

# informed

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Policy and practice newsletter for the community information & support sector

## Planning for sustainability



...helping local communities help local people

*informed* is a policy & practice newsletter for the community  
information & support sector  
September 2016 Edition

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Disclaimer: the opinions expressed by our contributors do not necessarily reflect CISVic's position or policy.

## Introduction

Our last edition of *informed* looked at the role social enterprise can play in organisational sustainability. This edition looks again at sustainability, with a different focus – how can we successfully plan for sustainability?

In the current social, political and economic climate, not-for-profits are facing a myriad of challenges in establishing and maintaining sustainability, and it appears the pressure here will only increase. We see key challenges in this space around the need to diversify funding, create & maintain successful ‘brands’, partnering or merging with other agencies, and the constant need to demonstrate community value and accountability to funders. Smaller agencies are under greater threat and these challenges become exacerbated when working in high-need communities. Our smaller size can also be out strength – community run, place-based agencies can be more flexible and agile than larger, bureaucratic services.

As always, we open this newsletter with an overview of this topic; documenting key trends and themes.

The development of the CISVic Emergency Consortia was a direct response to this environment, and for us, has demonstrated the very real tangible value of strategic planning and formalised collaboration in sustaining our membership. Jill Wilson speaks to this in her article *The value of our collective strength*.

This edition also features a range of articles from CISVic member agencies who have grappled with these very challenges and found a way forward. This newsletter provides just a snapshot of the work of our members in this space, and by highlighting and promoting their work, we hope we can go some way to ensuring the sustainability of not just individual members, but the broader sector.

Special thanks to this editions author, Social Work student Shakira Wilson, who has written the overview and sourced articles. I would also like to thank our contributors for sharing their stories; Cobram Support & Information Services, Doncare, Knox Infolink, South East Community Links and Southern Peninsula Community Support & Information Centre. I think there is real value in hearing from our peers, and learning from their successes and failures! I love this quote from Nineteenth century woman’s rights activist and journalist Margaret Fuller; “If you have knowledge, let others light their candles in it”.

Kate Wheller

## Overview

Victoria's not-for-profit sector is incredibly expansive and diverse. It covers a vast array of services and activities that respond to community needs, ranging from health, social services and religious groups to universities, arts, education, sporting associations and beyond. Because of its diversity, it is often easier to distinguish the sector by what does not belong, rather than what does. In 2010, the number of organisations in the Australian community sector was estimated to be at around 600,000<sup>1</sup>. Because of this diversity, it is difficult to present an accurate snapshot of the sector as a whole; one not-for-profit organisation has a very different mission and value to another. When attempting to measure the effectiveness, efficiency and social impact of many organisations, the diversity amongst not-for-profits can prove difficult.

Within the current policy setting, changes are rapid and have the potential to impact enormously on community agencies and the people who need them. The not-for-profit sector generates extensive social capital, strengthening the networks and relationships that underpin the effective functioning of a society. It provides communities with extensive economic and social benefits, giving a voice to those who are often marginalised while providing place-based services that enhance engagement, participation and a response to relevant community needs.

However, agencies are now facing the long-term issue of sustainability. The trend towards increased competition for social services, the emphasis on client-control and government funding cuts has meant that the not-for-profit sector is becoming unsustainable. How do we then plan for the future? In a changing political, social and economic landscape, the need for organisations to be strategic and have an outward plan in response to emerging trends is extremely important.

Previous editions of *Informed* have documented the rapid changes our sector is experiencing and the impact of such changes. This edition looks to the future for the community information and support sector, highlighting achievable ways to respond to an uncertain environment and emerging trends that have generated much discussion in the face of sustainable policies and practices.

The potentials and challenges of trends such as strategic planning and decision making, mergers and acquisitions, digital changes and innovative service models and approaches are examined. Such trends have generated discussion within the not-for-profit sector in response to funding cuts, an unstable political environment, divestment of services and programs and shifts towards outcome-based funding. With an underlying focus on governance, contributions from our member agencies address the question of how to respond to an increasingly challenging context, providing information, guidance and reflection on innovative and forward-thinking processes.



## Strategic planning and decision making for organisational growth

As changes occur, the community sector must adapt and respond accordingly.

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<sup>1</sup> Productivity Commission 2010, Contribution of the Not-for-Profit Sector, <<http://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/not-for-profit/report/not-for-profit-report.pdf>>.

Strategic planning, often referred to as business planning, is simply a process that involves defining a medium to long-term strategy or direction for an organisation. An organisation that is strategically governed is better placed to handle internal and external factors that may influence an organisation's direction. The operation of a community-based organisation is said to be at its most effective 'if it is maximising the achievement of social outcomes to address the community need that it was established for whilst maintaining financial viability'<sup>2</sup>. Strategic planning gives a greater accountability and sense of purpose within agencies, but can be confusing, challenging and time consuming. However, in the face of organisational change, strategic planning and decision making is becoming an important and essential component in planning for sustainability.

### Highlights, gaps and barriers to strategic planning and decision making

The 2013 *Strategic and Business Planning Tools for Not-for-Profit Organisations*, released by Social Traders on behalf of Victoria's Office for the Community Sector, demonstrates the value of strategic action, planning and decision making for a large majority of the not-for-profit sector. The report showcases the steps that are being taken by many in the community sector to develop strategic plans for the future, with 89% of organisations undertaking some form of strategic planning in the past. A small number of organisations had not undertaken any form of strategic planning or decision making process due to not knowing how to do so, having limited time and/or a lack of financial resources. A major shortfall was the large majority of organisations who did not utilise appropriate resources, with 85% of organisations stating they did not use the internet as a main source of information to assist with strategic planning, despite the vast array of free-of-charge tools and resources available. The research suggests

that although the not-for-profit sector has demonstrated growth and innovation, there are significant gaps in organisational knowledge and capability that presents challenges when strategically planning for the future.

The study presents a significant majority of community-based organisations who have been operating in the sector for more than 20 years. Such organisations have developed the capacity to operate and respond in a very different environment to the one that currently exists. Raising awareness of the importance of strategic planning, and taking steps to implement organisational strategy informed by effective data and analysis, is the first step to prepare for a rapidly changing environment.

### Mergers and acquisitions

There has been much discussion generated around the possibility of organisational mergers and acquisitions. In a challenging and competitive environment, mergers are becoming increasingly common in the not-for-profit sector and more successful collaborations are now being seen. So what do we mean when we talk about mergers? In the corporate sector, the merging of two companies is frequently an acquisition, where a larger company acquires a controlling interest in a smaller company. The community sector occupies a different landscape where there are other stakeholders to consider, who have an interest in creating long term social value and benefits.

The largest Australian survey of not-for-profit governance, the 2015 NFP Governance and Performance Study<sup>3</sup>, examines collaboration and merger activity as a key topical issue. Interestingly, the recent 2015 NFP Governance and Performance Study reveals that despite smaller not-for-profits having lower efficiency and higher rates of consideration of closure, it is the larger that are discussing and successfully performing mergers with other organisations. Amongst

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<sup>2</sup> State of Victoria 2013, *Strategic and Business Planning Tools for Not-for-Profit Organisations*, Summary Report

[k/corporate/your-industry/not-for-profit/nfp-governance-and-performance-study.pdf](https://www.commbank.com.au/content/dam/commbank/corporate/your-industry/not-for-profit/nfp-governance-and-performance-study.pdf)>.

Australian Institute of Company Directors 2015, *NFP Governance and Performance Study*, <<https://www.commbank.com.au/content/dam/commban>

## Mergers - four key points to consider

1. Clearly identify and clarify an organisational core purpose, informed by data and analysis of need and context
2. Develop a financial strategy that looks to the future and takes into account forecasts for future years
3. Understand the capabilities required to deliver an organisations model
4. Identify and forecast future financial and social impact targets

Source: State of Victoria 2013, Strategic and Business Planning Tools for Not-for-Profit Organisations, Summary Report

the not-for-profit sector, the rates around those considering mergers are considerably higher in the development and social services sectors than others. Considering the increasingly competitive environment that such organisations now operate in, including the contraction of available funding and a focus on outcomes-based measurement, this is not surprising.

### Mergers and acquisitions: opportunities and challenges

Although mergers are frequent in the corporate sector, discussion has been generated around the possible challenges they may present to the not-for-profit sector. Mergers respond to performance management, with potential benefits such as increasing impact, improving funding, reducing capital requirements and boosting efficiency. For clients, improving existing

services and broadening the range of services available is a large gain to be made from a merger.

Whilst there are many potential gains to a merger, there are also many challenges. When considering a merger, it is worth thinking about complexities such as cost, time consumption and succession rate. Unlike the corporate sector, the resources needed to manage a merger are commonly



not readily available to not-for-profits. It is imperative to consider the idea of community, and the ties ones organisation has to its community. Rather than thinking of a merger as simply combining organisational structures, a merger must carefully consider bringing the people, mission and values of different structures together. The not-for-profit sector relies heavily on the generosity, good will and hard work of volunteers, and mergers can be a big change for organisations. If all aspects and levels of a merger are not considered carefully, the merging of organisations can cause feelings of loss, frustration and unintended power structures and hierarchies. As the changes that can arise from a merger will affect individual staff members, volunteers and clients, such changes must be given careful consideration.

There are also many other strategies that can be utilised before a merger is discussed. Such strategies to be examined include improved collaboration, joint ventures and franchising options. Many social service organisations already have high levels of collaboration, with 78% of directors reporting that their not-for-profit already collaborates closely with others to advocate for the sector. Mergers have been successful in the sector, and are a feasible option in response to a difficult policy setting that now requires the consideration of alternative ways of

operating. It appears that the key to a successful merger is preparation, communication and transparency at all levels. There are a variety of stakeholders that must be considered, such as internal and external stakeholders and staff members, volunteers and clients. A successful merger will have a clear vision of what is achievable throughout the process, and a focus on improving services to clients and strengthening relationships within the community.

### Spotlight on digital changes and challenges

When considering organisational sustainability, the significance of emerging digital technology cannot be underestimated. With recent developments in outcome-based performance management, client-directed funding and a focus on measurement and evaluation, the expectation on agencies now is to increase efficiency and productivity. Although digital changes can seem daunting, they can provide a new avenue to increase impact and can lead to many benefits for staff, volunteers and clients, such as improved collaboration, information accessibility, maximised productivity, minimised service interruptions and effective and easy tracking of client outcomes and services. Transparency and accountability within community organisations has always been important, and in order to demonstrate this, reliable and effective data systems are needed. It is also worthwhile to consider digital platforms, such as crowdfunding and philanthropy, which have emerged as key players in the sector. Such platforms may not be directly applicable to the work an organisation undertakes, but such trends are having an impact on the sector.

### Digital technology in the not-for-profit sector: priorities and challenges

As stated in *the Digital Technology in the Not-for-profit Sector* report released as a result of a collaborative survey between Infoxchange, Connecting Up and TechSoup

#### Five steps to building awareness of 'digital disruption' within the community sector

1. Think strategically and consider how the emergence of digital technology can affect your organisation
2. Re-consider the technology capability of the mix of skills within an organisation
3. List digital disruption as a risk for an organisation, applying risk management practices at a board level
4. Expand environmental scanning to consider a digital dimension
5. Co-operate with others within the sector and beyond to enhance collaboration and partnership

NZ, the use of digital technology in the not-for-profit sector is changing rapidly and

'holds the key to change'<sup>4</sup>. The use of digital technologies – websites, social media platforms, infrastructure, mobile devices and information systems – can assist organisations with responding to efficiency and productivity needs. The report found that across the 230 Australian and New Zealand organisations that responded to the survey, the key challenges to the emergence of information technology were funding, knowledge and capability. The key priorities for agencies were revealed to be an improvement on websites and better use social media, assistance with infrastructure, and planning and implementation of better systems for client management.

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<sup>4</sup> Infoxchange, Connecting Up, TechSoup NZ 2016, Digital technology in the not-for-profit sector,

<[https://www.infoxchange.org/sites/default/files/digital\\_technologies\\_in\\_the\\_nfp\\_sector\\_-\\_31\\_may\\_2016.pdf](https://www.infoxchange.org/sites/default/files/digital_technologies_in_the_nfp_sector_-_31_may_2016.pdf)>.

Historically, the not-for-profit sector has focused on investing in frontline service delivery rather than digital technology. With changes occurring in competitive funding and outcomes-based data measurement the use of digital technology needs to be re-considered.

### Innovative planning for the future

Innovation can be easily dismissed as somewhat of a 'buzzword' that is difficult to implement on the ground. Generally, innovation refers to changing or creating more effective processes, products or ideas. Despite appearing seemingly overwhelming, innovation does not mean inventing entirely new service models; it can be as simple as looking to other organisations that provide similar service models and evaluating what is effective and what is not. Simply adapting effectively and appropriately to changes in the environment is thinking innovatively.

Within the community sector, it can be helpful to build innovation into planning for an organisation, such as integrating innovation into a strategic plan as a core commitment for the future. Innovative service models and approaches are a necessary consideration for agencies operating in the community, highlighting new processes that can act as a way forward in an environment that presents new challenges.

### Innovative and collaborative approaches: digital trends<sup>5</sup>

Innovative digital trends, such as crowdfunding, are becoming increasingly common and are providing alternative models to traditional charitable giving. A process of raising funds through an online platform and a collective community effort, crowdfunding has become an extremely popular means of financial support for both individuals and organisations. Crowdfunding is not a new concept, but with technological advancement it has grown at a rapid rate. With ideas pitched to members within the

community, the crowdfunding model has the capacity to impact significantly on agencies operating within the community sector. There are both positives and negatives to crowdfunding through an online platform; crowdfunding is more targeted and generally used to raise funds for a specific project, rather than an organisation as a whole, requiring innovative project ideas and models. Online crowdfunding also becomes more accountable to those who invest, providing frequent updates on the progress and outcomes of the project and transparency at all stages to those who are involved. With its popularity and efficiency growing, it is worthwhile to consider how crowdfunding and other digital trends will impact on an organisation, or how to incorporate such trends into a plan for the future.



### Innovative and collaborative approaches: food security

Food security is a major issue in our contemporary society. The issue crosses boundaries as a local, place-based issue into international policy discussions and debates. Defined as 'the ability of individuals, households and communities to acquire food that is healthy, sustainable, affordable, appropriate and accessible'<sup>6</sup>, a lack of food

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<sup>5</sup> See Featherstone, T 2013, The Art of Digital Fundraising, Company Directors Magazine, <<http://www.companydirectors.com.au/director-resource-centre/publications/company-director-magazine/2013->

[back-editions/november/feature-the-art-of-digital-fundraising](http://www.companydirectors.com.au/director-resource-centre/publications/company-director-magazine/2013-back-editions/november/feature-the-art-of-digital-fundraising)>.

<sup>6</sup> Rychetnik L, Webb K, Story L, Katz T 2003, Food Security Options Paper: A Food Security Planning

security is experienced particularly by those on a lower income or otherwise disadvantaged or vulnerable groups. Many of the individuals and families who utilise CISVic member agencies experience financial hardship and issues with food security. The challenge faced by governments, governmental departments and policy makers is ensuring solutions to food security are local, community based and respond to those in need.

At a local level, innovative service models and approaches have attempted to address the issue of food security that is a shared, common problem for vulnerable clients. Innovative service models such as SecondBite and FoodBank have utilised the vast amount of excessive food that goes to waste each day, and redistribute food donated by farmers, wholesalers, markets, supermarkets, caterers and events to community food programs around Australia. The community food programs assist many vulnerable members of our community, such as those who are homeless, families experiencing disadvantage, young people at risk, indigenous communities and asylum seeker and refugee families.

Such organisations are a great example of using innovation to plan for the future, and demonstrate the importance in rethinking service models and using innovative approaches that respond to a communities needs and make appropriate use of resources available.

## Useful resources

### Workshops on strategic planning and decision making

Workshops on strategic planning can be helpful in assisting the community sector with practical advice and information to build and expand capacity. In conjunction with The Bank Australia, VCOSS has previously held forums and workshops on practical strategic and financial planning and is an important resource to utilise to be kept updated on

upcoming events. To be informed of future events, you can sign up to VCOSS enews, a free, fortnightly newsletter.

<http://vcooss.org.au/>

### Tools, advice and resources in planning for a sustainable future

As revealed in Strategic and business planning tools for Not-for-Profit organisations, a large majority of community organisations are now utilising online tools and resources to assist in strategic planning. There are many different strategic planning tools available online, often free of charge.

The Our Community Group has services, tools, resources, advice and information for people and organisations who are working together to strengthen communities. There are resources around strategic planning, leadership, advocacy, effective training and marketing amongst much more.

<https://www.ourcommunity.com.au/>

The Australian Institute of Company Directors grew out of Our Community, and provides useful help sheets, books and reports, tools and articles for members of community boards.

<https://www.communitydirectors.com.au/icda/>

Mind Tools is a website where there is extensive resources around building, stimulating and strengthening individuals and teams in the work that they do. There are tools around team management, leadership, time and stress management, decision making, communications skills and creativity resources amongst much more. You can use a free trial to access information and resources.

<https://www.mindtools.com/>

## The value of our collective strength

**Jill Wilson, Sector Development Manager, Community Information and Support Victoria (CISVic)**

### Changing Landscape

New grant arrangements and tendering process for Emergency Relief, Food Relief and Financial Counselling funding from the Department of Social Services, was the catalyst for the establishment of the Community Information and Support Victoria's (CISVic) Emergency Relief Consortium.

It was this significant change for the sector that opened the doors for a more collaborative approach to delivering emergency relief. Scarcity of funding, a more competitive tendering process and new regulatory and data collection requirements all demanded a new response in how smaller emergency relief providers remained competitive and sustainable. Along with the following factors, the idea of initiating a consortium to deliver emergency relief was cemented:

- The option of forming a consortium had previously been considered within the CISVic membership,
- Conversations with departmental staff and the Minister's office have demonstrated an appetite for consortia models,
- Formation of a consortium held the potential to best position CISVic agencies as it offered protection against larger competitors, and
- with already reduced funding a consortium approach provided an opportunity to 'maximise members' chances of retaining emergency relief funding.

Given time, maybe the partnership approach that a consortia arrangement offer would have evolved organically through the strong relationships that exists within the CISVic membership. It was certainly this close

working relationship and our shared commitment to addressing the complex needs of the vulnerable and disadvantaged that solidified this collaborative approach. Mutual trust, flexibility and resilience from member agencies all played a part in forming the consortium, and ultimately to its success.

### Consortium

Coming together as a consortium was an opportunity for members to take stock and reflect on their collective and individual strengths and to draw on these when considering the new collaboration. Members felt it was important to retain their independence, remain responsive to their local communities, continue to have control over operational matters (emergency relief policies; community engagement; service integration) and protect their existing service models.

Unfortunately there was only a short timeframe to consider the formation of a consortium and it was only through the strong personal relationships and networks that existed within the CISVic member agencies that the Consortium came together.

We were fortunate however that a high level of social capital was brought to the Consortium through the partner agencies using and leveraging their strong community connections and experienced volunteer base. This, along with the following strengths, are at the core of the CISVic ER Consortium model:

- Wrap-around generalist services,
- High standard and quality of trained volunteers,



- Place-based organisations embedded within communities

## The Success of the Consortium

As a direct result of the Consortium model, CISVic has employed a Sector Development Manager and has worked as a lead partner to drive and implement strategies and initiatives to deliver services with a lens of best practice. This has supported and increased the capacity of not only the 30 consortium members but CISVic's broader membership. Key initiatives implemented include:

- Introduction of a cloud based client management system, which has enriched data collection and improved data consistency, increased reporting capabilities and compliance and enhanced service practices and processes.
- Development of a consortium Program Logic and a common set of Practice Standards, the development of these key documents has defined our collective identity and outlined a shared program framework. A consistent expectation of service across the Consortium has also been established and a shared focus for service provision becoming more effective, efficient, and appropriately targeted has been strengthened.
- Enhanced communication methods and increased training opportunities to ensure agencies and volunteers/workers on the ground are well informed and resourced.

The Consortium has also provided us with a stronger focus to expand the knowledge and capacity of all CISVic agencies through sharing of skills, experience, ideas and approaches in service delivery and operations.

A big achievement of the CISVic ER Consortium is that we have the second largest DSS funded emergency relief footprint in Victoria, second only to the Salvation Army. However, the Consortium has the flexibility and individualised

approach to remain responsive and innovative in how we provide services and supports on the ground, with the largest impact.

## Challenge in the collaboration

It hasn't all been success though with some of the Consortium's key strengths playing a large part in the challenges we have faced. Having agencies that have mainly operated independently has meant multiple consultations and robust discussion has been needed to establish agreement on decisions and structural mechanisms of the Consortium. It has also been a challenge in ensuring that all members of the consortium, large, medium and small are heard and have a say in decision making.

Introduction of new technologies has also presented a challenge for another of the Consortium's strengths - our workforce. Great effort has been made by CISVic and member agencies to accommodate new technologies to ensure compliance, including resourcing and considerations for our older volunteers.

As a sector we have seen a reduction in the overall funding for the delivery of emergency relief, which has had a significant impact on service delivery, and continues to remain the biggest challenge for the consortium and the broader emergency relief service sector.

The first year of the consortium has seen a focus on compliance, service standards and supporting members with the change to a collaborative model, the second year will see a consolidation of service standards and practice as the consortium moves towards measuring impact and outcomes for clients and communities.

## Sustainability

**Jackie Currie, Manager, Southern Peninsula Community Support and Information Centre**



I should probably begin this piece on sustainability by saying Southern Peninsula Community Support and Information Centre has not found the key to sustainability – We are not sustainable. However, we have found some ways to be more sustainable that we were before. In thinking about writing this article about sustainability I guess the key to it for us was not about the specifics of the actions – the tricks we employed and specifics that ‘fell into our laps’ or the cool people who ‘suddenly appeared’ to help us. Our sustainability journey began and succeeded when we identified we wanted our core work to survive, thrive and grow. We wanted to provide the best for our community and we opened ourselves up to trying to find different and new ways to do it. And we identified that we all at SPCSIC had a common purpose to do just that.

SPCSIC’s goal isn’t in any way different from your organisation’s goal. We want to provide the best services to our community, in the best ways possible. I bet our financial position isn’t that much different either – we need to do it all with very little money.

So the first thing we did was ask the ultimate question. What is the meaning of life at SPCSIC? Who are we? Why are we here? Why do we do what we do? Do we all have the same ideas about why we are here? Are we all saying the same things about the centre? We have a mission statement – but does anyone know what that means? Let’s ask our volunteers what we are – and our staff, and other agencies, and clients. We asked the questions lots of different ways. Surveys were useful later on, but most of the

time it was about just chatting, talking to our community, understanding, listening. Recognising that there was no wrong opinion, just different ones, and that our community, volunteers, staff, agencies, clients, businesses and local government all had information that could help us.

All this chatting and information sharing helped us understand who we were, not just as an agency, but the individuals within the agency. How we were perceived in the community. Who had a passion for what, who was inspired by what, who had always dreamed of doing what. It helped us understand this about ourselves and our wider community. It also showed that we were willing to discuss and listen. It helped us as individuals within the organisation to understand what we were part of, and what our parts were. It helped show committee members what they needed to be doing, it helped the staff and volunteers to feel they are part of the solutions, and it helped me, as leader of the organisation to realise what the people at SPCSIC could do, if they were properly equipped.

From this discussion we had a framework of information and connections, so we could start planning. Now don’t groan at the word planning. Unlike some of you, we don’t have to do planning as part of our funding commitments. Nope – we do strategic planning because we love it. Seriously! It’s fun, exciting and well... it’s honest.



At our very first planning session we got our paid staff, committee and volunteer reps together and said “what do we want to do?” Golly – did we have a list of things we wanted to do, projects to deliver, community needs

to meet – it went on, and on and on. Then we said – how can we do it? That was much harder to answer – didn't have a long a list about how to do it. We didn't have any ideas all – but we did know we needed to find a way.

All those people we had chatted to leading up to this. We started talking to all those people again. We started telling them what we wanted to do. And we knew what we wanted to do because we had a plan – a plan that everyone was behind, that everyone believed in. So we started talking about what the bits of the plans were. And people started coming up with ideas about how to make the plan work – and how to build on the plan.

An idea would build like this:

- Need more services but no money to do it ourselves? Let's get agencies that can to collocate and do it!
- Co-locators not getting much traction in the community? Let's run a network to get the agencies communicating and help them connect up!
- Agencies need a simple referral system to the co-locators? We can build that and share it out!
- We don't have enough time to do it all? Let's employ a colocation coordinator to manage all that from the rents we are charging!

Each time we added something the community we worked in saw the value of what we were adding. Planning made it considered, deliberate, and intentional. Planning helped everyone at SPCSIC align with what we were doing. Planning meant there were no surprises.

We said we were going to increase service delivery – and look at that – we did!

Planning made it possible to do and succeed. The community saw us doing, and succeeding. The community wanted to be part of our doing and succeeding. They started to give us lots of things: time, money, resources, funding, donations. And they came from lots or different and new places.

And we were able to start asking for specific things – targeted things. Things we had planned.

Now our planning sessions have changed. Every 6 months we get together – all staff, committee and volunteer reps and ask: What are we doing, and what opportunities do we have? Now the list of opportunities is very long, and our list of resources is even longer. We find ourselves turning back some opportunities in favour or ones that would be better suited to what is needed. Instead of a long list of things we would like to do and no list of how, we have a long list of things that are underway or on the horizon, and an even longer list of things that we can use to make it happen.

It's not Nirvana. I still spend the beginning of every financial year working on the budget and not sure where we are going to get all the money or resources from. But it doesn't seem like a nightmare scenario any more. Now it seems like an adventure. We don't know where every dollar or resource is going to come from, but we DO know that we will be able to achieve what we planned to do. We take advantage of the best opportunities that come our way, to provide the best services to our community, in the best ways possible.

#### Co-located services at SPCSIC

- ➔ Casey North Community Information and Support Service – Financial Counselling Program
- ➔ Featherby's Lawyers
- ➔ Gambler's Help Southern – Centralised intake service
- ➔ Good Shepherd Youth and Family Services – Financial Counselling Program
- ➔ Marillac Disability Support Service
- ➔ Maurice Blackburn Lawyers
- ➔ Monash Drink Drive Education
- ➔ National Training Centre of Australia
- ➔ No Interest Loans (NILs)
- ➔ South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault
- ➔ Stepping-Up Drug and Alcohol Services
- ➔ Tax Help
- ➔ Victorian Legal Aid
- ➔ Liz Chapman – Psychologist

## Strategic planning for sustainability

**Alison Ames, Manager, Knox Infolink**



### Stage One

After 2014 with Knox Infolink losing half their funding, the committee of management decided to undertake a Strategic Planning process to look at where the service was going and the steps to take to ensure we are still here in 2020. There is concern that our small service may not survive due to the changing focus of not-for-profit services and a current trend seeing many amalgamate, merge and certainly be open to more partnering. We wanted to look at what is serving our service to its optimum level and how we can go forward successfully.

The committee of management spoke to Council's community participation team for suggestions on 'How do we ensure we are still functioning in the future?' Council's suggestion was to apply for funding through the community grants programs to do a strategic plan and work from there.

The Centre Manager and the Committee of Management took this on board and the process started:

- Looking at the service and what we are doing
- Do we need to change any aspects of our service?
- Speaking to volunteers and staff about where they would like to see the service
- Putting a big suggestion box in the staff area encouraging all workers and volunteers to utilise this as all suggestions will be addressed

What do we do, how do we do it, why this is this way and where do we fit in in the community? How does the community see us and what is the most valuable thing the

community gets out of our service? I looked at the past, and how the service had changed, and why the changes have impacted on the service and the community as well as looking at the present.

I looked at our partners and then looked at the networks we are a part of. What value are we getting out of all of our connections, where old ways are not working for us and how we can bring in newness without losing Knox Infolink as the service it is renowned for. I then approached four strategic planning firms and spoke with them about our service and listened to the recommendations as well as requesting quotes for service. Three out of the four told me that unless we fee for service we will not have a service. They found it difficult to grasp the notion of no fees that is the fundamentals of our service.

The fourth company was totally not-for-profit based and advised us accordingly on the current changes in the not-for-profit industry and what others are doing in the meantime – Australian Strategic Services.

### Stage Two

With these quotes I filled in the funding application and we received a grant for \$20,000 dollars for a Strategic Plan for Knox Infolink.

During this process the planner came out to our service and spent some time with staff and volunteers to understand the service and culture. This was valuable time spent as he got to know the lay of the land and with his experience and knowledge of current government directions and how not-for-profit services will be shaped in the next 5 years.

Areas looked at were:

- Growing the service
- Merging
- Partnering with a larger service
- Partnering with smaller services
- Partnering with similar services and growing out of Knox
- Funding and what is being offered

- The building and is it sustainable in its current size?
- Who are our strengths in the community?
- Building a profitable service
- Providing paid service delivery! Fee for service
- What is wrong with being a boutique service and providing the same service the way we have been doing it for the past 24 years
- Do we join a hub and have collaborative services with Council?

The first meeting held was with the Committee of Management where all these areas were looked out and an agenda was then formed to address all of these ideals. A local venue was then sought and all volunteers, Committee of Management and staff were invited to attend. This was a well-received event where 85% of the service attended. The first hour was spent with the Committee of Management to prepare and then the rest of the day was spent with all of the service.

The service was presented with the big picture of current trends in the area of not-for-profits, as well as directions governments are heading with not-for-profits. We as a service took this on board, and everyone wants the service to be around in 2020 as well as preserving the richness of what Knox Infolink does but we all can see the best way forward for us was to start a merging process. This was agreed to by 95% of the volunteers, Committee of Management and staff.

### Stage Three

Presentation of the strategic plan to the Committee of Management with all of what was suggested on the day and if there is anything further that needed to be included. At this stage, we also included council and found out what their thoughts were and that we are still in line with Council's directives as well as using the time for a period of council offering up ideas in line with the plan (e.g.: HUBS).

We then as part of the process held a forum inviting community leaders and other agencies in the City of Knox and agencies engaged with services in Knox to showcase our service and to talk about where welfare is heading and how we look in this climate of change. Out of this very successful forum Knox Infolink is in discussion with four services all wanting to merge/partner/amalgamate with the service.



The benefits we have gained from our strategic process so far:

- Strengthening of our service bonds with council
- Purpose for all staff/volunteers and Committee of Management for Knox Infolinks sustainability into 2020
- A huge insight into effects of governmental decisions
- A service wide dedication to Knox Infolink being viable in 2020
- Understanding why we need to change and how we are doing this
- Recognition from other services who also want to see us grow
- Recognition for our importance and relevance in the community by Knox Council and the wider community who are aware that we will be changing parts of our service.

So far whilst it's been very busy, it's also been exciting. The feedback from volunteers is that they are excited. Staff are trepid as waiting, for the outcomes and who we will merge/amalgamate with. The Committee of Management are trepid and excited and also feel as though they are diving into the unknown.

## Joining the Consortia

### **Neville Gloury, President, Cobram Support and Information Services**

Coming under the auspice of CISVic, whilst being extremely beneficial to our community, has presented many challenges. However, it must be said that, those challenges have seen our organisation grow and expand immensely.

Firstly, the updating of qualifications of our volunteers was a major consideration. Being rather remote (three and a half hours from Melbourne and one hour from a major centre – Shepparton) presented some difficulties and considerable cost. Travelling time seemed such a waste!

The allocation of substantial funding forced us to project a twelve month budget, something we had not previously experienced. Prioritising this money made us re-consider our procedures and probably for the good. We now have a much broader outlook towards the funds and their delivery to our clients which will also be so beneficial in the upcoming financial years planning.

A major challenge for us has been the documentation and record-keeping necessary to fulfil CISVic's requirements. Hard copy and computerised data input is something we grappled with initially.

However, we now see the need and benefit of this requirement as it allows us to look back and use such data to improve our performance and allocation of funds. The statistics we draw from the data is also of immense value. Whilst our organisation is volunteer based, we have chosen to allow a small portion of our administration allowance for some clerical assistance to service the Consortium website. As far as 'Governance' is concerned we have not really struggled as our volunteers have always shown commitment, passion and a good knowledge of ethical and legal considerations. Our staff is fully trained, mentored and undergo 'on-going training' on a monthly basis. Efforts to attend 'In-Service' opportunities, whether in Melbourne or Shepparton, are embraced. Our representatives relish the opportunity to meet, greet and swap information with members of other branches and

organisations. This also enables us to establish other agencies networks, service providers and the extent of their involvement which we may be able to draw on and share from time to time. Our learning and improvement is also on-going.

With regard to 'Sustainability' we certainly have the need for continued funding to service our growing 'Emergency Relief' sector in the Moira and Berrigan Shires. The labour force in our area has its itinerant, therefore seasonal, work component. A good deal of our funds are expended on this category of client. Unemployment in our districts is relatively high along with added farm problems (e.g. dairy industry). A new consideration for Sustainability is the relatively new stress showing up in 'utilities' –particularly 'energy'. Accommodation issues are also notably on the rise.



We must express our appreciation to the Consortium for allowing us to increase our public response. Although we struggled at times, particularly with terminology, and to a lesser degree, policies and procedures, it must be stated that Cobram Support & Information Services) has provided our community, and our volunteers, with a great deal of satisfaction. The guidance, support and back up given by CISVic has enabled us to expand, become more professional and therefore better serve our clients.

The workload and the required confidentiality has prompted us to re-locate into vastly improved accommodation and strike a partnership with other service providers.

## The Creation of an Information and Crisis Support Service Inc.

**Ian Clark, Manager, Information and Crisis Support and Integrated Family Services**



### Challenges to the traditional model of Emergency Relief

Doncare's Information and Emergency Relief (I&ER) program has been an integral part of the organisation since it began in 1969. This crucial frontline program plays a central role in the provision of support, information, referrals, advocacy and practical assistance to clients who are in crisis. However, in common with similar services across the region, changes to the funding allocation rules have significantly diminished the organisation's capacity to distribute funds to clients in the form of food vouchers. Specifically, Doncare's allocation of distributable Government funds has fallen by two thirds over the past few years, and consequently the amount of funded help we can offer to individual clients over the year is much reduced. Food insecurity presents routinely as an issue for our clients and we can only provide extra help with the assistance of the community. In this, we are extremely indebted to our very generous network of local Rotary groups, church groups, schools and sporting clubs amongst others who assist us by donating generous quantities of food items that we can distribute to clients as an essential supplement to food vouchers.

Concurrently, whilst food insecurity is often the trigger that leads a client to present for Emergency Relief there are increasingly a range of multiple complex issues that underlie the need for crisis assistance. For a large cohort of clients we have found that these issues were some of the main drivers for repeated requests for emergency assistance. Examples include; issues with Centrelink payments, family breakdown, mental health issues, homelessness etc.

## Planning and establishing a Case Management Unit (CMU)

Research has found that a case manager's focus and individual capacity building can help to reduce the long-term reliance of clients experiencing financial hardship on emergency relief services. We had noted the success of a pilot project during which a student on placement with the Emergency Relief program had followed up with a client following their appointment, supporting the client to make effective use of the assistance provided. Findings suggested that assistance to deal with immediate crisis coupled with a further period of casework to tackle underlying issues promotes client empowerment, enables immediate assistance to be delivered in the context of a more substantive emphasis on change, and could reduce the demands on the overstretched Emergency Relief resource. However, whilst referral to specialist programs remains a key function of the program, they are often subject to high demand and tend to offer issue specific services. Our CEO and senior staff involved in the CISVic Student Placement Pilot Program concluded that a generic, short term case management program would be a useful addition to these services that should be equipped to respond quickly when crisis is current.

In order to examine the CMU's future direction and applicability within Doncare and the wider community, it was useful to apply certain Theory of Change concepts. In this particular case, a Program Logic model was developed with the aim of providing a clear understanding of the CMU's core values, desired impacts and outcomes, and which allowed an analysis into its inputs, participants, and activities.

Drawing on our pilot project, the Program Logic analysis and recognizing resource constraints, the Doncare team determined that the short term nature of the casework model would fit well with current placement requirements for Social Work students. It was anticipated that well supervised students would bring enthusiasm and informed curiosity to the role, would relish the opportunity to work with clients with a diverse range of issues, and could practice and refine their emerging social work skills.

Initially the CMU was able to secure funding from the Lord Mayor's Charitable Trust to fund a part-time senior social worker to coordinate the program for two years. The role of this staff member would be to coordinate the intake and allocation of referrals from the I&ER program to students and to supervise the students in their client work.

The next step was to establish a relationship with a Social Work department within a Melbourne university in order to offer placement opportunities to Social Work students. We successfully negotiated and designed an MOU with RMIT University, who were enthusiastic about the potential for assured placement opportunities within a well-known and well-regarded agency. Subsequently, our program formally commenced with two student placements in September 2013.



### Consolidation, challenges & learning

As the program developed it was important to develop strong communication between the CMU and I&ER program. Allocation meetings were developed so that issues of capacity and demand could be shared and clients formally referred with some pre-planning based on contact to date which might form the basis of a CMU action plan. Over time we developed a shared client file system so that, with the consent of the client, information sharing across the two programs enabled staff to track progress and trends that usefully inform ongoing client work. Work continues on continually improve the

quality of information and pre-planning that takes place when a new client presents to the service so that effective triage and program allocation can take place as early as possible.

Most recently, the programs have been re-structured so that the I&ER and CMU teams are now known as the Intake Team and the Response Team respectively, and together form the Information and Crisis Support program which is managed by one manager. Each team is led by a part time Team Leader.

Outcomes measures suggest that most clients who receive this additional support tend to be less prone to recurrent crisis and often make substantial progress in addressing underlying issues. Without this period of case management, it is likely that these vulnerable clients would continue to struggle with their complex issues, presenting to crisis services who have neither the resources nor time to assist them to move beyond this perpetual cycle.

Students invariably report high levels of satisfaction with their placement experience. Doncare values its commitment to the training of these new workers and the role we can thereby play in ensuring the sustainability of social work as a profession.

When welfare resources are scarce it is those who are most vulnerable who can fall into the gaps between services. Doncare is proud to have developed this innovative and cost effective approach to assist clients in crisis to use the crisis intervention as a potential springboard to substantive change to their underlying and recurrent difficulties.

## SECL: a success story

### Jinny McGrath, Manager, South East Community Links (SECL)

Hi I'm Jinny and I'm a general manager here at South East Community Links (SECL). Throughout my career as a social worker, I've been involved in a couple of mergers, or potential mergers.

### Funder-assisted merger

The first one was about 10 years ago when local council asked Springvale Community Aid and Advice Bureau (SCAAB) and Dandenong Community Advisory Bureau (DCAB) to merge – I think they saw a merge as a way to streamline their funding and work, given that they funded both of us. I was actually on the Board at SCAAB at this time, and there were a couple of things the Council did really well. The first was they bought in, and paid for, an independent consultant to work with the two organisations around the merge, who was very good. The second was that whilst Council obviously wanted us to merge, they did understand that the final decision was a decision of the members as two separately incorporated associations. Thirdly there was no penalty threatened or implied if we decided not to merge.

The consultant took us through a process where there were regular meetings of the CEOs and Chairs of each organisation which a Council officer sometimes attended. There were also meetings of our two Committees of Management, so we all had the chance to work through a number of key issues. That took quite a long period of time, maybe about 6 months. In the end, SCAAB's board agreed to the merge, but DCAB's board did not. The board of DCAAB felt that there was actually no benefit for the clients in the merge and were probably a little more suspicious of the council, thinking that they would maybe cut funding after we had merged and use it as a cost saving measure. Although we requested it, the council also never did a cost benefit analysis in order to see if it was financially better for the two organisations to merge.

## Lessons from a failed merger

I also think that one of the things that contributed to that merge being unsuccessful was that it was imposed upon us, rather than something we had come to freely. In some ways, I think that taints what people want to do. More recently, some councils have been pressuring a number of community information centres to merge. If they were going to go down that path, I would be strongly recommending three key things. First, that councils pay for an independent person to facilitate the merge. Second, that councils are upfront about why they're wanting to do it and if they intend to cut funding in some way. And finally, that there is a cost benefit analysis done. Once you merge, there's actually a lot of extra costs before you see the efficiencies down the track.



### Agency-led merger

The second merge has been more recent, and one of the interesting things is the differences between both mergers. I was previously employed as the Manager of DCAB, which merged with two organisations. That process commenced with the Southern Migrant and Refugee Centre (SMRC) approaching SCAAB to request consideration of a merge of those two organisations. My understanding was that within six weeks, they had come up with a heads of agreement that set the parameters for investigating a merge between the two organisations. When it was made public, I then raised it as a strategic issue for the DCAB board because of the potential implications for us – we would be left as a small organisation on one side of the municipality.

## Driven by strategic and sustainability considerations

The Southern Migrant and Refugee Centre (SMRC) provides a lot of the settlement services in the Dandenong area, and has been in existence for just over twenty-one years, whereas SCAAB was established in 1970 and DCAB in 1969, well before MRC's were even in existence. At DCAB, we had never done any specific settlement services as it would have duplicated what was already provided by the SMRC and SCAAB. The issue was that if those two organisations merged, it was simply going to leave DCAB providing emergency relief, some generalist casework, and some microfinance programs to people who lived in the Dandenong and Keysborough areas. This would leave us with limited capacity for growth, the possibility of being taken over or having little chance to maintain our services after the next round of ER funding, particularly as they would have a base in Dandenong (as the SMRC has their main site in Dandenong).

SCAAB and DCAB had always divided our emergency relief areas so it was quite clear to clients or residents which agency they could go to depending on where they lived. That arrangement had been an agreed upon thing over many years, and had worked well for clients in terms of where they could access ER and ensuring the funds went as far as they could.

I talked about it with our Board and they could see that we would be left quite vulnerable financially if we were to continue to go on by ourselves. So we actually approached the other two organisations, and asked to be part of their consultation and a partner in the merge. We were the smallest organisation with half a million dollars turnover, in comparison to SCAAB with about \$4 million and the SMRC with about \$5 million. By combining the three organisations we could then be considered a large organisation of \$10 million, which research tends to show is a decent size to be able to have good infrastructure and good sustainability.

## Aligning missions, values and services

Luckily, we were accepted into those talks and over a period of five to six months we explored how the merge could work. A merge committee was established, made up of people from each Board and the CEOs of the three organisations. This group considered the way each organisation was working and the values and vision of each. There was a lot of close alignment, particularly between SCAAB and DCAB, in regards to the values and vision and service provision offered. The SMRC was providing the settlement services that DCAB didn't provide but SCAAB did, so that was also a really good alignment of mission, values and services.

There were, however, some tensions around volunteers, culture and having different membership groups with different voting rights. In the end, the SMRC withdrew from the merger process. As we had already worked through processes such as the constitution and undertaken financial, legal and HR due diligence, we were already so far down the track that it was easy for SCAAB and DCAB to continue with the merge and finish within a couple of months.

## Ensuring representation and the emergence of a new entity

SCAAB and DCAB each held a special general meeting in September 2015 where the new constitution was adopted. We'd already established who would be on the new Board – certain numbers of people from each of the previous boards for the first year, and we'd also agreed that we would advertise for and appoint a new CEO. This left the process open to current staff but the onus was on the new Board to get the best person for the job. The new organisation came into being on the 1st of October 2016 – South East Community Links (SECL) and the new CEO, Dr Rhonda Cumberland, commenced in January 2016.

While all this was happening, Southern Ethnic Advisory and Advocacy Council (SEAAC) had been talking to SCAAB about wanting to merge with them and subsequently into the new SECL. In terms of what SEAAC contributed, it provided youth

services which complemented SCAAB's youth services which are mainly direct client services. SEAAC brought a far more preventative, group work and community development range of services that covered a broader geographical area to the merge. These approaches are something that we are all committed to but hadn't the resources to provide previously. SEAAC had investigated merging with at least two other organisations before they decided to merge with us. In the end, legally it was easier for them to wind up and transfer their assets to SECL which they did by December 2015. SECL made provision for them to have a new member on the Board too.



### Key reasons why the SECL merge was successful

- ➔ A strong alignment between organisations  
There was a strong alignment not just of written vision, values, mission and programs but of very similar cultural aspects. This included respect for volunteers, wanting to share and learn from each other, and feeling like we were stepping out into a new, stronger and more financially viable organisation that would lead to better services for the community.
- ➔ Ongoing commitment between organisations  
At the beginning, when the SMRC were involved, there were some up front promises or commitments made between the organisations. One of the commitments was that it wasn't about cutting jobs – although there was an understanding that efficiencies could be made, particularly in the back end. For example, if the SMRC and Springvale both had a HR manager – there wouldn't be the need for two HR managers. There was a commitment by the larger organisations not to 'take over' the smaller ones; ie although we may not have been equal in size, we all

had positive aspects to contribute - it was a merge, rather than an acquisition.

#### ➔ Due diligence

Another key thing was due diligence. We had an independent auditor look at the accounts of each of the three organisations and write up a report. The auditor didn't look just at the finances, but also other important aspects such as salaries. How do you pay your salaries if somebody is on an EBA? If SCAAB is on an EBA with above award, say sick leave, what is the impact of that going to be? This is important, as you can't have staff go backwards if everybody moves, or if you have coordinators in different organisations but they're being paid differently. It's not just where you sit financially now, but what the risks to the new organisation will be when you level out those aspects that need to be integrated. It's very important to do a projected, combined budget for at least one to three years. In addition to the financial due diligence, there is also legal due diligence. Does anybody have work cover claims? Or legal suits? In our merge, there were no issues, but these things need to be considered.

#### ➔ Independent advisors

We had independent consultants come in and look at these financial aspects, to try to do a projected for the merged organisation. Although there are some cost savings, they probably don't happen until the 2nd half of the 1st year that organisations merge – and there's also going to be some costs. In retrospect, one of the things we should have done was an IT audit what we have found after the merge is that to move everyone onto the same IT systems is going to be quite expensive. A tip would be to do that analysis at the beginning. Are we all on MACs or are some on PCs? What are our client registration or management or electronic systems? These sorts of things are important to consider as they can have quite a large financial impact on going forward as a merged organisation.

#### ➔ Collaboration between the organisation's boards and merge representatives

The boards of the organisations need to come together to agree on the decision making powers of their representatives that will be on the merge committee – they need to be very clear on what they can decide and what the boards need to decide. This is because it can really slow things up if lots of decisions have to go back from the merge

group to the board for ratification. It's best for the board to set some parameters and really think about the things that are non-negotiable. The board of DCAB was very clear that one of our non-negotiables was volunteers having the ability to be full members and to vote as members but the merge reps need to be given some flexibility as the merge meetings were where most of the negotiations took place.

→ Ongoing consultation with staff and volunteers

As soon as it was agreed upon that we would look at going towards an organisational merge, DCAB had a consultation with our volunteers. Because volunteers make up the majority of our staff, about 80%, we had a fairly informal meeting with all of our volunteers explaining what the merge was about and asking them what their major concerns were. Some of them were minor, but they needed to be put to rest. There were questions around changes such as: will we be told we've got to go to another site and volunteer? They also wanted to make sure that as a manager, I would still be there for them, and that I wasn't going to be sacked in the process. We couldn't assure that, because when a new CEO comes in, a new structure might come in, but there was a commitment that I would be there as part of the process. We continued to have consultation with our volunteers throughout the process. The CEOs of the organisations also focused on giving consistent messages on a regular basis to staff, both paid and volunteer, on what was happening.

### After the merge – forging a new identity

SCAAB and DCAB merged on the 1st of October 2015 and things didn't really settle properly until the new CEO was appointed. In our case, that happened to be somebody from outside, which I think can be really good to have when there are organisations of different sizes merging.

As SCAAB was already considering a new name, we decided that we should look at this. There was a commitment to the boards of the smaller organisations before we merged that we would try to give some honouring to the identity of the other organisations, which resulted in when we first merged having divisions for each organisations –the SCAAB

division or SEAAC division. What is really interesting is that almost a year down the track there has been a coming together, an idea of let's try to just commit to one name but still honour the history and what people have brought to the new organisation.

Even though DCAB hasn't been subsumed, there are at times feelings that with Springvale being the larger partner, a number of processes and procedures they have developed are being imposed on the smaller partners. This is partly due to the fact they have well documented policies & procedures.

This is partly due to the fact they have well documented policies and procedures. However it is important for us to push back at different times, asking questions such as 'do you realise that may not be the best way? Can you look at the way we do things?' I think it's an ongoing negotiation and will be assisted by the new structure recently implemented that involves some people moving sites as well as the recent planning processes that have involved everyone in developing our new strategic plan. In this way we are becoming one SECL

### Keeping it local – merged entities can still be place-based

There is a commitment to the fact that the clients that we might see at the Dandenong site might be different to the Springvale site. In Dandenong, we probably have a higher level of single males that we see who live in boarding houses, whereas there may be higher numbers of single parent families in Springvale. These clients have different needs, and there is an acceptance that the services provided need to meet the community's needs. We did do a volunteer survey as the new organisation earlier this year and asked about communication and the amalgamation. What was really interesting was that there was a very positive response from volunteers feeling that they had been given information, kept up to date and had a say in the process. That was good feedback to hear in terms of how we did the merge.

## SECL tips - things to think about for organisations considering a merge

### 1. Establishing a merge committee

It is important to have a merge committee that has representatives from your board and your CEO or manager, and to give them very clear terms of references and a fair amount of decision making power. I would also recommend a few joint Board meetings with an experienced facilitator to work through some key decisions to ensure buy in from all Board members. The merge committee spends a lot of time negotiating and it's always a bit of give and take. It can be a very long, drawn out process if key issues don't have endorsement from all.

### 2. Consider time

It is important to try to complete the merge in the shortest time possible – six months is a good amount of time. Another aspect is the time of the year. SEAAC came in with us in December. This and January are not good times to do mergers, as people are away on holidays, funding acquittals are due etc. If you can, the beginning of a new financial year, from the first of July, would be better (although acquittals due then too). SCAAB and DCAB merged from the first of October which was the beginning of a quarter, and that's probably the next best thing. There also needs to be time given to the people who are going to have to transition. I was employed for about an extra day a week for the whole six months that led up to the merge, and that's a big cost in terms of time. Whilst eventually we'll be more financially sustainable, in the short term there's a lot of costs.

### 3. Keep stakeholders updated

Keep all of the stakeholders, including the funding bodies, updated. As soon as DCAB had decided that we would explore a merge, we informed all of our stakeholders. To keep them updated is important, especially when you move to the next point of committing, and making stakeholders aware that, 'yes, we're having the meeting, and we're going to merge' and then 'we have merged'.

### 4. Be adequately prepared

There is quite a lot of work to be done after a merge – legally and administratively. SECL probably could have been more adequately prepared. Whilst we had transition plans for merging finances, getting DGR status for the new entity, notifying stakeholders and many other things, the list grew substantially after the merge. It could well be worth having the Special General Meetings to decide on a merge three months prior to the amalgamation date. This would then allow a new CEO to be in place by the time the merge comes into effect and would give more time to organise the things that you can't start until after those meetings e.g. setting up new bank accounts, applying for DGR, getting the new constitution approved by CAV, notifying suppliers, getting new letterheads, organising merging of IT systems.



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