one of City West Housing's values since our initial inception nearly 30 years ago. Since the pandemic it's been less about big moves and more about minor modifications to our design requirements to reflect our current environment, such as incorporating study nooks for working from home. Our common area design requirements are forcing our consultants to not just make pretty places, but to have areas that are protected from the elements. Our amenities are beyond the built form and we are working to make them more useful for a wider range of residents. For example, providing free wi-fi in our common areas allows residents the option to work in the building, utilising our beautiful areas. Post pandemic, our residents are telling us how important our pet policy has been to combatting loneliness, so ensuring our buildings are pet friendly addresses the increasing pet ownership rates of our residents.

**City West Housing's commitment to affordable housing is demonstrated by the development and operations model of Ironbark Apartments which won the UDIA NSW Excellence in Affordable Housing. It is just one example of your work. When you look at that development, what do you see and what are you most proud of?**

I am most proud of our projects when I see the design being fit for purpose, addressing the needs of our residents and operations staff. Good design is often unnoticeable, but bad design is a constant reminder when something just doesn't work.

**One of your key deliverables is to create housing that is indistinguishable from market housing. How important is that aspect of your work, and how has the community responded to your developments?**

Fortunately, as a society we have moved on from the historical identifiable subsidised housing buildings. Our human nature is to be proud of where we live, no matter what your income or the rent you pay. Quality design is appreciated by our residents who take pride in showing off their buildings and homes.

We have received nothing but positive comments from residents, community and industry regarding our design.

**We are currently experiencing the most challenging housing crisis and cost of living stress. Can you describe the importance of providing affordable housing for the people of NSW.**

There has always been a demand and need for affordable housing, but the current, severe lack of supply has contributed to the current housing crisis. Having diverse communities equates to vibrant local economies and a reduced burden on infrastructure, such as transport and healthcare. Without secure affordable housing, many people risk living in inadequate housing or facing homelessness. If our youth cannot have the security of a roof over their heads, how can they study and become our future inventors and teachers?

**UDIA has led advocacy for the FSR Bonus policy that provides 15% affordable housing over 15 years,**

**funded by a 30% FSR and height Bonus. What advice would you give other developers on the way forward for the affordable housing bonus scheme.**

Engage early with a Community Housing Provider. Just like developers, not all CHPs are the same. Find one that aligns with your project vision and collaborate early. CHPs are the original build to rent adopters and have a wealth of knowledge about tenants' needs and asset management requirements.

**Can you describe the culture of City West Housing?**

As a 'for purpose' organisation, we hire first and foremost on cultural fit. Culture is so important to us as an organisation. Our values of Accountability, Compassion, Inclusion and Integrity were selected in consultation with our staff and reflect our professional yet caring approach. I often get comments from new staff that we are like family and we are a work family that shares more than planning problems. Our smaller

size facilitates this, as well as our leadership, which is dedicated to our staff and residents. Our genuine approach sees us year after year have higher employee satisfaction results than our peers in the industry.

**If we were sitting here again in 12 months, what would you like to be celebrating?**

I'd love to be celebrating our waiting list reducing from 2,500 eligible households who are currently waiting years for housing, to a level in the hundreds, like when I started at CWH 5 years ago. This stretch scenario is probably unlikely, so I'd love to say that our existing pipeline will all have unconditional development approvals to deliver 700 apartments, taking advantage of the housing bonus scheme.

*Ed: Now that's heart. We look forward to catching up with City West Housing in a year's time to hopefully celebrate this achievement.*

