WA Social Enterprise Council - Learning Community

How to build a peer-led micro social enterprise

This guide draws on the experience of participants and speakers in WASEC's Learning Community for micro social enterprises - including the peer-led models behind The Social Hermit and Queer and Diverse Pathways, and the panel discussion Leading Change: Diverse Voices in Micro Social Enterprise. It's written for founders whose enterprise is built on lived experience and community trust, rather than on a large team or a lot of start-up capital.

1. Start with lived experience, not a business plan
The strongest peer-led enterprises begin with someone who has personally navigated the gap they're now filling - whether that's isolation, an unsafe service system, or a lack of flexible, disability-friendly employment. That lived experience is your unfair advantage: it tells you exactly what 'good' looks like for the people you're serving, long before you write a formal plan.

2. Choose a governance model that keeps decisions close to community
'By community, for community' has to be more than a slogan - it needs to show up in who makes decisions. That might mean a board or advisory group made up of peers, contracting arrangements that pay community members fairly for their expertise, or simply a habit of checking major decisions back with the people you serve before you make them.

3. Build peer mentoring and informal leadership into the model
You don't need a large staff structure to deliver quality support. Mentoring relationships - a more experienced peer guiding a newer one - let your enterprise grow its capacity without losing the peer-to-peer feel that makes it trustworthy in the first place.

4. Design for genuine choice, not just access
Reducing isolation isn't only about opening the door - it's about offering real options once people are inside. Flexible formats (drop-in vs. structured groups, one-on-one vs. group support), concession pricing, and multiple ways to participate (as a client, a

workshop-runner, or a contractor) all give people agency rather than a single fixed pathway.

5. Reinvest revenue directly back into community
Where possible, pay the peers and practitioners who deliver your services above the rates typically offered by larger, mainstream providers. This keeps more of every dollar inside the community your enterprise serves, and it's a strong point of difference when you're pitching to funders or partners.

6. Lead by holding space, not taking power
A recurring theme from Learning Community peers and experts was that good leadership in this space means creating room for others to lead, rather than controlling outcomes. Humour, authenticity and persistence were named as more important to sustaining leadership than formal authority.

7. Diversify your revenue from day one
Combine a few small, complementary income lines rather than relying on one grant or funding source - for example, space or service hire, ticketed programs, and NDIS or other government-linked funding streams. Each line should reinforce the others, so people who arrive through one door become customers, clients or advocates through another.

Quick checklist

- What lived experience is this enterprise built on, and whose voice is missing from decisions so far?
- How does money flow back to the community - through wages, fair contractor rates, or reinvested profit?
- What genuine choices (not just access points) does a participant have once they walk through the door?
- Where is leadership shared with peers, rather than held centrally?
- What two or three revenue lines, together, make this financially sustainable?

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