



The New Zealand Psychological Society

Te Rōpū Mātai Hinengaro o Aotearoa

Opinion Piece on Social Bonds for Mental Health Services

On behalf of the New Zealand Psychological Society

June 2015

Investing in Futures- Who will benefit?

Who wouldn't want to support investment in positive mental health outcomes for those who are having difficulties in living lives that we all aspire to? Having, healthy, happy relationships, steady employment access to education and satisfying leisure activities provides a firm foundation for a well-lived life. New Zealand has had an inspirational history of looking after its citizens. We have had a democratic ethos of paying taxes with the expectation that the Government will, on our behalf, fund services for those in need.

The introduction of social bonds signals a dramatic change in our values around assisting people with mental health problems. Many New Zealanders might struggle with the idea of some citizens profiting from the misery of others. They might think it repugnant to use market forces - the creator of damaging inequality in our society – to fix the mental health problems which are often caused or exacerbated by inequality. This is what social bonds are all about- a return on investment for the funders of essential social services.

Social bonds seem to offer an elegant financial solution to an acknowledged area of social need. People with mental health problems should have access to paid employment. Private investors have money they are willing to spend for a good cause (especially if they stand to make something out of the deal as well). Put these two together and the problem is solved. But, like all apparently simple solutions, the devil is in the detail.

Let's consider the issue of work for people with mental health problems. Yes, being able to work may bring a sense of worth and independence for some. For others work may be a source of stress, a challenge to growing confidence in other areas of life and a threat to

precariously established gains in mental health. In some cases one type of work will be helpful and in others detrimental. Flexible or part-time hours or the ability to shift in and out of work as needed will be what is needed in others. These subtleties make all the difference and it just might be that the profit motive mitigates against flexible, individual solutions. This is familiar terrain for people who work in the health and social service sectors.

The difficulty with social bonds is that successful outcomes are framed not in the murky and complicated world of social problems. They are framed in the neat clear language of commercialism that talks of measurable targets and financial rewards. As critics from elsewhere in the world have noted, social bonds are not well set up to deal with the complexity of social problems. The risk is that targets will drive a focus on those who are easiest to place at the expense of those whose needs are more complex or have less capacity to work. But the issue is bigger than just who will and will not be helped with this new funding system.

What seems to be missing from the discussion of social bonds are the people who will be affected by these changes. How will social bonds improve the lives of many people who struggle in often complex situations of deprivation where poverty and mental health problems go hand in hand? Who will want to invest in the uncertain futures of these New Zealanders? Those who are able to work do not need the monetary investment of profit seeking New Zealanders to do so- they need the support of psychologists and other mental health workers and families to return to work in ways which meet their needs. They also need jobs to be available and a living wage to sustain them.

What is also missing is a discussion of the mental health and addiction services which are already highly successful in assisting people to recover and contribute. In promoting the social bond concept for the funding of social services, it seems the Government has bypassed many questions and jumped straight to a single answer. The answer – an unproven funding model with some broader ethical issues - is not one that will rest easily with all New Zealanders.

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About the New Zealand Psychological Society

The New Zealand Psychological Society is the largest professional association for psychologists in New Zealand. It has over 1400 members and subscribers who apply psychology in a wide range of practical and academic contexts to health, education, young people's services, organisations and corrections. Our collective aim is to improve individual and community wellbeing by supporting and promoting excellence in psychology.