



# Circles of Support and Accountability in the Thames Valley

Interim Report November 2003



## Countering Hatred and Fear

The work of Thames Valley Circles of Support and Accountability provides an outstanding example of how communities can counter and manage their anxiety about sex offenders.

The commitment to do this work comes from our understanding that it is through relationships of compassion that those who have been damaging to others (and often as a result of being damaged themselves) can change by acceptance and social reconciliation. This transforming process challenges the stereotype that sex offenders are frightening people, deserving of hatred and exile.

The experience of commitment from courageous volunteers and dedicated staff has demonstrated that the concept of Circles works within our setting of statutory supervision and controls. We are still at an early stage of development and evaluation but the experience has been that working towards emotional health and active citizenship within a group of supporters provides powerful and safe opportunities for growth.

The work achieved so far has major implications for the management of risk in the criminal system. The signs are that serious offenders respond to the opportunity of being held accountable by their fellow citizens. The signs are that there are people willing to volunteer to become involved in this demanding involvement on our behalf. The signs are that there is a wider acceptance that this is the right way to restore dangerous, damaging and damaged people into full community.

**Tim Newell**  
**October 2003**

# Introduction

It is not difficult to imagine some of the negative feelings of a man being released after years in prison, especially if he has been rejected by family and friends because of the nature of his crime. Bitterness, loneliness, fear of being recognised, alienation from society... And it is increasingly being acknowledged that a sex offender who comes out of prison in that frame of mind is more likely to re-offend, even if he starts off with the best of intentions.

Circles of Support and Accountability is a scheme which was first developed in Canada in the mid 1990s to address that very situation, and Quakers and many others are working to get the same approach established in Britain. At its heart is a way of working which might be described as a partnership between voluntary and statutory agencies and the community. In Canada it grew out of the principles of restorative justice, which seeks to involve, and work for the benefit of, the victim, the offender and the wider community.

In the Canadian criminal justice system there was a paradox. Most prisoners were released from prison before the end of their sentence and for the remainder of the period were given some form of supervision in the community. But prisoners who were considered too dangerous to release before the end of their sentence were given no support or supervision after release. Ministers felt some moral obligation for these 'warrant expired' prisoners and this formed one of the catalysts for Circles. There was also a felt need to address the sense of powerlessness within the community when potentially dangerous prisoners were released. Groups of individuals, mainly churchgoers, responded by spontaneously forming small groups or circles around one or two particular offenders and from these informal beginnings a project grew, partly funded by the Correctional Service of Canada (which runs their prisons and probation) and administered by the Mennonite church. The police in the parts of Canada where Circles have been operating for some time have become convinced that the scheme works and now co-operate with it.

## **How the scheme works in Canada**

It seems sensible at this point to describe the 'classic model' of a Circle of Support and Accountability, though there are many slight variations. The offender is identified while still in prison – up to a year before release. He (and it was always 'he', at least in the early years) will be a high risk sex offender, with high levels of need and little or no support from family or friends in the community. He is usually at 'warrant expiry'. He is referred to as the 'Core Member' of the Circle. Many of the Core Members will have committed offences against children, but those who have offended against adults are also included in the scheme.

The volunteers have to be prepared to make a substantial commitment of time, over a period of one year in the first instance. They must be willing to befriend the Core Member, but don't need to be experts. They need to be responsible people with their feet on the ground, mature about their own sexuality. Volunteers are screened, trained and supported by the Circles scheme. Typically, four to six volunteers will be allocated to a Circle. If possible, the Circle of Support and Accountability will meet with the Core Member before he is released.

When the Circle first meets, they make a covenant or contract with one another, which will include being committed to openness within the Circle, confidentiality beyond it and a respect for consensus decision making. The Core Member will promise that there will be no more victims at his hands and will commit himself to following his release plan.

After the Core Member's release, the Circle arranges for weekly meetings and for contact of some sort between the Core Member and another member every day. These could be informal social contacts such as going shopping together, or could be just a phone call sometimes. Over time, the frequency of meetings will reduce to, say, once a fortnight and the contacts with individual Circle members would also become less frequent. Milestones such as birthdays are celebrated and seen as important. If the Circle is concerned about the Core Member's behaviour, they will challenge him and may begin to meet more intensively for a while to help him to address the problem. It is crucially important that the Circle knows at what point to inform the statutory authorities – police or probation – about a problem. The ground rules for this are established at an early stage in the setting up of the Circle and close contact is maintained between the Circle and police and probation. The Circle is not taking away their responsibility, but is a structured way for the community to take its share of responsibility.

### **How Quakers got involved**

Quakers have a traditional interest in crime and prison issues, ever since they were imprisoned in large numbers when the movement started in the seventeenth century. There are close connections between Mennonites and Quakers in Canada. Some Canadian Quakers became involved in Circles and began to write about the scheme in their journals. The Crime and Community Justice Committee, which I provided with staff support at the time, became aware of it by reading these journals. The Committee, part of the central structure of Quakers in Britain, were impressed by what they read, explored it further and then approached the Home Office Dangerous Offenders Unit with the proposal that a workshop should be run to inform key players in Britain about Circles.

The Home Office agreed to co-host the workshop, which took place in June 2001. Five Canadians flew over – a Director of Parole, a member of Toronto Police sexual assault squad, a psychologist from the Correctional Services, the Executive Director of Circles and the National Chaplaincy Co-ordinator. At the meeting were representatives of: Home Office, parole, police, probation, prisons, sex offender treatment, chaplaincy, victim support, NSPCC and several churches.

### **Setting up the pilot programmes in Britain**

Responses to the Canadian presentations were positive enough for a series of follow-up meetings to develop. The Home Office invited two probation areas to consider setting up pilot schemes, one of which – Hampshire – responded positively and now works closely with the Hampton Trust, who manage the pilot programme with the help of Home Office funding.

Meanwhile, Donald Findlater, then manager of the Wolvercote Clinic which provided sex offender treatment programmes, was aware of particular men going out at the end of treatment 'to nobody'. So Donald went ahead and set up a Circle for one man, recruiting and training the four volunteers himself. This led to the Lucy Faithfull Foundation, who ran the Wolvercote Clinic, taking on the management of a pilot Circles programme, to set up further Circles around the country, again with Home Office funding. At first the intention was to provide Circles for those

who had been assessed and treated by Wolvercote, but since the clinic has closed they have been exploring other 'sources' of Core Members.

This interim report focuses mainly on the third pilot, set up in the Thames Valley (Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Berkshire), as a partnership between police, probation, prisons and Quakers. It is funded wholly by the Home Office and managed by Quaker Peace and Social Witness, part of the central organisation of Quakers in Britain. The Quaker involvement was approved by our national decision-making body and many individual Friends have expressed their interest and support. Some, indeed, have become Circle members.

The two staff, Chris Wilson and Rebekah Saunders, appointed in April and June 2002 respectively, are based in an office in Buckinghamshire. There is a steering group where representatives of the partner agencies contribute to the development of the programme and the staff also report to relevant committees of Quaker Peace and Social Witness.

The staff of the three pilots and people involved in their management keep closely in touch with one another and with the staff of the Public Protection Unit (formerly the Dangerous Offenders Unit), part of the National Probation Directorate in the Home Office. There are meetings every couple of months and each pilot makes regular reports to the Home Office as funder. Matters such as evaluation processes and how to handle media interest are considered at these meetings.

Support for the concept of Circles has come from many directions, including the Home Affairs Committee of the Church of England and successive Home Office ministers for prisons and probation. I have also received letters from prisoners expressing their support and their hope that a Circle could be provided for them when they come out of prison.

To conclude, I would like to quote the words of a British volunteer. Although it is important to screen out would-be volunteers who might use the Circle as a therapy group for themselves, that does not mean that the benefits gained will all be in one direction.

'I suffered from abuse as a child. I was attracted to this project because I hoped that it would help me lay some ghosts...

'My gut feeling is that working in this Circle has substantially reduced the likelihood of our Core Member re-offending. I may be wrong, but I just can't see him doing it again. To me, as a survivor, that is the greatest reward I can imagine – that other little girls are spared.

'To my complete surprise, I have also come to really like our Core Member. It makes me happy to feel that he, too, will be able to live a better life now. It has helped me to see that whatever awful things someone might have done, they still have a human heart beating in their chest.'

**Helen Drewery**  
**Assistant General Secretary, Quaker Peace and Social Witness**

# Why are Circles of Support and Accountability so important?

## Extracts from an article in **NOTA News, July 2003**

The maintenance of treatment objectives requires both support and monitoring. As is common to us all, an offender has to feel that he can function in a positive and productive environment in which he is valued while he can offer something of value in return. Therefore the issues of accommodation, employment, social activities and social networks are vitally important in ensuring a sense of good self-esteem and positive thinking. Research (Bates 2002) related to recidivism, highlights that low self-esteem and emotional loneliness are significant common psychometric factors evident in all offenders who have re-offended after having completed a treatment programme. Sex Offender treatment has to challenge deeply held beliefs; those challenges can only be sustained if the offender's environment allows for the growth of confidence and positive thinking, thereby reinforcing his motivation not to re-offend. If an offender leaves treatment to be faced with inadequate housing, unemployment with its inherent financial difficulties, social isolation and exclusion, this will inevitably lead to those issues related to recidivism, i.e. low self esteem and emotional loneliness, becoming the dominant issues in his life. Old thinking patterns will re-emerge, reinforcing old beliefs. Circles of Support & Accountability are designed specifically to reduce emotional loneliness and isolation and thereby reduce re-offending.

### **What is a Circle of Support & Accountability?**

The concept of 'Circles of Support and Accountability' is a simple one. A small number of volunteers are recruited from the community where a high-risk/high-need sex offender will be living. The volunteers are then trained and appropriately screened as to their suitability to undertake such a task. A Circle will be a support network for the offender, who will be known as the 'Core Member', while holding him accountable for his actions. Although treatment has helped the offender identify pro-offending beliefs and attitudes, the Circle will help him apply this learning into every day living. Where he grows in self-esteem and develops healthy adult relationships, the Circle will hold him accountable, ensuring that he is adhering to their personal relapse prevention/new life plan. Therefore the life of a Circle will relate to the needs of the community as well as to the needs of the Core Member, and these needs are inextricably linked to the continued level of risk the Core Member poses to the community.

The 'Circle' helps address both practical and emotional issues relating to possible recidivism. This then allows the Core Member to use their relapse prevention/new life plan in an appropriate and meaningful way. A relapse prevention plan is a dynamic, living document that is to be shared with others, usually with those people identified as the offender's support network. A high risk/high need sex offender is more often than not socially isolated and emotionally lonely, therefore the Circles provides the vehicle that allows the relapse prevention plan/new life plan to be more than just a paper exercise. Initially meeting on a weekly basis, the Circle will conduct its business sharing both the positive and negative issues experienced by the Core Member outside of the Circle. Each volunteer will meet with the Core Member individually during the week offering both emotional and practical support. This will provide intensive support and monitoring that

would otherwise be unavailable. However, the Core Member has to be an equal with other Circle members, fully involved in every discussion and decision taken by the Circle. All Circle members are fully aware that accountability is only truly meaningful if the Circle is based on honesty. The relationship between the Circle and its partnership agencies (Police and Probation) allows this honesty to enhance the safety and well being of the Core Member. It can avoid negative conclusions such as licence revocation, through constructive and supportive intervention.

### **Can a programme developed in Canada work in Britain?**

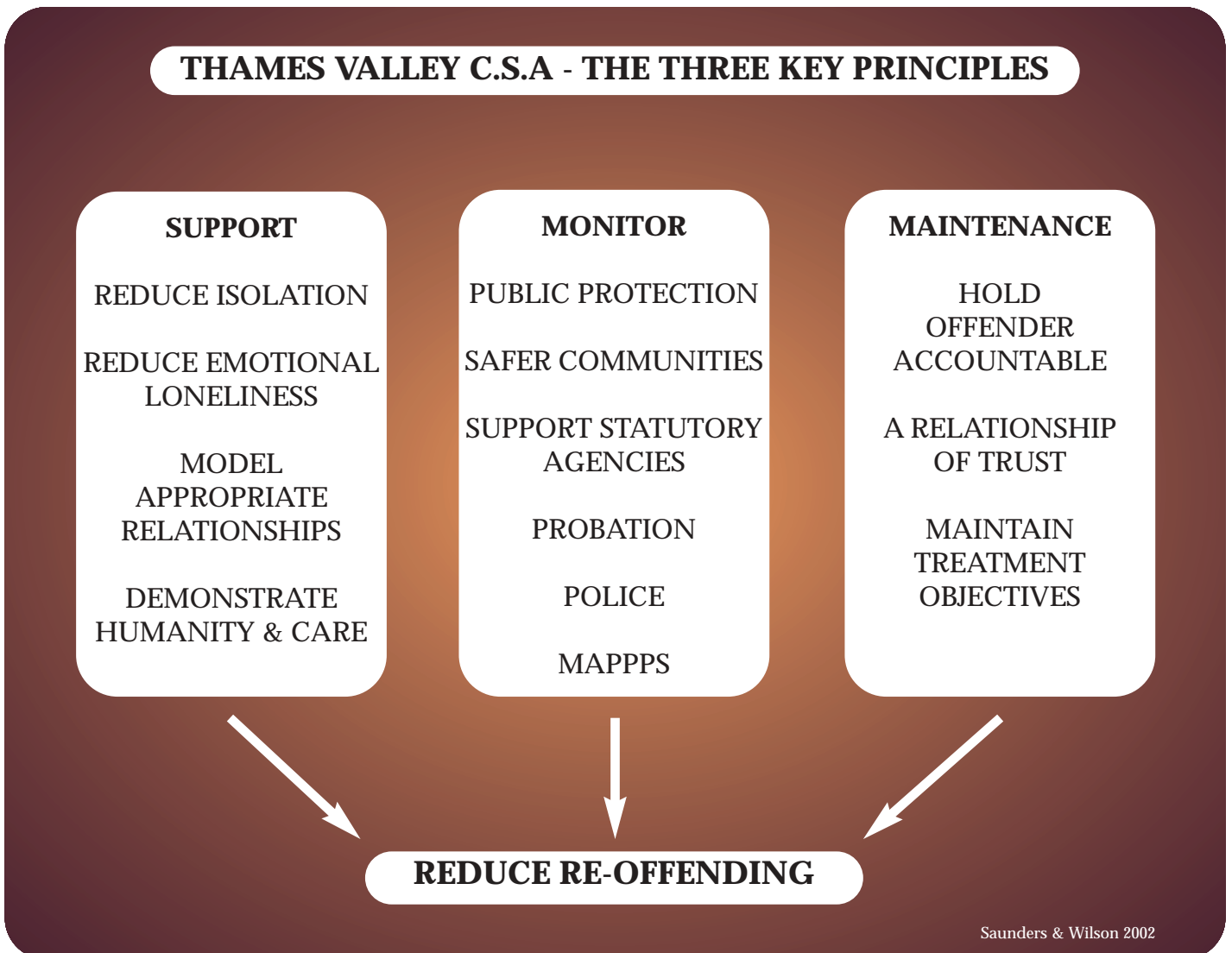
The concept of Circles of Support & Accountability has been operating in Canada for the past ten years. The Canadian Evaluation highlights the dramatic impact the programme has had on rates of recidivism in relation to high risk, high need sex offenders. Doubts have been and continue to be expressed as to whether the Canadian concept of Circles could work in Britain. In Canada, Circles evolved as a community response to a community fear. In Britain, Circles is a Home Office funded pilot programme. However, as in Britain, the philosophy of Canadian Circles has always been concerned with public protection, and to achieve their aim they too have had to establish relationships with local Police and Parole/Corrections authorities. The Evaluation report of Canadian Circles states: 'Some had been involved with Parole and the Police for a long period and already had strong connections. In each case, especially over time, relationships grew strong, allowing Circles of Support and Accountability to become important partners in the community'. This partnership has now been further formalised with funding for Circles of Support and Accountability being secured from the Correctional Services of Canada. This having been said, it is important not to forget that both in Canada and in Britain, the volunteers who make up a Circle are there not only to hold the Core Member accountable but also to act as a support and to work in advocacy roles on behalf of the Core Member. Therefore Circle volunteers need to share a commonality of thought. That commonality needs to be a strong belief in the principles of restorative justice. Volunteers also need to be mature empathic people with the ability to separate the offender from the offending and have a desire to be part of constructive initiatives to protect our communities from further sexual crime.

### **Why is a partnership with Police & Probation helpful?**

Thames Valley Police's investment in restorative justice has been substantial both financially and in practice, and it is this investment that has helped lay the foundations for the successful development of Circles in this particular geographical area. In an attempt to make the Sex Offender Register a meaningful and helpful tool, the Thames Valley Police ensured that the role of the Sex Offender Registration Officer was both helpful and supportive to the registered offender while continuing to monitor and maintain community safety. The thinking behind such an approach was to engender a relationship of trust between the officer and offender that would help reduce re-offending. This led to a significant change in the attitude of both Police and offender, to the point where the Sex Offender Registration Officer was more often than not identified as a key support in the offender's own relapse prevention plan. This combined with a multi-funded, multi-disciplinary approach to the provision of sex offender treatment in the Thames Valley area has produced a cultural change in those key agencies responsible for the management of sex offenders living in the community. Those persons committed to not re-offending and building a positive 'new life' are supported by those agencies in achieving this. Because both Police and Probation are partner agencies with Circles of Support & Accountability in the Thames Valley and are represented on the programme's steering committee, they are well aware of and supportive in helping manage the inherent tensions between support and accountability.

## Are Circles of Support & Accountability a compromise on Sarah's Law?

Amongst all those persons charged with the responsibility for the management of sex offenders living in our community, it is agreed that general community notification is likely to cause more problems than it would solve. The fear that already exists within our community would be further exacerbated by such a policy, resulting at best in further isolation of the offender and at worst public disorder. Therefore it seems appropriate to perceive the concept of Circles of Support and Accountability as an intelligent and constructive compromise on 'Sarah's law'. The volunteers are the community's representatives, in that they hold key knowledge relating to the offender and act as the ears and the eyes of those agencies responsible for the management of that offender, feeding vital information into the Multi Agency Public Protection Panel (MAPPP).



The chart above represents the three key aims of Circles: Support, Monitor and Maintain. The balance between support and monitoring is achieved through the open, honest understanding between the volunteers and the Core Member. A contract is signed by all involved in the Circle, and although the Core Member is aware that through the Circle he will find support, this has to be balanced with the objective of holding him accountable and the protection of the public.

It is my belief that the concept of Circles of Support and Accountability lies at the very heart of restorative justice. The response and desire of individuals in the community wanting to be part of constructive initiatives to address the issue of sexual crime has been a very affirming experience – affirming the concept of citizenship and affirming the belief that, given the opportunity,

communities can and should take responsibility for their own safety, using an approach that is both restorative and positive.

## **References**

1. Bates. 'A study in recidivism using a research sample of 184 men'. Awaiting publication. For further information contact Andrew Bates at the Thames Valley Project
2. *Circles of Support & Accountability Evaluation Report*. Correctional Services of Canada Chaplaincy. March 2000

**Chris Wilson**  
**Programme Manager**

## **A National Perspective**

### **Reports from all three pilot projects**

#### **Circles of Support and Accountability Thames Valley**

The Thames Valley pilot site has now been operational for an eighteen-month period. We are fortunate in that our pilot site has the advantage of two full time members of staff backed by administration from the Thames Valley Partnership. Both the programme staff were recruited from the Thames Valley Project (a provider of Sex Offender Treatment Programmes), which enabled already established working relationships with our partnership agencies to continue. This has been reflected in the enthusiasm and co-operation shown by both the Thames Valley Police and Probation Service in their desire to see the pilot programme work effectively.

Our first Circle was established at the request of both local Police and Probation under the remit of Public Protection. The Core Member was categorised as very high risk and had been excluded from Sex Offender treatment because of a learning disability. He has now been in a Circle for twelve months and the Circle has done much to improve his quality of life and reduce his risk of re-offending. The Probation hostel where he resides is very favourable in its feedback on the work that has been undertaken by Circle volunteers and he is now established in employment and will soon be moving on to independent accommodation.

Two further Circles were established in Oxford, one that has been equally successful, thus far, in allowing the Core Member to achieve his stated objective of an offence free life while the other Circle's success has to be measured within a context of public protection (see the Programme Co-ordinator's account of the Management and Supervision of Circles, page 26). It was information

that Circle volunteers were able to give to the Police and Probation that in part prevented an offence being committed, thus highlighting the accountability aspect of the programme.

Two Circles have been established in Reading, one of which lasted a period of four months before the Core Member was recalled on licence. Volunteers in this particular Circle worked in partnership with Police and Probation monitoring very high-risk behaviours until his eventual recall. The other Reading Circle has been in existence for the past ten months and has supported the Core Member through a number of crisis but has now facilitated his move into independent accommodation and inclusion into his own social network. A Circle has now been established in Milton Keynes and the first female Core Member is part of a Circle working with volunteers in West Oxfordshire.

Future Circles include two further Circles in Oxford, both of which will be having their first meeting in the very near future. We also have the potential to create a new Circle in Reading. A future imperative is for us to focus on the East Berkshire area to recruit volunteers for a Core Member who has been waiting patiently in a Probation hostel for a Circle. Due to the recall on licence of one Core Member in Reading we also have the potential for a new Circle in Reading.

We currently have thirty trained volunteers working in Circles in the Thames Valley area and a further six potential volunteers awaiting training.

**Chris Wilson, Programme Manager**

## **Circles of Support and Accountability Hampshire**

As one of three pilot projects funded by the Home Office, the Hampton Trust in partnership with the National Probation Service (Hampshire) manages the Hampshire project. The Trust aims to improve the quality of life for communities, families and individuals by promoting creative approaches to reducing crime and anti-social behaviour. The guiding principle underlying our projects is based on restorative justice. The Trust focuses on the needs of people who are socially excluded, at risk of re-offending and those whose lives have been affected by crime.

In the course of setting up the project, I have met with criminal justice and social care professionals, community leaders, church leaders, lay people and volunteers. They have encouraged us in our work because they recognise that Circles are designed to enhance public protection and aim to reduce the risk of re-offending by providing effective supervision in addition to the treatment facilities offered by the statutory agencies. Our respective steering groups, trustees and Home Office have worked closely to ensure we are co-ordinating our work at local and national levels. The collaboration has proved very successful and I know that it has been invaluable to call on colleagues for constructive support and advice.

It has been difficult to recruit volunteers to work with a person with a history of sex offending. I appreciate that discussion and debate needs to take place before individuals' unease can be allayed. I am, therefore, pleased to report that the first volunteer Circle has completed the training programme and is waiting to be matched with a Core Member. A further potential Circle has been recruited and has recently started the training programme.

It is a challenge to set up a project for which there is no precedent in England and in a social

climate where there is understandable concern about resettling sex offenders in the community. Earlier in the year, there was widespread media coverage about the Circles pilot. The press articles were sometimes balanced, at other times negative and always questioning.

The first group of volunteers recently visited a prison to hear at first hand the concerns and fears felt by convicted sex offenders. They talked about the prospect of release into communities perceived as hostile and unsupportive. The meeting was a very valuable exchange of views and confirmed the need for Circles for everyone involved. There are many positive contributions that volunteers can make to the lives of offenders who feel very apprehensive about rejoining local communities.

A favourite quotation that I like to use in volunteer training helps to put Circles of Support and Accountability into context; 'We believe in human goodness, but we also lock our houses when we go out for the evening'.

**Phil Collins**  
**Project Co-ordinator**

### **Circles of Support and Accountability** **The Lucy Faithfull Foundation**

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation Circles project was set up to provide support and accountability for men who left the Wolvercote Clinic, following completion of a year's full-time residential treatment programme. It followed the successful setting up of the first UK Circle by Donald Findlater, Clinic Manager, for one man, then another, who had left the clinic. Donald himself served as a Circle volunteer.

The temporary closure of the clinic in July 2002 resulted in men who were partway through treatment returning to the community, and the project also works to support them. They have returned to such diverse locations as South Wales, Yorkshire, Teesside, Southern Scotland, Dorset, Kent, Thames Valley, Sussex, and North & South London.

Since the pilot project started, with one part-time dedicated member of staff, we have set up two Circles, one of which has completed its task, and has ceased to meet formally, although volunteers continue to meet up with the Core Member. Another Circle will shortly celebrate its first anniversary, and yet another will commence work in October. We are currently working to recruit volunteers for three more Circles for 'our' men, plus three for clients of a London probation area team. In addition, outside the pilot project, two Circles have been set up in Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man respectively.

There have been three significant factors which have limited the number of Circles set up:-

- a) men often did not know until close to leaving the clinic where they would be housed
- b) we have needed to recruit volunteers in geographically disparate communities of which we have little knowledge and where we have had few, if any, existing contacts
- c) we cannot advertise our need for volunteers as this advertises the presence of a child sex offender in the community.

We have therefore primarily sought to recruit volunteers through the faith community, but there

have been a number of men whom we have not helped because we have been unable to find sufficient, or in some areas any, volunteers. Having waited a long time for a Circle, one man's behaviour resulted in his return to prison just as the training of volunteers for his Circle had been completed.

However, what has been achieved has proved very worthwhile as evidenced by the following comments written by a former Core Member: 'The Circle has done much for me. Not least it has shown me that in the current climate of near hysteria about the whole subject of paedophilia, there are still people prepared to offer friendship, help and encouragement to me in building a new life free from abusing. It is of incalculable value to know that this friendship is there indefinitely... With the help and encouragement of the Circle I have established a social life which fairly well fills my current needs and on which I can build in the future. I am now quite comfortable with the position I have to adopt with avoiding contact with children. Indeed... I seldom think about it nowadays'.

**Dick Foot**  
**Circles Development Officer**

## The Volunteer's Perspective

### **Three accounts of volunteering for work in Circles**

The following three accounts relate to the volunteer's experience of working in a Circle. The accounts highlight the individual nature of each Circle. Conversely they also highlight the similarity of the task that is involved in Circles work. Although the objective always remains the same, in that the Core Member must be held accountable for his or her past sexual offending behaviour and that this must be achieved through an atmosphere of trust and support, our practice is informed by both the needs of the Core Member and the needs of the wider community. These accounts not only demonstrate how effective Circles can be in relation to public protection but also emphasise both the intellectual and emotional challenges that working with high-risk, high-need offenders often present.

By definition volunteers bring to their work in Circles a wealth of experience that not only helps the positive development of their Core Member but also informs the future working practice of Circles. It is a head teacher who gives us the first perspective. His professional insight into such issues as attachment disorder and the effect of early deformative life experiences was helpful to the Circle's general understanding in relation to their work with the Core Member. The account also reveals the practical tension between support and accountability. However, these two issues are not diametrically opposed, as is eloquently exemplified in this essay. Indeed the work described displays how interdependent support and accountability are in achieving both the initial objective of rehabilitation and restoration of the Core Member and the overall objective of creating safer communities. To this end the philosophy of Circles is simple, in that you cannot have one without the other.

The second perspective has been written by a retired farmer whose work in Circles is a testament of his faith. His motivation to volunteer to work in a Circle is an instinctive belief that no one created by God is beyond redemption. We should not forget that the Mennonite church, who had developed the original Canadian Circles, stated that their guiding principle for this work has been 'the acknowledgement of pain and the victim's need for healing, while recognising the humanity of both the victim and the offender. Believing in a loving and reconciling God who calls us to agents of healing work in the world, it also affirms that only love has the potential to heal the wounds of the victim, the offender and the community. This love is lived out in the context of meaningful and accountable relationships where support and care takes on a human face'. Whether faith based or secular these guiding principles are applicable to all of us working in Circles of Support and Accountability. All of us involved hold dear the principles of restorative justice, holistic approaches to the healing of pain and the need to break the cycle of fear and ignorance relating to sexual crime that exists in our communities.

I am aware, as someone who has spent many years as a practitioner in the assessment and treatment of sex offenders, that this second perspective raises a particular challenge, which is the issue of forgiveness. Treatment providers are well aware of confronting offenders in their desire to seek forgiveness from their victims. It is not their place to ask a victim for forgiveness. The desire for forgiveness of wrongdoing is a normal human response, in that it allows us to assuage our feelings of guilt, and there lies the dilemma. How does one reconcile the belief relating to the individual's right to seek forgiveness and redemption, while holding true to the rights and empowerment of victims? I have stated on many occasions that I believe Circles of Support and Accountability to be, conceptually, at the very heart of Restorative Justice and yet also at the heart of Restorative Justice lies the core principle of forgiveness and restoration. Whenever I read the guiding principle, as written by the original Canadian Circles, I am moved by the power of its message, and find a renewed commitment to do all I can to ensure the success of this pilot programme. I also believe that the statement goes some way to addressing this dilemma.

The achievements of this Circle in bringing about a positive change to the life of their Core Member have been remarkable. Programme staff have received very positive feedback from both Hostel staff and the Sex Offender Registration Officer regarding this positive change. This feedback has related to both the work of the Circle generally and this volunteer specifically.

The third and final perspective was originally written for a national newspaper. Once again it reflects a number of issues that are raised in the first account, not least the tension that exists between support and accountability. Written in the style of a diary, it allows the reader to travel with the volunteer on the 'journey' of facilitating a Core Member's desire to live an offence free life. It gives a true reflection of the difficulty in working with a population who characteristically try to distance themselves from their abusive behaviour and feel comfortable in feeling sorry for themselves, known as the 'poor me syndrome'. A Circle of Support and Accountability is not a therapy programme. As this account states, the initial group meetings are essential so that a relationship of trust can be achieved in an environment that feels safe for all those who are involved. Basic information about the Core Member's risk and offending has previously been given to the Circle volunteers. By definition, once the Circle begins to meet as a whole certain therapeutic elements are recreated. The difficulties of managing this issue are highlighted in this account and as programme staff we have much to learn with regard to the development of best practice.

Collective action and active citizenship are issues that concern us all, and Circles of Support and

Accountability is just one of many programmes that encourage and facilitate active citizenship. This becomes reality and is evident when the author states 'It feels like democracy in action. There is a hell of a lot more civic pride for me in this than going to the ballot box once every five years.'

The volunteer herself is a survivor and was primarily motivated to join the programme out of a desire to break the insidious cycle of sexual abuse that feeds on secrecy, fear and ignorance. We have a number of survivors working in Circles all of whom are motivated to engage in a creative process to ensure the reduction in future victims. We were aware, when setting up the programme, that volunteers generally do so because of some vested or connected interest. Circles are not and should never be used as a means for volunteers to address their own victim issues. However, the inclusion of survivors working in Circles is a powerful testament to the validity of the programme. There is also something very powerful related to the concept that those who have been robbed of something very precious can find the strength to reclaim that which was taken, through a restorative structure.

**Chris Wilson**

### **A Volunteer's Perspective (1)**

I was introduced to Circles by Alan (not his real name), the sex offender I was visiting at HMP Grendon. He had already by then undergone a large part of SOTP (sex offender treatment programme) and was due for release in six months. Over the 11 months that I visited him he had made dramatic progress and I came to admire the courage he displayed in facing his demons and his determination to become what he described as a 'proper person'. There was no self-denial, no papering over the cracks, no self-justification, no editing of his past offences. He had come through all that. He answered all questions with openness and honesty and with gut-wrenching bluntness and his pain and shame were there for all to see. He believed passionately, however, that he had 'cracked' the problem and couldn't wait for his release and the chance of a new life.

Nevertheless I feared for him on the outside. The huge challenges and the widespread rejection that awaited him on release would, I believed, drive him back into himself, into isolation, hopelessness and depression, and would ultimately bring the powerlessness and fantasy that leads to re-offending. I could hardly bear the thought of this happening to a man who had worked so hard and come so far, and I told him so. He said he knew he would find it difficult on his own and it was then that he told me about Circles of Support and Accountability. He had already written to the organisers to 'book' a place on the programme following his release. The more he told me about it, the more I came to realise what an inspired idea it was and I was determined that I wanted to become involved. It seemed to me that without such a support system even the most committed 'devotees' of rehabilitation, like Alan, had little chance of avoiding the inexorable slide back into old patterns of behaviour.

I contacted the organisers, signed on to the programme and underwent the training. Given the universal abhorrence in society at large to all sex offenders, I had expected to be one of just a handful of strong-stomached volunteers. I was wrong and pleasantly surprised to find that there was no shortage of people who, like me, had recognised the value of such a programme, and from a variety of professional and social backgrounds.

There were six of us in my first Circle, including the Core Member (hereafter referred to as CM). I

had not at this point given much thought to accountability. I suppose I expected CM to be like Alan, with minimal danger of relapse given the right support and encouragement. It seemed to me that there was something of an inherent contradiction between support on the one hand and accountability on the other, the one requiring a relationship of trust and shared confidence, the other requiring vigilance and scepticism. How, I wondered, could trust be built between CM and the Circle members, if CM felt we could at any moment 'shop' him to the authorities? Surely he would be bound, in those circumstances, to withhold from us anything that he calculated would land him back in trouble. I could not have been more wrong, as the following months were to show. Accountability was to prove central in CM's case.

In the first few Circle meetings, CM, then living in a hostel following release from prison, was nervous, but enthusiastic about the Circle. Each week he brought along details of his SOTP and talked animatedly about his treatment but it became clear, over the ensuing weeks, that his apparent willingness to open up was something of a smoke screen. He deflected or skirted around our questions about his offending, often answering with vague generalisations, and appearing to minimise its significance. 'I don't know what came over me. I touched her under her clothes' was the most we ever elicited from him. We had the distinct impression that he wanted us to believe that this was an isolated incident and totally out of character. When pressed to tell us whether there had been other abuses, he at first insisted there hadn't but in a later meeting, when we returned to the subject, he referred to it as a box he wasn't ready to open – it was too painful for him, he said. He kept trying to steer the conversation back to areas where he felt safe, talking animatedly about his treatment and his family, the death of his mother to whom he was very close, and in all this he attempted to get us to collude. He was manifestly in major denial and attempting to manipulate our meetings to avoid facing the real issues. He tried to reassure us by frequent vehement protestations that he knew for sure he would never offend again, further evidence for us of his unwillingness to acknowledge his latent tendencies.

We were not convinced. His certainty seemed to spring more from a determination not to go back to prison than from any acknowledgement of his offending or sense of shame and willingness to face reality. After a couple of months of going around in circles (forgive the pun) we decided to have a meeting without CM to review progress. We all agreed that we had been too soft on him, had allowed ourselves to be taken for a ride and that from then on, we would be more direct, not allow him any longer to dictate the content or direction of our meetings and hold him more to account.

At about this time he left the close supervision of the Probation hostel and found accommodation elsewhere. His pleasure at this move forward in his life seemed at first to elicit a more open response to our 'harder' line and in the next two meetings, there were some incipient signs that we were at last getting somewhere. We decided it was time to initiate individual meetings with CM, something normally recommended after 4 - 6 weeks, but in our case it had taken twice as long.

CM failed to turn up to the next Circle meeting and the four following individual meetings arranged for the following week. He contacted nobody to explain his actions. The authorities were alerted and enquiries quickly revealed that he had moved into the home of a vulnerable single-parent mother with a 14-year old daughter, an almost exact carbon copy of the pattern of his previous offending. He had told his new partner nothing of his history of abuse. His Probation Officer insisted that this was done and the ensuing revelation ended the relationship.

A further meeting with the Circle was arranged at which CM was full of contrition and self-pity,

assuring us all that he was deeply sorry, that the Circle was really important to him and that it would never happen again. The insincerity of his appeals was demonstrated a short time later when Circle members made it clear to him that they felt used and exploited and that his behaviour was totally unacceptable. There was a sudden switch from pathetic penitence to outright anger. 'I'm not listening to this,' he said and stormed out of the building.

There followed in the ensuing weeks much heart searching on the part of the Circle members. Some were prepared to go on meeting with CM. Others felt he was not ready to benefit from exposure to a Circle. I was one of the latter. I felt that our support and commitment had yielded scant results and that we had failed in our task of rehabilitation. Our commitment had been met by CM's lack of it. All our time and effort, I felt, had been for nothing. Over time, however, I have come to realise that we had in fact been central to the prevention of CM's re-offending and that alone was of no small import. We had played our part in holding CM accountable and prevented the creation of another victim.

It has been a steep learning curve for me and immensely valuable for that. I remain disappointed that we were unable to do more for CM himself, but I now have a much deeper understanding of how the twin pillars of support and accountability are in fact inseparable. My conviction of the vital part played by Circles in the reduction of sex offending remains rock solid and I intend to continue to play my part.

**Laurence Clark**  
**Circles Volunteer**

### **A Volunteer's Perspective (2)**

Circles are absolutely essential not only for sex offenders but for all long term recidivist offenders. Being a member of a Circle has given me the opportunity to provide practical, as well as emotional, support for a resident in a local Probation Hostel. I have also spent the past fifteen months visiting prisoners at HMP Grendon and know that there is a high awareness and expectation amongst prisoners regarding Circles. All sex offenders I have met have stated quite clearly that they want a Circle.

By definition serious sex offenders are subject to long-term custodial sentences. They are all actively aware that upon release society will be very frightening and unforgiving towards them. Combined with society's lack of forgiveness a number of sex offenders have also experienced rejection by their family and friends. Further to this, many cannot, upon release, return to their home environment. Consequently they are very alone.

For the Core Member in our Circle the key is friendship. Through the Circle's facilitation he now has more friends than he has had in years. It was essential with our Core Member that in the beginning a minimum of a weekly individual contact was made by each Circle volunteer and that the Circle met weekly as a whole. Although this was a fairly rapid time frame, trust was established on both sides. Friendship and encouragement plus a commitment to listening are the dominant benefits. Flowing from these are the practical issues of finding the Core Member a job and accommodation. These are very time consuming but essential.

Firstly I have found the experience personally very rewarding, even though that was never the

motivation or expectation. Personally, because of my Christian faith the desire to offer meaningful forgiveness provides a valuable 'added value' benefit. Both at the Hostel and HMP Grendon the majority of prisoners really struggle with this issue. Consequences include lack of self worth that is likely to lead to lack of confidence and depression. However our Core Member who is also a Christian seems to be doing very well.

Circles work with the Core Member takes up a lot more time than just one hour per week. In practice the average is two and a half per week and I believe that time to be necessary. While there is no problem with the individual contact, almost a year on, meetings involving all Circle members can become less frequent and at times can now be somewhat haphazard largely because we have difficulties in co-ordinating diaries. In practice there are now only four members of this Circle and that is not enough. It has been interesting to observe how each Circle volunteer has focused on specific issues such as housing and employment. Becky provides a vital link with the hostel and the Circles office.

Circles have a very real and essential function to provide. Personally I am very committed to continuing supporting and working for Circles. I also believe that faith is a key element. The reason for this is that forgiveness is essential. Forgiveness for them is absolutely key to making progress. The Core Member needs to know and recognise that Circle volunteers will not judge them but through love I believe that the sky is the only limit to ensuring that re-offending is removed.

**Christopher Hargraves**  
**Circles Volunteer**

### **A Volunteer's Perspective (3)**

Suddenly I feel like a cartoon character tricked into running off the cliff, clawing the air in a vain attempt to delay the inevitable. But it's too late: by this time next week I will have met, in this room, a man accused, convicted and imprisoned for sexual offences against children. And I, with four other volunteers am committed to befriend him for a year.

Why am I doing this? When I first heard of 'Circles of Support and Accountability' I was bowled over by the blinding common sense of its approach. For obvious reasons, most offenders are dislocated and isolated when they come out of prison. For sex offenders, this is positively dangerous: emotional loneliness is a key factor in re-offending. To provide ex-offenders with a 'circle' of trained volunteers will help carry them through the difficult early days back in the community.

The scheme requires that Core Members have completed a sex offender treatment programme before Circle work begins. It also is important that both the ex-offender and the volunteers actually want to be there, so the scheme is voluntary.

Knowing that the man we will shortly meet has acknowledged his crime, has sought treatment and has asked for this Circle to help him live an 'offence-free life' is not, at this moment, making much impression on my sense of panic.

Andrew (not his real name) has been convicted of indecent assault against young girls (three

counts – this is his ‘Index offence’) and ‘failure to register’.

For now I remind myself that nothing terrible can happen to me, or to anyone else, here in this room. That we are in this together – with full support and backup from the police, probation service, sex offender treatment programme, social services as well as the staff of the Circles programme. We have been given all their numbers on a small card.

Practical concerns absorb us. What will we ‘disclose’ to Andrew about ourselves at this first meeting? Will we lay down ground rules or play it by ear? Is it appropriate to shake his hand? My panic remains. It seems almost impossible that we will be able to find a handhold between the real – the outrage of sexual abuse, and the ideal – the possibility of redemption for one man. I can’t shake the fear that I am betraying the victims.

## **Week One**

Surprise, and no surprise. I first catch sight of Andrew a moment before the allotted time, as he is on his way upstairs with the facilitator. He is, of course, a very ordinary looking man, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, somewhere in his mid-thirties. And no, you would never know to look at him that he has a history as a sex offender.

When we are finally introduced, I am struck by the soft look about his face and body. He is a nervous talker, and fills the available space with details of his journey and his excitement at meeting us. His neediness is the most shocking thing about him. The meeting passes in a blur as my mind rapidly re-sets the co-ordinates of ‘sex-offender’ to match this new experience.

Each of us is asked to sign the ‘Circle Agreement’ in which Andrew commits himself to living a new, offence-free life, and we commit ourselves to helping him do this. I find this strangely moving. Whatever else happens, hope is here. The official business over, we all relax a little.

Like all other sex offenders in prison, and even in the probation hostel where he now lives, Andrew has to keep up his ‘cover story’ – and may not talk about the nature of his offence. He has lost contact with all friends and family, and other than his probation officer, has no one to talk to on personal matters. Used to violence in any situation where people know of his crime, Andrew tells us he finds it hard to trust people. Does he see the irony in this? We wonder, but none of us wants to go there, yet.

‘Trust is an issue for us, too,’ I find myself saying. ‘To be here, we have to have believe that you really want an offence-free life. ‘ I hesitate, and then shake his hand as I leave.

## **Week Two**

I am momentarily confused. The notice board giving the room allocations for meetings makes no mention of our group. Eventually, by a process of elimination, I work it out. ‘Just in case ‘ someone passing in this semi-public venue should recognise it, the name has had to be changed. A reminder, in case we needed one, that coffee room chats with other centre-users aren’t a good idea.

Upstairs, Andrew, who has been turned down for work during the week, is nursing a bruised hand. He lost his temper and later, hit a wall. Nonetheless, he seems mighty cheerful that we have all turned up.

He warms to his subject right away: to get work, he has to disclose his offence to his new employers, and employers, when they know what his offence is, will not want to employ him. Our work from this point will be an uneasy balancing act. In our 'support' role, we are collectively exercised by his plight. Ex-offenders need to be able to work. But where? How have other sex offenders solved this problem?

Our accountability persona is not so sure about buying the passivity, the reflexive self-pity. No one owes anyone a job, we say. We ourselves have all been turned down for work. Is he prepared to be flexible in where he looks and what he expects? Has he taken advice on *how* to tell his employers about his record? Has he done his best to put his best qualities forward? We give him an impromptu role-play job interview just to check this out. Could do better is my feeling.

I go home happy though. There is something uplifting in this opportunity to share what I know. It feels like democracy in action. There is a hell of a lot more civic pride for me in this than going to the ballot box once every five years.

### **Week Three**

Andrew is, he tells us, a happy man. He has been offered a fully furnished flat in a nearby town. He will move next week – he already has his bags packed. No one has ever offered me a fully furnished flat, I think, peevishly. 'Whatever it takes,' my thought-police counter, through gritted teeth. 'Give the man whatever it takes to ensure he never does this again.'

He talks about his family. None of them know where he has been these past years. His plan is to get a car, to have 'made good' before he gets back in touch. He is on a great deal of anti-depressant medication.

Everything seems to be going right – but something is definitely wrong. What has happened to the wall-punching man, of last week and the one before, without a friend in the world, and with a criminal record that will destroy any chance of a normal life?

### **Week Four**

Andrew is devastated - his offer of accommodation has been withdrawn. He seems stunned, is pale and quiet and hasn't been sleeping. On some level, this feels more real, and safer, than his eager beaver stance of our sessions up until now.

The explanation seems to be an administrative mess-up, but naturally, it's hard for Andrew (and for me) not to think that this has something to do with his ex-offender status. Nevertheless, he is adamant that by this time next week he will be 'totally over it'.

Now it is our turn to be relentlessly positive. We encourage him to think about the upside: he won't have to deal with the loneliness he had anticipated (especially at the weekends) just yet. He can concentrate on finding work.

We encourage him to notice that this time, with a disappointment in his life, how many people there are now to fight his corner, now that he has vowed to set out on a new life. We are there, all five of us, feeling his disappointment with him, rooting for him.

## **Week Five**

I come to expect two layers to my experience of each Circle: the narrative of the discussion, in which we all share, and a second, more elusive layer that unfolds in my thoughts afterwards.

The narrative this week is ultimately frustrating. Andrew begins the task, agreed last time, of telling us the story of his life. He gets out his 'life line' – a chronological account of life events he put together in his therapy that will act as our guide.

We don't get far before Andrew throws in, almost as an aside, that after an encounter with another member of the probation hostel where he lives, he locked himself in his flat and broke two doors. The group seem to feel, as I do, that this is one of the 'live issues' we have been told to look out for, an indication that Andrew is feeling the pressure.

If Andrew is disappointed or relieved at this change in direction, it doesn't show. With his usual unnerving acquiescence, he answers our questions. But he doesn't seem to 'get' why we need to know exactly what happened.

To him, its simple – the guy wound him up, he left the room ('Or I would have put him in hospital'), locked himself in his flat and broke the doors, bruising his knuckles. He will pay for the damage, and as far as he is concerned, it's over.

Later, part of me wants to laugh out loud at our earnest attempts at assertiveness training. For all we know, this *is* the best outcome in the kind of world Andrew lives. The other part wonders whether we took the bait of a convenient distraction hook, line and sinker.

## **Week Six**

Evaluation week. Our facilitator is with us once again, to see how we are doing. The plan has been to change at this point to a system in which each of us takes a turn to have daily contact with Andrew of about an hour. But none of us feels ready to do this – we have not had the all-important conversation about his offences. We don't know him well enough.

## **Week Seven**

Andrew has reached the stage in his treatment where he is required to make a presentation about his offence, and be cross-examined by his peers. He is dreading this. Rehearsing with us, he describes his thoughts, feelings and actions in the immediate run-up to his offence, and then describes what he did.

At times during his account, I am aware that I have stopped breathing. I want to scream, to make any excuse to stop him talking.

When he stops, my first feelings are of relief. Relief that it was one little girl, not three. Relief that there was no 'other' violence – physical or verbal, involved. But it feels insane to be thinking like this: no assault on any 10-year old is acceptable in any circumstances. How can I think, even for a moment, that threats and physical assaults could be more violent than violating a child's genitals, and her trust?

I am also relieved that he was caught so quickly. God only knows what you went through, little

girl, and what your life is like now. I am sorry that as adults in this society we failed to protect you. And thank you, for your act of courage in speaking your truth. Whether or not he ever acknowledges it, Andrew owes his chance of a 'new life' to you.

## **Week Eight**

In the weeks we have known him, Andrew seems to have an impressive array of hard-luck stories. In the last session, he makes sure we know how traumatized he was by having to role-play his victim in his treatment session – how he cried, how he felt petrified with fear.

His sympathy-play hasn't missed a beat, we can now see, despite the fact that we are now in the picture about his offences. He just doesn't seem to have any sense of his ability to cause serious harm to others.

## **Week Nine**

A discussion with other members of the Circle confirms that we are all feeling the same way. It feels brutal, but it has to be done. At the next meeting, we tell Andrew that we need to go deeper than we have been up to now. It is not enough for us that he says he will never do this again. We need to understand the journey he has been on within himself to get to the understanding of *why* he wouldn't want to do it again.

About half way through, Andrew's face alters: he has turned pale, is looking down, and his voice is shaky. He offers that he knows more about his offence than he can bear to 'talk to himself' about. Under great pressure, he finally tells us that he knows that he did it – his offence – for himself. This week he leaves quickly, and for once, does not offer to wash the coffee cups.

This is what I have been waiting for. In these past weeks, we have offered Andrew whatever support we can in the bleak and scary situation in which he finds himself. With this meeting, we have called him powerfully to account for the choices he has made that brought him to this place.

It has taken time, but the journey has been worth every step. Strangely, or maybe not so strangely, I have also found the answer to my own question: that it is not only possible, but also my right, to stand in the space between the real and the ideal. My fear finally disappears, as I understand that it is not my responsibility, but Andrew's, to choose whether he joins us there.

## **Postscript**

In the Circles that follow, Andrew is much more relaxed, much less defensive. We laugh more. We feel ready, finally, for individual contact sessions. We consider walks, breakfasts out, and maybe a trip to the theatre. To me, this Circle feels like a small miracle – a simple, but effective tool that has enabled a sex offender to be met precisely where he needs it. It has affirmed my belief in citizenship and collective responsibility. No-one knows what challenges lie ahead, but so far, only good has come out of this: for me, for Andrew and for the children who need adults who will not turn away.

**Tany Alexander**  
**Circles Volunteer**

# The Professional's Perspective

## **The experience of working with Circles from a Probation Officer and a Police Officer**

### **A Hostel Perspective**

Since the establishment of Circles of Support and Accountability, we have had two residents supported by volunteer groups. Although one resident was ultimately recalled on his licence, in both cases it was a valuable resource for the hostel to be able to access and I believe that many other residents could benefit from this input.

Our first resident, HM, was a prime example of someone experiencing emotional loneliness. His behaviour in the hostel was very demanding and time consuming for duty staff as HM behaved in ways that would attract their attention. It was HM's view that he was marginalized and isolated. Once he had established links with Circles, it was evident to all staff that his general mood had improved.

It was also useful to HM that he could see his contacts from Circles as volunteers. This allowed him to see them separately from members of the Probation Service who, at times, he categorised as overly restrictive and controlling because they were required to enforce hostel rules and licence conditions.

HM has now moved out of the hostel and continues to derive benefit from his contact with Circle volunteers, which has given him a support network beyond the hostel and has facilitated his move on.

In the case of MR, our experience was also positive. MR would spend most of his time in the hostel in a very reclusive way. He did not interact with other residents and chose to isolate himself.

Contact with the Circles programme proved very successful, as he was able to spend time outside of the hostel in a constructive and supervised way. In addition, this contact with Circle volunteers enabled us to discover and monitor relationships that he began to develop over a telephone chat line.

MR disclosed to volunteers his intention to meet with two females contacted via a chat room. This enabled the hostel to take appropriate action to ensure that everyone's safety was considered, thus highlighting the accountability aspect of the scheme.

Overall we have had two very positive experiences of working with Circles of Support and Accountability, and look forward to future joint endeavours.

**Liam Yapp**  
**Deputy Manager**

## **A Police Perspective**

Throughout the Thames Valley Area are police officers and civilian staff in the role of Public Protection Officers. There is at least one Public Protection Officer for each Police Area and the busier areas have a police officer plus a civilian member of staff.

The role of the Public Protection Officer is governed by the Sex Offenders Act 1997 and also the Criminal Justice and Courts Services Act 2000. The role entails the supervision of persons required to register as a Sex Offender and also anyone who is deemed to be a potentially dangerous person in that they have served a term of imprisonment for 12 months or more for a sexual or violent offence, or a person who is not one of the above but is felt to pose a risk of harm to the public.

A static risk assessment is completed on these persons and then an ongoing dynamic risk assessment is commenced. The risk will be assessed as low, medium, high or very high. All relevant persons are part of the Multi Agency Public Protection Panel information sharing protocol. Those assessed as very high risk are deemed to be the critical few and are discussed by the Multi Agency Public Protection Panel so that the risk can be managed and hopefully lowered.

As a Public Protection Officer part of the role is, along with other agencies, to provide support to these individuals. This includes regular visits and contact depending on the level of risk assessed. Low and medium risk persons are visited about 2-3 times per year. There is however a facility where the person can contact the Public Protection Officer at any time if support is needed. High and very high risk persons are visited as regularly as it is felt necessary. This can range from daily or weekly to monthly.

As there are only one or two Public Protection Officers per police area the contact with the high or very high risk persons can be very time consuming and stressful, especially as it can be a 24-hour 7-day-a-week commitment.

Over the past year Circles of Support and Accountability have been set up within the Thames Valley Police Area. From the start there has been regular contact between the Police and staff of the Circles of Support and Accountability programme. This contact has also extended to Circle group members as the Circles have been formed. This has resulted in a strong relationship between Police and Circles, not only from a Public Protection aspect but also from a joint support network for the Core Member.

To date Reading with Wokingham has had three persons as Core Members of Circles of Support and Accountability.

Now that we have in place this facility there have been positive results in a number of areas.

The person who poses a risk has a support network from a wide range of people who are contactable on a regular basis. In my view, from the conversations I have had with Core Members, this has featured greatly in reducing the trigger factors that will raise a person's level of risk. The Core Member now feels that they 'belong' in an area of society and can therefore function more consistently.

There is also the fact that Circle members are gaining a greater understanding of sex offenders and how they can fit into the community successfully, with the risks being managed. However if the

risk cannot be managed successfully there is with a Circle the added factor that if the risk posed to the public or the Core Member does increase then it can be identified and dealt with quickly.

The role of the Public Protection Officer within the Thames Valley Police has also been greatly assisted in that now the role of support is shared with the Circle volunteers. From a personal point of view my role has been enhanced by the implementation of Circles of Support and Accountability, I have seen great improvement in the Core Members, and also my workload has been eased considerably.

I fully support the Circles of Support and Accountability programme and would hope that it is used to its full potential nation-wide in the future.

**WDC 3872 Corinne Greenall**  
**Public Protection Officer**

## The Core Member's Perspective

### Extracts from an Evaluation Study

*This is the result of a study conducted by Sarah Bell. Sarah is a Social Work student at Oxford Brookes University who undertook a placement with the Thames Valley Circles of Support and Accountability Programme. As part of that placement Sarah undertook to interview four Core Members who were currently in a Circle. She designed a semi-structured interview aimed at eliciting both the thoughts and feelings experienced by the Core Members in relation to their Circle. What follows are extracts from that study, highlighting the Core Members' perspective of being in a Circle.*

The Core Members in this study had heard about the Circles Programme either from their Probation Officer or Prison Chaplain. Application forms were completed with absolute confidentiality and each Core Member received a reply about their acceptance directly from a member of the Circles programme team who then visited them.

The voice of the Core Member is important not only to ascertain how well the Circles have been running but also for other offenders, who may or may not have the opportunity to experience the kind of non-judgemental support offered by Circles. It became apparent that this was a key feeling with each Core Member.

As one Core Member tries to explain: 'Although the Police treat you with respect they also judge you on your crime and their profession requires them to judgementally question you, for instance, as an ex sex-offender.' He was aware that if there were any offences committed in the community where he lived, he would be questioned automatically about it. While understanding why, he felt this would be a pre-judgement on behalf of the Police towards him. He believed both the staff in his Probation hostel, and the Sex Offender Registration Officer would make the same kinds of pre-judgements. He was clear however that this was not the case with the volunteers in his Circle.

‘They challenge me but they don’t judge me.’

The general feeling was that judgement seemed to be left outside the front door of any Circle contact. Each Core Member stated that they enjoyed the meetings and looked forward to them. Meeting with volunteers in their Circle and consequently building relationships helped their self-esteem and confidence. Being able to practise these skills helped them deal with other social situations.

Their first thoughts and expectations of what it would be like being in a Circle were how it would help their transition and reintegration back into the community and support them in areas such as housing and employment.

The Core Members felt that the Circle would be there for any general queries, issues and questions they may have, offering advice and support. It was positive to hear that Circles met the Core Members’ expectations ‘and more’; in each case comments like ‘they wanted to help me’, ‘they gave me positive feedback’, ‘we got to know each other’, ‘I felt like an equal.’

There were, as always, some unexpected feelings, one of which was that one Core Member was not expecting Circles of Support and Accountability to be so closely linked with the Thames Valley Project or the Probation Service, but has since found this beneficial as he felt that he has more support if everyone is involved and knows what is going on.

One particular Core Member felt that having a Circle (instead of just one person such as the key worker) helped because ‘I can talk to a certain member about one issue and likewise about another issue with another member.’

Each Core Member felt that the Circle had helped them achieve changes on a personal level. They said the volunteers offered encouragement, acceptance, ideas and advice which encouraged them to become more confident, moving forward in positive ways, becoming less isolated and more accepting of how positive the future could be.

‘When I am advised/told something which does not necessarily make me feel comfortable, I do listen because I know that it is honesty in order to benefit me.’

‘Coming out of prison was an emotional period for me. If I had not had the Circle it could have led to re-offending when feeling emotionally down. They have helped me to focus in on the way I think so that I do not get into a situation of re-offending.’

‘Without the Circles support I think I could have re-offended, they offered me support and advice at one of my lowest points and were there to help and support me.’

Each Core Member felt that their Circle had accepted them as people. This enabled them to feel comfortable concerning disclosing information about their offending and treatment programme (one core-member however did not have any treatment but was still able to feel they could open up and be honest).

‘My relapse programme, with the support from volunteers, has real meaning. I feel that I can continue with my main aim of not re-offending.’

Trust and honesty were all-important tools for the Core Members. The thought of 'not knowing' would be just too much. Circles ran on assurance that the Core Member will be informed at all stages with any issue, including any that were of concern and may need to be passed onto other agencies (Sexual Offender Registration Officer, Probation, or the Core Member's key worker). Openness and honesty is key.

Listening was important, as was the feeling that the volunteers in their Circle seemed to take an interest in their lives: what they were doing; feeling; thinking; and what they said.

'The Circle do understand your feelings of isolation and loneliness. You need to genuinely want to change the way you think and then you can re-build yourself as a new person with help from Circles.'

There seemed to be no problems within the Circles that any Core Member felt were important enough to mention. Some relationships still needed to be established, as a particular Circle had not developed enough to provide individual contact.

Each Core Member felt strongly that Circles should be available for all offenders who need it.

'There needs to be a lot more Circles, I don't know where I'd be without one...'

Circles should

'become national, everyone like me should have the opportunity to have support. This works for the public as a whole and future victims, not just for the offender...'

**Sarah Bell**  
**Social Work Student**

# The Management and Supervision of Circles

*The following is an insight into the perspective of a Circles of Support and Accountability (CSA) staff member in creating and sustaining Circles within the community. It explores the journey that all involved have taken and identifies not only the positives of the Circle but the difficulties experienced and the knowledge and understanding gained through this experience.*

As Project Co-ordinator for Circles of Support and Accountability, I have a responsibility to manage and supervise the Circles, providing a supporting role for both the Core Member (CM) and Circle volunteers. Having identified a suitable Core Member the next step was to bring all the volunteers together to meet each other and prepare for the introduction of the Core Member to the Circle. The Circle volunteers have completed 16 hours of training and will meet as a group for at least three weeks prior to meeting the Core Member.

One of these sessions will include a visit from the Sex Offender Registration Officer. However, although this is our aim it is made clear to the volunteers that we will not bring the CM into the Circle until they feel comfortable and confident that they are ready. Although staff will do everything to ensure they are prepared, it is essential to be sensitive to the volunteers' needs and not place pressure on them to enter a situation they are not ready for, as this could have a negative impact on the CM.

The aims of the sessions with the volunteers on their own are:

- Introduction exercise/Team building
- Practical issues
- Group boundaries/Guidelines/Individual contact
- Circle contract
- Essential information about Core Member
- Discuss introduction of Core Member
- Any fears or concerns

## **Introduction exercise**

Each volunteer brings to the Circle strengths and skills that will benefit the Circle and Core Member. As part of the introductory exercise we ask each volunteer to introduce themselves and discuss their motivation for Circles and the strengths that they feel they will bring to the Circle. It is equally important that volunteers if appropriate identify any areas or issues where they feel they may have difficulties, so that the other volunteers are aware of this and can support the individual if necessary. In particular if a volunteer is a survivor of sexual abuse, although their individual decision, it may be appropriate to disclose this to the other volunteers.

The volunteers are asked to disclose some personal information about themselves that they are comfortable with. This is important as at the initial meeting with the Core Member we ask them to

discuss their motivation and some personal information can help volunteers prepare for this. If the CM is expected to enter the Circle and disclose personal information about his past and offending, such disclosure from the volunteer can help assist in the development of a trusting relationship.

## **Practical Issues**

The group need to identify a regular time and date on a weekly basis that is convenient to them for the Circle meeting. Project staff try and establish this information prior to forming the Circle. The group are asked to fill in a feedback form at the end of the meeting summarising the contents of the meeting, individual contact and tasks to be undertaken by the Circle.

Travel expenses, mobile phones, emergency numbers, personal alarms, (if appropriate) are all addressed. Emergency numbers and contact details for case manager, Sex Offender Registration Officer, CSA project staff, hostel staff (if appropriate) are given out. All volunteers will have each other's contact details and the Core Member's mobile phone number.

## **Guidelines for Circle Meeting**

If an open, honest and trusting relationship is to be developed between all Circle members it is essential that it is the Core Member's responsibility to disclose personal information. It is important that the Core Member does not feel undermined by having this information already disclosed on their behalf. The Core Member will however be aware that the Circle volunteers have been given information on offending behaviour, risk factors and progress in treatment.

Circles of Support and Accountability staff and treatment providers are there to assist the sharing of information and verify that all relevant information has been disclosed. If the Core Member struggles to share information or the information being given is not clear then the individual's treatment facilitator will attend a Circle meeting to assist this process and offer support to all members.

## **How does it work in practice?**

One of the first Circles established was in Oxford. The Thames Valley Pilot had only been running a short time and therefore we had only recruited a small number of volunteers. In forming the Circles, programme staff endeavour to match appropriate volunteers with the Core Member, bringing together skills and experience that will best benefit the Core Member. However, in forming this Oxford Circle we simply took five volunteers that had been trained and allocated them a Core Member we had assessed as suitable for requiring a Circle. What this meant was that we had not necessarily considered the balance of the volunteers in the Circle and whether they were the most suitable for that particular individual.

However, all the volunteers were motivated and committed to working with the Core Member and came together on a weekly basis. One of the first obstacles that the Circle faced, and sought guidance from myself on, was the issue of sharing of information. The volunteers were struggling to discuss the Core Member's offending behaviour, believing that the Core Member was still reluctant to discuss specific areas and was holding information back. The volunteers were unclear on how open and honest they could be regarding their comments and feelings and felt that they were not moving forward. What was required was permission to express their opinions, thought and suggestions and once this had been given the volunteers felt more confident in their role.

On several occasions I was required to attend a Circle meeting to help address specific issues. At the beginning of the Circle there was clearly a problem between two of the Circle volunteers who were struggling to work together. Their behaviour and relationship impacted on the Core Member and the running of the Circle, and this had to be addressed. The Core Member was aware of why I was visiting the Circle and provided an extract from his diary to illustrate his feelings on the matter. Through presenting the thoughts of the Core Member and allowing an open discussion with all volunteers participating I began to see the group coming together. The group were also encouraged to go on a social evening together to help develop their relationships.

After approximately six months the Core Member started missing his individual contact with the Circle volunteers. Prior to this he had disclosed to the Circle that he had begun a new relationship with a woman. He stated he was going to marry her, and that this was the best thing that could have happened to him. The Circle volunteers asked appropriate questions regarding whether the woman had children (he had offended against children) and advised him to take everything slowly. They offered to work with the Core Member to assist him disclosing his past to his new partner. They shared this information with myself so that I could verify that all relevant agencies were aware of the situation and clarify if the information they were receiving was correct.

After some discussion with relevant agencies involved with the Core Member it became clear that he had also missed other appointments and had not been seen in the hostel where he was resident for over a week. What transpired was that he had moved in with his new partner where there were vulnerable children living. He had chosen to ignore his commitment to the Circle, wishing to avoid any accountability for his behaviour. He had just completed the end of treatment and it was a concern to all that he had ignored all of the strategies and work he had undertaken including recognising the importance of contact with his support network.

The Circle came together with the Core Member to discuss this behaviour and how the Circle could move forward from this considering he had ignored the support provided. It was felt by the Circle volunteers that the relationship of trust that had been built over the months together had vanished and that it would be very difficult to re-establish this. However, the Circle felt that it was important that the Core Member have the opportunity to discuss what had happened and that if he accepted responsibility and was willing to work on what had gone wrong the Circle could continue.

Problems arose when in this meeting he struggled to take responsibility for his behaviour and was reluctant to discuss the situation with the volunteers. He ended up leaving the Circle half way through which left the volunteers with a difficult situation and experiencing some difficult emotions. The result of this was that a further meeting was held in which the volunteers were provided with a number of suggestions as to what should happen. The Core Member was then invited to attend at the end of the meeting.

The final decision was that out of the four remaining volunteers (one was currently out of the country) two would move into another Circle, one would end their involvement with Circles and one would continue working with the Core Member and we would introduce new volunteers. It was further agreed that five was too large a number for him and the Circle was reduced to three. In the time that has elapsed since the end of the first Circle the remaining volunteer and myself have continued individual contact, the Core Member has attended sessions with his treatment facilitator to review the work done in treatment and address areas where there were difficulties with his Relapse Prevention plan and strategies.

## **What we have learnt**

- It is important to consider the mix of volunteers when allocating them to a Circle.
- Five volunteers can be a large and intimidating number and there should be flexibility on numbers in a Circle depending on the need and risk of the Core Member.
- Attention must be given to team building and providing the volunteers with an opportunity to get to know each other prior to working with the Core Member.
- The supervision and support provided by project staff is essential and must be regular. However, a balance must be achieved in providing support but not allowing them to become too dependent on guidance for every action or decision made.
- The volunteers are part of the Circle team and should be included in all decisions, however at times guidance and decision-making will be expected from project staff.
- The inclusion of Case Managers, Sex Offender Registration Officer in Circle meetings is important.
- An emphasis on task-orientated work should be made to avoid the group becoming too intellectual in their focus.

**Rebekah Saunders**  
**Programme Coordinator**

# Evaluation

*It is important that all aspects of the work being undertaken by Circles of Support and Accountability are properly evaluated. Evaluation is an ongoing process in which the data that will inform our eventual outcome flows from the daily task. The following account gives an insight into the model of evaluation, developed and agreed between the pilot sites and the Home Office. This is followed by extracts from the programme co-ordinator Rebekah Saunders' masters dissertation that highlights the importance of Circles in maintaining treatment objectives. The conclusion of Rebekah's work reflects much of what Core Members reported when talking to Sarah Bell, extracts of which are contained within this report under the heading 'The Core Member's Perspective'.*

## **A summary of the official Thames Valley evaluation model**

The Home Office have consistently given a commitment to evaluating the three pilot programmes. However in these times of finite resources, this translated to an agreed proposal that each individual programme should engage in an ongoing process of data collection and interpretation. Programme Managers of the three pilot sites worked together ensuring parity in relation to the evaluation, allowing for a comparative study to be made by the Home Office at the end of the three-year period. A thank you should be extended to Development Officer Dick Foot at the Lucy Faithfull Foundation for the creation of a National Circle of Support & Accountability database upon which the majority of data relevant to the evaluation can be held. Phil Collins in Hampshire and Chris Wilson in the Thames Valley have adapted the Canadian questionnaires for evaluation purposes in relation to the English pilot programmes. There are three questionnaires that focus on the Core Member, Professional/Agency representative and the Circle Volunteers.

The greater proportion of the evaluation is to be a qualitative study focusing on four key elements:

- Infrastructure
- Operations
- Volunteers
- Criminogenic/Psychological factors

### **Infrastructure**

The qualitative work focuses on the first three elements of the evaluation. Looking at the infrastructure of the programme helps to identify how (and why) the programme was set up. This needs to take into account both the philosophical reasoning underlying the need to establish such a programme and then the technical way in which the programme was set up. It was envisaged that the pilot site would undertake this component of the evaluation in conjunction with its managing organisation, i.e. the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in the case of the Thames Valley.

## **Operations**

The operational aspect asks the question 'What do Circles do?' This question encapsulates the issues of what we, as programme staff are doing and how we do it. Data from the needs and resources profile, weekly Circle record sheets etc will be of great significance in measuring the effectiveness of the operational management of the programme.

## **Volunteers**

The commitment and dedication of volunteers are obviously essential to the success of the programme as are their selection and retention. Therefore it is important to look at both the issues of what motivates volunteers to undertake such work, and by what criteria volunteers are recruited and selected for the programme. The reasons why potential volunteers may be screened by programme staff as unsuitable or decide themselves not to pursue volunteering for the programme are also important and informative issues. All potential volunteers complete evaluation forms after the initial intensive two-day training and such data will be important in achieving a robust and credible evaluation outcome. It was decided that the adapted questionnaires should only be used at the point that either the Circle or the pilot programme ceases to exist (whichever comes first). However what is needed is a regular (six monthly) appraisal of each Circle. The method used to achieve this is a semi-structured group interview (focus group) to ascertain Circle members' thoughts and feelings in relation to process and outcome.

## **Criminogenic/Psychological Factors**

The criminogenic and psychological component of the evaluation relates specifically to the Core Member and seeks through the combined use of psychometric testing (social competence measures) and clinical evaluation to profile and measure the impact the programme has had on their life and ultimately their pro-offending behaviour. It was thought to be both appropriate and expedient to administer the tests on Core Members when they first join a Circle and then for the task to be repeated every six months in conjunction with the semi-structured interviews. Given the high proportion of men who are entering a circle having just completed an SOTP or community based relapse prevention programme, these tests may well have been recently completed. If this is the case the results of those psychometrics can be used as the base line against which future scores can be measured. For those men who are already established in a Circle they will be tested at the first six-month stage. The social competence measures include:

- Locus of Control (Norland-Strickland)
- Self Esteem (Thornton)
- Emotional loneliness (UCLA)
- General Empathy (IRI)
- Anger Questionnaire (Buss-Perry)
- Social Response Inventory (Marshall)

It must be remembered that in general it is the Core Member who has requested to be part of a Circle and his membership is on a voluntary basis. The Core Member's past experience of psychometric testing will be inevitably linked to past experience of treatment. It is therefore important to stress that the psychometric tests undertaken in the Circle are for the purposes of

evaluation rather than a tool of continued agency management. It is for this reason that doubt has been expressed over the usefulness of including the relapse prevention measures in the overall test to be done. Initially the three pilot projects had identified Beckett and Fisher's two relapse prevention measures, children and sex cognition scale, victim empathy child or adult as being appropriate in helping measure the impact of Circles on Core Members. A suggested alternative is the designing of a specific questionnaire that can then be used to measure the impact of a Circle upon the maintenance of treatment objectives/relapse prevention plan.

Accredited personnel will score the completed psychometric tests and Andrew Bates (Principal Psychologist for Thames Valley Probation) will then interpret them. As with the Circle volunteers, it was decided that for the Core Member the adapted questionnaires should only be used at the point that either the Circle or the pilot programme ceases to exist (whichever comes first).

**Chris Wilson**

### **Life after relapse prevention**

*The following is a summary of the dissertation: 'Life After Relapse Prevention: a qualitative analysis of seven personal accounts of maintaining an offence free life within the community', prepared by Rebekah Saunders for her MSc in Assessment and Treatment of Sex Offenders with Leicester University.*

#### **Abstract of the full dissertation**

This is a qualitative analysis and study of the personal accounts and experience of seven men maintaining an offence-free lifestyle within the community. The study explores life after Relapse Prevention and the necessity for maintenance work to sustain motivational levels and treatment effectiveness. This study links the perspectives of academics, practitioners and offenders and recommends a long-term approach to the management of risk of sex offenders in the community.

The study concludes that the positive work and progress made by individuals within treatment can be greatly undermined and undervalued by the inadequate resources for long-term support and long-term maintenance work. It is argued that in order for men to abstain from offending they require combined intrinsic self-management and extrinsic control and monitoring factors to maintain motivation long-term. Through the use of maintenance groups, Circles of Support & Accountability, long-term evaluation and follow-up work safer communities can be created and ex-offenders can maintain their offence-free new life.

The findings within this study are not conclusive, however they should provoke some careful thinking by professionals and encourage researchers with access to larger resources and samples to carry out a full-scale evaluation of long-term issues for men in the community.

*[The full text of the dissertation can be obtained from Rebekah Saunders on request]*

#### **Introduction**

Relapse Prevention (RP) equips offenders with the tools to manage their potential future risk and maintain an offence free life. In exploring personal accounts of life after Relapse Prevention a realistic picture of the obstacles facing men in achieving this can be gained.

This study explores the potential failings of professionals in the treatment of sex offenders. It presents realistic and resourceable solutions to the problems professional agencies have in facilitating long term support and maintenance work for men. Public protection is the number one priority of treatment providers. This study argues that this can be achieved through a long-term approach to risk and involvement of community volunteers.

The successful reintegration and rehabilitation of sex offenders into the community requires consideration of the needs of the offender, victim and community. It also requires professionals to fully explore whether these needs are met successfully:

‘We suggest that the way to reduce re-offending is to give individuals the necessary conditions to lead better lives (i.e. ‘good’ lives) than to simply teach them how to minimize their chances of being incarcerated. However, it must be noted that the good lives approach is not simply about giving offenders better quality of life: the primary aim is to reduce offending and it is argued that this is best achieved by taking a more constructive and holistic approach to rehabilitation.’ (Ward, in press, p2)

Offenders will not be motivated to change if they do not perceive there is anything valuable in their lives. Individuals’ ability, strengths and environment should influence their treatment.

Individuals’ well being is significantly linked with the progress made post-treatment. If men still possess high levels of emotional loneliness and isolation combined with low levels of self-esteem their well being within the community can become problematic. Due to the dynamic nature of risk they can quickly return to their old lifestyle and behaviour and their risk in turn escalates.

Figure 1, ‘Intrinsic and Extrinsic Factors Maintaining Motivation to Change’ draws together the conclusions and recommendations of this study. It illustrates the process required for the achievement of long-term maintenance of motivation essential for treatment effectiveness, public protection and the achievement of the offender’s New Life:

‘Unless the individual is motivated to use what he has learned from the treatment programme he will not apply his new skills and knowledge to changing his lifestyle and his likelihood of recidivism will not be reduced.’ (Fisher et al, 2000, p4)

Fisher & Beech’s ‘Model of change’ (1998, as cited in Eldridge & Faux, 2001) identifies three factors required for treatment effectiveness: motivation to change; locus of control (internal control and responsibility); and level of fixation (emotional congruence with children). This model in conjunction with Prochaska & DiClemente’s ‘Stages of Change Model’ (1982) which has assisted the formation of Figure 1. The following definitions have been used to create this:

‘Extrinsic motivation arises from external factors, from conditions outside the person such as social pressures, reinforcement, and punishment.’ (Viets, Walker, Miller, 2002, p19)

‘Intrinsic motivation, by contrast, arises from within the person. Self-regulation has to do with intrinsic motivation (as contrasted with external controls). This type of motivation is positively associated with interest, enjoyment, flexibility, spontaneity, and creativity in the behaviour (Deci & Ryan, 1987).’ (Viets, Walker, Miller, 2002, p19)

## **Motivation to Change**

If men are motivated to change then they can enter a sex offender treatment programme, mandatory or voluntary. Regardless of whether men have completed a treatment programme in prison they will be reassessed and allocated to the treatment programme according to risk and need. The sustaining of motivational levels is essential in men if they are to maintain successfully treatment targets. In order to enhance the initial motivation, treatment has to be designed around a man's individual needs and learning abilities:

'If offenders do not fully admit to the offence, they are denying or minimising culpability; if they do not admit that offending is shameful and express a wish to desist, they are at best anti-social and at worst psychopathic; and if they do not own up to needing the help of a professional, they are considered either arrogant or lacking in insight. In short, an offender is deemed motivated to change as long as he or she agrees with the professional point of view. A different and potentially more useful perspective is to look at motivation to change from the offender's point of view.' (McMurran 2002, p4/5 )

Offenders' quality of life, their environment and interaction with others within the community contributes significantly to the achievement of a successful new life. Professionals have a commitment to reduce re-offending and equip men with the tools and resources they require to manage potential future risk. The Relapse Prevention (RP) component of treatment assists men in producing a New Life plan which will help them in achieving a positive offence free future. The RP block helps men improve their self-esteem and form positive appropriate relationships. It allows men to learn, practice and develop new skills and use support available productively.

## **Enhancement of Motivation**

Motivation to change is desirable if treatment targets are going to be successfully maintained. This motivation has to be enhanced further and maintained through an internalised understanding and an active acceptance of responsibility. Internal self-regulation and external support and control are required to facilitate the process. Relapse Prevention is designed to equip men with the tools to maintain abstinence for the rest of their life from offending behaviour. However, RP programmes can only address issues within the time frame allocated.

The diagram below illustrates how the motivational levels are enhanced through men moving from passive to active responsibility facilitated through the therapeutic alliance and peer support provided by group dynamics and delivery style (Marshall, Anderson and Fernandez, 1999). In order to maintain this motivation offenders require an adequate support network in which they can safely share their New Life plan.

The New Life plan is designed to be shared, revised and adapted to the circumstances of the offender and it is their responsibility to ensure that this happens. However, those that are closest to the offender are often not best placed to assist. Even if a man has identified a support network consisting of friends and family it may be difficult, due to the investment these people have made in him, for the offender to disclose high-risk behaviour or pro-offending thoughts.

# EXTRINSIC AND INTRINSIC FACTORS MAINTAINING MOTIVATION TO CHANGE

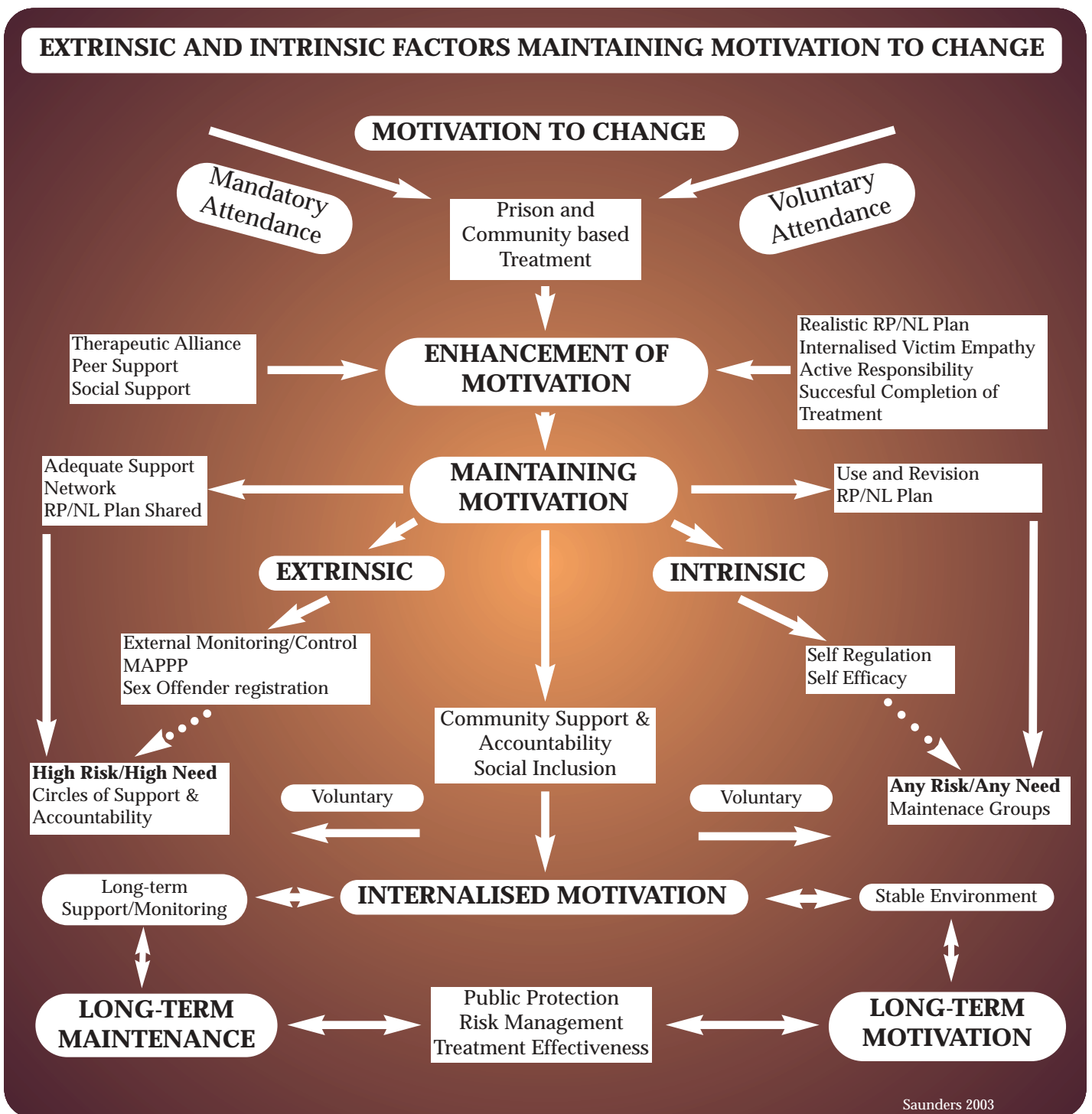


Figure 1

## Maintaining Motivation

Key factors such as external support and monitoring, stable environment and community inclusion are also important in assisting offenders maintain motivation long-term. The development of the Multi Agency Public Protection Panel (MAPPP) and the National Accredited Sex Offender Treatment Programmes has made risk management of men in the community more consistent and effective, providing external control and monitoring. The MAPPP was designed to manage the risk of offenders likely to cause a risk of harm to the public. However, there are still dangerous gaps in the approach of the professional which need to be recognised and addressed.

Figure 1 illustrates that long-term support and maintenance resources should become an extension of the treatment men have received. Relapse prevention needs can be integrated into an aftercare

package for the offender. Professionals involved in treatment, community initiatives and housing must combine their resources to increase public protection.

## **The MAPPA**

Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements became operational in April 2001. 'The MAPPA place a duty on the police and the National Probation Service to assess and manage risks posed by offenders in every community in England and Wales' (Benn, 2001 p2) The annual reports emphasise the importance of stable accommodation and outreach workers linking housing and probation resettlements teams. Yet there are still specific geographical areas and housing professionals that do not feel equipped to manage and resettle sex offenders back into the community.

Marques *et al* conducted a small study of men who had re-offended to learn about the relapse process:

'The most striking finding from our interview data was that despite the fact that the average time to re-arrest was 28 months, six of the nine subjects had returned to high-risk behaviours within 1 month of their return to the community.' (Marques *et al*, 2000 p328)

In relation to motivation all participants of the study identified that at the commencement of treatment they had been very motivated to change but were unable to sustain this as time elapsed. Marques identified that those men who had returned to pro-offending thinking had seen this as an inability to change and for them re-offending was near.

Maintaining motivation is in essence what RP programmes are equipping men to do. However, on the completion of treatment, as Marques' research indicates, men can experience high levels of emotional loneliness and isolation increased through inadequate support in the community. Bates (2002 awaiting publication) conducted a study in recidivism using a research sample of 184 men from the Thames Valley area. He concluded that low self-esteem, emotional loneliness and isolation are common psychometric factors related to recidivism. Circles of Support & Accountability, a new community initiative, aims to reduce levels of emotional loneliness and isolation through community responsibility and inclusion, with volunteers providing a balance between support and accountability.

The recognition for the development and resource of maintenance groups is also a way of providing a balance of support, guidance, monitoring and accountability:

'It is recommended that probation services develop maintenance programmes for offenders who have successfully completed treatment, whether through the prison core treatment programme or via other routes (e.g. community based programmes).' (Beckett *et al*, 1998 p93)

## **Community Support, Accountability & Inclusion**

We live within communities where there are high levels of fear and ignorance surrounding the insidious cycle of sexual abuse. The media campaign of the *News of the World* and the demand by the community for Sarah's Law and community notification captures the feelings of the public. It is into these communities that men and women who have committed sexual offences need to find

acceptance and inclusion. Men are filled with fear as they enter the community, fear of being found out, fear of re offending, fear of rejection. In order to positively and appropriately meet their needs and maintain abstinence they need to have combined internal and external factors to assist them maintaining responsibility and motivation to abstain from offending.

Laws (2000) argues that sexual offending is 'everyone's business'. He emphasises that communities must be informed of the characteristics of sexual offending and the strategies implemented by professionals to address the issue. He discusses the need for 'primary intervention', a strategy now being implemented through the work of Stop it Now! UK (see [www.stopitnow.org.uk](http://www.stopitnow.org.uk)).

Men require a balance of self-management combined with an adequate support network where full disclosure has taken place. For some men in the community this support is not available. Circles of Support and Accountability is a new initiative calling on community volunteers to accept responsibility to create safer communities and move away from an environment of social exclusion and ignorance to one of social acceptance and inclusion:

'This is an important pilot project that has the potential to grow into a key aspect of relapse prevention work with all high risk/high need offenders, as it combines the best aspects of public agency and community-based restorative justice themes. (Baim, 2003)

Resettlement is beginning to be a key word amongst professionals but the nature of what this means and requires needs to be explored further. Men within the community can provide a realistic picture of what their needs are, whether treatment has helped them and what are the difficulties they are facing and how if necessary can they be assisted. Men living within the community do require access and recognise the need for long-term support services such as maintenance groups and Circles of Support & Accountability.

For many the development of a support network can be a difficult experience. For some individuals they have experienced the rejection of family and friends as a result of their offending behaviour, they are in a new area, and find it difficult to form new relationships due to the fear of disclosure. For others their support network identified in treatment has deteriorated and has never been replaced.

Regardless of the reasons, professionals have a responsibility to the victims, the offender and the community, and to their own professional integrity, that public protection remains a top priority. Through the work of Circles of Support & Accountability and the recognition and action of further long-term support services this can begin to be achieved and safer communities can be created.

## **Rebekah Saunders**

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## Circles of Support and Accountability Thames Valley Area



### Current membership of the Steering Group

**Tim Newell**

**Religious Society of Friends**

**Helen Drewery**

**Religious Society of Friends**

**Sue Raikes**

**Thames Valley Partnership**

**Mary Faux**

**The National Probation Service Thames Valley Area**

**Judith Johnson**

**Thames Valley Police**

**Alison Webster**

**Church of England Board of Social Responsibility**

(Representatives of the Prison Service and Victim Support receive papers but do not currently attend meetings)

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