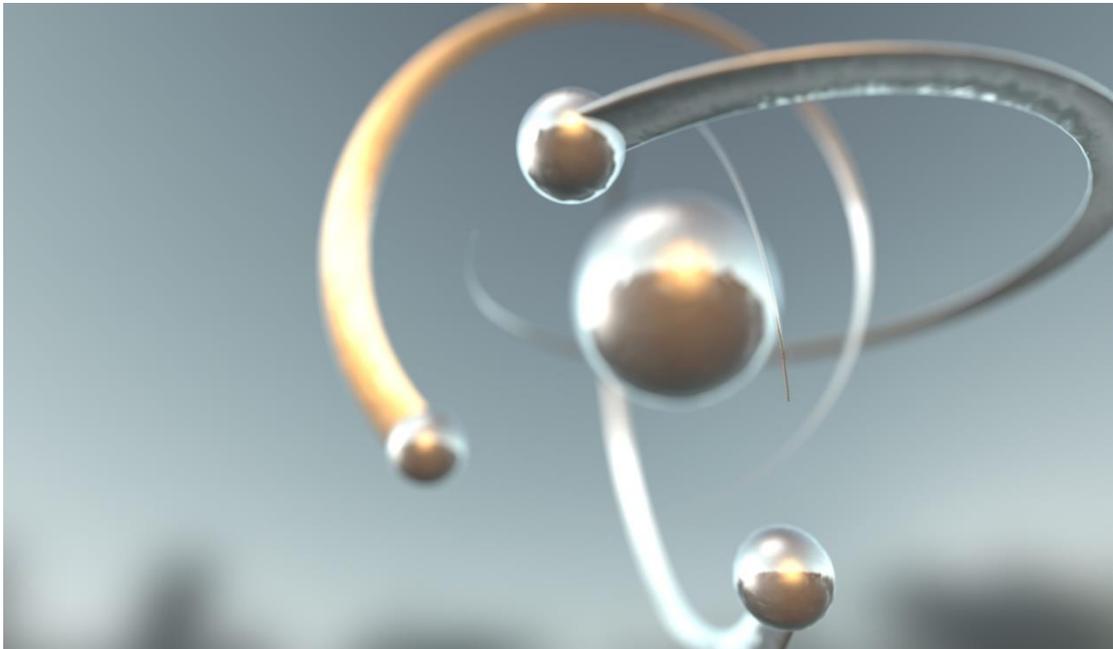


Assessing the impact of Circles of Support and Accountability on the reintegration of adults convicted of sexual offences in the community

Executive Summary

**Terry Thomas,
David Thompson and Susanne Karstedt**



**Centre for Criminal Justice Studies,
School of Law,
University of Leeds.**



June 2014

Executive Summary

Sexual offending is a serious and uniquely invasive form of offending. When the victims are children the violation is even more harmful. The subject of sexual offending and the appropriate response to such offending has moved steadily up political and public agendas over the last 15 -20 years. Successive Governments have introduced laws and policies to manage and contain the person living in the community who has been convicted for sexual offences and to enhance the levels of public protection to that community.

A complementary approach to managing people in the community has been that based on ideas of restorative justice and the GLM (Good Lives Model). Rather than identify 'deficits', risks and other 'negatives' that needed treatment, managing or 'exclusion', these approaches seek to work with the sex offender and to 'include' them back into society as better functioning members of that society. It particularly focused on a person's 'positives' and 'strengths' rather than his or her 'deficits'. Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) is a prime example of this approach.

This report is about Circles of Support and Accountability and their work with sexual offenders. CoSA is a community-based initiative that originated in Canada whereby volunteers work with sex offenders living in the community where the majority of the offenders live having only recently been released from custodial sentences. CoSA Projects consist of a Coordinator who organises a team of volunteers who form a Circle to work with the offender known as the Core Member to help them resettle in the community after imprisonment. The Coordinator also liaises with the probation service and the police service to ensure that relevant information on the Core Member is fed back to them. *Circles UK* is the umbrella organisation of all regional CoSA Projects in England and Wales.

This report is based on research that was conducted from the University of Leeds and Leeds Metropolitan University. From May 2013, the research team included Professor Susanne Karstedt, Professor Terry Thomas, PhD Candidate and Researcher David Thompson and Professor Birgit Völlm. For a certain time period between 2010 and May 2013 the research team included Dr Catherine Appleton and Professor Anthea Hucklesby.

Funding for this study was generously provided by the Wates Foundation and they supported the project throughout its lifetime. The School of Law, University of Leeds, also provided financial and other support to facilitate the completion of this research project. To further disseminate the findings of the research, funding was awarded to David Thompson and Professor Susanne Karstedt by the University of Leeds Professional Services Sector Research and Innovation Hub.

This report was authored by a team of academics working in Leeds. This team was led by Professor Karstedt, and the interviews were conducted by David Thompson; the draft text was jointly written by Professor Terry Thomas and David Thompson and finalised by the whole team. Chapter Five was written by David Thompson.

This report is the result of a three year study. The original aim of the research was stated as ‘to assess the extent to which CoSA Projects contribute towards the reintegration of adult sex offenders into the community’. The more specific objectives of the research were to:

- Examine the frontline practices of CoSA;
- Describe the cohort of Core Members who have completed or are currently in a Circle;
- Explore the experiences of Core Members;
- Identify the key components which are associated with re-integration in the community;
- Explore the background, motivation and experiences of volunteers;
- Investigate the links between the operation of CoSA and statutory provisions for sex offenders, such as Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA), probation and the police;
- Assess the relative importance of factors and services in the process of reintegration for sex offenders;
- Contribute towards the development of good practice.

The report is based on a literature review, collection of administrative data on Core Members, interviews with Core Members, interviews with volunteers and interviews with key stakeholders. 70 interviews were conducted, 30 with Core Members, 20 with volunteers, and 20 with key stakeholders from Police, Probation and Project Coordinators, from a number of ongoing CoSA Projects in England and Wales. For all interviews, the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach was adopted. In addition, the Core Members and volunteers completed short questionnaires to collect socio-demographic data.

The report is divided into four Parts:

- (1) Circles of Support and Accountability - History, Development and Assessment;
- (2) Sex Offenders in the Community: the context - the statutory arrangements of public services working with sex offenders in the community and pending changes from the *Transforming Rehabilitation* agenda; the role of the private sector and the voluntary sector;
- (3) The findings of this study based on 70 interviews with offenders (Core Members), volunteers, and stakeholders - the Project Coordinators, Probation Officers, Police Officers working in Public Protection Units and MAPPA Coordinators and Senior Managers holding positions within MAPPA. This Part examines the frontline practices and the experiences of the respective participants in Circles.
- (4) Review and Recommendations – This part includes a summary of the key findings from the research and recommendations and suggestions based on the findings.

This research and report focus on the experiences of those who are involved in CoSA, those who are Core Members and those who work as volunteers, Coordinators and stakeholders in and with Circles Projects. The research is not an assessment of the impact or efficiency of CoSA Projects in terms of recidivism, employment and other measures of wider integration. It is not a comparison with other types of programmes

in this area. Instead this research assesses the experiences of those being in and working with a Circle, those who organise the Circle and those who work with CoSA in statutory agencies. On a cautious note, even if Core Members might give the subjective impression that they profit from a certain type of intervention, this might not be true if measured against objective measures of behavioural problems, recidivism, and other indicators. However the report represents a thorough assessment of these experiences, independent of any measurement or indicator of reducing recidivism or reintegration. Overwhelmingly, these are positive experiences by all groups, and in particular the Core Members.

Summaries of Result Chapters

Circles of Support and Accountability – History, Development and Assessment

Circles of Support and Accountability originated in Canada and started in the UK in 2001. The practice of organising volunteers in this way to help rehabilitate people with convictions for sexual offences back into the community after custodial sentences has gradually spread across the country from its beginnings in the Thames Valley and Hampshire. A centralised coordinating body – *Circles UK* – now sets standards for Circles and accredits new Projects and monitors existing ones. Evaluation studies to date have demonstrated the achievements of Circles, but no evaluation studies which can generate sufficiently robust results on CoSA in England and Wales currently exists. Public awareness has been relatively low-key although there has been a degree of press and broadcast coverage. Other countries have taken an interest in Circles and the movement looks set to continue spreading.

Sex Offenders in the Community

The current ‘management’ of sex offenders in the community by the public statutory agencies include primarily the police, probation service and the prisons linked together in the local Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA). Within these arrangements the emphasis in the past has been on ‘containing’ the released offender. More recently that emphasis has been revisited in the light of concepts of rehabilitation and resettlement. At a national level policies of rehabilitation have been the subject of intense debate as the *Transforming Rehabilitation* agenda of 2013-2014 seeks to implement major changes to our ways of assisting people released from custody. The private sector and the voluntary sector are envisaged as playing an important part in this changing landscape of rehabilitation. Organisations like *Circles UK* and individual Circles Projects will be seeking their own footing in this new world. The National Probation Service will be the obvious partner for *Circles UK* and Circles Projects because the National Probation Service are responsible for supervising sex offenders in the community under the new regime. Given all the uncertainty surrounding *Transforming Rehabilitation* however, there is a possibility that some of the lowest risk sex offenders could be managed by the private sector and this presents another opportunity for partnerships for CoSA.

An initial assessment would suggest that Circles Projects will not experience the major changes that other parts of the rehabilitative services might experience. High risk sex offenders will continue to be managed by the National Probation Service and if required Circles of Support and Accountability will continue to work in partnership

with the National Probation Service. Few changes are anticipated for the police and their Public Protection Units and their role of on-going risk assessment of offenders on the sex offender register.

The voluntary sector will be encouraged to form partnerships with the probation service (public and private). *Circles UK* and CoSA Projects are well placed for this change because the volunteers are committed to what they do with CoSA. *Circles UK* also has established a number of good practices for training and guidance for volunteers. In this way, *Circles UK* and CoSA Projects actually have an advantage over other providers. If the private sector do get involved with the management of sexual offenders, some volunteers might not be attracted to work with the private sector as easily as they have been attracted to the public sector. CoSA Projects have an advantage in attracting volunteers to work with offenders because they are mostly charitable organisations working not for profit. Thus they have a greater appeal for the outwardly motivated volunteers, who will prefer working for charities rather than for the private sector, if unpaid.

Frameworks of Change

The welfare approaches to working with offenders to help them back into society was somewhat restricted by the mid-1970s doubts about 'what worked'. The resulting move was toward 'just deserts' sentencing and a 'negative' focus on an individual's 'deficits' or 'criminogenic needs'. This movement was referred to as the Risk, Needs, Responsivity (RNR) approach. In the late 1990s and early 2000s this 'deficits' approach was challenged by what was seen as a more 'positive' and 'strengths-based' approach. This means that offenders have the same basic human needs as everyone and strive for basic 'primary human goods' in order to live a reasonable life in society. This movement was referred to as the Good Lives Model (GLM). In turn the GLM also fitted with the growing restorative justice approaches emerging at the same time.

With its approach on 'Support' and 'Accountability' CoSA aims at integrating these different approaches. However, operating on a mix of risk-based and so called strengths-based approaches might explain some of the difficulties experienced in the work of CoSA by different groups.

The Volunteers: Key Findings

The use of volunteers to work alongside the professionals who deal with people convicted of sexual offences is the unique feature of Circles. Findings include how volunteers got started in this field, what motivated them, how they experienced recruitment and training and what they thought of the actual Circle meetings. Further, views on their working relationship with the Core Member and with their fellow volunteers were explored, as well as general views of Circles. The research probed into how they perceived concepts like 'support' and 'accountability' and how they might recognise signs of success and risk in their contact with the Core Members.

The volunteers were highly motivated. Nearly half of the volunteers stated they had initially volunteered to aid their own career prospects or expressed a voyeuristic desire to work with sex offenders, however, many changed their views having completed a Circle. The majority had volunteered for outward, more altruistic reasons. They had their expectations confirmed and have continued in their role with

Circles. Training was highly thought of with most saying it added to their knowledge or provided a strong base for them to start working with Core Members. The relationship volunteers had with the Coordinator was also identified as important and providing a link to the Project as a whole. In some cases it was the 'sales-pitch' or enthusiasm of the Coordinator which encouraged the volunteers to join CoSA. The volunteers stressed that they felt the Coordinators were an ever-present support for them should they need it and were a respected source of knowledge.

What constituted a good meeting varied between the Circles and the individual needs of Core Members, though free-flowing and humorous meetings were seen as important. Outside of the formal meetings, volunteers met with Core Members at libraries, art galleries, café's and other venues according to the Core Members wishes or needs. These meetings outside of the formal settings were seen as pivotal in developing the Core Members' social skills and relationships, but also in helping them recognise the progress they were making. The volunteers felt Core Members enjoyed activities which were 'fun' though benefitted more from activities such as library visits or assisting at the job centre.

Volunteers had a realistic assessment of what they could achieve with Core Members. They felt they could not completely change their behaviour but they could 'nudge' them in the right direction through pro-social modelling. They all felt the importance of accepting the Core Member as a fellow-citizen rather than seeing him as a stigmatised 'outsider'. Providing a sense of structure and reliability in the Core Members life by attending the weekly meetings was also felt to be important by volunteers. Despite being unable to control behaviours or directly change the behaviour of Core Members, the volunteers did imply that via the Circle they could affect some changes (e.g. mannerisms and appearance) and provide an environment which offers something different to that which professionals give in supervision meetings or treatment programmes.

The interviews demonstrated the capacity of the volunteers to be supportive of the Core Member. In doing so, Circles in line with reintegrative shaming principles, express societies disapproval for the act while accepting the guilty party back into the community and thus help prevent future offending through a process of active reintegration.

There was apparent confusion regarding the meaning and limits of the word 'accountability'. The lack of a precise and shared understanding of this central concept remains significant. Some volunteers saw accountability to be about the past and the Core Members' original offence, whilst others saw it as being about the present and future behaviour. Some volunteers felt that they as volunteers were ultimately accountable for any risky behaviours not being identified. Others felt that the role of the volunteers was limited to passing any instances of risky behaviours or disclosures of harm to the Coordinator. Despite this lack of clarity it is arguable that the volunteers are in fact holding Core Members to account and are able to effect some changes in their behaviour.

The Stakeholders: Key Findings

The professionals who worked with Circles collectively were seen as the 'stakeholders' and included the Coordinators of CoSA Projects, Police Officers,

Probation Officers and MAPPA Coordinators and Senior Managers. Project Coordinators have a pivotal role in Circle Project arrangements pulling everyone together and ensuring the service is delivered. The police has a slightly more distant role from the actual Circles but have clear views on the work they do. Probation Officers feel closer to the volunteers and are well informed on the work carried out. Both Police and Probation Officers feel that part of their role is to ensure the welfare of the volunteers.

The CoSA model was considered a good model by all stakeholders and was seen as adding an extra dimension to the work that they themselves could do with sex offenders. However, CoSA also offered something different from the professionals' contribution. There was broad agreement that the use of volunteers is good and volunteers were regarded positively by all respondents. Many of the stakeholders noted the levels of commitment displayed by the volunteers and the common-sense views which volunteers could bring to the role, which is unencumbered by professional training.

Most stakeholders did raise some concerns as to the need to protect volunteers from the Core Member or from the consequences of the actions of Core Members. Both Police and Probation Officers made this point about protection for the volunteers, albeit in slightly different ways. The Police saw protection in terms of ensuring that the volunteers had sufficient information about the potential Core Members. In contrast, the Probation Officers were concerned to directly intervene if they saw any risk to the volunteers, and if necessary even by stopping a Circle. These risks included volunteers being in harms-way of a Core Members behaviour (e.g. offending or grooming etc); volunteers feeling mistreated by Core Members or being under-valued by the Criminal Justice System. The need to protect came from the Police Officers and Probation Officers rather than it was mentioned and requested by the volunteers, and in our material we did not find any such remarks from volunteers.

At the same time the volunteer's commitment and enthusiasm, as well as their motivation was questioned, especially by half of the Police Officers interviewed. This group raised questions as to the initial motivations for the volunteers engaging in CoSA although their knowledge of recruitment and training of volunteers was by their own admission, limited, and thus not based on accurate information. This should be of concern to Circles.

All Project Coordinators had previous links to Probation. They displayed the best understanding of CoSA and there was a consensus amongst them as to how CoSA should operate. Some Coordinators took on additional duties 'at the edges' of the formal role which had been unexpected but which were deemed to be important to maintaining the functioning of the Project. These additional duties could lead to stress among Coordinators.

Communication, Collaboration and Information Exchange

All stakeholders and the volunteers placed a high value on information exchange within Circle Projects. However, there were differences of opinion amongst them about the information flowing from and to Circles. The Probation Officers felt the flows of information to be quite strong and regular whereas the Police, who placed a high value on any information they received had mixed experiences. Some were just

grateful for any information received from the Circle, but others found the degree of information not as forthcoming as they had expected.

A distinction was made between 'personal information' and other forms of information. 'Personal information' about the Core Member went from the professionals to the Circle volunteers and alternatively went from the volunteers to the professionals. The Coordinators held a pivotal role in the centre of proceedings acting as a 'gatekeeper' and ensuring the movement of relevant 'personal information'. Personal information was the category of information that was of most concern. This was information that related to an identifiable person and could lay claim to being 'private' and needing a degree of 'confidentiality' surrounding it. The personal information about the Core Member coming into the Circle was generally very strong and positively received. Good communication channels existed and this incoming personal information was seen as part of the professionals' duty to 'protect' volunteers. This appeared to be an example of collaboration working at its best.

Personal information moving outward from the Circle to the professionals could be more problematic. Quite a number of professionals saw Circles as an extra set of 'eyes and ears' for the criminal justice system. Most of the time it worked well and was valued by the professionals, but sometimes there was a lack of clarity over the relevance of outward information from the Circles. Some professionals wanted to see 'any' information coming from the Circle because all was considered to be useful and supplementary to their own interventions and intelligence and contact with the Core Member. The Project Coordinators, however, saw it as their role to filter information and be the gatekeeper of the Circle and sometimes they kept the gate closed. In most instances this filtering was carried out in a responsible way with Coordinators making considered and defensible decisions on what information was being passed on. The *Circles UKs Code of Practice* states that information should be '*relevant to risk, progress and safety*'. These are arguably quite ambiguous and subjective terms and open to interpretation. Coordinators who are putting 'everything' through, could be deviating from the Code and using a 'precautionary logic' that implied it's 'better to be safe than sorry'.

The levels to which filtering is open to interpretation could create difficulties to all parties. At the centre the Core Member could be limiting their input of information to the Circle based on how much they think will be moved forward by the volunteers. The volunteers consider how much they should pass to the Coordinators and the Coordinator has to decide how much he or she will pass to police or probation. This discretionary filtering could also be open to misinterpretation which at worst could jeopardise the balance and functioning of the Project. Support and accountability in a Circle are always in a delicate balance and the perceived misuse of information on the accountability side could lead to an undermining of the support side of the equation.

There is also a balance between providing personal information and keeping the trust of the Core Member. Generally the Coordinators did very well in maintaining this balance in their gatekeeper role. However, at least three examples of instances were found where this balance was difficult to maintain and decisions were made under high levels of uncertainty. This further corroborates other findings that highlight the lack of clarity around the concept of accountability.

The Core Members: Key Findings

Core Members recounted the discomfort, uncertainty and fears that their 'new' status as sex offenders gave them. Many had lost family, social networks and the familiarity of a home town. In the wider context this isolation could be amplified by adverse press reporting and moving to towns or cities where they knew no-one. The result was often a self-imposed restriction to the home and a withdrawal from the community. The opportunity provided by CoSA, however, even with the initial uncertainties they had of its role, was seen as representing an opportunity to counter some of the barriers to reintegration. Misconceptions included fears of CoSA being an extension of the statutory agencies, especially the police and probation services or being judged by the volunteers. For those who were better informed the move to a Circle provoked less anxiety.

An unexpected finding was the extent of contact made by telephone outside of the formal meetings. Contact was equally initiated by volunteers and Core Members. The use of the telephone constituted an informal and valued supplement to the formal Circle, not least because contact could be made throughout the whole week if necessary. The existence of this 'virtual' network was another means of countering the isolation they experienced.

Initial meetings were 'scary' for many of the Core Members, especially about meeting a group of complete strangers and talking about their offending. As the routine of the meetings developed, Core Members became more comfortable, settled and recognised the mostly non-judgemental attitudes of the volunteers. The meetings could be challenging for some Core Members and could induce stress for them but on the whole the context of the meetings provided a different type of meeting to that which Core Members had with the statutory sector and it was recognised and appreciated as such.

Core Members spoke highly of other activities that took them beyond the formal meetings with the volunteers. Those activities included visits to coffee bars, museums, art galleries, sporting events and walks. Meals were also a popular activity of the Circle to celebrate birthdays and seasonal events. These activities took the focus away from their offending and were seen by Core Members as activities which 'normal' people would do.

The opinions Core Members held of the volunteers were largely positive, with many Core Members being grateful for the time given up to help them, the acceptance of the Core Members as fellow-citizens, and for providing a safe environment for the discussion of sensitive topics. Core Members did question the number of volunteers who came with previous experience of working in criminal justice, particularly from the Probation Service. Opinions of Coordinators were also mostly positive and Core Members were grateful for their reassurance at difficult times and their ability to match their needs with suitable volunteers. Highly directive interactions with Coordinators were rejected by Core Members and seen as inappropriate.

Understandings of Support and Accountability contrasted. Support was well understood and Core Members were appreciative of the efforts of the volunteers in terms of general encouragement and with specific matters. Accountability on the other hand was a more difficult concept for them to understand. Most Core Members

initially were confused by the very word accountability and its meaning, however, many of the Core Members were able to provide instances of where the volunteers had called them to account for their past offending or current 'risky behaviours'. Generally though the Core Members felt that responsibility to be accountable rested with them.

The vast majority of Core Members reported feeling more confident, gaining a wider social circle, being more appreciative of themselves and many said their working relationship with statutory agencies such as the police and probation had improved. Some felt they had gained new perspectives on their lives and more self-awareness as a result of their participation in CoSA. Many credited the Circle as having effected these changes, although others were more circumspect, saying CoSA were just one of a number of influences that had caused them to rethink their life. Overall CoSA, the volunteers and Project Coordinators were seen positively by the Core Members.

Review and Recommendations

The governments *Transforming Rehabilitation* agenda implemented in 2014 will change the landscape of rehabilitation for people leaving prison. Circles of Support and Accountability and *Circles UK* as their coordinating central body has to find its best and most suitable position within the new panorama that is opening up.

The changes will mean the new National Probation Service will retain only 30% of its former work and the remaining 70% of traditional probation work will move to the private sector. The 30% of work left with the National Probation Service will include work focused on public protection, work directly managing those subject to MAPPA and those who pose the highest risk to the public; this will include work with sex offenders. High risk sex offenders will continue to be managed by the National Probation Service and if required Circles of Support and Accountability will continue to work in partnership with the NPS. Few changes are anticipated for the police and their Public Protection Units and their role of on-going risk assessment of offenders on the sex offender register. The voluntary sector will be encouraged to form partnerships with the probation service (public and private).

Circles UK and CoSA Projects are well placed for all these changes. The reasons are: they have volunteers with a strong commitment to their work with CoSA; *Circles UK* has established a number of good practices for training and guidance for volunteers. This provides *Circles UK* and CoSA Projects with a pole-position in the future, more competitive environment.

Volunteers and Volunteering

There was a time when it was felt that only professionals could work with sex offenders and that this was not suitable work for volunteers. That position has clearly changed and Circles Projects are the manifestation of that change.

The Circles Coordinators find them either an easy group to manage being excellent in their role, enthusiastic and relating well to the Core Members. On the other hand they are a difficult group to manage. These difficulties arise because they are volunteers

and not ‘workers’ and at worst they can just walk away from the Circle if they do not like it. Being part of a Circle is a big commitment.

Volunteers are lay people and as such this is both a strength and a weakness. A strength because they offer a fresh non-professional outlook that represents an acceptance of the Core Member but with the ‘man (or woman)-in-the-street’ view. They offer commitment and an immediate set of relationships for the Core Member. The weakness of the volunteer is that they might miss things that a professional would recognise. The very appearance of the Core Member was cited as a case in point. Volunteers thought that a dishevelled and scruffy looking Core Member was evidence of going ‘downhill’ where more offending might be about to start while a smartly dressed Core Member was showing signs of engagement with the world and evidence of probable desistance from offending. The professionals on the other hand, thought smart appearance could denote the opposite and could mean Core Members were already re-offending.

The volunteers were also unsure of whether ‘accountability’ meant accountability for the Core Members original offending or whether it should be applied to future possible offending. An emphasis was put on the initial disclosure of original offending by the Core Member at the start of the Circle but there was uncertainty as to whether this meant a need for constant revisiting of that event in later meetings.

Recommendations:

Recruitment of Volunteers

- Thought should be given to ways of widening the marketing of Circles for a greater cross-section of society to be brought in;
- More balance between ‘ordinary’ members of the public and people with backgrounds in criminal justice should be sought;
- More monitoring and exploration of absences and withdrawals by volunteers should be carried out.

Training for Volunteers

- Regular reviews of training provision and material are recommended;
- More sharing of best training practices at Coordinator forums and via Newsletters is encouraged;
- Evaluations of the initial training and further training should be sought from volunteers;
- Short refresher training for volunteers starting a new Circle is encouraged (some projects are already doing this)
- Training should include more content on the isolation and stigma attached to people with convictions for sexual offending;
- Training should be jargon-free for volunteers;
- Training should provide greater clarification and understanding of what is meant by ‘support’ and ‘accountability’;
- Training should provide clarification and understanding of ‘personal information’ ‘privacy’ and ‘confidentiality’;
- Training should help volunteers decide what to report and not report; at present there seems to be uncertainty;

- Training should help volunteers better distinguish between the roles of the Police (PPU) Officers, Probation Officers and volunteers;
- *Circles UK* and regional CoSA Projects should look into the possibilities to reduce the time gap between training ending and first Circle

Circles and Activities of Volunteers

- Training should cover appropriate other activities that could take place in a Circle;
- Guidance should be given to volunteers on what degree of planning should go into a Circle meeting and how much should be unplanned and spontaneous;
- Guidance should be given to volunteers on whether a Circle should focus on past offences or future behaviour;
- Guidance should be given on suitable venues for meetings (e.g. should probation offices be avoided to make the point that Circles is not a part of the statutory mechanisms);
- Guidance should be provided on ensuring meetings are in ‘safe’ places and not liable to interruption;
- Guidance should be provided on what is the minimum operational size of a Circle should individual volunteers not be available for a meeting; rules on one to one meetings should be clarified;
- Guidance should be provided on what constitutes ‘progress’ in a Circle and of a Core Member;

Communication and Collaboration

Collaboration and ‘working together’ is a well-established feature for agencies working in the criminal justice system. Working together can be pictured as a continuum from regular arms-length communication, through to various degrees of closer cooperation and coordination and on to elements of merger and ultimately incorporation. Such working together can take place at a high strategic level between organisations or at a lower service delivery level between practitioners on the ground. There is a recurring debate on the degree to which Circles of Support and Accountability should work closely together with the statutory public services and what levels of independence they should have. CoSA Projects that move too close to the probation service might risk incorporation as an extension of the formal supervisory systems provided by the police and probation service. This was something the original CoSA schemes in Canada managed to avoid. They have been said to be more ‘organic’ and independent than ‘systemic’ and embedded with the formal agencies. Circles Projects in the UK are therefore already seen as more ‘systemic’ and embedded in the formal arrangements where ‘the success of Circles in England and Wales was, in part, due to the strategic decision to place it within the existing structure of inter-agency cooperation’ (Hanvey et al 2011: 62). On the other hand Circles could introduce a countervailing approach to that of the ‘containment’ policies of the statutory arrangements.

This systemic position, close to the statutory agencies comes with a number of difficulties and problems. The probation service, police and MAPPA Coordinators and Senior Managers were appreciative of the added value that Circles brought to their supervisory and management work. This was especially so in terms of the ‘personal information’ that a Circle could gather from a Core Member and pass on to

the professionals. A recurring theme from the professionals interviewed was the idea that Circles gave them ‘extra eyes and ears’ with which to supervise offenders.

However this is a view contested from within CoSA. The idea that Circles are in existence solely for purposes of being ‘extra eyes and ears’ has been challenged openly and that particular phrase was rejected by the chair of one regional Circles Project (Chair of Yorkshire and Humberside COSA writing in their Newsletter *Ever Increasing Circles* No 8 Spring 2014). Volunteers also made this point. They queried whether Circles was becoming too close and tied into the statutory services and in turn becoming too ‘professional’.

The position of Coordinators seemed to affirm a very close relationship with the probation service. All the Coordinators we spoke to had strong links to the probation service being either seconded from the service or themselves being ex-probation officers. One Coordinator respondent told us it would be very difficult to be a Coordinator if one did not speak the language of probation. This is mirrored by the volunteer respondents. They felt that ‘professional language’ had to some extent infiltrated training efforts.

This systemic closeness is also obvious to some Core Members. It was perhaps interesting that it was the Core Members who noticed this more than other Circles participants and it was they who commented on the ‘overlap’ in language and attitudes. If the volunteers are meant to be representative of ordinary men and women in the street the use of professionals and ex-professionals from the criminal justice system might undermine this expectation and need to be further examined.

In the following section we provide some points for attention with a particular focus on the Coordinators who are ‘gatekeepers’ and focal points for the collaboration with professionals from Police and Probation.

Recommendations:

Coordinators

- Police and Probation Officers should be properly informed of the Project role and standing of the Coordinators and accept this;
- *Circles UK* might explore the possibilities to appoint volunteers as Coordinators so as to divide the roles between Project managers and volunteer Coordinators;
- The formal role/description of the Coordinator should be re-visited;
- The degree of local discretion accorded to Coordinators by *Circles UK* should be made more explicit;
- *Circles UK* should provide information to Coordinators on national strategy matters;
- Forums organised by *Circles UK* should be explicitly used to showcase best practices and for information exchange between Projects;
- *Circles UK* should review the amount of regular information they require from Coordinators;

Police, Probation and MAPPA Coordinators and Senior Managers

- More general information about CoSA should be provided to all stakeholders on a regular basis; for those new to CoSA, an induction pack should be prepared;
- Guidance should be provided to clarify police contact with volunteers;
- *Circles UK* and CoSA Projects need to manage expectations from professionals regarding being an extra set of ‘eyes and ears’.

Support and Accountability

Support and Accountability are both key to the concept of CoSA. Support and Accountability are always stated as evenly balanced concepts with one as important as the other. Some commentators have described the two concepts as not opposed but with the support ‘hiding’ behind or being obscured by the accountability side and the latter even emphasised for public relations purposes (Hannem 2011). However, the research found evidence that for the majority of stakeholders and volunteers, accountability took priority over support. Some of the volunteers, for example, thought that their Circles training focused more on the accountability side of the equation than the support side. This was mirrored by views from the Police Officers.

Our research found that support from a Circle was well received by most of the Core Members interviewed. The Circle might not be able to help with major problems like accommodation or employment but it could provide acceptance, company and it could stop isolation; in those terms it could be very effective. Breaking the cycle of isolation seems to be a key achievement of the Circles and recognised by all.

Understanding and acting on accountability was problematic for all participants in Circles. All groups had never considered the term/concept before and when asked to do so found it quite difficult. There was confusion amongst volunteers, for example, over whether accountability referred to ‘past’ crimes, or ‘future’ behaviour. Some Circle volunteers continually focused on the original offence that had led to conviction and sentence believing that accountability referred to that behaviour which had brought the Core Member before them. Others thought it was about future behaviour and possible future offending and meant looking for the risky behaviour patterns that might lead in that direction. This was the type of information on current behaviours that the volunteers sought and passed on to the professionals. Some volunteers thought that accountability referred to their accountability as a Circle in eliciting and channelling information from and on the Core Member. This could place an unexpected responsibility on their shoulders, and at worse could lead to a ‘fear’ that meant they were responsible for any future offending if they had not identified and passed on relevant information.

The most common tactic for the volunteers was to off-load their perceived accountability by passing information on to the Coordinator. Once they had reported to the Coordinator, they felt relieved of their responsibilities and left it to the Coordinator to determine how to proceed.

The imbalance between Support and Accountability, and the ensuing problems of communicating the concepts might be the result of the more ‘systemic nature’ of *Circles UK* and CoSA Projects and their stronger integration with statutory agencies.

The researchers are not in a position to question this in principle, however, we wish to make recommendations that improve the present situation in particular regarding the flow of information. Training for volunteers might focus on these two concepts of support and accountability. The nature of support and accountability and the delicate balance between them should be as fully understood as possible before volunteers start their first Circle.

Recommendations:

‘Personal Information’ flows

- The nature of ‘personal information’ should be clarified in order to ensure agreed standards and provide certitude for action;
- The nature of ‘confidentiality’ with respect to Circles Projects should be clarified;
- The meaning of ‘accountability’ should be clarified and guidance produced for all participants involved in a Circle (Core Member, volunteer and professionals);
- The role of the original offence in the first and following meetings should be clarified; for Coordinators the level of discretion they have in their ‘gatekeeper’ role of filtering information flows should be clarified and guidance provided;
- The use and production of meeting minutes should be revisited: Are Core Members required to sign these? Policies regarding retention and access to minutes should be developed;
- Policies on informal exchanges of information and the use of that information should be established.

Communication with Core Members

- Core Members should be provided with more guidance in advance on what Circles are about in order to avoid misconceptions;
- Guidelines could be developed on the degree to which volunteers can challenge a Core Member in a meeting;
- Guidance should be produced on the nature of ‘virtual circles’ based on telephone contact and the extent of such contacts.

Conclusion: Circles as an Experience

This report has captured the experience of being part of a Circle Project whether as volunteer, stakeholder or Core Member. The report does not attempt any conclusions on whether the CoSA experience is effective in reducing re-offending. More robust research will be needed for that to be demonstrated. We can report that all participants feel their involvement in CoSA to be a worthwhile exercise and there were no criticisms in principle of CoSA. Core Members found it overwhelmingly useful and helpful. The report highlights a number of difficulties and problems that mainly result from the highly fraught environment in which CoSA operates and the conflicting demands that are imposed on its work. Notwithstanding these issues CoSA is well prepared for the changes in this landscape which lie ahead.