

Shepparton, Victoria

KEE HOMES

Kee Homes was originally the carpentry section of Goulburn Valley CDEP. It was established in 1999 with the aim of giving CDEP participants the opportunity to undertake training in carpentry skills. Three years ago, they adopted the name *Kee Homes* and with it a new attitude and approach to participant development through real enterprise activities. The business trains participants within a supportive environment that allows for cultural issues and personal support, yet within the context of a mainstream housing construction and maintenance enterprise.

The Story So Far...

Kee Homes is one of the business arms of the Goulburn Valley based CDEP organisation, Koorie Employment Enterprises (KEE). The organisation has an excellent workshop facility and over the years has provided training to many Indigenous CDEP participants, skilling them in basic carpentry skills. They also offer building participants training in other areas such as chainsaw use, chemical handling, basic computers, OH&S and first aid.

Besides these technical skills, the project focuses on personal development skills. As Lindsay Jennings, Manager of *Kee Homes* says – *‘The building part of the formula is the longer term goal. The biggest challenge is building the guys. Building their confidence, teaching them about the responsibility of getting to a job on time, with the right tools, in the right clothes and with a packed lunch! Realising the importance of having – and keeping – a driver’s licence. The importance of separating their private lives from work. Teaching them to manage their finances and time – in fact, teaching them how to take control of their lives.’*

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Over the past three years, *Kee Homes* has changed its focus from training projects in the workshop to looking for mainstream contracts that enable training in a real work environment. *Kee Homes* does most of its work for Indigenous organisations, but not exclusively. Some of the projects have included:

- a major maintenance and upgrade contract on 60 homes belonging to Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative;
- construction of a house in partnership with a mainstream builder;
- construction of a series of cubby houses;
- renovation of a dilapidated old church; and
- design and construction of a pair of two bedroom brick units for the Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria.



Construction of cubby houses

These jobs were undertaken at a competitive price and achieved excellent standards. However, the projects took longer than mainstream competitors would have allowed. Training is time consuming. As Lindsay explains - *'The guys work with the concreters, the brickies, the tilers, the plasterers, the cabinet makers and the painters. They are not just learning to be a carpenter.*

They are getting a good overview of all the trades and how they interact with each other and fall into place with each other. This is a very time consuming process'.

The apprentices work under the supervision of Lindsay, a qualified builder, but spend time with all tradesmen on site. *Kee Homes* takes longer to build a house as the tradespeople are there, one at a time, so the apprentices can take part in all

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trades. This longer time makes the houses less cost effective. Time is money! However this is deemed money well spent in relation to the additional skills, reality experience and the confidence the participants gain.

The *Kee Homes* team takes pride in the quality of its workmanship. The two units were designed in-house to meet or exceed the Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria's construction standards. They are low maintenance, have a five star energy rating, have quality fittings throughout and all homes are provided with concrete driveways, footpaths and basic landscaping including hardy shrubs and plants.

The success of this project has encouraged *Kee Homes* to take on the next challenge of designing and building a four bedroom house. *Kee Homes* will fund these themselves and are building for the mainstream market. They are confident of success. There is also the possibility of further projects for the Aboriginal Housing Board.

Kee Homes has five apprentices of varying levels working on projects. Where possible, Lindsay likes to place the apprentices with appropriate tradespeople for differing periods of time, just to give them an understanding of different workplaces and practices and to have a taste of the real world. They also undertake regular accredited training at the local TAFE in block release.

As Koorie Employment Enterprises CEO John Martin said, '*Kee Homes is another avenue to get our people job ready. Our workers get all round employment preparation. However, Kee Homes also gives us the opportunity for business development at the same time.*'

Critical Issues to Achieving Business Sustainability

Kee Homes have identified five critical issues.

The Core Business of Kee Homes

Simply, the development of *Kee Homes* as a stand alone business is not seen as the major goal. The focus is training and placing a large number of young Indigenous people into mainstream building jobs and creating role models for unemployed Indigenous youth. The vision is generational change in attitude and opportunity – ‘Given time and a lot of effort, these role models we’re developing will make it easier for the next lot of young kids. Not all will succeed, but those who do, will inspire others to think, ‘if he can do it, so can I’ - and eventually the welfare cycle will be broken,’ according to Lindsay Jennings.

Critical Sustainability Issues

- The Core Business of KEE Homes
- CDEP Connection
- Productivity
- Networking & Partnerships
- Attitudes & Expectations of Participants

CDEP Connection

Working only two days a week is not conducive to building up a good work ethic. However CDEP wages provide the basis of a salary allowing for top up from other sources.

Productivity

The main goal of *Kee Homes* is moving participants into mainstream employment. This means the business is always taking on a very high proportion of low skilled workers which affects its productivity as a business. As Lindsay said - ‘In most instances, if these guys went straight into the mainstream they would have been sacked months ago and been back where they started. We nurture them, build their

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skills and confidence and then gradually increase the pressure. We have to work as a team and back each other up.'

Networking and Partnerships

The continual development of strong networks with organisations such as Rumbalara Cooperative and the Aboriginal Housing Board, who are sympathetic to the additional time requirements for jobs, ensure work projects for KEE Homes. In addition, further partnerships with both mainstream and other Indigenous organisations are essential for securing work contracts.

Attitudes and Expectations of Participants

Many of the participants have poor literacy and numeracy skills, very little formal education and some are teenage parents. They are not your average workers that normally build a business. They can become so, but it will take a lot more time.

Lindsay provides an example of the reaction of one of his participants who had been on CDEP for six years and then gained a job in a field not at all related to building – *'I'm a blackfella, I thought I would be on the dole for the rest of my life, as that's what blackfellas do.'* It took time to help this participant gain confidence, self-esteem, to identify what he might like to do and then have the confidence to state the desire and make it happen.

Changing the expectations of CDEP participants is crucial. *'We have to change our perceptions,'* said Lindsay speaking of some of his CDEP participants. *'We take it for granted that they realise they have to get a job, when in actual fact they don't. They see living on the dole as inevitability. They have had now many years, growing in the wrong direction. They become dependent on welfare (for many it is the only life they have seen) lose independence, self-esteem, confidence and pride. They lose their identity. We need a CDEP system that allows greater time for*

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building the basic bricks of living. It is hard work, initially, for many just to turn up to the workplace on a regular basis. We need to teach the importance of generally accepted behaviour, especially responsibility. We need the right personnel to deliver this training in the framework of a 'job and business' and we need to help Indigenous people re-gain self-belief and eventually a full time position in mainstream employment.'

For Further Information

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