

# Circles of Support and Accountability UK



## Type of intervention



*Peer Support*



*Mentoring*

## Target group/s, level/s of prevention and sub-group/s:

Tertiary prevention

(Potential)  
Offenders

Young Adults (18-20 years), Adults (21 Years +) | Male & Female | Peer Support, Peer Support

## Target population

Individuals aged 18 years and over with a conviction for one or more sexual offences, having been assessed as presenting a medium or high risk of sexual reoffending and who are returning to the community after completing a prison sentence. The individual should realise that he or she still presents a risk and should want support to live an offence-free life

## Delivery organisation

In the UK, Circles are provided by 11 autonomous local or regional Circles of Support and Accountability (CSA) Projects who in a membership structure, work to national standards set and monitored through Circles UK (a UK charity and service provider to the Ministry of Justice/UK government). Circles of Support and Accountability originated within the Mennonite community in Ontario, Canada, as a means of social support to high-risk sexual offenders who have completed a custodial sentence. Projects based on the model are now in place across Canada, in several jurisdictions in the USA, in the UK and elsewhere in Europe.

## Mode and context of delivery

Small volunteer groups of four or five are carefully selected, trained and supervised and should commit to the project for a minimum of 1 year. They meet on a weekly basis initially, with an offender who is attempting to reintegrate into his or her local community following a custodial sentence for sexual offences. It is important that the individual (Core Member) volunteers to participate. Circles of Support and Accountability focuses on assisting them to avoid falling back into risky situations and on helping them develop positive and safe ways of spending their time including building safe social support networks and finding employment and hobbies. Circle volunteers also include the Core Member in, for example, social activities, cinema trips and coffee on a Saturday morning, in order to counteract the dangerous social

isolation of many high-risk offenders. Any concerns that a Core Member may be leaning towards future offending behaviours or thoughts, results in the statutory partners being immediately notified e.g. the Police or Probation Services. Each Circle operates for 12-34 months depending on how progress is viewed and subject to agreement by all partners. The object of the Circle is not to develop too great a dependency upon it, but to gradually facilitate wider, appropriate social contacts and networks that are safe both for the Core Member and the local community. Often, some degree of contact continues between one or two of the Circle volunteers and their Core Member, following the conclusion of the Circle.

### **Level/Nature of staff expertise required**

Circle volunteers are local adults drawn from a range of social and demographic backgrounds. No professional skills are required. Volunteers are recruited for their ability to support and creatively challenge the Core Member. They bring their life-skills, humanity, commitment and ability to manage boundaries to the Circle, to both support and hold accountable the Core Member, including through regular feed-back to statutory partners. Whilst the volunteers require no previous sex offender knowledge, they are carefully selected and required to attend an intensive 2-day training programme to equip them for their role. They are also provided with on-going support, both individually and as a group, from their local or regional Circles of Support and Accountability Project. Those providing the training and supervision need to be professionals (e.g. Probation Officers) with extensive knowledge of sex offender supervision and treatment.

### **Intensity/extent of engagement with target group(s)**

Engagement between Circle volunteers and the Core Member begins with weekly Circle meetings of approximately 90 minutes, which reduce to fortnightly meetings after about three months. In addition, there are weekly social meetings between the Core Member and some or all of the volunteers. Phase 1 of the Circle is fully minuted and reported to statutory partners and lasts for approximately a year. Following a review, Phase 2 of the Circle is less formal and more socially-oriented, covering a further period of 6-12 months.

### **Description of intervention**

During the initial weekly meeting, the Core Member describes the nature of his or her offending history and the measures he or she identified during a Sex Offender Treatment Programme to avoid reoffending. The intervention therefore will include a number, but not necessarily all, of the following:

- Focusing on those activities the Core Member identified in their Relapse Prevention Plan. On a weekly basis checking what effort and progress he or she has made towards achieving these. Positive affirmation for effort and progress, challenge for delay and defensive excuses, ritual recognition of real achievements (e.g. a celebratory cake to mark being out of prison and offence-free for 6 months).
- Practical support in developing and living a 'good life', including planning social objectives, e.g. attending a hobby club, church or appropriate event.
- Practical support in managing personal challenges and demands e.g. support in completing housing or job applications or attending hospital or clinic appointments.
- On-going challenges when distorted attitudes and beliefs are present with regard to the Core Member's acknowledged offence or when inappropriate attitudes or beliefs are voiced.

- Feedback re social interaction skills. Modelling with reference to better, more appropriate ways of presenting and relating to adults as well as ways of avoiding interactions with children or young people, as appropriate and necessary.
- Quarterly assessment through a structured scoring of changes in perceived dynamic risk factors (i.e. those that can change such as ability to manage emotion, challenge and social circumstances) reflected back to Core Member for consideration and learning.
- Social events to mark key achievements, birthdays, national celebrations; the sort of occasions usually alien or inaccessible to most of those returning to the community with serious sexual convictions.

## **Evaluation**

Circles UK has a Research and Evaluation Committee, which both sets evaluation standards and tools, and commissions or oversees approaches around research proposals at post-graduate level. In addition to a six monthly report of Circle information (numbers, referrals, reconvictions, volunteers recruited/trained/left or deselected etc.), they also collect individual Core Member demographic data at Circle commencement (through a coded and anonymous system), in a number of fields. This includes offending history, risk levels, treatment history, personal circumstances and health. At the conclusion of the Circle, data is collected which includes recalls, further offences, changes in personal circumstances, health and employment. The Dynamic Risk Review scores changes in perceived risk levels. Circles UK currently has a four year research study underway with Leeds University and is facilitating a number of individual PhD studies around the country.

## **References**

*A U.K. Cost-Benefit Analysis of Circles of Support and Accountability Interventions. Sex Abuse* published online 7 May 2012. Ian A. Elliott and Anthony R. Beech <http://sax.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/05/03/1079063212443385>

“Circles South-East: The first ten years 2002-2012” by A. Bates, D. Williams, C. Wilson, & R.J. Wilson (2013). Published online first April 24, 2013, *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*. doi: 10.1177/0306624X13485362

“Circles of Support & Accountability: An innovative approach to community-based risk management for high-risk sexual offenders” by R.J. Wilson & A.J. McWhinnie (2010), in M. Herzog-Evans (ed.), *Transnational criminology manual*. Oisterwijk, Netherlands: Wolf Legal Publishing. ([read article](#), requires [Acrobat Reader](#))

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