

Case study 4: A synchronisation of mindset and priorities

Four non-profit providers of mental health support services in different parts of New Zealand have come together to share ideas and resources to increase their effectiveness.

In 2009, the chief executives of **Wellink**, **WALSH Trust**, **PACT** and **Comcare** decided to take their professional connections to the next step by forming an alliance called the **Arc Group**.

They came together at a time when there were lots of messages about collaboration, but little else happening to put them into action. Their primary motive was a shared belief that they must rise to the challenges of a rapidly changing environment. They wanted to find and exploit alternative approaches to accessing expertise, resources, knowledge and support. Major shifts in demographics, technology, the economy and service expectations also signalled a period of rapid and significant change that the four medium-sized organisations could try to influence and face better together.

The range of services the organisations offer is similar, but each is distinct in different ways – offering specialist skills or leadership. For example, PACT has the most experience with people with both intellectual disabilities and mental health issues; while Comcare has a focus on housing for people with mental health issues, as well as peer leadership. WALSH Trust is a leader in supported employment, and Wellink has the longest and most extensive use of consumer voices in shaping direction and in encouraging their participation in frontline, service delivery roles.

Together the four providers employ 655 staff, support 3,000 clients and manage combined revenues of \$36 million per annum.

A memorandum of understanding was drawn up for the Arc Group, although developing trust took effort and commitment.

“Learning how to collaborate ain’t easy!” says WALSH Trust CEO, Rob Warriner.

However, it only took three meetings before the providers were sharing their financial and other ‘sensitive’ information with each other.

“We are like-minded people from like-minded organisations,” says Virginia MacEwan, chief executive of Wellink Trust.

All Arc Group partners promote the value of peer support services. Arc Group’s Statement of Intent says that concepts of recovery should be at the core of organisational activities. In its simplest form, recovery is based in genuine expressions of courtesy, respect and integrity. For services aiming to support positive change in people’s lives, the fundamental purpose is communicating and supporting people’s worth and potential so clearly that they are inspired to see it in themselves – in spite of their experience of mental illness.

“We share a belief that there are more cost-effective, alternative approaches to designing and providing mental health services that rely less on costly medical interventions. Instead, we see there are huge opportunities to make use of resources that are available in the community – and developing that capacity further,” explains Virginia.

The Arc Group enables the four providers to share best practices and increase their focus on excellence. They’ve been able to benchmark salaries, operating costs, staff turnover and sick leave, while getting a better understanding of sometimes significant differences in the unit prices for services.

“We’ve learnt how to use and analyse information, even if we don’t use the same instruments,” says Louise Carr, chief executive of PACT in Dunedin.

PACT is active in Southland, Otago and the West Coast; the WALSH Trust is based in West Auckland; Wellink in Wellington and Hutt, and Comcare in Canterbury.

Rob Warriner says one of the challenges to working together is that the four members are geographically separate, but he also believes this has been a key factor in the success of the alliance.

“We don’t have to be reticent about what we share because we are not in competition with each other,” says Rob.

“It is so refreshing, empowering and rewarding to share issues and perspectives and receive rich feedback and comment, based on many years of collective experience.”

The four chief executives and their deputies come together six-weekly on a face-to-face basis to share experience and challenge each other. Members prioritise the meetings, which Louise describes as “invaluable supervision time”.

All are involved in local, regional and national committees or groups, so are able to share valuable insights from these too. Each is also able to bring a rich source of international networks and connections.

“We all benefit from specific expertise that is around the table,” says Kay Fletcher, CEO of Comcare.

“For instance, the expertise of Comcare means that we are kept up-to-date with the development of best practice standards for social housing,” concurs Louise.

Members are always trying to lift their standards and make improvements to their systems and services, even when something goes wrong for one of them.

“One of our organisations had an experience in coronial court that took all of us by surprise. It’s something that would probably only happen once every three or four years, but we were all able to learn from it and make appropriate changes to minimise risk in the future,” says Wellink’s Virginia.

“Because we are not competing, we have supported each other with proposals, as well as being on the look out for opportunities to work together.”

Within the alliance, various partners have worked together differently according to needs. Pact and Comcare developed a joint proposal and worked together on services on the West Coast. WALSH Trust is sharing its staff development programme and information system with Wellink; for 12 months both organisations shared a Director of Operations, seconded from WALSH Trust.

The Arc Group’s ability to do things collaboratively and challenge current thinking had its most public exposure in December 2010, when the Arc Group brought Professor Roberto Mezzina from Trieste, Italy to New Zealand for a series of forums.

Since the early 1970s, mental health services in Trieste have been guided by a strong emphasis on social inclusion and citizenship as core values. This has meant less reliance on acute services, absence of restraints and little use of compulsory treatment. Easy access to services 24/7 has been a fundamental hallmark of services in Trieste.

Professor Mezzina was recently re-appointed Director of the WHO Collaborating Centre for Research and Training in Mental Health.

“He allowed us to expand our own visions of what change is possible,” says Virginia MacEwan enthusiastically.

“His ideas sparked a lot of interest with the funders, leading clinicians and other NGOs who attended the forums.”

In turn, this opened up new opportunities for Arc Group members, including a further collaboration with the NSW College of Psychiatrists and an invitation to present on the ARC Group at the Australia and New Zealand Mental Health Services (TheMHS) Conference in Adelaide. Professor Mezzina has now been invited back to the Southern Hemisphere to be a keynote speaker at next year’s TheMHS Conference in Cairns.

The Arc Group also takes an active interest in the activities and well-being of member organisations.

“Whenever we’ve got a key vacancy, we try to look to each other first for ideas on different ways of doing things before we recruit,” says Virginia.

Kay Fletcher of Comcare will shortly be discussing with WALSH Trust staff, options around using their integrated Client Information Management (iCIM) system, as well as other opportunities for further collaboration.

“Our commitment to the Arc Group encourages each of us to be as efficient as we can as a business. It is now far easier to explore ideas and opportunities with others who you know share your values and aspirations for the future,” says Kay.

Cost efficiencies have been made, but they are often hard to quantify or make direct links to. The organisational improvements, higher standards and sharper services are more obvious.

Wellink and PACT have just received seven excellence ratings between them in recent Ministry of Health Certification audits and Wellink has received an Australasian service achievement award for the second year in a row. Similarly, WALSH Trust was a finalist in local business awards; Comcare has award-winning housing services and is taking a lead role in innovative developments in post-earthquake Christchurch. PACT has initiated a project called MH3 that is influencing the shape of future mental health services in Otago, Southland and West Coast.

“We share in each other’s successes and when our partners are proud, we are all proud by association,” says Virginia.

“We’ve exchanged some board members between organisations and we are able to share so much without losing our unique flavours or our connections to our own communities, which we are pretty engaged with.”

ARC Group members consistently challenge themselves and each other and are supported to access tools that enable them to anticipate tomorrow’s challenges.

“We see this alliance as an option which values and upholds the uniqueness of organisations that have been shaped by and grown out of local communities,” says PACT’s Louise Carr.

“We have the opportunity to explore and recognise the benefits of being a part of a larger collective – and the potential economies of scale that might ensue.

“The Arc Group remains a group of four. However, we welcome opportunities to collaborate with a broader range of organisations.”

More information:

www.pactgroup.co.nz or www.wellink.org.nz or www.walsh.org.nz or www.comcare.org.nz

This is one of the 15 case studies profiled in *How NGOs Make a Difference to Health Care in the Community* – a 96-page report from the Health and Disability NGO Working Group, Jan 2012.

The case studies cover acute nursing services, health information services, virtual practices, youth one-stop-shops, mental health networks, community development approaches, cardiac rehab, Whānau Ora and Asiasiga models of care, and more – from North to South.

See www.ngo.health.govt.nz for more of the report.