Circles of Support & Accountability:
Consideration of the Feasibility of Pilots in Scotland

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May 2008

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DISCLAIMER AND CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The research team benefited from the involvement of Professor Alec Spencer (University of Stirling) and Professor Mike Nellis (University of Strathclyde) who both acted as special advisers to this work. Professor Spencer, in his prior capacity as Director of Rehabilitation and Care Services of the Scottish Prison Service, advised the Justice 2 Committee on issues regarding sex offender treatment and rehabilitation, including Circles of Support and Accountability. Professor Nellis has worked closely with Quaker organisations in England that have promoted Circles. He also sits on the board of SACRO, an organisation that has submitted a proposal seeking funding to operate pilot Circles in Scotland. Neither Professors Spencer or Nellis were responsible for writing any part of this report, nor directed research activity. Their role was limited, albeit very usefully, to sharing their past experiences and knowledge of developments on this topic.

This research did not consider the particular feasibility of the Sacro proposal, nor does it intend to imply either an endorsement or rejection of its content.

ABBREVIATIONS

CC	Circle Coordinator
CJA	Community Justice Authority
CJSW	Criminal Justice Social Work
COSA	Circles of Support and Accountability
CSC	Correctional Service of Canada
HTVC	Hampshire and Thames Valley Circles Project
IMPACT	Innovation Means Prisons and Communities Together
ISP	Intensive Support Package
LFF	Lucy Faithfull Foundation
MAPPA	Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements
NOMS	National Offender Management Service
OLR	Order for Lifelong Restriction
PPO	Public Protection Order
RM2000	Risk Matrix 2000
RMA	Risk Management Authority
RRASOR	Rapid Risk Assessment for Sex Offence Recidivism
SACRO	Scottish Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders
SCCJR	Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research
SPS	Scottish Prison Service
ViSOR	Violent and Sexual Offenders Register

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

1.1   Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA or Circles) have been operating in Canada and England for several years. Following a recommendation by the Justice 2 Committee, the Scottish Government now believes it timely to consider the feasibility of introducing COSA pilots to Scotland. The SCCJR was subsequently commissioned to undertake this investigation on behalf of the Scottish Government. This report broadly covers these areas:

- The implementation experience of Circles in England and Canada;
- The distinctive features of Scottish criminal justice that might affect implementation of pilots;
- The implications of volunteers working with sex offenders;
- The evidence of effectiveness of Circles so far; and,
- Feasibility issues of establishing pilot Circles in Scotland.

1.2   COSA use volunteers to form a 'circle' around a high risk, high needs sex offender (the **core member** of the Circle) to support that person's reintegration into the community. Volunteers **support** an offender by modelling pro-social relationships, assisting with practical needs such as housing and employment, and generally encouraging the offender to lead a life free from further offending. They hold the offender **accountable** by challenging his attempts to rationalise or minimise offending behaviours and risky thought patterns, and by reporting concerns to authorities.[1]

1.3   Some of the claimed advantages of this approach are: enhancing the monitoring capacity of statutory agencies; addressing the social support needs of offenders which are linked to offending but beyond the capacity of professionals to manage; empowering communities to participate in reducing reoffending; and providing a means of public education for volunteers and their social networks about the nature and realities of sexual offending.

1.4   Some of the claimed concerns raised by this approach are: attempting to provide statutory supervision 'on the cheap'; risks of using volunteers from the community to work with a highly manipulative group (such as risks of collusion and safety); difficulty recruiting adequate numbers of appropriate volunteers; great expense in providing adequate training, support and supervision of volunteers;

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[1] The vast majority of core members have been men and so this report generally refers to them in the masculine.

difficulty in isolating the role of Circles in reduction of reoffending for evaluative purposes; and adding a competing demand for criminal justice funding.

1.5   Findings in this report are based on information supplied from the three main research activities: interviews with a range of Scottish stakeholders including statutory agencies, the voluntary sector, and faith groups; review of the available literature describing and evaluating Circles, mainly in England and Canada; and a field visit to and interviews at the largest English Circles project (in Hampshire and Thames Valley).

CHAPTER TWO - IMPLEMENTATION OF CIRCLES IN CANADA AND ENGLAND

1.6   The Canadian experience with implementation was ad hoc and developed incrementally. In Canada, core members generally are under no form of criminal justice custody or supervision and so Circles provides their only monitoring.

1.7   In England, four identified potential pilot areas led to three pilots actually being funded. The pilot that did not get past the planning stage seems to have experienced difficulties due to different priorities in the area. One pilot that received initial funding but failed to develop many Circles appeared to suffer from inadequate personnel resourcing which limited volunteer recruitment and establishment of the necessary links with local agencies.

1.8   The ongoing pilots offer two distinctive models of running Circles. The Hampshire and Thames Valley Circles project (HTVC) is a substantial organisation devoted to the needs of a particular region. The Lucy Faithfull Foundation (LFF) pilot is a 'go anywhere' model designed to set up Circles wherever offenders are living. Each has its advantages and challenges.

1.9   The factors which appeared to be most important for implementation of pilot Circles include: responsiveness of COSA to a perceived problem; positive local agency attitude to working with the voluntary sector; strong relationships among local agencies and with COSA; adequate resourcing of infrastructure and agency coordination; relevant professional experience and expertise of COSA managers; integration of COSA into MAPPA; substantial investment in training; adaptability of the model to an offender's location; and targeted recruitment of volunteers.

CHAPTER THREE - DEMAND AND TARGETING – WHICH OFFENDERS AND WHY

1.10   The COSA concept is designed to target particularly high risk, high needs sex offenders. High risk offenders are often extremely socially isolated, a factor that exacerbates the likelihood of reoffending. Moreover, reoffending can be of the most serious and traumatic kind. There is therefore an argument that the resource intensiveness of the COSA approach should be reserved for this group.

1.11   Research on the Canadian COSA showed that in a matched comparison core members tended to have higher STATIC-99 and RRASOR scores than their counterparts, suggesting the higher risk targeting criterion was being met.

1.12   A review of case data from the Hampshire and Thames Valley Circles project shows Circles are being used by medium to high risk offenders (RM2000 scores were mainly 'medium', 'high' or 'very high', with most in the latter two groups; all participants studied were being managed at MAPPA Levels 2 or 3).

1.13   Although risk data suggests COSA is being used for the client-group it was intended for, screening and assessment for Circles depends on a case-by-case assessment and sometimes risk is balanced with the social needs of an offender in the decision to form a Circle.

1.14   Scottish stakeholders felt that a population of high risk, high needs offenders who may fit the criteria for COSA did exist in Scotland. It was commonly reported that meeting the supervision and support needs of this group was a major challenge for statutory agencies.

1.15   Other eligibility criteria used by Hampshire and Thames Valley Circles, for example, are exclusion generally (but not automatically) of: chronic deniers, those with psychopathic personality disorder, and those who have not participated in or who have failed treatment programmes. Factors tending to support inclusion in the project include: high needs; high profile offending; low self-esteem; limited or no pro-social supports; and a demonstrated interest in wanting to lead a healthy, offence-free life. These criteria were consistent with the views of Scottish respondents who commented on issues of eligibility. Other factors which require special consideration in deciding to form a Circle are the age and maturity of the offender, the presence of a learning disability, and alcohol/substance misuse issues.

CHAPTER FOUR - STAKEHOLDERS PERSPECTIVES ON SCOTTISH INFRASTRUCTURE

1.16   Scottish management of sexual offenders has undergone major developments in recent years. These developments include: recommendations of the Cosgrove Report resulting in greater local involvement in development and delivery of programmes; implementation of joint arrangements for sex offender management (MAPPA); creation of the Community Justice Authorities (CJAs); establishment of the Risk Management Authority; the roll-out of a sex offender register and risk management database (ViSOR) that links all parts of Scotland; national adoption of common tools of risk assessment and management; and development of an accredited group-work treatment programme for sex offenders.

1.17   Views on current management of sex offenders: there was widespread consensus that these developments had enhanced management of sex offenders, particularly in increasing the consistency of responses and use of a common language for working with this offender group. There was also strong and uniform support among respondents for the belief that one of the most pressing gaps remaining in the system are post-treatment support services for the most isolated and high risk offenders.

1.18   Awareness and support for Circles: nearly all Scottish respondents had heard of Circles and were generally positive about the concept, believing it addressed an identified need. The Scottish stakeholders tended to know more about the 'support' aspect of Circles, although those with more knowledge of the approach were also able to comment on its 'accountability' function.

1.19   Responsibility for running Circles: there was strong support for the involvement of the voluntary sector in criminal justice, and acceptance of its potential to contribute. However stakeholder respondents were divided between those who felt Circles would be best run as an independent operation, and those who felt it should be located within the public sector (e.g. run within a CJSW department or centrally by the government). Everyone felt that whatever organisational model was preferred, Circles should have clear lines of accountability to statutory agencies.

1.20   The biggest concern about piloting Circles in Scotland was around the use of volunteers. This has been a common concern among stakeholders in all areas where Circles have been introduced. Specific worries included volunteers' ability to maintain boundaries, risks of collusion, information sharing/confidentiality, and appropriate reporting of concern about an offender's thoughts and acts. No stakeholder felt strongly that these concerns ruled out piloting Circles, but it was

acknowledged that vigilant and stringent preparation of procedures and protocols would be required.

1.21   Scottish respondents also identified many potential benefits of Circles. These included responding to an important aspect of offender need that statutory agencies cannot prioritise (e.g. pro-social modelling); the ability of Circles to provide added monitoring capacity, and for this monitoring to allow agencies to act when potential recidivist behaviour was identified before it escalated into reoffending. Respondents also identified the unique support relationship that could be provided by an unpaid person who chooses to spend time with an offender. It was generally acknowledged that this relationship between offender and volunteer could have benefits for addressing an offender's self-esteem and openness issues.

1.22   In terms of implementation issues for pilots, Scottish stakeholders desired strong oversight of Circles, but in a way that minimised the burden on professionals' time, specifically in terms of day-to-day contact with volunteers. A common suggestion for achieving this was for Circles to be accountable to MAPPAs, although there was a range of ideas about how this might happen. While some respondents suggested Circles should be embedded within MAPPA (e.g. with MAPPA in charge of decisions to form or refer offenders to Circles), others were of the view that Circles should have only a reporting function to MAPPA. Developing clear information-sharing protocols was also seen as a primary implementation issue.

1.23   Perspectives of the feasibility of Circles in Scotland: the common view was that Circles is feasible in Scotland. They are generally seen as an 'added value' option in the overall system of management of sex offenders. However, stakeholders wanted clarity about what they can do and who they are for, as well as reassurance that adequate safeguards could be put in place.

1.24   The voluntary sector respondents were predominantly in favour of the introduction of COSA pilots in Scotland, and in varying degrees either supported the running of the programme in the voluntary sector, or saw a role for their agency in the provision of COSA. Respondents were generally satisfied that pilots could be effectively operated by voluntary bodies who had sufficient credibility with, and support from, statutory agencies. These respondents echoed the views of the statutory sector respondents in both their support for and concerns about COSA, with particular agreement around issues relating to volunteers.

CHAPTER FIVE - USING VOLUNTEERS WITH SEX OFFENDERS

1.25   There is increasing government recognition of the value of volunteers in criminal justice work, particularly in the context of community development and

safety. Volunteers participate in a variety of ways in current criminal justice practices including as Special Constables, appropriate adults, youth mentors, and independent custody visitors, as well as in offender resettlement.

1.26   The central role of volunteers in COSA was seen by most of our interview respondents as a strength of the model. There was a range of arguments in support of volunteers: it allows communities to be part of the change process; it reduces fear of crime (in addition to whatever impact COSA has on crime itself); it takes advantage of a relatively cost-effective community resource; the existence of a well-established volunteer tradition in Scotland will support recruitment efforts; it enhances the ability to establish a relationship of trust that encourages offenders to be open about their thoughts and conduct; 'volunteer' does not mean 'inexperienced', and COSA may draw on those with a professional or prior volunteer experience in criminal justice or social work; and it is adaptable to changing offender circumstances and needs.

1.27   There are many conceptual concerns about the volunteer aspect of the programme, including: lack of certainty that there would be a sufficient supply of volunteers for COSA; questions about volunteer recruitment and motivation; the need for serious and substantial training; risk of collusion and need for stringent oversight; negative effects on volunteers and their support needs; exit strategy; implications of faith group involvement in COSA; maintaining the balance and resolving the tensions between support and accountability roles.

1.28   The empirical evidence on the volunteer experience provides a context for these issues. In Canada, volunteers' views of Circles changed from anxiety and idealism to reduced anxiety and greater pragmatism about their potential impact, following their involvement in a circle. The volunteers from HTVC provided a rich and nuanced account of how they felt Circles worked, and how support and accountability are mutually inclusive aims.

1.29   Recruitment in HTVC began by targeting faith communities, primarily the Quakers. Targeting recruitment may assist in minimising the risk of a tabloid/vigilante backlash, although some Circles have recruited via their agency website with no apparent negative media effect. Vetting procedures seek to identify volunteers considered to be stable, known in the community, mature, possessing healthy boundaries, available to make a significant time commitment, and to have a healthy and balanced lifestyle and viewpoint.

1.30 Volunteers from HTVC generally identified a number of motivations to become a volunteer, rather than having a single dominant reason.

1.31　Training is given considerable attention by contemporary Circles projects. Volunteer respondents and local stakeholder agencies expressed strong support for the rigour of the HTVC training package which includes initial training, mandatory annual booster sessions and ad hoc events. Training topics address issues including: boundaries, manipulation and collusion, practical aspects of criminal justice supervision, and confidentiality.

1.32　One major gap in the research is the lack of information about the long-term impact of COSA on volunteers. Because of the potentially disturbing information that may be shared by sex offenders, it is concerning that little attention has been paid in the research to potential traumatic effects on volunteers. However, volunteers we interviewed from HTVC expressed satisfaction with the system of support in place. There are also numerous safety protocols that have been implemented to manage the risks of working with this offender group.

1.33　Information sharing and disclosure issues are managed successfully within HTVC through training and through the HTVC's organisation which includes regular oversight and monitoring of Circles and the issues discussed in them.

CHAPTER SIX - ASSESSING EFFECTIVENESS OF CIRCLES

1.34　Questions about 'what works' can lead to narrow definitions of effectiveness and limited research design. Evaluation of effectiveness is better guided by the question – what are the effects of the initiative? Specifically, in the case of Circles:

- How might COSA be effective for **offenders**?

- How might COSA be effective for **communities**?

- How might COSA be effective for **criminal justice professionals**?

1.35　There are several linked elements constituting **effectiveness for offenders**: reconviction and recidivism, pro-social skills acquisition, and community integration.

1.36　**Recidivism and reconviction** research is only now emerging, and is based on small sample sizes, but the initial work shows very promising impacts and is worth validating in replication research. In Canada, a study of 60 core members, matched to 60 sex offenders not in Circles, showed that Circle participants, despite having higher risk ratings had lower rates of general reoffending than the comparison group and a 70% reduction in sexual recidivism. In the HTVC project, a self-evaluation involving 16 core members noted that there had been no instances of reconviction for a sexual offence. Circles also contributed to the recall of offenders to prison, showing that recidivism, rather than being treated as a programme failure, might

actually be evidence of the successful ability of Circles to pick up on recidivist conduct before an offence occurs.

1.37   The evidence base on **pro-social change** is also emerging. Psychometric testing of offenders participating in the HTVC found improved attitudes in some core members. Qualitative research conducted in the HTVC self-evaluation claimed Circles assisted core members in acquiring strategies for coping and managing their lives. These claims need independent validation, but it is clear that the philosophy of Circles shares common ground with pro-social offender treatment approaches, and there is evidence that pro-social improvements are linked to reductions in reoffending.

1.38   **Reintegration into communities** partly flows from having pro-social skills and attitudes, but Circles might help in other ways with this goal. Volunteer assistance with daily activities is one way that they can be helpful to the process of an offender's reintegration.

1.39   Research in Canada has suggested COSA can be **effective for changing community perceptions** about crime and sexual offending. Surveyed respondents reported that if a high risk sex offender moved into their neighbourhood, they would feel less angry and fearful if he were involved in a Circle. Our interviews of HTVC volunteers suggested that Circles provide opportunities for community members to feel involved and informed, and even to deepen a sense of duty to do something about the problem of sexual offending.

1.40   Criminal justice professionals in the same Canadian research also felt that a Circle would improve community safety. There may also be additional aspects of COSA's effectiveness for professionals if it supported their work and improved morale.

CHAPTER SEVEN - ASSESSING FEASIBILITY/ISSUES FOR PILOTS

1.41   It is important to distinguish the feasibility of doing something on a pilot basis from its adoption as general policy. Our discussion of feasibility is limited in that it aims only to inform thinking about the value of pilot Circles in Scotland. We have identified several questions which anyone considering piloting Circles would wish to resolve before making this choice:

- Are the risks reasonably well known or foreseeable?

- Are there acceptable mechanisms for managing risks?

- Can all relevant implementation factors be identified?

- ▪ Is the approach sufficiently promising to show a pilot project would be worthwhile?

1.42   The main feasibility and implementation issues for Scotland are: siting a pilot; choosing an appropriate organisational model; defining the mission and role of Circles in Scotland; investing in volunteer training; building adequate organisational infrastructure; developing information sharing protocols; putting in place a robust evaluation strategy; attending to a communications and public education strategy; considering and managing project costs; deciding on national or local organisation and funding; and, having an exit strategy.

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1   Circles of Support and Accountability ('COSA' or 'Circles') have been running now for seven years in England and for nearly twice that amount of time in Canada. Almost since the first Circles were piloted in England there has been interest in and debate about introducing them to Scotland. Formal proposals to initiate a pilot were rejected by the Scottish Government, partly on the grounds that it would be beneficial to await outcomes of the experience of the pilots in England as well as see through implementation in Scotland of major policy and practice changes affecting the management of sex offenders. Regardless of timing, funding for criminal justice activities is finite and constantly under pressure from competing demands for services. The implementation of Circles pilots thus requires consideration of whether this kind of approach – namely, volunteer-based support and monitoring of high risk sex offenders in the community – would address an identified and important gap in existing services or contribute to 'best practice' in this field.

1.2   In December 2006, after taking evidence from a range of organisations, the Scottish Parliament's Justice 2 Sub-Committee on Child Sex Offenders compiled a report and recommendations on moving forward in this area:

> 'The Sub-Committee, recommends that the Scottish Executive considers the potential of Circles of Support and Accountability projects and, if found to be effective, instigates pilot projects within Scottish communities.' (Recommendation 17, Justice 2 Sub Committee Report J2SC/S2/06/R1)

1.3   The Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research (SCCJR) was subsequently commissioned to carry out this work on behalf of the Scottish Government and study the feasibility of piloting Circles in Scotland. Our remit was to consider the issues but without making a recommendation. In this report we aim to:

- Review the implementation experience of Circles in areas where they have and have not become established features of high risk offender management.
- Identify the distinctive features of Scottish criminal justice policy and practice that might affect implementation of pilots in Scotland;Consider the implications of volunteers working with sex offenders.
- Assess the evidence of effectiveness of Circles so far.
- Set out relevant feasibility issues should a decision be taken to proceed with Circles in Scotland.

What are COSA?

1.4   COSA use volunteers from the community to form a Circle around a person with a history, and assessment of potential high risk, of sexual offending who is or is about to live in the community. Volunteers and the person for whom the Circle is formed are all Circle Members, but the offending individual is referred to specifically as the core member. The Circle meets regularly (often weekly) in places such as church halls or coffee shops rather than in formal settings such as a probation office. The Circle aims to provide an informal environment and a healthy 'community' to assist the core member's development of a stable social existence. The COSA concept fits within the general principles of restorative justice given its focus on reintegration, although it does not directly seek to involve victims.

1.5   The support role of Circle Members ranges from practical acts of assistance, like filling out a job or housing application, to less tangible contributions like giving an offender a sense of hope or confidence to move away from old patterns of behaviour. The accountability role of Circles requires volunteers to confront and challenge a core member, for example if he tries to rationalize or minimise his past offending.[2] Volunteers often say the accountability and support functions are intertwined, for example if the core member is provided with a supportive environment of people, he will be more able and willing to open up about and genuinely confront entrenched sexual beliefs. COSA is positioned as a post-treatment, post-custody form of support that either works alongside statutory supervision structures (as is typically the case in English Circles) or in the absence of such structures because of the offender's completion of sentence (as is more common in Canada). It is also a voluntary programme in that offenders willingly agree to participate in a Circle.

Pros and Cons of Circles

1.6   Throughout our work, we learned of claims for and against Circles in the literature and from respondents. These 'pros' and cons', listed below, are not a statement of fact about what Circles always or never do; it would be more accurate to say they reflect the commonly stated aspirations, on the one hand, and scepticisms, on the other, that exist about this approach. In the rest of this report we address the evidence for these various claims, but it is useful to have an overview to guide understanding of what issues play into an assessment of feasibility.

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2 The vast majority of core members have been men and so this report generally refers to them in the masculine.

Pros

- Can enhance monitoring capacity of statutory agencies, providing an extra 'pair of eyes' in the community.
- Can offer the kind of informal support that is beyond the remit of statutory agencies.
- By addressing social isolation and low self-esteem, Circles have the potential to reduce likelihood of driving offenders underground, which would make formal supervision more difficult.
- Can empower communities to participate in the management of sex offending.
- Can provide a mechanism of public education for volunteers and their social networks about the nature and realities of sexual offending.

Cons

- Criticised as being an attempt to provide statutory supervision 'on the cheap';
- Volunteer collusion and safety concerns (sex offenders can be highly manipulative and sophisticated, and those working with them require special training and experience);
- Can be difficult to recruit an adequate number of appropriate volunteers;
- Expensive due to cost of providing adequate training and supervision;
- Difficult to isolate the role of COSA in reduction of reoffending;
- Competing demands for criminal justice funding.

Methodology and Research Activities

1.7   The methodology of this study was tailored to inform policy debates around the feasibility of piloting Circles in Scotland. This involved three main research activities. First, we reviewed the available literature on Circles. We prioritised peer-reviewed, independent published research. The evaluative work on Circles is only now emerging, however, and our work was also informed by sources including self-evaluations of Circles projects, project documentation, written evidence, media sources, and other materials.

1.8   Second, we interviewed Scottish stakeholders (31 interviews) who have responsibility for, are involved in or have relevant knowledge of the management of sex offenders in the community. These stakeholders included respondents from statutory agencies and public bodies (police, social work, prisons, local authorities,

MAPPAs, CJAs, Scottish Government policy and research) and the voluntary sector, where we sought the views of a range of organisations representing offender work, child protection, and victims' rights. Interviewees also represented a range of levels of public and private organisations including leaders and policymakers, managers and front line workers.

1.9   Third, we conducted a field visit to the largest English Circles pilot, the Hampshire and Thames Valley Circles of Support and Accountability project (HTVC). We observed office operations, and interviewed project staff and representatives from local statutory agencies (8 interviews) as well as spoke with key respondents involved generally in English Circles efforts (5 interviews). We also conducted interviews of Circle members (volunteers and offenders) (12 interviews). This provided information along the lines of a case study about the logistical aspects of running Circles, relationships with local agencies, and the views of and impact on offenders and volunteers (detailed information about these research activities can be found in Annex C).

2. IMPLEMENTATION OF CIRCLES IN CANADA AND ENGLAND

Canada

2.1   Canadian Circles grew out of an entirely community-led response to the needs of a serious offender and the concerns of a local community outraged at his presence:

> 'The Circles of Support & Accountability initiative began, quite simply, as an innovative response to a single set of circumstances: a high risk, repeat, child sexual abuser was released to the community from a federal penitentiary [in 1994]. The response of the community was swift – picketing, angry calls for political intervention, heightened media attention, and 24-hour police surveillance. In response to the offender's pleas for assistance, a Mennonite pastor agreed to gather a group of congregants around him, to offer both humane support and a realistic accountability framework.' (Wilson, Picheca and Prinzo, 2005: i)

2.2   A similar situation in another Mennonite parish led to the development of a second Circle, after which the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) expressed interest in developing the concept and introducing pilots. Circles continue to have the active support of the CSC which has also funded an independent evaluation of their work (Wilson, Picheca and Prinzo, 2005).

2.3   There are several distinctive features of the Canadian Circles. They began as a *community-led* and *faith group-led* initiative rather than a top-down government policy change. The involvement of faith groups remains a core component of Canadian Circles and is relevant for understanding the emergence of the English Circles. Canadian Circles deal with *high risk offenders* who typically are *under no form of state supervision*. They focus on 'sex offenders who had been deemed too risky to release early under supervision, and who were therefore released at the absolute endpoint of their custodial sentence, without any supervision or support at all' (Nellis, 2008: 3). Hence, Circles provide supervision and support *in the absence of state involvement*.

England

2.4   In 2002, the Home Office provided initial three-year funding for three pilot COSA projects and had intended to fund a fourth: regionalised pilots in Northumbria, Hampshire, Thames Valley, and a national pilot run by the Lucy Faithfull Foundation. Although only the pilot project in Thames Valley was run by the Quakers, this faith group was instrumental in disseminating information about the work of the Canadian Circles and lobbying the Home Office to introduce pilot projects in the UK. This section offers a brief overview of the experience of these pilots and concludes with a discussion of those factors that appeared to have been most salient to the implementation process. The discussion relies heavily on a brief history of COSA in the UK presented in Nellis (2008), and in the case of the Thames Valley pilot, on observations and interviews by the SCCJR team.

2.5   According to sources cited in Nellis (2008), the willingness of the Home Office to sponsor Circles marks a substantial shift from a previous position that discouraged involvement of volunteers working with sex offenders. 'Recent Home Office guidance had stated that "in view of the manipulation and denial that characterise much sexual offending, it is generally unsafe to deploy volunteers in work with sex offenders"'(Nellis, 2008: 4, quoting Drewery, 2000). Planning for the pilots also took place amidst the furore surrounding the murder in July 2000 of eight year old Sarah Payne by a known paedophile. These points are noteworthy for highlighting the ability of the Home Office to re-examine some basic precepts about the use of volunteers and engage constructively with a potentially controversial approach to working with sex offenders during a very sensitive period. Interestingly, the failure of two of the pilots, discussed below, was not fomented by the external political and media environment but by internal factors.

Northumbria Pilot

2.6   Northumberland appears to have been chosen as a pilot site because of the novel existence of a 'Sexual Behaviour Unit', 'a distinct interagency body comprising the Forensic Psychiatry Service of the Northumbria NHS Trust, the Northumberland Probation Area and Barnardos' (Nellis, 2008: 8). The additional involvement of The Derwent Initiative charity in planning for the pilot led to an initial focus on working with learning disabled sex offenders (Id.). The pilot in Northumbria failed at the planning stage: no business plan was submitted and no funding provided. Circles were never established in Northumbria despite the presence of a special, multi-agency body well-placed to provide a supportive infrastructure for volunteers' work. There is no obvious explanation why Circles should have failed to take root here compared with other areas. Nellis (2008) suggests that despite the presence of local

champions, their influence was not able to overcome agency resistance; there was also a perception that the most pressing need was for services targeting sex offenders with severe learning disabilities, a need which was met through other means.[3]

Quaker/Thames Valley Pilot

2.7   Thames Valley presented what can be described as a natural choice as a site for a Circles pilot. The area is well known for its experiments with and openness to restorative justice initiatives, and its police and probation departments have long experience of partnership. In addition, the Quakers had worked hard in the region establishing links with various agency stakeholders, setting up a steering group for COSA in Thames Valley, chaired by Tim Newell, then Governor of HMP Grendon. This paved the way to develop a COSA project run by the Quaker Peace and Social Witness charity (QPSW, the social action arm of the Quakers). Once Home Office funding for pilots was released, QPSW employed two former senior probation workers (with experience managing sex offender treatment programmes) to establish and operate the project. They in turn hired two more probation officers (also experienced in sex offender treatment) to work for them as Circle Coordinators. Volunteer recruitment was initially aimed at faith groups (particularly the Quakers). The Thames Valley pilot was able to secure both enough volunteers and offender referrals to get a number of Circles started early in the first period of pilot funding. This success at the implementation stage led to a second round of Home Office funding (for another period of three years).

2.8   The efforts of the Thames Valley project to establish a relationship of trust and cooperation with statutory agencies did not stop at the implementation stage. This project in particular has continually emphasised public protection as a primary goal. Towards this end, the pilot worked closely with local police and probation to integrate COSA into the MAPPA process. Assessments of referred offenders are presented to the MAPPA, which must review and endorse applications before a Circle can be formed. MAPPAs also receive minutes of Circle meetings, and review issues raised in these or by the Circles Coordinators in reviewing the level of risk at which an individual is managed. These practices reflect formal protocols prepared by the police liaison to COSA. Police, probation, hostel managers and other professionals also contribute to the volunteer training programme, so there is confidence among agencies that all Circle members understand the criminal justice process and the limits constraining the core member's movements and conduct. The Thames Valley project also has noted that in several cases where a core member was recalled to prison, the information picked up and reported by Circle volunteers was the main or contributing factor in this decision. The fact that there has to date been

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3 It should be noted that the first Circle in Canada was set up for an offender with a learning disability.

no known sexual reoffending by core members involved in the Thames Valley project is a point of pride and reinforces the belief of its staff, as well as the criminal justice professionals with whom they work, that this is a successful approach.

2.9   One implication of embedding Circles in MAPPA is that unlike in Canada where most offenders in Circles are under no formal supervision, almost all of the Thames Valley core members (at least at the time of their Circle commencing) are on licence or a probation order, or actively registered as sex offenders (entailing police monitoring).

2.10   A graphical presentation of information flow and coordination among participants in a Circle in Thames Valley makes clear the crucial and central role played by Circles Coordinators (Figure 2.1). [4] The Circle Coordinator (CC) acts as the main point of contact both for Circle Members and statutory bodies. Not only does the CC have responsibility for overseeing the work of the Circles as a whole – sitting in on meetings, reviewing minutes, monitoring group dynamics – he or she also maintains contact individually and separately with the core member and each volunteer. The CC liaises with the core member's Offender Manager to discuss relevant points arising at a meeting, feeds information into the MAPPA when necessary, reports to the Project Manager, supports the efforts of Probation assessment of offenders, and is the first port of call, both for those in the Circle and those responsible for offender supervision outside of it. One important example of the CC's work is managing the process when a Circle discovers an issue of concern about a core member's thoughts or behaviour. Such issues ultimately could be the basis of a recall to prison and so the CC works with Circle Members, consults with the project manager and offender manager in determining whether the issue will be 'contained' within the Circle or referred beyond it to the police, probation or MAPPA.

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4 The figure aims to isolate information flow around a Circle and so not all points of interaction and bodies involved in Circles are represented here. For example, if a volunteer felt there was an imminent threat of harm, the first point of contact would be the police; also, prisons play a key role in Circles but are not included in the illustration in the interest of clarity and brevity. In addition, the 'Project Manager' title will change to 'Chief Executive' when the project achieves its charity status in April 2008.

Figure 1: Hampshire and Thames Valley Circle Project Organisation
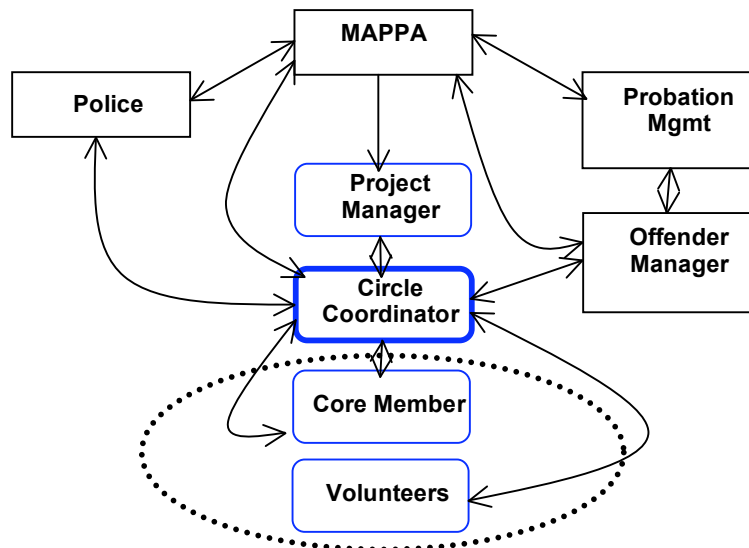
2.11   The CC forms the hub of the overall Circle operation, revealing that while COSA is an approach that is fuelled by the power of volunteers, it is also, in the case of Thames Valley, one that is directed and supported by a substantial professional organisation.

2.12   HTVC personnel estimate their current pool of volunteers at around 80-90 people, and there are approximately 20-25 active Circles running in their regions at any given time.

Hampshire Pilot

2.13   The Hampshire pilot was set up as a partnership between Hampshire Probation and the Hampton Trust, a locally-based voluntary organisation/charity which works with offenders. The site may also have been considered appropriate given that Hampshire encompasses Albany Prison on the Isle of Wight, a specialist prison for sex offenders. The Home Office funding paid for a half-time member of staff to coordinate the Circles project, which included recruitment of volunteers and interfacing with agencies. Unlike the Thames Valley initiative, the funded post went to a person with a strong background in volunteer organisation rather than in probation. Even so, volunteer recruitment was identified as a major difficulty, and one key difference between the pilots was that recruitment efforts in Hampshire did not target faith communities (Nellis, 2008). As the coordinator came from a voluntary sector rather than a criminal justice background, local police and probation

agencies did not have established prior contact with the co-ordinator, as was the case in Thames Valley. This, combined with the fact that the post was only half time, severely limited the ability to build up trust and spend time actively engaging with local agencies and professionals to develop support for the initiative.

2.14   Two or three Circles were formed in Hampshire during the initial period of pilot funding, but this was widely recognised as inadequate to justify further investment. At the end of the first pilot period, ongoing difficulties required Thames Valley COSA to take over the Circles that had been started, and now Hampshire has been formally amalgamated into the Thames Valley pilot (hereafter referred to as the Hampshire and Thames Valley Circles of Support and Accountability, or HTVC). The HTVC project then secured a full-time Circle Coordinator post for Hampshire, and this was filled by a seconded Hampshire probation officer who had worked in Albany Prison on resettlement of sex offenders and who had also had experience providing sex offender treatment.

Lucy Faithfull Foundation Pilot

2.15   The Lucy Faithfull Foundation (LFF) set up the first Circles in Britain after its director became aware, via the Quakers' efforts, of the work happening in Canada (Nellis, 2008). COSA was seen in this case as an opportunity to provide post-treatment support and supervision of men coming out of the LFF's Wolvercote Clinic's residential treatment programme for sex offenders. The fact that the Wolvercote Clinic was in Surrey and its clients would be returning to communities throughout the UK, possibly with no support whatsoever, required an entirely distinctive organisational approach to running Circles that was national in coverage. LFF consultants travelled to communities where an offender would be settling to work with local agencies and community members (quite often faith communities) to establish a local Circle. The transaction costs of such an approach were considerable. 'Finding volunteers was sometimes difficult, and in each area LFF had to win over police and probation anew, rarely an easy task' (Nellis, 2008: 9).

2.16   The residential unit of the Wolvercote Clinic has closed, but LFF's Circle project remains active and a successful case of Circles implementation. LFF responds to an invitation from local agencies interested in setting up a Circle. It sends consultants to the area to work with these agencies, recruiting volunteers and coordinating with the local MAPPA process.

2.17   This 'go anywhere' model, despite the challenges of having to start from scratch in each new area where it is invited to set up a Circle, offers an organisational model that can be national in coverage. It might also be an approach suited for managing the particular complexities of working with sex offenders in rural communities. A large, locally based Circles operation might not be feasible or

desirable given the higher profile it would have in sparsely populated areas. In this situation, a central office in an urban location with the ability to offer site-specific Circle development to distant areas might mitigate this problem.

Key Implementation Factors

2.18   Circles in Canada and the pilots in England are now well-established, and the successful and re-configured English pilots (i.e. HTVC and Lucy Faithfull Foundation) are continuing to receive support from the Ministry of Justice. As a result of the English experience, recent Home Office work has endorsed the COSA model. First, a qualitative study of operational practices for sex offenders managed at MAPPA Levels 2 and 3 recommended that MAPPAs 'expand availability of longer-term intervention strategies, e.g. Circles of Support and Accountability' (Wood and Kemshall, 2007: 4). Second, the Review of the Protection of Children from Sex Offenders report (Home Office, 2007: 14) noted COSA 'is considered to be an innovative way of monitoring' offenders. In concluding this chapter, we note the factors that appeared to have some influence on the course of implementation of COSA projects. This is an impressionistic inventory given that it mainly relies on secondary sources. A thorough examination of implementation issues would require more intensive study of all the pilot sites and the actors involved in them.

2.19   **Responsiveness of COSA to the perceived problem.** Northumberland seemed to founder over disagreements about the appropriate focus of COSA – on all high risk sex offenders or specifically on those with identified learning disabilities. This issue was eventually resolved in favour of the latter, and addressed through existing structures. The Lucy Faithfull Foundation developed a model that responds to invitations from local agencies anywhere in the UK, allowing services to flow wherever demand arises. Thames Valley's locally embedded approach can allow for regular adaptation to changes in local needs, and also creates a sense of 'ownership' among local stakeholders.

2.20   **Local openness to voluntary sector assistance with serious offenders.** Thames Valley and Hampshire were both areas where the voluntary sector partnership was seen to be consistent with criminal justice goals and practices. However, this will be a continuing challenge for LFF with its range of project locations, although one that may ease as its work around the country becomes increasingly well known.

2.21   **Strong relationships between COSA and local agencies.** The strong relationship between HTVC and local agencies in Thames Valley and Hampshire is

the product of assiduous efforts by HTVC personnel in working with, making presentations to and involving agency personnel in COSA to create awareness of its work. A significant factor in establishing basic trust between HTVC personnel and local agencies is the professional experience of HTVC workers in probation and sex offender treatment. This created a level of credibility that would be very difficult for someone without this background to achieve.

2.22 **Good relations and partnerships among local agencies.** Thames Valley provided a hospitable setting for a new initiative like COSA partly because there is a long tradition of partnership-working between probation and the police in that region. This eased the path for coordinating the work of COSA by avoiding the need to develop such partnerships from the outset.

2.23 **Adequate resourcing of infrastructure and agency participation.** A widely recognised lesson of the Hampshire experience was that a half-time post to recruit, coordinate volunteers and establish links to agencies was insufficient.

2.24 **Staffing COSA organisation with people who have extensive professional experience working with sex offenders.** This has already been mentioned, but deserves separate identification as a factor of successful implementation, and reminds us that COSA cannot accurately be characterised entirely as a volunteer-based initiative. The professional background of Thames Valley staff not only reassured local professionals that project personnel understood the risks and particular challenges of working with sex offenders, but also meant that they were personally known to many in the police and probation.

2.25 **Integration of COSA into statutory processes such as MAPPA.** This was a relevant factor for Thames Valley that institutionalised this model's focus on public protection, although it is not a factor that affected, for example, the successful implementation of the original Mennonite Circles. LFF also works with MAPPA and will not set up Circles without their agreement.

2.26 **Substantial investment in training, both prior to volunteering and as an ongoing part of the volunteer work.** Thames Valley's success in implementation has been enhanced by investing heavily in the design and delivery of its training package. This issue is considered in more detail in Chapter 5.

2.27 **Flexibility and responsiveness in establishing Circles.** The 'go anywhere' model of the Lucy Faithfull Foundation allows for a Circle to be set up in any part of the UK.

2.28 **Targeted recruitment of volunteers.** This seemed to be another important difference between the original Hampshire pilot and the one in Thames Valley. The

latter focused initially on Quaker groups (and has since expanded its recruitment efforts substantially) and was able to secure an adequate supply of volunteers to initiate multiple Circles.

3. Demand and Targeting – Which Offenders and Why

3.1   This chapter considers how demand for a service like COSA can be assessed, and criteria for participating in a Circle as a Core Member.

Level of Risk

3.2   COSA is a service designed for an exceedingly small but worrying group of people. The relative size of the sex offender group within a given population would be small, but COSA targets an even smaller sub-group within this: those who present the highest risk of harm and the highest social needs. This complicates the issue of demand because one cannot say a specific number of offenders would be minimally necessary to make a Circles project viable. The severity of risk that an individual presents is an important consideration, and so it would be possible that resources for Circles would be allocated to support their development in areas with relatively few offenders who have a demonstrated high level of risk. The original Circle was a response to just this situation: a single individual in a community requiring assistance.

3.3   Two indicators in Scotland of very serious offenders whose supervision presents major concerns are those receiving 24 hours a day / 7 days a week monitoring through Intensive Support Packages (ISPs) and those under Orders for Lifelong Restriction (OLRs). OLRs have been available to High Court judges since June 2006 and are issued on the basis of a risk assessment that an individual presents a high risk of serious violent or sexual offending. There can be overlap between OLR and ISP groups. Individuals on ISPs, however, are typically accorded this level of monitoring because of their past performance in programmes: they may have failed or refused treatment, chronically denied their offences or risk, or otherwise be assessed to be difficult to engage in developing internal controls. These criteria would tend to exclude them from participation in most COSA operations, which generally reject chronic deniers and may require prior successful completion of treatment. These are not surprising criteria given the voluntary nature of the model; without a willingness to engage, an offender is unlikely to desire the formation of a Circle in the first place.

3.4   In Canada and the UK, while Circles targets high risk offenders, the specific measure of high risk varies by project. For example, the Hampshire and Thames Valley project (HTVC) specifically targets offenders managed at MAPPA Levels 2 and 3 (it also performs a separate assessment and takes into account RM2000 scores). A

recent study published by a forensic psychologist with Thames Valley Probation and HTVC project staff presented a detailed case analysis of 16 core members registered with the project between November 2002 and May 2006 (Bates, Saunders and Wilson, 2007). Bates et al's review confirmed that all 16 core members were managed at MAPPA Level 2 (n=10) or 3 (n=6). They also reviewed the RM2000 rating of these 16 core members noting that more than half were rated 'high' or 'very high' risk (n=9), nearly one-third (n=5) had a 'medium' level of risk, and only two of the 16 were rated by RM2000 as presenting a 'low' risk (Id.). Table 1 below provides some context for the populations HTVC works with, summarising the numbers of MAPPA Levels 2 and 3 in the two regions.

Figure 2: MAPPA Levels 2 and 3 in Hampshire (2006-7) and Thames Valley (2005-6)

	Level 2	Level 3	*Total*
Hampshire	801	50	*851*
Thames Valley	457	28	*485*
Total	*1,258*	*78*	*1,336*

Source: Hampshire MAPPA Annual Report, 2006-7; Thames Valley MAPPA Annual Report, 2005-6

3.5   In Canada, Circles target sexual offenders who are coming out of the prison or criminal justice system and would otherwise be receiving no other form of supervision. In their matched study of Canadian sex offenders, Wilson et al (2007c) noted that for the group participating in COSA, the STATIC-99 (estimates risk of sexual and violent offending) and RRASOR (estimates risk of sexual offending) scores were higher on average than for those in the matched comparison group.[5] This again suggests that COSA targets people who are at the more serious end of the risk scale.

3.6   Total sizes of groups managed at different MAPPA levels are not yet available for Scotland, although it is worth mentioning that there are around 3,600 people on the Violent and Sex Offenders Register (ViSOR).[6] SCCJR interviews of Scottish professionals working directly with sex offenders were consistent in claiming numbers and levels of risk were high enough to warrant more services that could enhance monitoring and integration capacity.

3.7   Respondents in Scotland framed demand for a service such as COSA in terms of how it would fill existing gaps in management of high risk individuals in the community. As one respondent put it: "practitioners are constantly looking for added support, monitoring, [and] integration for high risk offenders which at present

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5 The reported findings did not include the specific scores obtained.

6 Although referred to as a 'register', users are trained to understand it more as an assessment and management system.

can be very difficult to access due to funding pressures and access criteria for services" (*Interview 15*). This comment was made in support of developing COSA in Scotland. The belief that there is a continuing need for services which can be offered to a group which is difficult to work with for a number of reasons was a common one among respondents. This may be an endemic feature of working in this field rather than a specific statement of demand for COSA, however. Many respondents identified 'lack of resources' as the greatest challenge to their work on the issue of sexual offending. By 'resources', interviewees included money, personnel and appropriate and accessible services. COSA might be an especially appropriate means of addressing this gap in that it focuses on the community integration and monitoring of individuals, which also emerged as a strong concern of Scottish stakeholders. Most respondents felt Scotland's management of sex offenders has made great strides due to the rolling out of common tools for risk assessment and management, introduction of MAPPAs, and the existence of an accredited treatment programme for sex offenders. Some respondents commented that these advances can only be sustained if there are adequate systems of reintegration and support when offenders go back into communities (Chapter 4 provides the main presentation of the views of Scottish stakeholders.)

Other Eligibility Criteria

3.8   The second factor in addition to risk of harm that is consistent across Circles projects is social isolation. Social isolation is a typical feature of life for individuals whose offences are very disturbing, especially when the victim is a child and not unusually also a relative or family friend. In these cases the offender often will lose his support network of family and friends. The concern for justice professionals is that the effects of social isolation, which may also be compounded by community harassment or vigilantism, will drive an offender underground away from services and supervision and into networks of similar individuals. There is also a risk of suicide.

3.9   A third factor is an offender's willingness to engage with volunteers. As a voluntary project, core members are free to seek a Circle or not, although core members in the HTVC project commit to a minimum of six months. The voluntary aspect of COSA theoretically means that individuals are more likely to enter into the programme with a willingness to engage because they have freely chosen to participate. HTVC project staff as well as the agencies with whom they work, including probation and the police, all cite 'willingness to engage' as an important criteria for participation.

3.10   One HTVC volunteer felt that a core member in a recent Circle was not really interested in working on his issues and left as soon as the minimum period of six months had elapsed, showing the difficulty of perfect screening for an offender's genuine interest. Another volunteer noted that in their experience the only two Circles that had broken down were where the core member was a younger offender (early 20s); in one of these instances the individual also had severe learning disabilities and substantial difficulties with social interaction. COSA is a long-term approach, however, and the case studies included in HTVC's interim (QPSW, 2003) and three-year (QPSW, 2005) reports show how the process of breaking through a core member's reluctance to trust volunteers and to confront their acts and thought patterns can take months or even years. Willingness to make a long-term commitment to a Circle may not be a strict eligibility criterion but could provide a gauge for estimating the success of the approach for any given individual.

3.11   A summary of eligibility criteria noted in the literature, in observations of the HTVC project and interviews of HTVC staff and volunteers is below. It should be noted that none of these factors alone operate to automatically include or exclude a participant, but are treated as the most relevant factors in making a decision. Cases are assessed individually, however, and specific circumstances unique to an offender will affect an assessment.

Factors supporting inclusion:
- high risk of reoffending, high risk of serious harm
- high profile
- lack of or insufficient supervision structure in place
- high degree of social isolation
- low self-esteem
- high needs and minimal or no pro-social support in community
- expressed interest in wanting to change

Factors supporting exclusion:
- psychopathic
- chronic denier
- major learning or developmental disability
- youth, immaturity

3.12   Age and disability are not automatic exclusion criteria, but have been noted as factors which have affected the longevity of past Circles and which would require special attention for matching volunteers with a core member (e.g. recruiting volunteers with specific experience working with the learning disabled). Drug and alcohol issues are mentioned neither as considerations for inclusion or exclusion, and they could affect both the positive decision to form a Circle (to provide added

supervision and support in overcoming these issues) or to end one (failure of a core member to address addiction, e.g. consistently showing up to meetings under the influence).

Perspectives of Scottish Professionals

3.13   Most of the Scottish stakeholders had heard of the Circles concept but did not uniformly have great knowledge of how it worked in practice (more senior social work/local authority respondents did appear to know a significant amount about Circles). Perhaps this is why respondents were divided about whether COSA should target high or lower risk individuals. Those who felt high risk offenders should be the focus either tended to have more knowledge of the approach or made this case in terms of the logic that 'resources should follow risk'.

3.14   A minority of professionals stated that social isolation does not appear to them to be a dominant feature of the group, noting that the typically sophisticated manipulation and obfuscation skills of sexual offenders means that they often have numerous social ties and a high level of integration (e.g. are employed). This was not a uniform view, nor one that can easily be broken down along professional lines, and there was stronger support for the claim that social isolation is a common problem in the management of high risk sex offenders. Some respondents noted that even when an offender has social ties, such as to family members, they may still be 'isolated' in terms of their capacity to find support relating to addressing their offending behaviour: they may for instance be unable or unwilling to share their thoughts and concerns about their sexual offending with family members, thus experiencing pressures to keep their behaviour secret.

3.15   The frequency with which accommodation was raised as an issue for managing the integration of this group establishes that integration is indeed a real concern since housing difficulty may attest to a number of risk factors for isolation including community opposition, lack of employment, alcohol or drug issues, poor familial and social support; it may also increase risk of offending by putting sex offenders into accommodation with or in proximity to each other.

3.16   Additional eligibility criteria mentioned in interviews complemented the views of those already at work in Circles projects. These mainly were the exclusion of individuals rating high on psychopathy tests and chronic deniers. Again, both presence of severe learning disability and alcohol/drug problems were mentioned as issues that aggravated the inherent difficulty of working with sex offenders.

3.17   Some respondents suggested participation should be voluntary otherwise Circles would not work. An offender who participates in order to secure 'points' on their record may only superficially or disingenuously contribute to a Circle. Some respondents felt it should be offered to those who are willing to undertake them pre-release or upon release from prison. Still others thought that making participation mandatory or otherwise creating strong formal incentives to participate would not undermine COSA's success, believing that it could work within a wider range of sentencing options including as a condition of probation.

4. STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES ON SCOTTISH INFRASTRUCTURE

4.1   While there are similarities and common arrangements throughout the UK for management of sex offenders, Scotland has its own system of criminal law and criminal justice and possesses many distinctive features that would affect implementation of new initiatives and policies in this area. This chapter reviews recent developments in Scottish policy and practice with regard to management of sex offenders, presents perceptions of criminal justice practitioners about existing needs and their views on COSA, and explores the voluntary sector dimension. Perspectives on COSA are oriented towards the *concept* given the fact that Circles have not been officially adopted here and so there was no possibility of collecting views from Scottish stakeholders based on practical experience of their implementation.

Policy and Practice Developments

4.2   One reason for delaying action on the early calls to introduce Circles to Scotland was that these were made either at the start of or prior to major national changes to the management of sex offenders. These included the:

- Report of the Expert Panel on Sex Offending (2001, referred to hereafter as the Cosgrove Report);
- Implementation of Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA);
- Reorganisation of local criminal justice administration through newly established Community Justice Authorities (CJAs);
- Establishment of a Risk Management Authority which would provide support for improved risk assessment and management practices in Scotland;
- National roll-out of the Violent and Sexual Offenders Register (ViSOR) covering and linking all local authorities in Scotland;
- National roll-out of common tools of risk assessment and management; and
- Development of an accredited group-work treatment programme for sex offenders.

4.3   Underlying these developments is the recognition that sex offenders have been identified as requiring special provision (Kemshall, 2002:5). As a result, there have been substantial changes to the coordination of agencies and resources with implications for how and whether an approach like COSA would fit with reconfigured and enhanced services.

4.4 The Cosgrove Report has provided a series of recommendations relating to, among other things, community and personal safety and prevention, risk assessment and monitoring of sex offenders. Cosgrove emphasised the need for multi-agency cooperation, increased vigilance, monitoring and enforcement. More specifically, it recommended developing a corporate approach to the management of sex offenders in the community (*Recommendation 10*), developing protocols to provide a framework for information-sharing and joint working (*Recommendation 64*), and specialist intervention programmes for those sex offenders who are subject to supervision in the community.

4.5 Significantly, Cosgrove made clear the need to develop initiatives at the local level in an overall strategy of reducing sexual offending. Its *Recommendation 22* states:

> 'All local authority criminal justice social work services should make available specialist intervention programmes for those sex offenders who are subject to supervision in the community and are deemed suitable. All criminal justice social work services should review the skill mix of staff involved in the management of sex offenders and make formal arrangements with adjacent authorities to ensure that specific sex offender programmes are available as close as possible to the offender's domicile.'

4.6 Other recommendations encourage strategies for improving awareness and providing education to parents and carers about protecting children from sexual abuse. Taken together with *Recommendation 22*, Cosgrove might be understood as championing improved community awareness and involvement in the management of sex offenders. This has been an interpretation promoted by Circles advocates in Scotland. The Report's *Recommendation 23*, which also refers to the community aspect of managing sex offenders, states that: 'Local authorities and the Scottish Executive should produce an agreed "core" intervention manual for use with sex offenders in the community based on *cognitive behavioural* principles' (emphasis in original), which led subsequently to the accredited Community Sex Offender Groupwork programme.

4.7 A second major set of changes were brought into being via the Management of Offenders (Scotland) Act (2005), which aimed to further strengthen the management of sex offenders. Under this Act, the police, local authorities and SPS were given a statutory function to jointly establish arrangements for assessing and managing the risk posed by sex offenders and certain violent offenders, including the sharing of information. Health Services are included as a responsible authority for 'mentally disordered offenders' who fall within the group of sexual or violent offenders covered by the provisions. Voluntary sector agencies, specialising in work

with offenders, are also included in the duty to cooperate in arrangements where they provide services to, or deliver services on behalf of, the responsible authorities in the establishment and implementation of the joint arrangements.

4.8   The model for the delivery of the joint arrangements, known as the Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA), have four core functions: identifying MAPPA offenders; sharing relevant information among those agencies involved in the assessment of risk; assessing the risk of serious harm; and managing that risk. The eight CJAs provide the infrastructure within which the MAPPAs sit. Each MAPPA is responsible for reporting annually on performance through the CJA to the National Advisory Body on Offender Management that aims to shape long-term national strategy to achieve the reduction in reoffending. The 2005 Act provides for the duty to co-operate to be underpinned by a Memorandum to ensure that there is a clear and agreed understanding by all involved of their roles and responsibilities. The memorandum is supported by protocols on sharing information. The Scottish MAPPA are not entirely identical to the MAPPA system in England and Wales; one important difference is that south of the border, there is a statutory requirement of lay member participation in MAPPA meetings.

4.9   The establishment of the CJAs at the same time as MAPPA may have been one reason for this difference in that CJAs created a new, locally based infrastructure that could be more responsive to local issues compared with central administration of resources. Some have contrasted Scotland's preference for the CJA model with the apparent trend south of the border towards greater centralisation manifest in the amalgamation of probation and prison services into the National Offender Management Service (NOMS). This may reflect a more generally supportive political environment within Scotland for community-based services and decision making, a disposition that sits well with the principles guiding the Circles model.

4.10   The establishment of the RMA in 2003 and the introduction of new common risk assessment tools, such as RM2000 (an actuarial screening tool), the Stable and Acute instrument (dynamic risk assessment), and others were further steps in attempting to standardise approaches to risk assessment and management and make them more consistent. ViSOR will also allow for greater consistency and coverage. Unlike similar efforts in England and Wales, ViSOR has gone live and links up information on sex offenders in all local authorities, providing responsible agencies with complete coverage of Scotland. This might be considered the kind of information safety net that could build up confidence in piloting a voluntary project like COSA.

4.11   Finally, in Scotland, the emphasis on the ideal of rehabilitation has been retained within the provisions of the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 although with increasing emphasis given to public protection and community safety in recent years

(McNeill, 2005). This has led to a dual focus of interventions aimed at the promotion of rehabilitation while reducing harm. While liberty may be restricted as necessary, ongoing emphasis is given to engaging the offender in a process of change (RMA, 2007). Thus while supervision and monitoring are distinct, there is often some overlap between the two. This again marks a contrast with the probation service in England and Wales, which has tended to prioritise, at least at the managerial and policymaking levels, a public protection mission.

4.12   Given the dual priorities in sex offender management (public protection and offender rehabilitation) and recent developments in legislation and practice, Circles can potentially be seen as fitting within both management of risk and promoting pro-social change in the offender. Scotland's sustained support for the rehabilitative and reintegrative functions of criminal justice social work could cut both ways in terms of the desirability of COSA. On the one hand, COSA might appeal most in just those places where probation has largely been stripped of its reintegrative role, the 'befriending' function of the traditional probation officer, because it is able to offer services no longer within the remit of the professions. On the other hand, COSA's two-pronged aspiration to both support and hold accountable appears to fit well with the dual aims of criminal justice social work in Scotland.

Views on Current Management of Sex Offenders

4.13   This section reports on the perspectives of Scottish professionals from all sectors responsible for the management of sex offenders. The sample has been described in our methodology. The discussion highlights the main areas of consensus about sex offender management and about Circles, but we also point out where there is a contrasting trend of opinion. Despite the diverse range of stakeholders interviewed for this project, there was a high level of consensus across sectors about the potentials of and concerns about Circles.

4.14   There was also strong consistency in views about the strengths of and challenges facing existing systems of managing sex offenders. In terms of **strengths** of the current system for managing sex offenders, the assessment of MAPPAs was overwhelmingly positive, although there were a few voices of dissent. In general there was strong support that this and other developments are effective at:

- Encouraging multi-agency partnership working
- Improving information sharing
- Improving risk assessment tools
- Achieving high level of consistency and standardisation

4.15   The two biggest **challenges** in the views of stakeholders are:

- Improved monitoring structures and technologies do not mean supervision and management of offenders is or ever can be perfect; and,
- The most pressing gap in services is the lack of post-treatment support for socially isolated offenders.

4.16 Despite advances, or possibly in some cases because of them, stakeholders shared concerns about the biggest challenges facing professionals working with sex offenders. Managing public expectations can be very difficult. There is inconsistency in what is generally understood by day-to-day supervision and intervention in terms of actual contact with the offender; agencies cannot provide 24/7 monitoring, although the public may feel this is what is or should be happening. It is also of course impossible to guarantee that reoffending will never happen, or to protect the public entirely against harmful behaviour. Interviewees reported that 'accountability' is currently achieved when the police and social workers visit offenders, but in between times an offender's activities are largely unknown, unless they reoffend. Respondents from different agencies and organisations pointed out that if an offender is actively registered on ViSOR, this entails checking in with the local police once a week, which is very different from providing meaningful integration assistance or investigating concerning behaviour. Stakeholders noted that supervision and monitoring is often difficult because many offenders resent being supervised. It is particularly challenging when dealing with an offender who is in denial about their offending behaviour.

4.17 Although new risk assessment tools are believed to provide for greater accuracy and refinement in the identification of high-risk offenders, they are recognised as having their limitations and some respondents questioned whether they could be sufficient instruments for assessing risk on their own, or whether they need to be combined with professional judgement which should have a capacity to override conclusions based on metrics. In view of one of the respondents, there are 'low risk' offenders (assessed as low risk) who go on to commit very serious crimes. This was not an isolated comment, and others also expressed some version of the idea that 'low risk doesn't always mean low risk'. This may reflect issues over risk assessment tools – use and training in the common instruments is still underway – but it may also reflect perceptions about the nature of sexual offending. As one respondent noted, some of the most serious sexual offences have been committed by those without any or much history of offending.

4.18 The key problem for **offenders** in the system, as noted by respondents, is lack of post-treatment support for socially isolated sex offenders. Many respondents emphasised the limitations of statutory support consisting of weekly social work supervision or check-ins with the local police. It was noted that:

- Social workers and the police only perform the supervision/monitoring functions on a weekly basis and are typically unable to provide wider support even where they want to;
- It is unclear whether wider needs are being met or not because sex offenders may not disclose their particular needs and issues;
- There is a lack of appropriate housing that suits the particular needs of an offender and takes account of the issues of risk;
- Social isolation and loneliness were considered factors that could trigger reoffending behaviour as well as harm to selves.

Perspectives on the Circles Concept

Awareness and Support for Circles

4.19 Nearly all interviewees for this research had heard of Circles and were familiar with the general idea that they use community volunteers to provide support to offenders. Those with some but minimal knowledge of Circles generally thought of them as a 'support', 'mentoring' or 'befriending' service. Respondents who had more knowledge of COSA, typically because they had heard a presentation about them at a professional conference or were part of a faith group organisation involved in Circles, displayed awareness of the accountability function. Those with the least knowledge of Circles assumed it was an approach for the low risk, while the more knowledgeable were aware that they target high risk offenders. There was bias in parts of the interview sample towards those most likely to have heard something about Circles because some contacts were generated from the membership list of the Steering Group for Circles in Scotland[7], but this was not always the case; for example, social work respondents were selected from a general call for participation. There was, however, consistency of views among both those contacted based on Steering Group involvement and pulled in from untargeted selection. Both those participating in or aware of the Steering Group and those with no Steering Group involvement expressed support for the *concept* of Circles. It is important to distinguish support for an idea from unqualified support for the practical implementation of that idea; there were numerous issues about how such an approach would work in *practice*, discussed below.

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7 The Steering Group for Circles in Scotland was set up by groups advocating their use. They invited relevant statutory agencies and the government to join the group, and now have membership from across the range of public bodies. However, agencies may have joined the Steering Group in order to keep a 'watching brief' allowing them to follow developments, and it would not be accurate to equate membership of this group with support for the initiative.

Concerns about Circles

4.20   The major concern among stakeholders is the use of volunteers to work with sex offenders. The Scottish stakeholders were concerned about volunteers' ability to recognise and maintain appropriate boundaries. Developing a close relationship with the core member could lead, in the view of some, to prioritising friendship over the objectives of the Circle. This in turn could result in collusion including inappropriate sharing of information with the core member or failure to report important information to statutory agencies.

4.21   Respondents also wondered about information sharing issues between Circles and statutory agencies because of lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities (what gets reported and what does not).

4.22   Respondents did not feel this ruled out the possibility of trying COSA on a pilot basis but underlined the importance of not only having clear protocols clarifying roles and responsibilities of volunteers but also having clear lines of authority and accountability within the Circle. On this latter aspect, interviewees wanted to know who within the Circle would be responsible for ensuring compliance and making sure that boundaries are not crossed, and who would have the authority and willingness to say 'no' to a volunteer if inappropriate behaviour with offenders developed. These are the sorts of issues which led in Hampshire and Thames Valley to the creation of the central role of Circle Coordinator (see Chapter 2).

Potential of Circles

4.23   Stakeholders generally felt Circles could be helpful in addressing the particular challenges of working with sex offenders if they are able to catch 'early warning' signals of recidivist behaviour and relapse that would allow other agencies to intervene before an offence occurs. Interviewees felt they seem to be well placed, through developing continuous and informal relationships with the offender, to provide useful information about changes in the offender's behaviour that may be indicating increased risk. However, stakeholders desired evidence of this capacity.

4.24   Many respondents expressed hope that Circles would be able to fill the post-treatment gap in support of offenders and address the issue of social isolation, by providing what seems to be in short supply (or absent) within current statutory arrangements – friendships, local community networks, positive role models, a 'human touch', the sense of care, and more continuity in the relationship with the offender. Overall, it was felt that a relationship with someone who provides voluntary support would be different from the relationship with police or social workers. In the view of one respondent, the knowledge that someone is there for

you not because it is their job but just because they want to help could be a very powerful inducement to offenders seeking to re-build their lives.

Views on Implementation Issues

4.25   Although respondents suggested some ways in which Circles could fit into the existing context of managing sex offenders in Scotland, many of them had more questions than answers about practicalities and it was felt by many that these issues would become clearer at the stage of piloting Circles in Scotland if this happens.

4.26   The views of the possible relationship between MAPPA processes and Circles ranged from Circles being full partners to having some other link, but in any case being accountable to MAPPA. Interviewees identified specific means of accountability as feeding information back to MAPPA via a Circles Coordinator or liaison person. Most felt that MAPPA should play a role in the selection or nomination of an offender for Circles. Correspondingly, there were differences in views of the extent to which information should be shared. One suggestion was that the lead responsible authority for each case might be informed of progress with an offender, while others suggested information should be shared at MAPPA meetings. Some respondents felt strongly that volunteers should not be present at MAPPA meetings; for them, the liaison with MAPPA would be best achieved through a COSA coordinator. Others suggested that there could be a two-stage process, with a COSA coordinator or liaison person representing Circles at MAPPA meetings at the first stage and possibly at the next stage inviting volunteers to the MAPPA meetings.

4.27   There were also different views about the information that should be available to volunteers. Most respondents seemed to share the view that volunteers' access to information about an offender should be somewhat restricted and careful consideration must be given to what is disclosed and what is kept confidential.

4.28   At the same time it was clear that some information must be available to volunteers as a matter of course because lack of this could limit their capacity to achieve progress with the offender. Volunteers might also need access to information which is directly related to the conditions of a probation order or licence, or which would allow them to understand if an offender slips into former patterns of offending.

4.29   It is clear that if Circles were to be set up in Scotland the question of sharing of information and confidentiality and other aspects of data protection will be an important issue to consider. Information sharing and confidentiality was seen as one of the ongoing concerns in the MAPPA process currently. Management of sensitive and personal data and the need to protect private data was seen as a big challenge; while some respondents pointed out some issues with information sharing. Similar

problems may be experienced, or existing tensions exacerbated, with the introduction of Circles; it is important as emphasised by some respondents to have a Memorandum and clear protocols on information-sharing in place.

4.30   Similarly, there is currently some lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities of agencies involved in the MAPPA process leading to disagreements about how to proceed, particularly in terms of perceived risks. These range from concerns about being too complacent to concerns about over-managing or acting punitively. One of the challenges as noted by a respondent would be a build up of a relationship of trust between Circles and MAPPA – so that for instance there is confidence that no inappropriate passing on to the offender of information about what is discussed at MAPPA meetings takes place. This goes back to the issues of selection, vetting and training of volunteers and having a robust confidentiality agreement between MAPPA and Circles. There should be clarity about what type of information would need to be fed back and what type of behaviour would be considered 'at risk', and there should be a memorandum of information sharing between Circles and responsible authorities.

4.31   Despite some differences in views of how Circles might fit into MAPPA, there was a common view that if Circles were to be set up they need to 'add value' to the MAPPA process in terms of monitoring and management of offenders.

Views on Feasibility of Circles in Scotland

4.32   The common view was that Circles are feasible in Scotland as long as there is clarity about what they can do and who they are for. They are generally seen as an 'added value' option in the overall system of management of sex offenders.

4.33   It was noted by many that although Circles are feasible in Scotland in principle, many issues need to be clarified before one can make judgements about their potential in terms of management of sex offenders, and there is a need for more awareness of the operations and effects of Circles elsewhere. This did not translate into a narrow desire that stakeholders receive statistics on reconvictions. Stakeholders seemed equally interested in exploring what Circles are about and what they are trying to achieve.

4.34   Views of anticipated effects on reduction of reoffending ranged from cautiously optimistic (can help reduce risk of reoffending if implemented and managed properly), to sceptical (impact would be very limited) to neutral (cannot say because am not aware of any research evidence of their effectiveness). Some of the respondents who were more familiar with Circles or have heard about the Thames Valley Circles questioned the findings from the self-evaluation reports and pointed out the need for evidence from an independent evaluation.

4.35   There were a minority of sceptical voices suggesting Circles would only be able to have a relatively minor impact on offending in terms of the number of offenders it would take on, and on these grounds would not make a significant difference to Scotland's management of sex offenders generally. Most respondents recognised there would be some potential value of Circles in Scotland in terms of contributing to providing support and strengthening accountability of offenders.

4.36   It was also noted that it would be important to select appropriate areas to pilot Circles.

Voluntary Sector Views

4.37   Many social and criminal justice services that were once delivered by statutory bodies have been taken on by the voluntary sector. Therefore, were COSA to be delivered by one or more agencies from the third sector, this would not be a marked departure from the shape of service delivery that continues to emerge in Scotland, as elsewhere.

4.38   COSA is not suggested as an alternative to extant measures of post-release supervision, but as an additional component to be added on to current systems. It might, however, be used in a small number of cases where the highest levels of supervision, in the case of ISPs, have been employed due to lack of appropriate lower intensity options.

4.39   COSA could therefore occupy the middle ground between ISPs (which make use of voluntary organisations to assist monitoring) at the top end of supervision, and at the bottom end current requirements to sign on at a police station once a week, or notify the authorities of a change of address. These latter were widely seen by our voluntary sector respondents as having deficiencies from a monitoring perspective. There was much criticism of these low-end current measures as having the formal appearance of monitoring while in fact doing little to control their subjects or hold them accountable in any serious way. There was also a strong feeling that current measures, other than the most intensive interventions (which are time-limited for reasons including resource allocation) are not capable of detecting risk factors in offenders' behaviour. Where these systems were thought to work was in their capacity to 'force' measures of formal compliance on offenders. As well as the practical limits to such forced and occasional measures of compliance, one of our respondents captured the ethos of COSA with the observation that 'If you want to get the best out of people you really need to get alongside them rather than in their face' (*Interview 22*). The voluntary sector respondents confirmed the views

of statutory agency representatives that current systems do not seem designed to embed released offenders into communities.

4.40   The voluntary sector agencies which replied to our invitation to present views for this study were predominantly in favour of running COSA pilots in Scotland, and in varying degrees either supported the running of the programme in the voluntary sector, or saw a role for their agency in the provision of COSA. There was some disquiet voiced about the role of faith elements in delivering COSA. Although many respondents were careful to point out that they did not want to rule out faith organisations as service providers here, some were concerned that this should only be as part of a carefully-managed national structure which included provision for ensuring an appropriate spread of volunteers from faith and non-faith backgrounds, and for vetting the volunteers as part of a rigorous process which selected only those who fitted certain pre-defined criteria. There was some suggestion that, for example, Circles populated in high number by elderly church members may colour quite dramatically the kind of support and accountability that the programme is able to deliver.

4.41   It was generally acknowledged that the suitability of the voluntary sector to deliver COSA in Scotland was linked to the very restricted type of sex offenders the programme dealt with. In other jurisdictions, COSA tends to be targeted at medium to high risk sex offenders and who, in the Canadian case, as we have seen, have been released from prison at the end of a sentence, and are not on parole or other form of supervision or licence. Some of the Scottish interviewees felt that while there was nothing to prevent the inclusion of lower risk sex offenders in COSA, such were the resource constraints that one should start with attention to the highest relevant category in the risk scale. In passing, it is worth mentioning that when confronted with the prospect of using COSA for high-risk offenders, several respondents – mostly representing victims' groups – questioned whether offenders judged to be of high risk should be released at all. Nevertheless, current systems do provide for the release of such offenders in certain circumstances, and generally respondents acknowledged that a discussion over continuing support and accountability mechanisms for them was worthwhile.

4.42   As well as being targeted first at the higher end of the risk spectrum, COSA only purports to apply to offenders who volunteer for the programme. In other words, to get into a Circle, offenders must be at the higher end of the risk spectrum and must have acknowledged their problem and want to change. This rules out the majority of sex offenders, not least because the two entry requirements tend towards mutual exclusion. Contrition and desire for self-reform is likely to be more evident in offenders judged lower risk (or put another way, a high risk score may partly result from an offender's resistance to change); one respondent summarised this view in suggesting that COSA would not be applicable to 'your run-of-the-mill

belligerent serious sex offender… [who] doesn't think they've done anything wrong' (*Interview 17*). Offenders in denial are acknowledged by all voluntary sector respondents to be unsuitable for COSA.

4.43   The answer to the question whether the voluntary sector is suitably placed to deliver COSA in Scotland must therefore take into account the particular type of offender the programme intends to engage: although it attends to offenders with higher levels of risk, it only selects those who express a desire to have a Circle, and the selection procedure would need to develop precise categorisation of types of suitable offender, excluding those in denial.

4.44   In the event that COSA were to be taken on in Scotland by a voluntary sector agency rather than a statutory body, it was acknowledged by respondents from the voluntary sector that there might be some competition for that lead position. Any agency selected to operate COSA would need to command wide respect; it would need to represent a choice that all other agencies in all sectors would be able to work with, and to accept as an agency that was chosen for reasons they could understand and would support. It would need substantial standing in the field, and would require to have experience working with sex offenders and rolling out programmes comparable in size and complexity to COSA. The scale of such an effort was also seen by some to have competitive implications for the 'market for third sector services', advancing the overall voluntary sector market share of some, while diminishing that of others.

5. USING VOLUNTEERS WITH SEX OFFENDERS

5.1   The volunteer element of COSA forms both its most innovative and most concerning aspect in the minds of those we interviewed in Scotland and for those in areas where they have been attempted or implemented. Perhaps the words of this volunteer in Thames Valley capture the essence of this tension between the concerns and benefits: 'It is a very strange situation to be in – talking about their sexual fantasies with someone you do not know really well, in a church hall, once a week!… I am not sure how likely either [of my two] core member[s] was/is to re-offend, but I think that by committing to Circles they are at least putting another barrier in the way' (*Interview 35*). Given the importance of volunteers to this model and related concerns, we devote some considerable attention to the issue of volunteers, in both conceptual and empirical terms.

Developments in Criminal Justice Volunteering

5.2   The main defining feature of the COSA model is its reliance on volunteers as the 'service providers' in relation to its mechanisms of support and accountability. In the recent years, the voluntary sector has increasingly come to be seen by the Scottish Government, as elsewhere, as a key provider of services in communities. Whereas, previously, volunteers tended to be seen in the policy discourse as helpful contributors 'at the edges' of local service delivery, the bulk of which was delivered by public agencies or contracted out to the private sector, it is now the case that the third sector is seen as an integral resource for carrying out state or state-supported functions. The movement of the voluntary sector from the periphery to the centre of public service delivery continues, and has to date largely taken place under the auspices of a discourse about the importance of communities as social institutions.

5.3   A recent white paper produced by the Department for Communities and Local Government in England & Wales, for example, proposes various measures which are thought to enhance the participation of communities in decision-making about the governance of matters which affect them, under the banner of supporting the development of 'strong and prosperous communities' (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2006). Likewise, the Scottish Government has as its goals the development of 'safer, stronger communities'. COSA, with its integrative ethos, tends to fit well with this trend. A major attraction of Circles, against the background of community interests, is that it allows a level of engagement with a range of those interests: with the volunteers who want to get involved, with the offender who is given access to mechanisms of support and

accountability, and with the community as a whole, which benefits from the protective effects of the programme.

5.4   The domestic political context in which this study of COSA emerges is therefore one in which a heightened concern with the role and capacity of communities to perform certain desirable social functions has been extended in recent policy movements towards volunteering, and the third sector generally, being seen as a central part of community activities in the future. These activities include crime prevention and reduction through, amongst other things, the management of offender risk.

5.5   The criminal justice system has for some time been supported by a range of volunteers. Perhaps the most obvious of these are Special Constables, but there are many less visible roles for volunteers to support various system aims and functions. In Scotland, these include 'appropriate adults', who represent and support witnesses, victims or detainees at police stations and through the court process; victim and witness support; mentoring and youth volunteering; various roles in the secure estate, such as prison visitors; and panel members in the Children's Hearings system. There are many volunteer organisations operating throughout the UK which provide opportunities for interested members of the community to become involved in and around the criminal justice system. These include Community Service Volunteers, Victim Support, Supporting Others through Volunteer Action, and Crime Concern, along with several of the participants in the present research (research participants are listed in Annex B). Of course, beyond criminal justice, volunteers are central providers of some essential services, such as blood donation, and the work of the Samaritans. And finally, we should note the involvement of lay members in MAPPAs in England and Wales, demonstrating the belief in that jurisdiction that community involvement can enhance the aim of managing the risks specifically of sexual offenders.

5.6   The role of volunteers in community justice initiatives also fits to some extent with the current policy manifestations of the ongoing concern with public protection, particularly in relation to attempts to reduce the fear of crime, through measures such as reassurance policing. The integration of policing functions and community needs is seen as important in reducing the fear of crime, and through the resulting interventions and activities of less fearful communities, in reducing crime itself. Volunteer participation in supporting aims such as the reduction of reoffending may actually reduce the incidence of reoffending, as the Canadian evaluations of Circles suggests (see Chapter 6). Even leaving aside the potential of Circles to reduce reoffending, however, they may also operate to reduce fear of crime in communities, if these communities feel reassured that 'something is being done' in relation to medium and high risk sex offenders who are released. Whether this reassurance does in fact result from the operation of Circles programmes is an

empirical question for future work. The answer will depend upon public perception of whether Circles is a worthwhile initiative. And this, in turn, will depend upon how entrenched public attitudes are in relation to the apparently popular view that exclusion and harsh punishment is the most suitable response to sex offending, and that rehabilitation by way of support and accountability is impossible or inappropriate. We have not conducted a public survey in the research reported here, but we have engaged with the question of public perceptions and reassurance through the interviews conducted with representatives of a range of agencies in Scotland and England, including third sector agencies (see Chapters 3 and 4). The nearly universal opinion among these stakeholders is that hardened public attitudes are understandable but have led to calls for programmes, such as community notification, that may exacerbate risk rather than reduce it. Respondents in Hampshire and Thames Valley point to the successful implementation of Circles there, which required recruitment of scores of volunteers, as evidence of the public's willingness to accept a positive social role for communities in addressing the problem of sexual offending.

Conceptual Dimensions of Using Volunteers in Circles

5.7   The central role of volunteers in COSA was seen by most of our interview respondents as a strength of the model. Many respondents at the same time voiced concerns about the volunteer aspect of the programme, however, and even those who were steadfastly in favour of the COSA model acknowledged that the inclusion of volunteers in delivering support and accountability services to sex offenders was an issue that required deep consideration and sensitivity to a participant's needs, capacities, and aspirations. The generally favourable stance taken towards volunteers, coupled with an acknowledgement of the specific risks and concerns their involvement brings to a programme, broadly echoes the position taken in the literature. We can set out the issues here for consideration. The answers to many of these questions are not yet clear; they would be key considerations during planning for implementation of COSA pilots, should these be adopted in Scotland. We can give some context through our Thames Valley case study to the types of answers one model of COSA has developed, and will do this after identifying the key issues.

Factors Supporting the Use of Volunteers

5.8   There is much to be said in favour of encouraging volunteers to work with sex offenders. Some of the points **supporting** volunteer involvement are:

- **Communities are part of the change process.** The underlying ethos of COSA, and indeed many other post-release programmes for offenders – re-

integration of released offenders into the community – seems to require some level of community participation in the process.

- **Community involvement in COSA could have an effect on reductions in fear of crime.**
- **Volunteers are a community resource which tend to be seen as relatively cost effective** (although note our comments on this in Chapter 7, below – COSA are proposed as an additional layer of support and monitoring, rather than an alternative to any current systems).
- **Volunteering is well established in Scotland.** Many agencies in Scotland have a ready supply of volunteers to hand, and mechanisms in place for accessing them.
- **Volunteers can encourage trust and openness of offenders.** The voluntary aspect to participation in the programme is part of both the offender's and the Circle's philosophy, in the sense that all parties to the occasion are present because they (say they) want to be. This is thought to support the formation of relationships of trust between the parties, and to make open disclosure more likely between the offender and the Circle.
- **Offenders may be willing to disclose issues to volunteers that they would hold back from statutory agencies.** Volunteers are not officials, and therefore the core member should, in theory, feel less reluctant to discuss risk behaviour, problematic thoughts and impulses, and other concerns about his own behaviour which might otherwise lead to official measures being taken against them.
- **'Volunteer' does not necessarily mean 'inexperienced' or 'lay'.** Many volunteers may in fact be qualified in respect of working with offenders in some degree, such as retirees or people on a career break from the prison and social work professions. While COSA does not depend on any particular expertise, it may be an effective way to make use of such expertise which is present in the community, but currently under-used.
- **Adaptability to an offender's changing circumstances.** COSA can adapt to periods of particular need in a core member's life in a way that other more formal measures might not. If a core member goes through a period where they do not need high levels of support, the Circle can adapt its workings accordingly; likewise, in times where more support is needed, such as where a marriage ends, or some other traumatic personal event occurs that might otherwise lead to an increase in social isolation, the Circle can offer a suitable response.

Concerns

5.9   Set against these arguments in support of using volunteers are **concerns** relating to COSA's use of volunteers:

- **Availability of volunteers for COSA is still not certain.** Will enough volunteers be found to support the effective running of COSA in all locations in Scotland in which they might be needed? While there is an established tradition of volunteering in Scotland, doing so to assist sex offenders would be a relatively new direction.

- **Recruitment and motivation of volunteers.** This relates to the previous concern but also raises separate issues about adequate screening of volunteers. Careful assessment of a volunteer's motivation would be necessary to ensure that people are joining up for the right reasons. It is conceivable that COSA could attract those with an unhealthy interest in sexual offending, those who are especially vulnerable (e.g. survivors of sexual abuse), those who may have an underlying agenda at odds with the COSA aims (e.g. primary interest in pursuing a faith mission with an offender), among other issues. A second and equally important concern about recruitment would be the risk that a general call for volunteers would trigger public outcry or even vigilante action. This suggests there should be careful, well thought-out approaches to targeted volunteer recruitment. COSA requires a long-term commitment by volunteers as a Circle slowly develops the trust of core members. Recruitment therefore has the added challenge of amassing a supply of volunteers not only willing to work with a difficult group but for a long period of time.

- **Volunteer Training.** There would be a need for serious training requirements for all volunteers, along with ongoing monitoring and support. For some respondents, the specific demands of working with sex offenders, who can often be highly manipulative, would involve such high levels of training for volunteers that they would in a sense be professionalised. Despite the ethos of COSA as a community support and accountability network, it was recognised that the dangers presented to the Circle members, and their need to be able to pick up risk signs for their own protection and the protection of the community demands high levels of training and support. This leads to questions how such highly trained volunteers might represent the 'general' community, or bridge the gap between offender and community.

- **Volunteer Collusion and Oversight.** Volunteers are at risk of becoming vested in the outcome of a Circle and personally in the lives of offenders. If the Circle is not working or the offender is manifesting risk behaviour, they may be less likely than a professional to seek intervention, as the failure of the Circle might be perceived as a personal failure on their part. Respondents in Scotland wanted reassurance that Circles would be overseen by professionals, either as part of an independently run organisation or as a project managed by statutory agencies.

- **Effects on and Support of Volunteers.** The research focus so far for Circles has been offender-focussed; for example on the effects for reconviction rates. There has been little consideration of the potential traumatic effects of

volunteers working with sex offenders. It is plausible that some volunteers, particularly those who drop out and therefore are least likely to be interviewed in ongoing research about COSA, will have had negative or painful experiences. This is an issue for future evaluation work, which needs to analyse the role of support systems, monitor the emotional state of volunteers, and consider provision for counselling or peer support.

▪ **Exit strategy.** Putting a support network in place could create dependency on the part of the offender: what happens if volunteers need to leave the Circle, or the decision is made that the Circle should end? While the fact that Circles involve a team of volunteers, typically between three and five, is advantageous, losing or needing to replace even one or two could still have impacts. A second dimension of the 'exit' issue is the lack of clarity about the end of a Circle and developing a 'withdrawal' plan: When does/should a Circle end? What time span is appropriate and feasible? What happens after a Circle ends – do volunteers remain in contact with the former core member, and what degree of liability might the Circles organisation have over this relationship?

▪ **Implications of faith group involvement in Circles.** There is strong interest from faith groups in Scotland in being involved in providing COSA in their communities. This may be quite appropriate where the core member is a member of the particular faith community, but where the local Circle is staffed entirely or mostly by volunteers from a particular church and the core member is either not religious or belongs to a different denomination, this structure of volunteers might not be suitable.

▪ **Maintaining the balance between support and accountability.** There remains some confusion over the precise role of volunteers in achieving a balance between support and accountability. Volunteers are simultaneously asked to juggle the requirements of being supportive in respect of risk factors in the behaviour of the core member, and also to act as the 'eyes and ears' of the state in ensuring accountability for the behaviour. This is a difficult balance to strike. When a Circle becomes aware of information that is potentially relevant for assessment of an offender's risk, it must make a judgement as to whether such behaviour must be reported. This is clearly a site for further investigation, thought, and the setting of clear procedures. It would not be appropriate or fair for this judgement to be subject exclusively to the idiosyncrasies of a group of volunteers. There is a deeper philosophical issue here in that encouraging volunteers to provide a kind of non-judgemental support and at the same time probe for and receive evidence of thoughts and behaviours from the core member which might be worrisome or even incriminating calls attention to a potential conflict between the support and accountability functions of COSA.

5.10   So we can see that as well as there being obvious benefits of the volunteer aspect to COSA, there are also a set of considerable concerns. Aside from the many practical concerns, such as the risk to the safety and mental health of volunteers, whether enough can be found, how to advertise, etc., perhaps the most problematic latent concern in our review emerged as the sense that in COSA volunteers may have inflated expectations of their role and attempt to do something for which they are not qualified. One of our voluntary sector respondents in particular expressed this concern: that volunteers who took part with the idea that they could work on offenders, or change them, were almost certainly going to be disappointed, and that this was a job for trained criminal psychologists.

5.11   This gets to the root of one of the central issues for the COSA model: it must be clear about what volunteers are expected to do and to achieve; it must also be clear about the limits of this role. A respondent from the faith community even went so far as to say that COSA was a model primarily geared towards meeting community needs for increased public protection, and had no real ambition to rehabilitate offenders through therapeutic means. Several respondents echoed this concern to clarify the limited role of COSA in the overall offender change process: the implication in some of the more enthusiastic output supporting Circles that the process is an effective way to change offenders should be tempered with much caution. There does seem, however, to be an implication in the COSA model that the Circle can provide exposure for the offender to conventional norms, and can help them to become reflexive through discussions of their personal problems and concerns that would not be available to them elsewhere, at least not confidentially. COSA also aspires to give offenders alternative socialisation groups besides other offenders, which can be the result of social isolation or exclusion, and is problematic for obvious reasons. These are admirable aims, and quite possibly realistic ones for community groups such as those in question, especially when we remember that COSA only proposes to deal with the minority of offenders who are contrite and want to change.

Empirical Dimensions of Volunteers in Circles

5.12   In practice, Circles projects have sought to realise the advantages of and address these concerns about volunteers. In this section we primarily focus on the case of HTVC, but also incorporate information from the research covering the Canadian experience. In the case especially of HTVC, where project organisers have faced many of the issues identified by our Scottish respondents around the use of volunteers, Scotland has the advantage of seeing how a nearby jurisdiction has worked through the issues, and whether the strategies they have developed would be applicable and acceptable here.

5.13   It should be noted that the published research base on COSA is small; and though it is growing, its main focus, for good reasons, is on the impact and effectiveness of the approach for offenders, and even more narrowly on recidivism, often expressed as reconvictions. Even the work that incorporates the perspectives of volunteers tends to do so in the context of establishing how well they are able to engage offenders. Research into volunteers' experience of COSA in their own right has not yet been a main line of inquiry and so we have only indirect evidence on important questions of their safety, vulnerability to trauma, sustainability as the main 'labour' supply of COSA, and their emotional and technical support needs.[8] Consideration of volunteer issues must be a core element of an evaluation strategy for developing COSA initiatives (see Chapter 7).

5.14   The existing evidence base does show a high level of commitment by volunteers to the principle of COSA, and satisfaction with their experiences of taking part in a circle. Volunteers studied in Canada and those interviewed by the SCCJR team highlighted potential links between volunteer participation in the management of sex offenders in the community, and more informed community views – and consequently reduced fear – of this form of offending. Hence, there is the possibility that COSA's use of community members provides an opportunity of educating the public about issues central to criminal justice including the meaning and management of high risk offenders and the realities and myths of sexual offending. It would be prudent to remember the limited nature of research while reading these promising signs. Views of volunteers reported in the literature and reported here are exclusively those of *active volunteers* who felt strongly enough about COSA to want to contribute to research. In other words, such research has not included people who did not make it through the vetting process, who began to volunteer but then decided not to continue, or, given the relatively recent emergence of COSA as an approach in the UK, who have had many years' distance to reflect upon their participation in Circles.

Information on Samples

5.15   The Canadian volunteer experience is captured in an evaluation of COSA in one area (South-Central Ontario) by a study team including researchers from the Canadian Correctional Service and led by Robin Wilson, a psychologist and researcher from the Humber College Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning (Wilson et al, 2007c).[9] The research comprised a survey questionnaire covering

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8 At the time of writing, we are aware of one planned piece of research that focuses exclusively on the volunteer experience and was motivated by a concern about the absence of this consideration in previous work.

9 This journal article presents a peer-reviewed version of the evaluation also reported in Wilson and Picheca (2005) and Wilson, Picheca and Prinzo (2005).

issues of recruitment/awareness of Circles, motivations for volunteering, demographics and personal background, views about and relations with core members, logistical and technical matters (training received, relationships with professionals), and perceived impacts of Circles on offenders and communities. Findings are based on 57 completed surveys (out of 84 distributed to past and current Circles volunteers, a 68% response rate).

5.16 HTVC has produced two reports/self-evaluations with some information about volunteers (QPSW, 2003, 2005). The Interim Report (QPSW, 2003) contains some information about all the pilots funded by the Home Office (now Ministry of Justice), while the more recent piece focuses on Thames Valley alone. In both of these reports the volunteer experience is presented mainly through brief essays by the volunteers themselves.[10]

5.17 The SCCJR research team's review of HTVC comprised distribution of 35 requests for interview from Circle Members (including both volunteers and core members) at Circles meeting places, to which there were 19 replies expressing an interest in participating, and twelve completed interviews or emailed replies from Circle Members, two of whom were core members and ten who were volunteers. (All Circle Members were given the choice of a telephone interview or submitting answers to the interview questions via email.)

Demographics and Background

5.18 The Canadian volunteer group included a balanced mix of genders (two-thirds men, one-third women), but tended to be dominated by the middle-aged, and had a slightly higher average age than the offenders who were in their Circles (volunteer average: 55; core member average age: 48). This may reflect demographic patterns among volunteers generally, where there is disproportionate representation by retired people (although only 25% of the Canadian volunteers reported being retired). Volunteers participating in the Canadian research also tended to be highly educated, with more than 80% having attended university and/or graduate school. Less than half the group were parents (40%).

5.19 One of the concerns we raised about community volunteers working in sensitive areas such as criminal justice is that an entirely inexperienced lay public will be the source of volunteers. However, consistent with the experience in Hampshire and Thames Valley (discussed next), Wilson et al (2007b) report that 40% of Canadian volunteers learned about COSA through prior experience in corrections or

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10 The Ministry of Justice is conducting its own evaluation of Circles and is due to complete its analysis of data by the end of 2008. It is looking exclusively at reconviction, however, and will not address the issues of volunteers.

contact with a core member, and almost half (48%) of the volunteers who were not retired worked in the 'helping' professions (e.g. counselling). If the experiences of this group are not atypical among other areas of Canada, this would suggest that volunteers are not entirely new to work or contact with offenders. Given the origins of COSA out of a Mennonite congregation, it is not surprising that 28% reported learning about COSA through church groups.

5.20   In the Thames Valley self-evaluation (QPSW, 2005) there is graphical depiction of data about volunteer backgrounds.[11] About 92 volunteers came from professional backgrounds (including those who are retired), with 10 of the volunteers having a background in criminal justice. Even more volunteers reported they were survivors of sexual abuse (around 22). Around 48 of the volunteers reported coming from a faith background.

5.21   Among HTVC volunteers interviewed for this report, four of the ten were retired. There were also slightly more women (six out of the ten) than men providing information. Many of the people we spoke with had some experience working in criminal justice, from volunteering in related areas (e.g. drug abuse charities, Samaritans, prison, probation service) or due to professional experience in public service and helping professions (counselling, education). Five of the nine of the group were Quakers. And like the Canadian sample, this was mostly a middle-aged group, with most still working or in education.

5.22   Some areas within the HTVC catchment have predominantly men while other areas have mainly women volunteers. A core member commented to us that his Circle volunteers were all women of different age groups. He felt this may have been the result of availability but did not see it as necessarily a negative factor for the potential of the Circle. However he said he personally would have preferred a mix of male and female volunteers. This would be an important consideration, however, for reflecting on COSA's potential to provide pro-social modelling of adult relationships. Three respondents who worked in Circles where all the volunteers were women[12] expressed their preference for having a mix of genders as well, and there was a general consensus among volunteers interviewed that a mixture is best. HTVC staff claim that sometimes gender imbalances are a strategic decision in matching a core member to an appropriate group of volunteers. They gave the examples of a female sex offender who herself was a survivor of male sexual abuse being placed with an all female Circle, and a young gay offender having a Circle entirely of gay men.

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11 The graphical presentation of the material does not include numerical data about the total number of volunteers included in this analysis nor how many reported multiple backgrounds (e.g. professional and survivor of criminal justice and from a faith background). Hence, numbers are estimated.

12 Due to confidentiality, it is not known whether these three respondents are in the same Circle.

Motivation

5.23   Interviews of current HTVC volunteers revealed a variety of motivations to sign up to Circles, and in fact no volunteer we contacted identified any single factor as dominant but named at least two or three. One volunteer stated: 'It seemed such a self-evidently good idea, and something that I felt I potentially had the aptitude and attitude for. I had also seen the effects of abuse in someone close to me, and wanted to help that not happen again' (*Interview 39*). The following were the most frequently noted reasons for signing up (but not listed in a particular order):

- Wanted to 'stand up and be counted'
- Reducing reoffending, public protection
- Sounded like a really sensible/self-evidently good idea
- Interested in criminal justice
- Have relevant skills (counselling, public health, other professional experience, volunteer experience, have worked in prisons or probation)
- Interested in developing professional career
- Faith, belief in redemption
- Reaction to, felt unhappy about negative tabloid coverage, vigilante actions
- Abuse survivor, know a survivor
- To protect children, no more victims

5.24   Volunteers reported that they did not feel they or any of the volunteers in their Circles had inappropriate motivations for participating. There was a lot of feedback about group dynamics, and the occasional situation of some volunteers wanting the support or accountability focus to become dominant. But despite some admissions of occasionally not being personally sympathetic to fellow volunteers, there was confidence that everyone was there for more or less the 'right reasons'. These issues are picked up again in the discussion on recruitment and screening.

Volunteer Views about Circles and Core Members

5.25   The views of the Canadian volunteers as they were about to or just beginning their work in Circles are a predictable blend of fear (51%) and anxiety (32%) about coping with difficult situations but also of hopefulness (91%) about their ability to make a difference in an offender's life, and faith (60%) in the support of the organisation coordinating their work. As volunteers had more time under their belts working in a Circle, all of these views tended to fade a bit, reflecting perhaps a shift from an idealistic but not necessarily self-confident disposition to a more pragmatic and self-assured one. Volunteers reported marked declines in the rate of anxiety to four per cent and fear to 27 per cent once they had had some experience in a Circle. However this experience also led them to become less hopeful that their work was making a difference in the offender's life (43%), and fewer felt supported by the

organisation (23%). Nearly all the volunteers, however, reported feeling that their work was well-received by the core member (92%), and the majority (specific figure not given) felt that their Circle 'was effective at recognizing when a core member was experiencing difficulties' (Wilson et al, 2007b: 297).

5.26   While there is a sense that volunteers had become less idealistic or ambitious about the magnitude of the impact they might have, Wilson et al (Id.) report that most of the volunteers (61%) felt that in the absence of a Circle, the core member would have reoffended. Moreover, nearly all felt that without a Circle the core member would have difficulty adjusting to life in the community (93%) and leading a stable life (82%); nearly all felt that the community experienced an increase in safety (89%) and was at least moderately helpful to the offender (93%) (Id.). Volunteers were also by large margins very positive about the impact of the supportive aspects of their work, believing the core member felt supported (96%), able to develop positive friendships (82%), and experienced an enhanced sense of self-worth (84%).

5.27   Interviews with HTVC volunteers offers a qualitative expansion on the statistical picture from Canada. The volunteers who spoke with us, with the exception of one person, all had at least a year's experience of being in a Circle, and several had been involved in Circles since the beginning of the Thames Valley pilot. When asked about the purpose of Circles and how the support and accountability elements are balanced, volunteers tended to see the two factors as interrelated:

> 'Circles of Support and Accountability exists for two main reasons. Firstly to ensure that as a result of the support of a Circle no further victims are created by the core member. Secondly to help the core member to integrate back into society. I believe that both aims are mutually inclusive. To these ends I have supported core members by providing them with safe, confidential and non-judgmental listening so that they are able to express their concerns, fears and hopes. This also means that at times I have had to question quite rigidly some of a core member's statements and beliefs.' (Interview 33)

5.28   Some volunteers seemed to suggest that ultimately, the accountability function is paramount:

> 'Support means sharing knowledge, giving non-judgemental understanding, being helpful. Accountability means keeping children safe. I would have no problem whatsoever with acting on perceived risk. That is the priority.' (Interview 37)

5.29   It would be accurate to say though that the volunteers we heard from felt that being able to support an offender, and for an offender to feel genuinely

supported was the way in to effecting change and creating accountability. One volunteer put it that, '[t]he main thing is giving a person hope about their future and their ability to make it' (*Interview 38*). In response to a challenge about the possibility that the support role might tend to displace accountability aims, one volunteer countered that 'support is a necessary part of the approach because you can't change people if you see them as monsters or animals. You have to see them as human beings and have to want to help them change' (*Interview 34*).

5.30 The pragmatic and informed perspectives of volunteers in HTVC was consistent and impressive and provides powerful counterevidence of the general perception that the public are not able to transcend the outrage of this form of offending and the influence exerted by the tabloid media. Awareness of the nuances of having both to encourage openness and yet to be wary is captured in the view of one volunteer that Circles is a 'paradox of trusting a core member absolutely and absolutely not trusting him….It's friendship with a distance' (*Interview 34*). There is a sense that you have to believe absolutely in the possibility that someone can become a contributing member of society while remaining at the same time constantly aware of the risk that they might do something terrible.

5.31 This pragmatism is born of volunteers' hard won and long-term efforts to work with a core member. Sometimes these efforts did not bear fruit in quite the way a volunteer would have hoped but may have fulfilled a more limited purpose. As one respondent noted: 'With my first core member, given the benefit of hindsight I'm not sure that a Circle was ever going to be the best solution for him. I think we worked well at the level of monitoring him and giving him a safe place to vent his feelings but as far as helping him fit back into society I'd have to say we didn't achieve that' (*Interview 33*).

5.32 Some who had worked for long periods to break down walls of communication with a core member experienced a kind of success more in line with their expectations. One volunteer spoke of achieving goals on the social support side when the core member 'came to believe and trust in people and [he now] has a group of people he can be fully open with and have confidence to talk to. This took a lot of time to achieve….and also provides structure to his life' (*Interview 37*). Similar views came from other volunteers. 'My core member went from being deeply angry, paranoid, and depressed after a seven year prison sentence but gradually came around. Circles helped him with [getting] a job. He found safe social relationships and got a partner, but hasn't told his partner why he was in prison' (*Interview 40*). The hard work of the Circle had paid off in assisting the core member's development of a more constructive attitude, although it is clear that issues remain for this person in developing openness and accountability in his personal relationship given he has been unable to disclose to his partner the reason for his long-term custodial sentence.

5.33 Perhaps of particular interest to criminal justice professionals, one volunteer felt the impact of Circles was to be measured thus: 'our core member has had his MAPPA risk assessment down-graded' (*Interview 41*). This simple statement contains some important revelations. First, where some stakeholders in our research had expressed concern about collusion and too much emphasis on the 'support' role of COSA, volunteers we interviewed were very much attentive to public protection issues and the official infrastructure for pursuing this goal. And in this volunteer's case there is evidence of knowledge specifically of the MAPPA process, which may reassure Scottish stakeholders about the ability of volunteers to work within the joint arrangements framework.

5.34 When asked about the overall purpose of COSA, one volunteer said, 'The stock answer is to prevent the next victim. But it locks in well with restorative justice principles, where we have offender, victim and community as participants. Circles is a powerful example of how we could and should take responsibility as a community for our community, instead of just leaving it to "them"' (*Interview 39*). This echoes the thoughts of a local agency stakeholder of HTVC, who had admitted being initially sceptical about Circles and the ability of volunteers to make a difference. 'Once it became clear to me that community volunteers *can* do this work, I began to feel like it's a public health issue, like they *should* be doing this work' (*Interview 31*).

Recruitment and Vetting

5.35 As noted in the list of concerns about use of volunteers are several issues related to recruitment and vetting. HTVC started out recruitment efforts in a targeted way, avoiding general public calls for volunteers to minimise fuelling tabloid sensationalism and to focus on groups most likely to provide acceptable recruits. The Quakers (and subsequently other faith communities), criminal justice offices (mainly probation), university students in particular disciplines (psychology, criminology, sociology, social work), and more recently volunteer fairs have been the main targets for recruitment and supplied the most participants. Efforts have broadened out now that the project has a well-established presence in the community. Recruitment leaflets have been left at local libraries and the project's incipient website will also be a means of recruiting new volunteers. (The Lucy Faithfull Foundation website has always allowed for recruitment via its website, with no reported adverse press or other reactions as a result of this.)

5.36 The HTVC project notes that recruitment of volunteers has and will continue to be a constant task but claim to have adequate numbers to support its work. Universities have been a particularly productive ground for recruitment, and it was noted that students tended to be women. It would not be inaccurate to say that many volunteers who are students are likely to be at the lower end of the age

spectrum among the rest of the volunteers, who are generally middle aged, although this is not uniformly true because some of these students are mature, and we came across students who had had professional or volunteer experience of prisons and probation.

5.37   Vetting of volunteers is an individualised process, although Wilson et al (2007a: 10) note the basic criteria applied to screening of volunteers in the Canadian projects[13], which provides a good sense of the sort of factors considered generally by COSA projects. Circles volunteers should be people who:

- Are stable in the community
- Are known in the community (references checked)
- Have demonstrated maturity
- Possess healthy boundaries
- Are available
- Have balance in lifestyle and viewpoint

5.38   The process in Hampshire and Thames Valley requires volunteers to complete an application, provide a CV and two references. They also have to undergo a criminal records check before being accepted into a Circle. HTVC personnel state that there is little attrition through the vetting process, either because applications are rejected by staff or a candidate withdraws. One HTVC staff member who had knowledge of all volunteer applications since the start of the pilot project said only one candidate had been rejected on the grounds of voyeurism (expressing excessive interest in case files).

5.39   One volunteer who is a survivor of sexual abuse claimed that a fellow volunteer with a similar, though more serious, experience eventually dropped out of her Circle because the issues it was raising for him personally became over-burdensome. We were not able to verify this formally, but HTVC staff agree that there have been a handful of cases where survivors have not been able to carry on work as volunteers for this reason, and they do attempt to screen for vulnerable people who may have unresolved issues of abuse.

Training

5.40   Training of volunteers is seen as the most important way of managing the identified concerns with volunteers. Thus it has become a primary focus for active Circles projects. Because of the informal, ad hoc origins of the first Circles in Canada, formal training systems did not exist in its early days. The current situation is vastly

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13 These are also listed in the Correctional Service of Canada's Guide to Project Development (2003).

different and in both Canada and Hampshire and Thames Valley documentation of their respective training packages is substantial.

5.41   Wilson et al's. (2007b) findings about training of Canadian volunteers reflect the fact that the project was evolving at the same time it was undergoing evaluation. For example, only slightly more than half (55%) the volunteers reported receiving any training prior to starting their Circle. It is not surprising then that when asked about how training could be improved, many desired more training to help prepare them for their work (40%), more training sessions available prior to beginning a Circle (42%), and more ongoing training sessions (44%). In terms of topics covered, most received training about restorative justice (62%), but in terms of training opportunities that could be developed, the areas that received the most interest were in the nuts and bolt matters of dealing with offenders, such as listening skills and responding to resistance (38%). Since the emergence of the first Canadian pilots, the CSC has established project development guidelines for Circles which include thorough coverage of volunteer issues such as recruitment, vetting, training, support and crisis (available online at: http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/prgrm/chap/circle/proj-guid/index_e.shtml, and see also Wilson et al, 2007a).

5.42   Because England has had the benefit of the Canadian Circles experience, there are marked differences in the approach to training even from the start of the pilots in the UK. The training that volunteers receive in Hampshire and Thames Valley, while undergoing some modifications over time, has always included training that must be completed by all volunteers prior to commencing a Circle. The current training package consists of a two-day initial training prior to commencing a Circle, mandatory annual booster training, and a number of special events and ad hoc coverage of particular topics. All volunteers participating in the SCCJR research reported having gone through the two-day training and annual one-day trainings, as well as mostly participating in the various events scheduled throughout the year. Volunteers we heard from reported strong satisfaction with their training in terms of the topics it covered and emphasised its additional value for providing a forum to meet with other volunteers in order to gain confidence (where they were new to Circles) and to share strategies or meet friends. One respondent said, 'I will still continue to go to trainings, even if it means repeating some, as I find that one of the most useful aspects is the insight it gives to offender behaviour and thinking. This is something it is easy to forget when you are simply faced with a charming and plausible person in the fairly social environment of a Circle' (*Interview 35*).

5.43   HTVC staff also have been invited to provide training or consult on developing training packages in other parts of the UK where there has been interest in Circles. As it gains its own charity status, HTVC is also developing plans to secure the sustainability of its project partly by generating income from training others.

5.44   In terms of training topics, volunteers listed the following examples they personally experienced:

- Group dynamics;
- Boundaries and manipulation;
- Sexual offending, challenging stereotypes;
- Accommodation (delivered by hostel workers);
- Sex offender treatment (SOTP trainers talk about purpose of courses, theories behind offending and course delivery);
- Probation, conditions of licence and other legal issues (delivered by probation staff);
- Police and MAPPAs (delivered by police);
- Prison;
- Questioning techniques;
- Media training;
- Victim's perspective.

5.45   The areas that volunteers mentioned as most useful for their role in Circles were:

- Boundaries and manipulation;
- Practical and legal issues: how licence (and probation) works, hostels, resources for housing, finance and employment support;
- Criminological: offender behaviour, sex offender treatment programmes (theory and practice); and
- Working in groups: group dynamics, managing group conflicts.

5.46   Volunteers reported that the training was dynamic, delivered through a variety of methods and involving the most knowledgeable person on an issue (e.g. a probation Offender Manager speaking about how probation orders work). Concrete information is seen as the means of strengthening the volunteer's position vis-a-vis the core member. Volunteers, according to one interviewee, "need to know a lot of stuff about licences, prison system, MAPPA, PPOs, otherwise there is a danger that the core member will see himself as the expert (and hence in control!)" (*Interview 39*).

Operational Features of HTVC Circles

5.47   In the Hampshire and Thames Valley project, volunteers may participate in a maximum of two 'active' Circles at a time. An 'active' Circle is one which exists in a formal way, that is, it is currently under the regular supervision of the Circles project team. Many volunteers have maintained some form of contact with core members once a Circle has become inactive or discontinued. The boundary between active and

inactive Circles can be fluid, and Circles can be reactivated where, for example, a volunteer's informal social contacts with a core member raise issues or concerns that are considered of a nature that more regular and formal contact with the entire Circle of volunteers would be appropriate (or where a core member has returned to prison, the Circle may become inactive until his release). An increase in meetings may occur for public protection and accountability reasons (e.g. where a core member is displaying reversion to risky behaviours and require more frequent check-ins) or for support reasons. One volunteer interviewed during this research noted that a Circle that was about to go to monthly meetings reverted to fortnightly meetings when the building in which the core member had a flat was covered in vigilante posters advertising the presence of a sex offender. The Circle met more frequently following this because it was felt he needed more support as this event caused him to become stressed and depressed.

5.48   HTVC groups active Circles into two phases: Phase I Circles are the most formal and feature weekly meetings with the core member in traditional meeting places (e.g. church halls). This phase generally lasts for a period of six months, after which Phase II moves towards less frequent formal Circles meetings (e.g. fortnightly or monthly) and adds in social meetings with the core member in public places. Phase II is earmarked to last for six months, but this may be extended based on the conclusions of the Circle members – volunteers and core member, Circles coordinators and any involved statutory agency representatives (e.g. Offender Manager). People interested in volunteering for COSA have to be able to commit for at least a year.

Effects on Volunteers, Safety and Support Issues

5.49   In addition to the positive impacts they felt Circles were having on the lives of core members, Canadian volunteers reported positive impacts on themselves as well. Three-quarters said it gave them a sense of community, 66% reported it provided them with friendship and over half felt they had an emotional bond with others (Wilson et al, 2007b: 298). There was no data about levels of stress or trauma experienced by volunteers, although this was indirectly explored in the questions about volunteers' feelings of fear, anxiety and being supported mentioned previously. Again, however, we note this as an unfortunate gap in the research that deserves attention, perhaps not before pilots are initiated, but in assessing the long-term impacts of this approach.

5.50   The information from Hampshire and Thames Valley provides examples of specific actions undertaken to ensure the safety of and provide support to volunteers. These include:
- Mobile phones are available from the project office for volunteers who do not want to use their own phones;

- All Circle members (volunteers and core members) use only first names with each other (this can change when Circles move into an inactive, social phase);
- Social gatherings with the core member are notified to all other volunteers and the Circle Coordinator in advance;
- Protocols against bringing core member to one's own home or meeting in secluded or isolated places;
- Always having a mobile phone on one's person when meeting with a core member;
- Vetting process includes screening for the vulnerable (e.g. abuse survivors not ready to deal face to face with offenders of this type);
- Circle Coordinator provides oversight through regular reviews of the Circle (assessing how volunteers are getting along and communicating with each other, ensuring core member is not attempting to control agenda and move away from discussion of key issues, e.g., identified in relapse prevention plans);
- A counsellor is employed by HTVC on a part-time basis and is available to support core members, volunteers and project staff (although most volunteer respondents were not aware of this service).

5.51   Interestingly, no volunteer interviewed for this report identified their own safety as a major concern. This may be partly a result of having a robust set of protocols in place, which provides reassurance to volunteers. In addition, as was noted above, because volunteers working in COSA often have some experience of criminal justice, they may have a higher average level of security and awareness than the lay public. HTVC staff note that during an early stage of the pilot there have been many lessons learned about volunteer safety which have resulted in the current set of protocols. There originally was no explicit rule against inviting a core member to one's home, and at least one volunteer interviewed for this report, who had participated in one of the first Circles, noted his family had always had the core member over for a Christmas meal. There have also been instances of HTVC staff having to meet with volunteers where observance of the protocols had weakened, as in the rule about notifying other volunteers and the Circle Coordinator about any meetings with the core member in advance. However, these procedures appear to be robust: HTVC staff reported that to date there have been no serious safety incidents concerning volunteers.

5.52   The general tenor of volunteer comments reveals a group that has a mature attitude towards working with high risk individuals. One respondent noted that volunteers have 'to accept a level of personal responsibility' for their own safety 'by following protocols and not meeting with core members in a secluded place' (*Interview 34*).

5.53   Volunteer respondents to this research also reported feeling that they had adequate emotional and technical support to carry out their work. One volunteer said he 'thought hearing about deviant sexual experiences might be difficult, not traumatic but [difficult] because I wouldn't know how to relate, support or guide an individual towards healthy ways. But it turned out not to be a big issue. Core members have set out to shock by being explicit, but this hasn't worked on me or my fellow volunteers' (*Interview 38*). Again, however, it is important to note the earlier proviso about the limited nature of our own and others' research on volunteers and the absence of information about those who decided not to continue in Circles.

5.54   The Circle Coordinators play a major role in the generally high level of satisfaction among volunteers about support and supervision. The Coordinators were reported to be the first port of call for any concerns with either the core member or other volunteers, and concerns were reported to be handled quickly and effectively. These covered a range of issues from those related to the core member's participation to problems in the group dynamic among volunteers. While Coordinators have primary responsibility for ensuring that a Circle's focus on COSA aims remains in place, volunteers themselves seem to self-regulate to some degree in holding themselves accountable to their mission and keeping within their explicit remit. In the words of one volunteer: 'A general issue is that we mostly have an amateur knowledge of counselling and therapy, but are not qualified to practise it – indeed it could be counter-productive. So there is always a danger of slipping into amateur psychology. Sometimes volunteers need to hold each other accountable in such areas' (*Interview 39*).

5.55   And finally, Circles has had effects on volunteers beyond their immediate concern with sexual offenders. One respondent said 'I wasn't very aware of victims of crime [before starting in Circles] but have begun to be after working in Circle. I think Circles could work for victims too in helping them get their lives back together. I think it's too bad victims don't have same level of support as core members' (*Interview 34*).

Information Sharing and Disclosure

5.56   As noted in Chapter 4, information sharing and confidentiality issues were raised by many of our Scottish interviewees as a concern about the use of volunteers in COSA. The Canadian research does not address this issue empirically, although guidelines are provided in the CSC's Guide to Project Development (2003).

5.57   In Hampshire and Thames Valley, information sharing and disclosure are covered by protocols and procedures. To begin with, the first Circle meeting with the core member is a 'Disclosure Meeting', and it is during this that the offender outlines the nature of his offences, the conditions of his licence where applicable, and

relevant information about his MO. Prior to this first full meeting, Circles volunteers will have met as a group once or several times. Partly this is a social initiative, to introduce volunteers to each other and to establish working relationships. It also serves the interest of reaffirming awareness of confidentiality. It is in these pre-Circle meetings that a Circle Coordinator and a core member's Offender Manager may provide volunteers with limited criminal history and other relevant information.

5.58   The training volunteers have received aims to clarify lines of communication and thresholds for reporting concerning issues that arise in a Circle. HTVC volunteer respondents displayed adherence to confidentiality protocols for example by noting that they tend to turn to other Circle volunteers for support more than to their family or friends due to the confidentiality issues preventing them discussing their core member outside the Circle. Even those volunteers whose husbands or wives also volunteer in other Circles stated they were limited in what they were able to tell their partners because of confidentiality.

5.59   Knowing when to provide information to authorities is a key challenge of information sharing. As noted, in HTVC Circles Coordinators are generally the first place a volunteer would turn either to report information or to consult about how to manage something that has arisen in a Circle. Bates et al (2007) reported in their case studies of several core members that there was an example of relevant information about a core member who was eventually recalled to prison not being passed up to Circles staff or authorities. Once this was discovered, HTVC personnel followed up with volunteers and reviewed information sharing procedures. Circles Coordinators sit in on at least the first few meetings of the Circle, and then again on a monthly basis to monitor issues that arise. Circles also produce minutes of every meeting which are supplied to the Circle Coordinator, who may then also provide them to the Offender Manager and MAPPA. The Coordinators may sit in on any meeting when they feel they need to provide closer monitoring or to work with a Circle in deciding whether to contain an issue within it or pass it up to the authorities for action. (The Bates et al, 2007, study provides detailed information about the circumstances when issues were contained within a Circle.)

Key Points

5.60   The central role for volunteers will always constitute COSA's most innovative and yet most challenging aspect. Our conceptual and empirical consideration of the volunteer dimension concludes with several important points to consider in assessing feasibility of Scottish pilots. First, the key issues around volunteering in Circles are now well known, and in Hampshire and Thames Valley have been successfully managed through establishment of formal training and supervision

processes. By 'successful' we do not mean to make an evaluative judgement of the content of training and supervision; rather, we mean that all of the participants and stakeholders in the HTVC Circles feel satisfied that there are adequate structures in place for dealing with known issues, and clarity about whom to contact if new questions arise. This satisfaction among volunteers, core members, project staff, and liaison personnel in local statutory agencies and MAPPA about the adequacy of volunteer management and supervision is reinforced by the fact that to date there have been no harms to volunteers or others.

5.61   Second, the trend of responses from Canadian volunteers reflects a very positive perception of the project and their impact and at remarkably almost universal rates. Volunteers feel strongly that they are having a positive impact on precisely those issues identified in the general literature on sex offenders such as social isolation and low self-esteem that are triggers for reoffending, and moreover, believe that they have reduced the likelihood of reoffending. The positive feelings of Canadian volunteers about COSA are mirrored in the perspectives of the HTVC volunteers we interviewed. However, one important and missing piece of the picture is the long-term impact on volunteers of this kind of work. It may be that volunteers are provided adequate support and that negative impacts are minimal, but we cannot say this with confidence despite the high levels of satisfaction reported among volunteers participating in research. The limited sample sizes of existing research would need to be expanded substantially to provide statistical validation of findings so far.

5.62   Third, recruitment of adequate numbers of appropriate individuals is a real concern for COSA. This was a factor in the implementation failure of The Hampton Trust pilot, which had a strategy of not focusing on faith groups for recruitment. Faith groups figure heavily in the COSA experience, and more study of this aspect of the approach would provide useful information about the implications of this. While there was some disquiet among Scottish respondents about involvement of church groups and the risk of COSA aims giving way to religious ones, there may also be unique positive benefits of involving people from faith communities. For example, we could conjecture that individuals coming from such communities have a pre-existing support system and set of beliefs well-placed to manage any of the otherwise potentially traumatic aspects of hearing in detail about instances of sexual offending and victimisation.

5.63   Finally, respondents from the HTVC project confirm the sense gained from the Canadian research about Circles: this is a model that ignites people's belief and enthusiasm in their ability to support positive social change. Aside from COSA's merits in reducing reoffending, this approach of involving volunteers will be of interest to those seeking innovative ways of energising and involving communities in governance. While volunteers display a sense of inspiration in their work, this is not

achieved at the expense of awareness about the difficulties and challenges of working with sex offenders. As one volunteer concludes:

> 'What I have written above perhaps comes across as universally positive, and that is what I meant. But it is also true that being a volunteer is sometimes tough. I didn't want to hear a lot of stuff that I did have to hear. I didn't always want to turn out on a winter evening for a challenging meeting. I didn't always want to spend an hour in a coffee shop trying to make conversation with someone I didn't very much like. But I would do it again!' (Interview 39)

6. ASSESSING EFFECTIVENESS OF CIRCLES

6.1   **What would a good system of sex offender management look like and what would it deliver?** This question drives this report's definition of effectiveness and provides the context for assessing Circles. In doing so we broaden quite significantly what it would mean for COSA to be 'effective'. For Scottish stakeholders, in addition to public protection and reduction of reoffending, there is a desire for services to deliver public confidence in criminal justice and to make efficient use of their expert capacities. Hence, there are multiple dimensions of COSA's potential effectiveness:

> ➢ **How might COSA be effective for offenders?**
> ➢ **How might COSA be effective for communities?**
> ➢ **How might COSA be effective for criminal justice professionals?**

6.2   Ultimately for policymakers, the key question for Circles is: Do they work? Determining the answer to this question will require gathering extensive evidence from pilots and projects obtained over a suitably long period. Should the Scottish Government participate in piloting Circles, it will be in a position to contribute to the answer. The information available so far is promising, but the evidence base is too small and from too brief a period to draw more than tentative conclusions on most measures at this point.

6.3   There is also a fundamentally important issue about what it means for such an approach to 'work'. Current research on COSA has focused on reconvictions as a test of effectiveness, because of all the ways to define recidivism, this measure is reliably indexed in criminal justice records. It is the kind of 'hard' evidence that policymakers prefer, even though there are substantial problems relating rates of reconviction (incidents that have been caught and successfully prosecuted) to rates of reoffending (what offenders do whether or not they are caught or convicted). Equally important, COSA is offered as a service which aims to work *with* statutory agencies and communities towards a goal of monitoring and reintegration. Hence a possibly more salient evaluation focus for COSA is on its ability to enhance the work of these stakeholders rather than its independent impact on offender behaviour.

6.4   Furthermore, as with all community-based approaches, not only is it difficult to isolate the role of Circles on offender behaviour, such a research aim may also miss the point of basing initiatives in the community in the first place. This is because the community is not just the *setting* of 'treatment' (like the prison is the setting of an offender programme), it is also an *agent* and *target* of change (Hope, 2005). That is, approaches such as COSA not only use communities in the aim of changing

offenders, but offenders provide the opportunity for communities to change themselves (by becoming involved in efforts to reduce crime and the fear of crime, and increasing a sense of community involvement, empowerment and hope). Evaluating the impact of initiatives like COSA thus requires a holistic perspective. A 'what works' orientation, with its emphasis on methods of evaluation imported from natural and especially medical science, has become popular in policy debates. However, the Nobel laureate in economics, James Heckman, reminds us that, '[t]he end result of a research program based on experiments [that treat communities as black boxes and seek to isolate efficacy factors] is just a list of programs that "work" and "don't work", but no understanding of why they succeed or fail' (Heckman and Smith, 1995: 108).

6.5   In this chapter we present the available evidence of effectiveness in the three areas listed (for offenders, for communities, for professionals) and, in highlighting the significant gaps of coverage, show where future research could provide a richer picture of how community approaches like this might have an impact.

Effectiveness for Offenders

Reconviction and Recidivism

6.6   The emphasis on measuring effectiveness by evidence-based practice and questions of 'what works' have led to attempts to demonstrate empirically the effect of an intervention in relation to desired goals. Interventions deemed effective are those which address offender risk, while targeting criminogenic needs, enabling the offender to make necessary changes and encouraging motivation to do so. While effectiveness is often gauged by rates of recidivism between offenders (in receipt of a particular intervention) and a matched comparison group (not in receipt of the intervention) it is difficult to identify statistical significance in relation to sex offenders. These kinds of comparisons, aiming for experimental or quasi-experimental status, also carry with them internal and fundamental problems, as we noted at the outset. And, as the work in Canada shows, there are challenges in identifying a comparison group as it would be expected that Circles would target high-risk offenders. Given that the number of individuals who come into this category is small, it would be expected that there would not be sufficient individuals remaining to constitute a comparison group.   The long-term follow-up period required to measure recidivism also causes difficulties in establishing the effectiveness of a specific intervention.

6.7   Even focusing narrowly on 'effectiveness' for offenders as a question of recidivism is highly problematic. In sexual offending recidivism there are difficulties in: establishing sufficiently lengthy follow-up times; low levels of reporting of sexual

offences (Loucks, 2002); and discrepancies in official sources of information about criminal convictions (Friendship and Thornton, 2001). Nevertheless, the implementation and operation of Circles has been followed by early attempts to evaluate this aspect of effectiveness.

6.8   Studies of the Canadian model of Circles have been resourced through the Correctional Services of Canada and carried out by academic researchers. Wilson, Picheca and Prinzo (2005, 2007c) matched a group of 60 high-risk sexual offenders involved in Circles following release from custody to a comparison group of 60 high-risk sexual offenders who did not participate in Circles. The two groups were matched on criminality and risk levels (using the General Statistical Information on Recidivism scale) and released from prison on or close to the same date. Both groups were also matched with previous sexual offender treatment. A range of measures were used to compare the groups (STATIC-99, RRASOR, Phallometric testing). The average follow-up period was 4.5 years. Recidivism in this study was defined as reconvictions and charges for new sexual offences or for breaches of order.

6.9   The study authors note that the individuals selected for Circles formed in fact a slightly higher-risk group (the higher-risk individuals were more likely to be targeted for intervention at the end of a prison sentence). While this may have suggested that the Circles participants would be expected to have higher rates of re-offending, the researchers found the opposite. The study results showed that offenders who participated in Circles had significantly lower rates of general reoffending than the comparison group. They also had a 70% reduction in sexual recidivism in contrast to the matched comparison group and a 57% reduction in all types of violent recidivism and an overall reduction of 35% in all types of recidivism. Where further sexual offending did occur, these offences were reported to be 'less severe' than prior offences by the same individuals.

6.10   Bates et al (2007) evaluated the first four years of the Thames Valley project's operation. This was a self-evaluation and was based on information collected within the project. Bates et al (2007) were unable to conduct a long-term follow-up study as the maximum length of time for a Circle core member to have remained in the community – at that time – was 3.5 years (10 years is considered to be the generally optimal follow-up period in sexual offending recidivism). This study distinguished between:

- **Reconviction** (subsequent conviction for another *sexual* offence);
- **Re-offending** (commission of a subsequent illegal act – including acts which are not detected by the police). Loucks (2002) in a review of recidivism studies indicates that estimates suggest that actual re-offending rates are more than twice those indicated by reconviction data; and,

- **Recidivism** (behaviour which breaks the law *and* behaviour which was present in previous offending, i.e. conduct consistent with an offender's prior *modus operandi*) (see also Loucks, 2002).

6.11   Bates et al (2007) argue that Circles provide an opportunity to collate a significant amount of data on core members through the collation of files and the 'local knowledge' gained through the formal and informal group and individual meetings which take place between core members, volunteers and Circle Coordinators. Using this data, accessed through interviews with Circle staff and case files kept on 16 core members between 2002 and 2006, the following results were obtained:

- No core member was reconvicted of a sexual offence.
- One core member was convicted of a breach of a Sex Offence Prevention Order.
- Four core members (25%) were recalled for breach of parole licence conditions.
- Five core members (31%) were reported to exhibit some kind of recidivist behaviour.

6.12   Keeping in mind the fact that this work is not presented as a formal reconviction study, the absence of any sexual reconvictions among the sample group is a promising sign. In addition, Bates et al (2007) make the case that examples of recidivism and recalls to prison are evidence of Circles' success because they showed the ability of Circles to pick up on and refer to authorities before an offence could take place. They note:

> 'The fact that four core members have been recalled to prison can be seen as evidence of the effectiveness of current public protection procedures of which COSA forms an active part. It is important to also recognise that three of these four have retained contact with COSA and have been or will be accommodated in further Circles interventions.' (Bates et al, 2007: 38)

6.13   In our interviews, Hampshire and Thames Valley project staff identified situations where problems were experienced with volunteers passing on appropriate information to Public Protection Officers – in one case this led to an internal review of communications procedures and resulted in more formal information-sharing between Circles and statutory agencies. In the cases where action was taken against a core member (e.g. recall to prison) agencies themselves have been able to identify behaviour – but in three out of six cases where this occurred, Circles contributed to this process and in four further cases, Circles identified recidivist behaviour which was addressed in consultation with public protection and probation officers.

Pro-social Change

6.14   The Good Life Model, a strengths based approach which is used within the HTVC Circles, shifts the emphasis beyond the removal of risk factors, and aims to develop pro-social opportunities for core members to develop a fulfilling life (Ward, 2002; Lindsay et al, 2007). According to the Risk Management Authority Standards and Guidelines, this model offers a constructive framework for enhancing offender motivation (RMA, 2007). It provides a way of intervening that focuses positively on providing individuals with the required skills and support to achieve a meaningful life in socially acceptable and personally meaningful ways. Although Bates et al (2007) provide some information on reconviction and recidivism, the evaluations conducted to date in the UK have focused on the process and development of Circles (Haslewood-Pocsik et al, 2008; QPSW, 2005). A key concern of this work has been to assess Circles' ability to facilitate greater stability and social integration in the lives of the core members (in comparison to predictions and/or earlier experiences).

6.15   Therefore 'effectiveness' and 'success' are defined by the providers of Circles as not only the reduction of recidivism, but also improvements in the lives of the core members (which may also be inter-related). Circles are aimed at providing a sense of community for individuals who, it is believed, would otherwise be isolated and socially marginalised. Providing support in this way is aimed at addressing criminogenic factors that may be linked to re-offending – and in doing so, reducing the likelihood of further victimisation.

6.16   The ongoing relationships between Circle members (core and volunteer) and Circle Coordinators enable the collation of significant information about sex offenders' attitudes and behaviour in the community. This collaboration underpins the expectation that Circles are likely to reveal more detailed information about the day-to-day activities of core members than relationships between sex-offenders and professionals within statutory agencies can obtain, and this, it is suggested, can lead to a greater potential for intervention and control over recidivist behaviour.

6.17   The Thames Valley self-evaluation used psychometric testing (based on Home Office questionnaires) to measure and assess core members' attitudes and beliefs (specifically levels of self-esteem, emotional isolation and locus of control). The evaluation indicates that improved attitudes were identified in 'certain (but not all) core members' (QPSW, 2005:20). This evaluation is based on a very small number of core members and while it usefully illustrates the concepts underpinning Circles and the development process, is limited in what it can offer in terms of generalising findings to a larger population.

6.18   The self-evaluation then shifted towards recidivism and the use of qualitative data, with the aim of depicting recidivist behaviour during the period of the Circle. The evaluation found that:

- Circles helped core members to develop tools for managing their lives and coping on an inter-personal level; and,
- The informal contact of Circles provided more opportunities to observe core members' daily behaviour in the longer term (QPSW, 2005).

6.19   The relatively small numbers Thames Valley was able to include (exacerbated by the small base rate problem for sexual offending generally), and the fact that this self-evaluation has not yet been replicated in independent research, mean the value of this work is limited in its ability definitively to identify the impact of Circles on offender integration. However, it does show the potential for Circles to have a role in promoting pro-social change and 'internal controls' in the offender's behaviour. The balance between external and internal controls (achieved through a combination of intensive supervision with cognitive behavioural intervention programmes) has been seen as a key success factor in risk management in MAPPA processes (Wood and Kemshall, 2007; Kemshall, 2002). Pro-social modelling has been applied in the English MAPPA processes and has been seen as contributing both to the goal of public protection and rehabilitation of offenders (Wood and Kemshall, 2007). While external restrictions are imposed on offenders' behaviour and freedoms, internal controls are enhanced through supervision and treatment programmes.

6.20   The philosophy of Circles suggests continuity between treatment provided by statutory agencies and post-treatment support that Circles can provide, with post-treatment support working to reinforce and sustain the effects of the treatment: 'Although treatment has helped the offender identify pro-offending beliefs and attitudes, the Circle will help him apply this learning into every day living' (QPSW, 2003:6). Whether or not this is what actually has led to the reduction in recidivism identified in the Canadian study of Circles (Wilson et al, 2007c) is an open question. However it is clear that the philosophy of pro-social change (developing victim empathy, talking openly about their offending behaviour and identifying ways to avoid situations triggering such behaviour) and the philosophy of Circles share common assumptions and therefore it is reasonable to see Circles as one of the possible post-treatment options (for those willing to undertake it) ensuring consistency and continuity in the process of offender rehabilitation. More importantly, Circles may be able to offer something statutory agencies cannot, namely alternative constructive activities and social bonds, an approach that may have more to offer in terms of reducing offending than a focus on negative outcomes and attitudes via a cognitive behavioural approach (Hayles, 2006).

Reintegration into Communities

6.21   Development of pro-social skills, improved coping and reduction in isolation supports reintegration of offenders into communities. But while attending to these general benefits, Circles also assist the goal of reintegration through the very specific and practical activities of volunteers. Some of these are seemingly very minor or mundane, but we should not underestimate the impact of day-to-day support on the lives of offenders, for whom they may have a disproportionate benefit. For example, by accompanying a core member to a doctor's appointment, helping a core member find an appropriate club to join, or escorting him to a computer class (all examples provided to us by HTVC volunteers), a Circle can directly link an offender back into a community.

6.22   A further small scale study of IMPACT Circles[14] (Haslewood-Pocsik et al, 2008) has recently been published and may provide some insight into this issue. It was based on in-depth qualitative interviews and focuses specifically on the implementation and preliminary operation of these Circles. While the researchers initially aimed to include five Circles in their study, only four were operational at the time of the study and of these four, two differed from the original process guidelines (one used only two volunteers; another was based on ad-hoc support from a range of people and subsequently formalised as a Circle).

6.23   Despite the small numbers and inconsistency of operation across the IMPACT Circles, the study highlighted a number of useful findings in relation to: the key features and dynamics of the mentoring relationship; perceptions of the risk management role of Circles; and importance of the self-employment/employment focus of the Circles.

6.24   The IMPACT study indicated that Circles were an additional tool in the support and management of sex offenders. In addition, the role of volunteers allowed an input which went beyond statutory supervision. This was viewed as important in reducing social isolation and assisting with the process of reintegration.

6.25   Sex offenders do often experience stigma and marginalisation within local communities when they are identified, as a direct result of their perceived risk as

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14 IMPACT (Innovation Means Prisons and Communities Together) Circles were set up in 2006. IMPACT is a developmental project in the North West of England, part-funded by the European Social Fund and led by HM Prison Service, focusing on innovative methods of resettling ex-offenders into the community. The IMPACT Circles were for sex offenders and those presenting a risk to children and focus on developing safe and supported opportunities for self-employment.

well as a degree of uninformed community prejudice. A Canadian study (Hanson and Harris, 2000) suggested that sexual offence recidivists (in comparison to sexual offenders not considered to have committed a further offence) had: experienced poor social support; attitudes tolerant of sexual assault; antisocial lifestyles; poor self-management strategies; difficulty co-operating with community supervision; increased anger and subjective distress.

6.26   Circles aim to address these difficulties by providing support from volunteers to assist core members to access resources in the community such as housing, employment and leisure facilities and to feel involved in local communities. The extent to which these factors directly affect recidivism is not evident from the literature however. Evidence of the link between a reduction in social isolation and reductions in recidivism could be explored in the Scottish context through the setting up of pilots. Alternatively (or perhaps additionally) the view might quite reasonably be taken that assisting isolated members of communities, whether offenders or not, with accessing essential services, support, and friendship networks, is a valuable end in itself for social policy.

6.27   While various studies have attempted to identify factors linked to predicted recidivism (see Loucks, 2002), evidence from Scotland suggests that sex offenders do not differ significantly from the general population in terms of intelligence, age, ethnicity, education, or psychiatric status. They are mostly male, come from all socio-economic backgrounds (although are more likely to be prosecuted if they come from lower socio-economic groups), the majority are not mentally ill though some have learning difficulties, and the majority can be classified as antisocial personalities or as paraphiliacs.

6.28   Loucks (2002) concludes that sexual deviancy was a better predictor of further sexual offending than other general factors. The characteristics of serious sexual and violent offenders appeared to be more similar to offenders generally, than to non-offenders. She also notes that the type of sexual offence appeared to influence rates of recidivism, with rapists being more likely to commit further sexual offences. Offence type and previous offence history appeared more likely to impact on recidivism than other characteristics.

6.29   Accordingly, while Circles are likely to prevent the increased isolation of core members, the relationship of reduced isolation and recidivism is not clear. Loucks (2002) suggests that the complexity of this issue (prediction of recidivism) is so complex that some authors have argued that it may be more effective to focus on methods of prevention than how to predict recidivism. In this respect Circles may have something to offer in terms of the early identification of potentially recidivist behaviours and a mechanism to feed this back to statutory agencies.

Effectiveness for Communities

6.30   Interventions aimed at enhancing the life experiences of core members have also been viewed as beneficial to the wider community. Wilson et al (2007b), through the use of surveys, identified a perceived increase in community safety by volunteers involved in Canadian Circles. They also collected survey responses from 176 community members (based on surveys left in large quantities in public places), which were screened down to 77 (34 men, 41 women). Those who indicated that they were employed in the area of criminal justice or who had prior volunteer experience in the correctional system were selected out, in order to reduce bias by those who may naturally be favourable to the correctional system (Id.: 293). Of the 77 community surveys, Wilson et al (2007b) found that most were 'glad' (69%) and 'relieved' (62%) that these offenders were getting additional help, although a small minority reported anger (8%) that offenders were getting this support. Most of these community respondents would feel fearful and angry if a high risk sex offender moved into their neighbourhood, however, 68% of the respondents reported that these feelings would change in a positive direction if they knew that the offender in question belonged to a Circle. This appears to suggest an overall impact on perceptions of increased community safety generally (Id.).

6.31   Criminal justice professionals, who responded to the Wilson et al survey (2007b) (n=16, out of 20 surveys circulated), also appeared to believe that community safety was enhanced by the operation of Circles:

> 'Approximately 70% of the professional/agency respondents believed that the community-at-large would experience an increase in safety in knowing that a high-risk sexual offender is part of a COSA and 63% felt the fear of reoffence would be reduced. In addition, 44% reported that the community would also get a contributing member of society as the core member became more functional' (Id.: 299).

6.32   Our interviews of the HTVC volunteers, described in Chapter 5, provide support for Wilson et al's (2007b) findings and also suggest additional ways that Circles have effects on communities. Involvement in Circles provided HTVC volunteers a thorough understanding both of the dynamics of sexual offending and the statutory system in place to address it. Circles thus may have an educative effect for communities that can counteract simplistic political and media representations. In addition, the fact that these volunteers consistently felt their work was making an important contribution to the management of sex offenders provided a real sense of empowerment and even duty. An approach like Circles may provide an example of how communities can shift from the view that serious crime is someone else's

problem to the view that it is an area where they can and even should make a difference.

Effectiveness for Criminal Justice Professionals

6.33   The fact that criminal justice professionals in Wilson et al's (2007b) small survey sample saw community benefits to COSA also shows that COSA could have benefits for the professionals themselves. There are many ways in which Circles might perform such an 'effectiveness' function. The model found favour among the majority of the statutory actors we interviewed, as filling a gap in supervision and support. Whether or not a reduction in recidivism is achieved, the introduction of COSA would seem to achieve greater satisfaction among criminal justice professionals as regards the reach and defensibility of the overall system of sex offender management. For those criminal justice professionals with responsibility for working towards community safety, the presence of a project that supports and enhances this goal could therefore have positive impacts for their morale and contribute to a renewed sense of mission. Research is required to evaluate this dimension of Circles, as it is central to an understanding of the effect of COSA.

6.34   The broader context and relationship with statutory agencies is clearly of significance. Wilson et al (2000) suggest that coordinated, multi-disciplinary approaches to community-based sexual offender management can reduce recidivism. Evidence from England also suggests that the accountability aspect of Circles may be more feasible where it is supported by: a legislative framework; robust notification procedures and agencies working together with appropriate capacity and expertise in order to support initiatives aimed at high risk offenders. Circles appear to work better where there is a formal partnership with the police, probation and prison services, and so the ability to assess the effectiveness and value of Circles for these stakeholders is important. Certainly the agency stakeholders in England with whom we spoke were convinced of the ability of Circles to have an impact. While they articulated this impact in terms of public protection and reduced reoffending, we observed that an equally important element appeared to be the confidence and satisfaction it gave them in feeling that their own work with offenders (whether through a treatment programme, relapse prevention, probation supervision or police monitoring) was being supported in the community. This is one area where the integration of qualitative evaluative methods could be particularly useful.

7 Assessing Feasibility – Issues for Pilots

7.1   As noted in Chapter 6 the decision to develop COSA as a *pilot project* is quite different to its endorsement as *general policy*. This is an important distinction to keep in mind when assessing feasibility of pilots in Scotland and considering the implementation issues they would entail. Feasibility of adopting Circles on a national level, as has happened for example with the development of an accredited sex offenders groupwork programme, would require a substantial evidence base supporting its use. This does not yet exist, and one purpose of developing pilots is to develop such an evidence base, which was one of the reasons the Home Office (and now Ministry of Justice) funded the English projects. The question for Scottish policymakers, therefore, is whether enough is known to instigate a pilot project. Our approach in this chapter is to identify feasibility issues within this more narrow construction. It has involved engaging with several questions:

- Are the **risks** of this project reasonably well known or foreseeable?
- Are there acceptable mechanisms for **managing risks**?
- Can all relevant factors bearing on **implementation**, and therefore affecting a calculation of cost, be identified?
- Is the existing evidence adequately promising to show a pilot project would be **worthwhile**?

7.2   Our brief was to provide information without making a recommendation about initiating pilot COSA projects. Therefore, in this chapter we raise the central issues affecting feasibility and implementation of pilots to guide decision making.

Siting issues

7.3   The implementation experience in England and Wales (Chapter 2) provides useful information about the factors that affected the success or failure of implementation. Where to develop pilots is a first concern and involves several issues:

7.4   **Demographics and offender profile in an area**: a pilot site should be responsive to need based on the sex offender profile in a given area. This does not mean a pilot is best sited in an area with the highest concentration of offenders; a locale may be appropriate if there are few offenders but several high risk, high needs cases. COSA have been used, with very few exceptions, to work with adult, white men. Hence an offender profile revealing ethnic, age and gender diversity might be

challenging for this model, presenting new issues to be worked out, for example in recruiting volunteers.

7.5 **Range of urban to rural settings**: Scotland is distinct from England in its large geographical mass relative to total population size. There are large areas of very low population density, which nevertheless may have needs of support for sex offenders. The biggest Circles project in England, HTVC, operates in mainly urban and suburban areas, although it does cover some rural communities. While some respondents in Scotland identified particular areas they felt would be appropriate to pilot Circles, it would be useful to select a range of places so that the value of this approach for different population densities and areas could be considered.

7.6 **Support of local stakeholders**. This again was a key implementation factor for the English pilots. Siting is not just a question of geography and offender profile; both of these might establish demand for Circles, but implementation would be difficult if not impossible without the commitment of local agencies and the voluntary sector and openness of the community. Views of the front line workers and managers in the areas being scouted for pilots are an essential piece of information.

Choosing an Appropriate Organisational Model

7.7 The varying implementation experiences in Canada and England show that there are many ways that Circles might be run. The 'go anywhere' approach of the Lucy Faithfull Foundation offers opportunities to provide bespoke services to offenders wherever they may be. This might be one way to address the needs of sex offenders in isolated communities where setting up a Circles project office would be neither feasible nor locally acceptable. The Hampshire and Thames Valley model of an independent organisation that works in close partnership with local agencies, on the other hand, avoids having to renegotiate relationships every time a Circle is set up and allows the Circles process to be embedded in a local criminal justice strategy.

Defining the Mission and Role of Circles in Scotland

7.8 Every Circles project has produced its own literature on its mission, values and roles of participants. All share the common elements of relying on volunteers to engage with offenders, and addressing both support and accountability, but there remains a great deal of scope for specifying the meaning and values of these issues. HTVC has emphasised especially the public protection mission of COSA working closely with MAPPA, while the first Circles in Canada focused on support. So far

Circles in England and in Canada remain firmly committed to the principle of voluntary participation, seeing it as central to the aim of an offender's engagement with the process. A minority of Scottish respondents felt that Circles could work as a condition of probation or a licence, and this would be a major alteration of its original premise, requiring consideration.

7.9   There also remain question marks over the precise roles, duties and capacities of volunteers with respect to techniques aiming to reduce reoffending, and a Scottish COSA model would be well advised to consider these questions carefully as these will affect establishing training, monitoring and ongoing support structures. Circles UK, an organisation that spun off from the HTVC project aims to provide consistent criteria for minimum elements of a Circle project as well as offering a set of aims and core values. This may turn into an accreditation process should Circles investment be significantly expanded in England. Whether Scotland signs up to such a scheme will require consideration of the specific factors that professionals and communities here would like to see from the service.

Investment in Volunteer Training

7.10   As we noted in Chapter 5, the issues around use of volunteers in Circles are known. The relevant focus therefore should be on addressing these through training, supervision and support. The HTVC volunteers felt that their initial training had equipped them to deal with the difficult issues that arose in Circles, and that mandatory annual training and availability of ad hoc sessions was just as important. The level of training offered in HTVC represents substantial investment and is seen as an essential element of the success of their project. Training also provides the most systematic way of managing issues of risk identified by Scottish stakeholders. A robust training package thus would be a minimum element ensuring successful implementation of pilots. Attention should be given to the length and coverage of initial training, amount and type of ongoing training and support, resources to allow for professional contribution to training delivery, and mechanisms for ongoing review and evaluation of the effectiveness of training.

Organisational Infrastructure

7.11   Whatever model of COSA is seen as most desirable, implementation success and project sustainability require attention to developing an infrastructure that allows for strong oversight of Circles themselves. The organisational element provides a means also of mediating contact between volunteers and the formal criminal justice system. HTVC does this through its Project Manager and Circle

Coordinators. Lucy Faithfull has consultants and its Director available to perform this function. Stakeholders in Scotland felt such an organisation could be run by the voluntary sector, though some also saw this as appropriately located within a statutory agency. This factor is also relevant for determining how Circles will relate to or be accountable to MAPPA.

Information Sharing

7.12   Legislation on data protection, agency rules, and concerns about maintaining volunteer boundaries are dominant concerns. At the same time, there is a need for volunteers to have access to some information about an offender's background and criminal justice status in order for the Circle to be able to monitor an offender's progress and identify when patterns of conduct represent a change in risk. Balancing these two concerns requires careful attention to anticipating the kind and depth of information necessary for volunteers to fulfil their task and developing formal protocols within the Circles project, and information sharing agreements with relevant statutory agencies (e.g. police, social work, prisons, housing).

Robust Evaluation Strategy

7.13   The value of a pilot project is premised on its ability to contribute to an evidence base on the Circles approach. As we have noted elsewhere in this report this requires that an evaluation strategy is in place at the start of pilot operations. In addition, it is useful for pilot projects to have a strategy for collection of management information that allows for ongoing self-review and improvement of operations. For a broader evaluation strategy, data should be collected that would allow for independent study of a broad definition of effectiveness, assessed in qualitative as well as quantitative terms, for different stakeholder groups. Basic issues to be evaluated include at a minimum:
Information about volunteer recruitment, attrition at different stages and motivational factors;

- Information about offender recruitment, screening, and views;
- Impact on and perspectives of professionals, communities and volunteers;
- Effects on volunteers and project staff of working with sex offenders;
- 'Case' data – information about Circles, such as number formed, failures by length of time and contributing factors, average time of Circles, frequencies of meetings, volunteer dynamics, numbers of volunteers per Circle, etc.;

- Information about management and coordination of Circles including amount and mechanisms of project staff contact with volunteers and core members, etc.;
- Outcome information including when and why a Circle reached its end point, information about convictions and breaches of orders, qualitative information about core member progress.

Communications and Public Education Strategy

7.14   There are significant constituencies in Scotland, as elsewhere, that are fundamentally opposed to doing anything other than punishing sex offenders. If there is money available for support or other programmes for sex offenders, they would rather it was spent on more or harsher punishments, or on victims. The media is predominantly heavily vested in these viewpoints. Without suggesting that there are not valid fears and concerns at the root of these popular views, they are not widespread among the policy community, who recognise they are unproductive. If COSA reduces reoffending it is in the public interest to have it introduced, and some of our respondents who represent victims groups have said that they would be prepared to work to help victims understand this point: that unless you keep offenders in prison forever, you have to manage their release.

7.15   Clearly, however, the introduction of COSA, whether it reduces reoffending or not, has the capacity to cause considerable public alarm, and a matching storm of adverse media coverage. COSA has the capacity to be a public education tool as regards the needs, and the management of the dangers, of sex offenders in the community, but ensuring that accurate information gets across to the public will be essential. Informing the public about COSA, and the process of enlisting volunteers from communities, will need to be a process handled with great delicacy in order to minimise the risk of the effectiveness of the programme being put in jeopardy by alarmist or misleading press reports. Ways of encouraging more informed understanding of work with sex offenders may be achieved partly through the involvement of volunteers themselves, who selectively share with members of their social networks the nature of their work. There may also need to be some specific strategies in place to pre-empt anger and concern over sex offenders receiving preference for finite taxpayer funds. The planning for a national victims strategy in Scotland may be one opportunity to engage with this issue.

Cost

7.16   The introduction of Circles presents on first sight an extra cost rather than a saving. This is not in fact entirely accurate, as the absence of alternatives to certain quite serious forms of monitoring such as ISPs means that some offenders will receive these very expensive forms of supervision because less costly and equally appropriate alternatives are not available. There could also of course be cost savings attributed to COSA if, as the Canadian evaluations suggest, they reduce reoffending. These cost savings would be in relation to the criminal justice process avoided, and services to support victims and families among others, not to mention the social cost of the crimes themselves.

7.17   While cost is an essential consideration in developing an initiative, this report does not address the issue in detail mainly because there are numerous possibilities for how COSA could be implemented in Scotland, all of which would have markedly different cost implications. The sizes of different operations will also affect cost.

7.18   Another important aspect of the cost issue is the fact that introduction of Circles to Scotland would create a new market for services. This is likely to be a market involving only charitable organisations (although the for-profit sector has had long involvement in offender programmes and areas such as risk assessment, it has not yet played a role in COSA). As with any market, there is the need for competent monitoring of contracts and independent review of budgets.

7.19   Once a budget is estimated, an even more difficult task will be to perform a cost-benefit analysis (the 'value for money' issue). The research literature and those involved in Circles projects agree that the costs of providing high calibre recruitment, vetting, training, supervision and support of volunteers (and also to some extent of core members) make COSA an expensive service. At the same time, police and probation representatives argue that Circle volunteers are able to provide a level of supervision and contact with high risk individuals that would be impossible to achieve through even massive expansion of current statutory services. And, as noted, the benefits of avoiding victimisation result in emotional, social as well as financial benefits.

7.20   The opportunity costs (both fiscal and political) of choosing one allocation of resources over another would also need to be considered. What else could money that is made available for Circles be invested in – more training for practitioners, increased staff numbers in a given agency or locale, expanding the number of places in sex offender treatment or relapse prevention programmes, providing more services for lower risk offenders who make up a larger proportion of the total

population of sex offenders, developing more services for victims of the types of crimes committed by core members? These are all issues that should be considered on their own merits and in anticipation of the political and public debates that can surround discussion of services for such a difficult group.

Local or National Sponsorship

7.21   There is nothing at present stopping any community, church, or local area from implementing Circles pilots right now; there are several Circles in Scotland already, informally operating out of churches. Proposals have been made to the Government to fund a Circles pilot, however, raising the issue about the relative feasibility of central vs. local funding. This obviously is a matter to be considered under the factor of cost, but it is not the only issue. Given the creation of the CJAs, which are attempting to make reducing reoffending activities and spending more locally responsive, there is an argument that the CJA would be the relevant focal point through which pilots could be developed were this identified as a priority in their strategic plan. If pilots are left to the initiative of local areas, this would encourage the implementation of projects in those areas where stakeholders were especially committed to the approach. On the other hand, central involvement in funding and planning for Circles would allow for there to be some consistency and standardisation of practice which would assist development of a validated evidence base and allow different parts of Scotland running Circles to compare their work with each other. Equally important, it would allow for the central government to ensure there is regulatory oversight of Circles projects and to leverage funding on the creation and realisation of project aims.

Exit Strategy

7.22   Finally, a pilot project should be set to run for a time-limited period, and so would need a plan for seamless winding down of the project should renewal not occur. This is a tricky issue for approaches like Circles which work with a high risk offender population and also use volunteers in whom it would be expected a significant investment in training has been made. It is not necessarily an insurmountable issue as it could be conceivable that a pilot would have a quota on the numbers of Circles, or designate a period within which all Circles must begin so that funding would not be discontinued at an inconvenient time (in the middle of volunteer training or after a handful of meetings have already been held with an offender). There might also be a plan for transition of services from national to local funding, as looks likely to be the case in England. Careful planning to wind down a

project is just as important as planning for implementation and recognises that there can be as much work to end an initiative as to begin one.

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ORGANISATIONS PARTICIPATING IN THE RESEARCH

ACPOS
Apex
Barnardos
Catholic Church
Children First
Church of Scotland
Circles UK
Community Justice Authorities
Hampshire Thames Valley Circles of Support and Accountability
Local Authorities
MAPPAs
Ministry of Justice, Public Protection Unit
Ministry of Justice, RDS
Quaker Peace and Social Witness
SACRO
Scottish Government, Effective Practice Unit
Scottish Prison Service
Scottish Social Work Departments
Stop it Now!
The Capability Company

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

Literature review

We prioritised peer-reviewed, independent published research on Circles. Our work was also informed by other materials including self-evaluations of Circles projects, project documentation, written evidence, media sources, and other materials.

Review of Operations in England and Wales

HTVC site visit: Two project team members spent two days at the Thames Valley project interviewing project managers, staff and other key stakeholders. This also included a visit to Circles UK, the national coordinating body. Relevant documents, materials and data were collected on-site and subsequent telephone interviews took place with Circle volunteers and core members.

This included interviews with:

2 Ministry of Justice representatives (research and public protection)
3 representatives of Circles UK
8 HTVC managers, staff and key stakeholders
10 HTVC volunteers
2 HTVC core members

Circle members (i.e. volunteers and core members) were recruited to the research as follows: The SCCJR team sent numerous copies of a project information sheet and consent form to the HTVC project office. HTVC project staff were instructed to deliver copies to scheduled Circles meetings, leaving the papers at the meetings and merely alerting Circle members to their existence but not making any other comment (e.g. encouraging or discouraging participation). Circle members interested in participating in the research returned consent forms in pre-addressed stamped envelopes to the SCCJR team, which directly arranged interviews. Respondents were given the option of speaking to us by telephone or answering the interview questions via emailed responses.

Research on other UK Circles: Telephone interviews were conducted where possible with those individuals involved with and/or knowledgeable about these programmes and via literature-based research.

Interviews and Analysis

31 interviews were conducted with key respondents in Scotland, primarily by telephone, with access negotiated through the Scottish Government. They included:

4 interviews with Scottish Government representatives
2 CJA Chief Officers
3 local authority Social Work Managers
3 Senior Police representatives
1 MAPPA representative
2 SPS representatives
1 ADSW representative
7 social workers
8 representatives of independent sector organisations

Interviews were semi-structured and collected perspectives on:

- Awareness of and potential involvement of agencies and organisations, and their commitment to the concept of Circles;
- Issues affecting transferability and implementation of Circles within Scotland;
- General views and comments;
- Perceptions of resource implications.

Ethical approval for the study was given by the University of Glasgow Ethics Committee.