

Circles of Support and Accountability in the Thames Valley

The First Three Years
April 2002 to March 2005



Contents

Foreword:	Tim Newell	3
Three Years in the Making	Chris Wilson	4
Recruitment, Selection, Training and Support of Volunteers	Rebekah Saunders	9
Professional Perspectives		
Thames Valley Police	D.C.I. Steve Neale	14
Thames Valley Project (Sex Offender Treatment Programme)	Linda Ricks	15
National Offender Management	Mary Faux	17
Evaluation	Andrew Bates	20
Four Circles Stories		
Contributors:	Chris Wilson	24
	Laurence Clark	
	Harry	
	David Beck	
	John	
	Yvonne Dixon	
	Shelia Perry	
The Future	Helen Drewery	46
Circles of Support and Accountability Staff		48

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Foreword

Circles of Support and Accountability have their roots in restorative justice approaches to meeting the needs of those who have offended, those who have been victims of crime, and their communities of care. They provide an alternative and yet complementary approach to the traditional justice processes.

Restorative justice is based on three main principles that can be applied to our work within Circles:

1. the principle of repair – justice requires that we work to heal victims, offenders and communities that have been injured through crime (our work with offenders and helping them to build their communities has been motivated by the need to avoid any further victims)
2. the principle of stakeholder participation – victims, offenders and communities should have the opportunity for active involvement in the justice process as fully as possible. (Communities as represented by volunteers were not thought to have much place with sex offenders but our work has shown that to be effective that dimension is critical)
3. the principle of transformation in community and government roles and relationships – the relative roles and responsibilities can be rethought, and this might be the most challenging aspect of restorative justice. In promoting justice, government is responsible for preserving a just order, and community for establishing a just peace. (This principle is well demonstrated in Circles work where the community has taken much responsibility and has been trusted by the agencies to work in this way)

The fear and hatred of sex offending and offenders can best be worked with by recognising the anxiety and demonstrating that by providing opportunities for growth and learning, the offender can enjoy the change to active citizenship and the community can accept the person back with a greater awareness of the risks involved. It is good to be able to report on the effectiveness of the dedicated work that has gone into this project and to welcome the way it has been recognised widely as effective practice so that it has the potential to become a standard part of integrating sex offenders into communities over the next decade.

Tim Newell, June 2005



Three Years in the Making

Imagine a childhood disease that effects one in five girls and one in seven boys before they reach the age of eighteen; a disease that can cause erratic behaviour and even severe conduct disorder among those exposed; a disease that can have profound implications for an individual's future health by increasing the risk of substance abuse, sexually transmitted diseases and suicidal behaviour, a disease that replicates itself by causing some of its victims to expose future generations to its debilitating effects.

Imagine what we, as a society would do if such a disease existed. We would spare no expense. We would invest heavily in basic and applied research. We would devise systems to identify those affected and provide services to treat them. We would develop and broadly implement prevention campaigns to protect our children. Wouldn't we?

Such a disease does exist – it is called child sexual abuse.

James A Mercy, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta USA

The cost of child sexual abuse to our society, both fiscally and in terms of human misery is enormous. As the extent of this problem grows in the public's consciousness, professionals are becoming increasingly aware that amongst the populations of young homeless people, prisoners and patients in psychiatric wards, there exists an over-representation of victims of child sexual abuse. Many others suffer in silence. To be victimised sexually is, more often than not, one of life's most profoundly negative experiences. Such is the extent of the problem that there are very few people amongst us whose lives have not at some point been touched by it. The need to rid society of this appalling problem is not in question: however the means by which we tackle it are both sensitive and sometimes contentious. The statement quoted above reflects an emerging realisation over recent years as to the reality and true extent of the problem. It is not that sexual abuse is on the increase; it has always been with us but for previous generations victims suffered in silence, while the rest of the population's understanding was informed through fairytales, folklore and the genre of horror. The recent realisation of the true extent of the problem causes a conflict within society. Society has always perpetuated the concept of "out groups". Moral panics fuelled by the tabloid headlines (asylum seekers, terrorists and sex offenders) are as prevalent today as the burning of witches and heretics was in centuries past.

The damage caused by sexual abuse feeds the stereotype that sex offenders are frightening people, deserving of hatred and exile. However, such vilification allows society to ignore its responsibility and does nothing to further understanding of how we confront the problem. In the short term it may well feel more comfortable to regard the sex offender in such a stereotypical manner, freeing ourselves from both a personal responsibility and the community's wider responsibility of how we view women, children and sex. Examples relating to the sexual objectification of women and children can be seen everywhere in popular culture and are not just the prerogative of the sex offender. We as a society have to break the insidious cycle of fear and ignorance that surrounds the subject before we can break the insidious cycle of child sexual abuse itself.

One of the most common criticisms relating to the work of projects such as Circles of Support and Accountability is that the focus of attention is on the perpetrator rather than resources being made available for victims. It is true that services for victims are woefully inadequate. However it is also an undisputable truth that to effectively tackle the problem of sexual crime, we need a holistic approach. Society needs to allocate time and resources to all the component parts.

Sexual abuse thrives on secrecy and a climate of fear only perpetuates that secrecy. If fear and ignorance is replaced with resolve and understanding, victims can speak, society can hold the perpetrator accountable and potential offenders can seek help before they damage others. We as a society can then move into a new paradigm of understanding, applying basic research that allows us to "...develop and broadly implement prevention campaigns to protect our children" and to develop effective Sex Offender Treatment programmes both in prisons and the community. We can develop initiatives like the Stop It Now! UK help line, operating since June 2002. The help line (0808 1000 900) has now received a total of 3496 calls of which 47% are from persons troubled and worried about their own behaviours and predisposition to sexually abuse children. Circles of Support and Accountability in the Thames Valley alone have recruited and trained over sixty members of the public to hold high-risk sex offenders accountable through support on behalf of their communities. In the Multi Agency Public Protection Panels (MAPPPs), all agencies responsible for the management of dangerous offenders living in the community meet, share information and formulate action plans relating to those individuals who pose a serious risk to public safety. These are now the envy of the North American Correctional Services (Roxanne Lieb, "Community Notification: A Decade Of Lessons", ATSA Conference, New Mexico 2004):

It is my firm belief that the engagement of both statutory and voluntary agencies working together to protect our communities in an informed and creative way, demonstrates that society has at last begun to embark on a journey into a new era of compassion and understanding where victims need no longer suffer in silence.

When Circles of Support and Accountability in the Thames Valley first became operational in April 2002 the task in front of us seemed enormous. Four months later Jessica Chapman and Holly Wells were murdered in Soham, Cambridgeshire. The media's insatiable need to feed off such a terrible event resulted in the Circles office becoming a media circus and our introduction to the wider public was informed through national headlines such as "What a Waste of Our Cash". The pilot site in Hampshire also had to establish itself within the historical context of the previous riots in Paulsgrove, Portsmouth, following the News of the World's "Name and Shame" campaign. However the experience of "Circles" over the past three years has been that there exists within our communities an abundance of individuals appalled by those elements of the media who prey upon people's fear, and given the opportunity these individuals have been willing to engage in a constructive and positive process whereby their role in Circles has been to hold the offender accountable through support.

Another reminder of the pain surrounding this subject was the murder of Arnold Hartley in November 2003. Arnold Hartley was a registered sex offender living in Middlesbrough. His death resulted in media headlines of "That's One Less on the Streets" and the community in which he lived, bonded together in silence, initially unwilling to help the authorities bring the perpetrator to justice. Such attitudes and disregard for human life have no place in a civilised society and give particular resonance to the guiding principle of the original Canadian Circles of Support and Accountability:

Guiding principles

- We affirm that the community bears a responsibility for the reintegration of offenders.
- We believe in a loving and reconciling God who calls us to be agents of healing work in this world.
- We acknowledge the ongoing pain and need for healing of victims.
- We welcome the offender into the community. When this does not exist for them, we seek to “recreate community” with them in responsible, safe, healthy and life-giving ways.
- We accept the challenge of sharing our lives with one another in the community taking calculated risks in the service of others.

From <http://www.magma.ca/~love/cosafiles/cosamovie.swf>

Whether we as individuals are from a faith-based or secular background the principle remains the same. Sexual abuse has to be confronted and dealt with in a holistic manner, giving equal importance to the needs of the victim, the offender and the community.

Having established fifteen Circles in the Thames Valley over a three-year period and having worked in total with twenty high-risk sex offenders, a number of valuable lessons have been learnt. Expected rates of recidivism amongst this group of offenders have thus far been reduced, with only three men being recalled on licence, none of whom had committed a further sexual offence. These numbers equate with the experience of the Canadian “Circle” recidivist rates, evaluated over a ten-year period. These recalls are not perceived as failures, in that the recall was facilitated by information passed to the statutory agencies by Circle volunteers. In all cases, further victimisation was prevented. In our Interim Report published November 2003 we asked about “Sarah’s Law” (the General Community Notification): “Are Circles of Support and Accountability a compromise on Sarah’s Law?” This is now answered in the affirmative by the evidence from practice. This has been achieved by recognising the cultural and statutory context in which we developed Circles in this country. In Canada Circles developed as a community response to a perceived fear held by a particular community and over the past ten years has been supported by the Canadian Correctional Services. In this country Circles was replicated as a series of pilot projects funded by the Home Office. Our agenda was to adapt Circles to support the statutory agencies in the successful management of high-risk sex offenders living in the community. While the model for Canadian Circles is organic, the UK Circles model is systemic.

Professional practice in the context of sexual crime has developed rapidly, informing and responding to a succession of parliamentary acts on the subject. The most recent and comprehensive legislation, the Sexual Offences Act 2003, has helped create a context in which both public and professional can work in partnership. The Hampshire pilot of lay representation on the Multi Agency Public Protection Panels is evidence of this, as is the Thames Valley Circles of Support and Accountability Project, which is run by Quaker Peace and Social Witness in partnership with Thames Valley Police, Thames Valley Probation and the Thames Valley, Hampshire and Isle of Wight Prison Area. The importance of this partnership between professional and public is highlighted in this report through the contributions of those professionals we have worked closely with over the past three years. Detective Inspector Steve Neale gives a clear and concise account of how public involvement through Circles enhances the role of the Police:

Circles make regular contact with the offender by Public Protection Officers easier to manage.

Probation Hostel Manager Sheila Perry states:

Circles have provided a valuable resource in working with some of the hostel's highest risk offenders. They have supported and enhanced the risk management process by developing a supportive relationship with the offender and are helping to assist their safe reintegration into the community.

Linda Ricks, Treatment Manager at the Thames Valley Sex Offender Treatment Project reflects how Circles not only complements their work but also sustains the values of treatment:

The Thames Valley Project has worked alongside Circles of Support and Accountability, in the Thames Valley area, throughout the pilot period. We have found this service invaluable; offenders who are assessed as being at high risk of sexual re-offending and have high levels of personal need are able to have a Circle to assist them in keeping the goal of avoiding behaviours that put others, and also themselves, at risk.

Andrew Bates, Principal Psychologist, Thames Valley Probation, who has given his time to the interpretation of psychometric data for Circles, comments on the importance of this work and highlights how Circles provides a wealth of data related to recidivist behaviour that had previously been difficult to collate:

The Circles process provides unique insights into the details of core members' behaviours and lifestyles well beyond statutory supervision by agencies such as the police, probation and treatment services.

Mary Faux, Area Resettlement Advisor, Thames Valley, Hampshire and Isle of Wight Prison Area, demonstrates how important it is to ensure consistency throughout the process of "Offender Management" and that to reduce re-offending, resettlement and reintegration is essential. It is an indisputable truth that successful resettlement is more likely to be achieved if the offender is released into a community of care and support rather than a community of hatred and fear.

The past three years have been a wholly affirming experience on many different levels. The high point of the three years for the staff at Thames Valley Circles has to be the number of people who have wanted to volunteer and their continued commitment to ensuring the project's success. It was therefore a great tribute to them that on 16 February 2004 at Church House, Westminster, the project staff accepted from Archbishop Desmond Tutu a Longford Award, (highly commended), on behalf of all who have made Thames Valley Circles of Support and Accountability a success. The sting of those early negative headlines has now faded and has subsequently been sweetened by articles in the *Guardian*, *Independent* and *Sunday Times*, promoting the concept of Circles in a positive and constructive way. Of course there will always be certain elements of our "fourth estate" that will pursue a destructive agenda but programmes such as John Waite's "Map of Minds" on Radio 4 (broadcast 18 February 2004) which focused on the Thames Valley Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements and broadcast interviews with Circles staff, volunteers and core members in a moving and dignified manner, will always counter the more insidious agenda related to the politics of despair, promoted by elements of the tabloid press.

Our two Christmas conferences in 2003 and 2004, held at the Oxford Quaker Meeting House, affirmed those principles of equality and dignity. Core members and volunteers sat

side by side with senior staff from the Home Office, Police and Probation, all working together, sharing their experiences, their difficulties and their successes. On 7 July 2004 at Friends House in London, the first national Circles conference was held. Representatives from all over the United Kingdom attended to listen to the Minister for Prisons and Probation, Paul Goggins, affirm the government's commitment to Circles of Support and Accountability and declare his admiration for those volunteers who represent the community and demonstrate the need for the public to play their part in enhancing public safety. This 7 July proved to be an important day for Circles. Having made his speech that morning, the Minister then spoke positively at an adjournment debate in the House of Commons, called by Reading East's Member of Parliament Jane Griffiths, a supporter of the concept of Circles. Aware that the pilot was operating in her constituency, she sought to raise the profile of Circles while seeking reassurance as to the government's commitment to the project.

The three-year pilot period, now extended for a fourth year, has affirmed that Restorative Justice can be effective in reducing serious crime. Described by one volunteer as restorative justice by proxy, Circles affirms that our legislators are committed to supporting positive initiatives. The pilot period has also affirmed that there exist within our communities significant numbers of people prepared to take a risk for the greater good and that amongst the population of high-risk high-need sex offenders, there are many who, given the chance, have proved they are committed to leading productive, offence free lives.

Chris Wilson
Project Manager
Thames Valley Circles of Support and Accountability



Circles staff receiving the Longford Award from Desmond Tutu

Recruitment, Selection, Training and Support of Volunteers

Volunteers are essential to the success of Circles. The key concept is that the community must accept responsibility for addressing the problem of sexual abuse. Volunteers bring many strengths and skills to the work of Circles. They are able to provide guidance and a listening ear, and have the ability to constructively challenge and hold an individual accountable for their behaviour when required. Volunteers are a powerful resource in the risk management of sex offenders in the community. Volunteers are freely giving their time and support to assist an ex-offender on the difficult journey that is in front of them. There is something very powerful for an ex-offender to come into a room of people who are there because they want to be, not because they are paid professionals. Although the core member is aware that they have an open relationship with the statutory agencies, the volunteers provide a sense of inclusion within the community and a sense of acceptance and for many this is the first time they have entered into such a relationship.

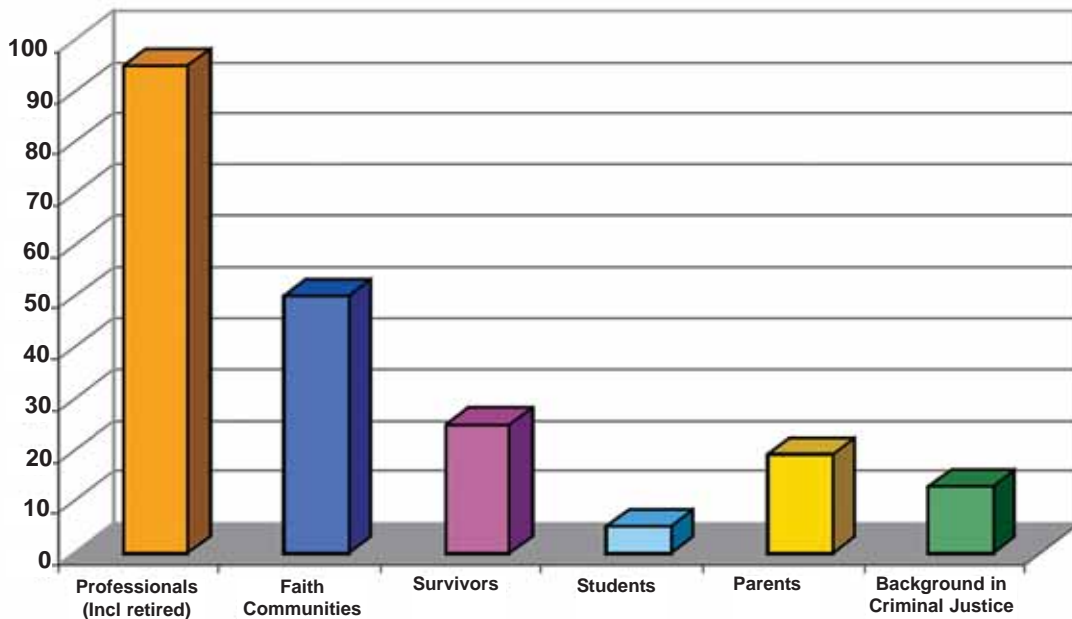
For those individuals that come forward to volunteer there is a challenging and difficult task ahead of them. Volunteers need to be able to balance the roles of support and accountability, maintaining a respectful and non-judgemental approach with the men and women they are working with. Volunteers must hold appropriate attitudes and be able to recognise that they are working with a person as well as assisting individuals in managing and controlling their offending behaviour.

There is something very special about those individuals that come forward and volunteer with Circles. They are committed to finding a constructive approach to managing men and women who have committed sexual offences. They recognise the dangers involved with community notification and understand that the hostility and fear communities possess is not helpful in making our communities a safer place.

Initially, when the pilot project began I sat with my colleague unsure of where to begin in the recruitment of volunteers. Where could we find individuals willing to be involved in such a cutting edge project involving such challenging work? The tactic initially was to play safe and look at professionals who were already working within relevant professions. We targeted hostel staff, and students studying within a relevant field, and offered the opportunity for NVQ awards in offending behaviour. We also focused on the fact we were managed by Quaker Peace & Social Witness and recruited amongst the Quaker community and then widened this to further faith communities.

Currently Circles has been successful in securing a wide representation of the community through the volunteers recruited. Interestingly a number of volunteers have been generated from recent press articles and television programmes addressing the issue of sexual abuse. It has also been positive that a number of volunteers initially expressed interest after reading very negative articles on sex offenders and the work of Circles. Others have been motivated to volunteer because they are parents or have grandchildren and wish to be part of an initiative that is attempting to make children safer in the community. Three years after the pilot period commenced we have now had to do very little active recruitment, many volunteers have come through word of mouth and have approached us expressing interest. We will however, continue to recruit and build on the ever-growing number of volunteers working with us.

The following chart details a breakdown of volunteers working for Circles:



Training of Potential Volunteers

After a potential volunteer has made an initial inquiry about volunteering with Circles they are sent an information pack and application form. An informal conversation will take place between Circle staff and the potential volunteer and they will be invited to attend a two-day training. The informal chat with the potential volunteer allows the staff to elicit the individual's motivation to volunteer and allows an opportunity to exclude those members of the public who are clearly not suitable to the work of Circles. Potential volunteers who are deemed suitable are invited to attend the initial two-day training event and are asked to do so to assist them in making an informed decision about volunteering. The training of volunteers is extensive and ongoing but the two-day event provides an opportunity for the individuals to gain an insight into what their roles and responsibilities will be as a community volunteers.

After the two day training an individual appointment is made with project staff for those volunteers who wish to take the work with Circles forward. There is no pressure placed on any individual to commit, and staff completely understand if after the training individuals feel that this work is not for them. A number of volunteers have decided that it would be too difficult due to time commitment, family relationships, their own individual attitudes and beliefs. The individual appointment is made to allow the potential volunteer to discuss any issues that they may not have felt comfortable discussing in a group environment. It also allows staff to provide feedback from the training and identify areas of strengths and areas they may need to be aware of and monitor.

Once this meeting has taken place and all paperwork has been completed (including a police check and two references), the volunteer will be allocated into a circle consisting of three to four other community volunteers. Staff will try and balance gender, age, experience, and skills and match the volunteers to a core member, that is the offender for whom the

Circle is being set up. It is the aim that the Circle represents a good balance of the community providing varied perspectives and skills so that the needs of the core member can be addressed and managed by the volunteers most appropriate.

Initially, staff arrange for the group of volunteers to meet formally as a group prior to the introduction of the core member for a period of three weeks. This allows for the group to begin bonding as a team and for the volunteers to ascertain each other's motivation, strengths and in some cases has identified problematic areas. An example of this is that a volunteer may wish to disclose to the group that they are a survivor of sexual abuse but that they do not wish to share this with the core member. Each of these meetings are attended by the Project Coordinator and work focuses around understanding the Circle Agreement (which sets out the way in which the Circle will operate, including openness within the Circle and confidentiality beyond it); planning for the initial meeting with the core member; and some levels of disclosure through the use of the Needs and Resources Profile regarding the core member's offending behaviour. It also provides an opportunity for the Circle to air any anxieties or concerns.

During these initial meetings key professionals are introduced to the volunteers. Contact cards are provided with key individuals numbers on so that in the event of an emergency the Circle can contact the Case Manager, Treatment Facilitator, Public Protection Hostel, and when relevant the Hostel Manager. Circles are encouraged to invite relevant professionals to their meetings and circle reviews so that they become involved in the work of Circles. This also reinforces a very strong message to the core member that we do have an open and honest relationship with the Statutory Agencies involved.

A balance has to be achieved between the work undertaken with the core member and the feedback provided to other agencies. It is not just about monitoring and reporting concerning behaviour. It is also very much about recognising the steps and progress that the core member is making and it is essential that when this occurs it is shared and recognised. For some core members it will be the first time that they have had positive encouragement and reinforcement and it can contribute considerably to increasing their self-esteem and self-confidence.

Circles have always worked as a team and the feedback and comments from all involved in Circles are listened to and if necessary changes are made. With regards to the initial three meetings of the Circle volunteers without the core member, changes have been made. Volunteers had fed back that they felt the meeting didn't allow them enough opportunity to get to know each other and bond as a team and they felt that once the core member had joined the Circle that opportunity was lost. This is mainly due to the policy Circles has that unless it is felt absolutely necessary the core member will be involved in all meetings and the volunteers will not meet without them being present. This is a result of the thinking that the core member should be able to listen and be involved in all decisions and discussions. What we have now introduced is that within the first three meetings without the core member one of those meetings (often the initial one) will be a social gathering. We have recently tried this approach with a group due to start and arranged for them to meet and have a meal together. The Project Coordinator initially attended to assist introductions and then the group were left on their own. The aim was to put them in a public place where they would have to avoid discussing Circles in detail and have to focus their conversation on each other. The feedback that was received was very positive and there has been a noticeable reduction in the time it took that group to come together as a team.

The training of volunteers is an ongoing process and Circles project staff are aware that their knowledge and skills need to continue to expand and grow. Through our own

observations, recommendations from the Home Office interim evaluation and through the feedback of Circle volunteers we have identified further training needs for volunteers. We have now developed a year's training agenda in which we hope to address identified deficits for volunteers. Only as the project has developed have we been able to see what challenges the volunteers are experiencing and therefore we need to address these areas. A circle does not work without volunteers and if they ask us to address particular areas it would be foolish to ignore this.

Additional Training Events:

Booster Training

This has been introduced so that existing volunteers can attend the basic two-day training programme again. It allows for volunteers to revise their basic knowledge, apply the knowledge to their experiences in Circles, bring issues or concerns into the forum and explore alternative ways of approaching problems or challenges. A number of existing volunteers have attended training again and have reported that it was of benefit as they could now envisage the person they were working with rather than apply concepts and models to an unknown person.

Housing/Employment Issues

Housing and employment issues are two common problematic areas shared by core members. Therefore there are issues that the volunteers need to have some understanding of in order to support the core member. Resettlement of the core member into independent accommodation is a very difficult task and can take considerable time. The core member often finds him or herself in temporary accommodation for a long period of time and can become very frustrated and de-motivated regarding their situation. This can be an experience repeated with employment. Although there are a number of potential employers willing to give core members a chance with employment there are many who will not employ men and women if they have convictions for sexual offences.

It is therefore essential that volunteers have an understanding of issues from a housing and employment perspective so that they can offer appropriate advice and support.

Questioning styles and techniques with core member

This is a training event that gradually builds and expands the skills of volunteers over time. Circle staff have invited an accredited trainer involved in the training of treatment facilitators, to examine the role of a volunteer and design a relevant training programme. The training has focused on assisting the volunteer to develop helping skills and to understand the importance of listening, guidance and instruction. It assists volunteers in building their confidence through the use of language so that they are not embarrassed or scared of using concepts such as "fantasy" and "sexual thoughts". It is the aim of the training to help increase the volunteer's skills in questioning techniques and styles so that they do not take an assumptive or leading approach with the core member. As in treatment it is essential that the volunteers allow the core member to come to their own conclusions and answers.

Substance Misuse Training

This is an event for any Circle who is working with a core member with substance misuse issues.

Working with Female Sex Offenders

This training is specifically in place as additional training for any volunteer who is placed with a female core member. This is important as there are different approaches and issues for female sex offenders and it is essential that the volunteers have a basic understanding of these factors.

Support and Maintaining Circle Volunteers

It is essential that Circle volunteers are supported, monitored and kept accountable for the work they are undertaking with the core member. This is the role of the Project Coordinator and, as the project expands, the new Circle Coordinators. The challenge is to find a balance whereby volunteers receive support but are not wholly dependent on the support in order to work successfully. Due to their inexperience, volunteers initially require a considerable amount of guidance and advice and often require permission before they make a comment or suggestion. As volunteers grow more confident they require less support: however regular Circle reviews are essential. Circle reviews allow each member of the group to verbalise how they feel their work is progressing and discuss openly any problems that may exist. This works very well and in most cases all difficulties and problems can be resolved within this open environment.

However, the personal well-being of Circle volunteers is crucial and it is important that they have an opportunity to speak to the Coordinator about any problems in a confidential environment. Volunteers are invited to attend a personal review with the Project Coordinator to explore their experience of volunteering and openly discuss any issues related to the core member or other volunteers. Volunteers will now be expected to attend a personal review twice a year, recognising that the Coordinator is always available to volunteers.

Maintaining volunteers' commitment and motivation to be part of Circles is at times a difficult task. Thames Valley Circles has been considerably lucky in the fact that the majority of volunteers working with us are passionate and committed to the concept of Circles and will work with us to develop the project. Over the three-year pilot period Circles staff and volunteers have both experienced a steep learning curve. Through shared experiences and subsequent discussions the project has grown and developed successfully. Volunteers need to feel that they are part of a team and have a voice within that team. Volunteers' viewpoints and suggestions are respected, valued and listened to. Experienced volunteers are involved in presentations and training events so that they can directly share their experiences and feel included in taking the project forward.

Rebekah Saunders
Project Coordinator



Professional Perspectives

A Police Perspective

It is easy to talk about the task of managing sexual and violent offenders in the community but in practice it is an extremely challenging and complex process. Society has shaped the nature of the criminal justice system and the legislation that govern this issue, so the Police and partner agencies are accountable within those constraints.

The fact is that offenders serve their sentences and are then released into the community. Unless all sexual and violent offenders are locked up for life, this is the unremitting truth. A few years ago, before sex offender registration and the rest of public protection legislation came into force, offenders were not managed or tracked except perhaps for some monitoring by Probation, so things have improved dramatically, and rightly so as the public deserve the best protection possible.

Offenders who have served their sentence have in one sense “paid their dues” and therefore positive reintegration into the community is the alternative to them reoffending. Those offenders wanting to positively adapt back and contribute to society deserve help and support. It is a position that is a win-win-win situation. The community benefits from fewer victims and less crime; the agencies reduce their burden of work; and offenders benefit through less incarceration and greater prosperity. Therefore if the management of offenders focuses on both protection of the public and the reintegration of the offender in the community then a synergy is achieved – because by successful reintegration, the protection for the public is increased and the risk of reoffending lowered.

Given then the Police–Probation–Prison Service responsibility for managing offenders, how does Circles of Support and Accountability contribute? Once the risk assessment is complete, action plans are put in place to lower and minimise that risk. This can include a range of things from all agencies, such as Probation licence conditions, police flagging of addresses, visits by social services etc – but if the offender feels isolated and cut off, they could be driven underground: and unless 24 hour surveillance is employed (which is extremely costly and used only in the most exceptional circumstances), who knows what the offender is doing, where they are frequenting, and who else are they making contact with?

Circles can provide support and stability for the offender. They also demand accountability – and will report areas of concern back to the MAPPP (Multi-Agency Public Protection Panel). This has enabled agencies to tighten control of the offender through targeted surveillance or recall to prison. Valid concerns have been raised about a number of issues. Confidentiality is one but good training and vetting of volunteers has ensured that risks around this are low. Another is the potential for volunteers to be manipulated by offenders, but again the training and standards to which the volunteers have to adhere guard against this risk. The safety of the volunteers themselves is also taken into account within the risk assessment and some offenders are clearly not suitable.

However, the successful running of 15 Circles in the Thames Valley has contributed to the management of that number of offenders in the community. A number have been recalled to

prison due to the vigilance of Circle volunteers being aware of precursory behaviour which has allowed action to be taken before a serious offence is committed. There have also been some really difficult cases which have succeeded in establishing offenders in the community (which in turn has saved prison costs which are enormous) where they have stabilised with jobs and housing – and this in turn from a police perspective makes regular contact with the offender by Public Protection Officers easier to manage.

Some offenders wish to pursue and practice their religion and Circles are particularly useful in this respect, coming from a faith-based core and understanding these issues. This ensures an encouraging supportive stance but Circles are also aware that some offenders will prey on naïve and trusting groups. Human rights can be balanced with protection.

In the Thames Valley in 2003/2004, 49 high-risk offenders were managed in the community and Circles contributed to nearly a third of those. None of those offenders committed a serious crime against the public in that time. Circles provides an extra dimension which cannot be filled by any of the statutory agencies, and provides the local community input which society clamours for, but without the dangers of lynch mobs.

Public protection would be more difficult, more challenging and more dangerous without the Circles service.

Steve Neale
Detective Chief Inspector
Thames Valley Police

A Treatment Perspective

The Thames Valley Project is a specialist team within the National Probation Service, Thames Valley Area. This team works alongside Probation Service Case Managers, and where appropriate through Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements, to manage any risk that individuals may pose whilst in the community. The Thames Valley Project provides both assessment and treatment of sex offenders, predominately focusing upon adult males through a group work programme (TV-SOGP); Case Managers provide pre- and post-group intervention and ongoing case management alongside the Thames Valley Project provision.

Men who have sexually offended and are assessed as suitable undertake up to 174 group work hours. Facilitators and Probation Officers are skilled in monitoring and assisting individuals to manage their risk, and are supported through actuarial assessment tools and psychometric evaluation, and in some instances polygraph testing. However there are limitations to the support and monitoring that the Probation Service can provide. The group work programme and other interventions provide the men with the tools to avoid behaving in a sexually abusive way in the future. In some cases external monitoring is also necessary and whilst statutory agencies have public protection and safety at the fore, there are limitations to the input that can be provided; few of the men can legally be restricted to 24 hours supervision within the community. Other agencies, and indeed the community, have a role to play if we are to keep communities safe.

The Thames Valley Project has worked alongside Circles of Support and Accountability in the Thames Valley area throughout the pilot period. We have found this service

invaluable; offenders who are assessed as being at high risk of sexual reoffending and have high levels of personal need are able to have a Circle to assist them in keeping the goal of avoiding behaviour that puts others, and also themselves, at risk. People who have sexually abused others tend to have many problems; in particular they often experience emotional loneliness, isolation and low self-esteem. Humans usually turn to others to help them alleviate these factors and manage stress. However, it is not uncommon for these men to have poor social support. This may be due to a number of reasons; individuals may become estranged from their family and friends, perhaps as a direct result of the individual's sexual offending or due to the offender's own shame and embarrassment. Additionally, available support may be inadequate to meet their needs or inappropriate. It is crucial that they are able to develop their confidence in building appropriate relationships with adults, to help them manage risk longer term.

Circle members provide a stepping-stone between the formal support of agencies and informal support such as family and friends. There is a heightened sense of self-value for the core member, knowing that he is meeting with a group of individuals who are not being paid to spend time with him. In the cases where these men have little or no informal support, it would be right to question their investment in society and their non-abusing life. Through the absence of informal support they lack the level of monitoring that can be provided simply through the presence of people who care. Circle members, however, provide more than a model of relationships that we hope the core member will develop within his wider community; they are an informed group of volunteers who are able to hold the core member to account in a proactive and supportive manner. This information can then be challenged and shared with other organisations as appropriate.

Additionally, Circle members are able to assist the core member in developing community ties, for instance by enabling him to take up education or to build confidence in the area in which he lives through other social activities. Again, it is important for the core member to have an investment in his community, and to feel safe so that he can live a fulfilling life away from offending.

Circle meetings are less formal than contact with statutory agencies, thus Circle members are well placed to observe how the men deal with their daily lives on a long-term basis. It can be difficult, even for the most highly motivated men to admit they are behaving in a risky way, and Circle members have demonstrated their ability to identify risky behaviours, challenge the offender and share this information in a relevant manner with their supervisor which has enabled Statutory Agencies to be more fully informed and to take appropriate risk management decisions. Holding a man to account for perhaps his drinking or use of pornography is not easy, but can be crucial to increase the man's awareness of his behaviour and manage risk.

Thus, Circles of Support and Accountability compliment treatment. Whilst one of the focuses of intervention is for the individual to develop the tools to manage his life more effectively, including self management, interpersonal relationships and general problem solving/coping, the Circle members can continue to motivate the individual, check out how the relapse prevention plan is working in real life, explore problems that arise on a daily basis and help the core member to strengthen his ability to cope. Such information can be shared with treatment providers, and thus inform the intervention process. As time progresses, some of the man's sentencing requirements are likely to decrease, and continued contact with the Circle is invaluable in supporting the man in maintaining his risk management plan within the community beyond treatment.

The importance of the role of Circles of Support and Accountability is clear; it enhances

treatment provision. Circle members are members of the community, who are able to respond in a non-judgemental manner towards someone who has committed a sexual offence. They complement the work undertaken by treatment providers, enhancing the individual's ability to self-manage, and working to support long-term maintenance of the core member's risk management plan.

Linda Ricks
Treatment Manager
Thames Valley Project

A National Offender Management Service Perspective

I have been a member of the Circles of Support and Accountability Steering Group since its inception, initially in my role as Assistant Chief Probation Officer, Thames Valley Area, and since April 2004 as Area Resettlement Advisor for Thames Valley, Hampshire, and Isle of Wight Prison Service Area. I have seen Circles grow and develop significantly during the three-year pilot period and now they are about to embark upon a crucial developmental period. However their working environment and context is changing too. A five-year major organisational change programme is underway within the Criminal Justice Agencies of Probation and Prisons to develop NOMS – the National Offender Management Service, which will offer new challenges to all of us involved in working with offenders either in custody or in the community. So perhaps this is a good point to reflect upon what Circles of Support and Accountability can offer to NOMS.

The Correctional Services Review (Carter Report) argued for a new approach to how offenders were managed that was “focused on the end-to-end management of the offender throughout the sentence.” At the core of this approach is the notion that an offender management model is one based upon a personal relationship approach, rather than one which is simply administrative or bureaucratic in nature. The offender management model is not a process imposed on an offender, but more of a process with which the offender will engage, and in which s/he ideally will take an active part. The end result being sought is one where the individual offender experiences the sentence as a consistent, coherent whole with high levels of co-operation between all those involved in the delivery of the individual offender's sentence plan. Does this not sound familiar to the community-based restorative work being undertaken by Circles of Support and Accountability with sex offenders?

This new NOMS approach also has at its core the value of involving local people in offender management through better communication with, and awareness of communities' concerns about offenders and criminal justice matters, together with fostering the public's active participation. Various initiatives and consultation exercises are currently being undertaken about what is termed “civil renewal and community engagement” and there is a range of opportunities for the public to contribute to and engage with this important agenda. Both the Prison Service and the Probation Service have had long experience of community engagement through working with members of the public in a number of ways in a range of activities. Members of the community over time have, for example, volunteered to become prison visitors, or members of Independent Monitoring Boards or undertake unpaid work in Visits Centres. I myself started as a probation volunteer, before embarking upon my training to become a probation officer.

Circles of Accountability and Support in Thames Valley has developed a model that potentially offers to both the Prison and Probation Service in working in “offender management”, a very clear way in which to actively and positively engage with the community. The public have become actively involved in the management of a group of offenders who continue to arouse much anxiety, fear and hostility in our communities at times. Circles of Support and Accountability has opened up the work of the statutory agencies to allow for an insight into how high risk and high need sex offenders are managed but, perhaps more importantly, it has provided an opportunity to contribute to the management of individual offenders by members of the general public. This work and approach has successfully promoted and translated the ideas of active community involvement and community engagement into practice through its direct working with the Circle members who come from diverse sections of the community and who have received training to undertake this sensitive work. Furthermore, as informed and trained members of the public, Circle members, who are all volunteers, act like “seeds” to counteract the growth of mis-information about sex offenders in general in the community. By the provision of accurate information, they can also counterbalance the distorted perceptions often demonstrated by a sceptical and mistrustful public of the work that “the authorities” do to secure the public’s protection from this group of offenders.

From my perspective the method of working developed by Circles allows for the desired NOMS consistency of approach to the offender, as it builds on assessment begun in the community, interventions undertaken by the offender in custody and reinforced by work on licence supervision and Circle involvement, and thus is following the individual’s risk or sentence management plan. To the individual sex offender this looks like, and is experienced as, “end to end” management with a “joining up” of various agencies’ work, and a focus on their safe resettlement and reintegration. Circles’ unique contribution is the holding of the offender to account, reinforcing key therapeutic messages, using their knowledge gained through their training to monitor the relapse plan, whilst promoting his/her reintegration into the community by the provision of practical, emotional yet accountable support. Consequently there is a consistency of message to the offender. With a continuity of the plan and relationships, commitment to the offender is enhanced and the gains made in treatment are consolidated and turned into “normal behaviour” through the reinforcement provided. These four elements are core to the NOMS offender management model.

No two sex offenders are alike; they all have different needs and represent different levels of risk of harm and reoffending. The individualised Circle is therefore far from a formulaic approach to the Core Member’s needs. From a statutory agency perspective with responsibility for public protection, it has allowed for some essential preventative risk management to occur as Circle members have detected “recidivist” type behaviours in some instances. From a resettlement perspective it has encouraged the development of wider networks of support in the community for other core members. Similarly, this flexibility of approach and partnership working has been drawn upon by statutory agencies on occasion when managing particular offenders, using Circle expertise to engage constructively with the individual offender.

David Blunkett, in January 2004 said, “Public Protection will always be the Government’s first priority”. Therefore work to assess and manage the risk of harm posed by offenders to victims and their communities will continue to be a priority for the Prison and Probation Services as we move towards the challenges of implementing Offender Management working within NOMS.

An additional challenge for both the Prison and Probation Services is the delivery of community engagement as an integral part of the work to reduce reoffending and increase public confidence in the whole Criminal Justice System. The effective work and innovative approach developed and delivered in the pilot period of Circles of Support and Accountability is possibly one model that could be built upon in the immediate future to facilitate active community involvement and participation as a way forward with other groups of offenders who pose particular risks to our communities, for example domestic violence perpetrators or prolific and other priority offenders, to assist their safe resettlement into the community. This would necessarily involve different community partnerships but by their very nature community based approaches and partnerships are flexible and evolving. Critically, however, the work undertaken in this pilot period of Circles of Support and Accountability has demonstrated that communities are motivated to exercise an active interest in offender management, with the offenders offered the opportunity to make the transition from offending to being responsible and resettled citizens.

Mary Faux
HM Prison Service
Area Resettlement Advisor,
Thames Valley, Hampshire, & Isle of Wight



Evaluation

In 2004 the focus of the local Circles evaluation in the Thames Valley Area was psychometric. Core members were assessed using certain of the “socio-affective” questionnaires which form a part of the Home Office approved batch used to evaluate accredited sex offender community treatment programmes in the UK. These questionnaires measure attitudes and beliefs in core members that were identified as relevant to the aims and objectives of the Circles initiative (for instance, levels of self-esteem, emotional isolation and locus of control – the feeling of being governed in life by internal as opposed to external factors). Positive findings were identified in certain (but not all) core members assessed using this procedure, indicating attitudinal changes in a positive direction, which were maintained over time.

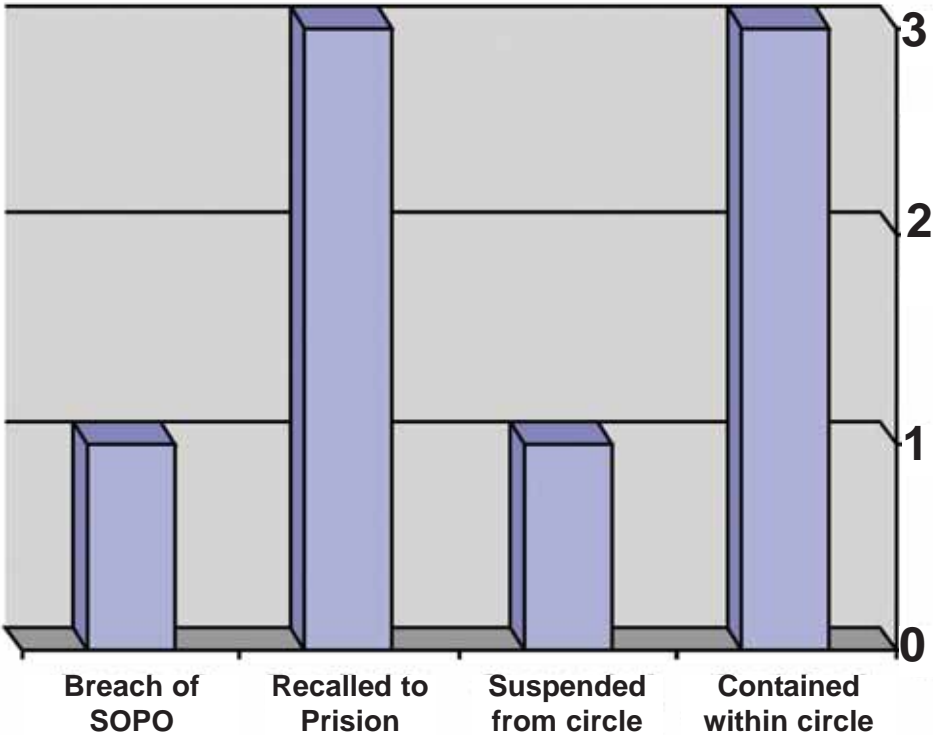
This year, 2005, another avenue of evaluation of Circles is being explored. The sex offender treatment literature (Falshaw et al, 2003) refers to pro-offending behaviour, which might indicate an eventual decline into reoffending as “recidivism” (“the commission of behaviour, legal or illegal, during a specified time period with a clear deviant sexual motivation”). Recent research (Bates et al, 2004) suggests that “soft data” (routinely held by Circles among other local agencies working with sex offenders) is highly significant in evaluating sex offender treatment through the identification of recidivism. It has long been recognised that analysing formal reconviction rates is only a very “blunt instrument” in the follow-up of sex offender intervention and does not provide a true reflection of actual behaviour post-treatment. Not all sexually abusive behaviour is even reported to the police. Of that which is, only a small proportion results in prosecution and less still in conviction, whereby it would become available as a matter of record, to show up in studies of officially accessed reconviction data. Recent research (Friendship and Thornton, 2001) observed that even the formal reconviction databases that are used for analysis by the Home Office (the Offender’s index and the National Identification System) display inconsistencies that reduce confidence in research based upon their analysis (Friendship, Thornton, Erikson and Beech, 2001). Researchers are therefore always attempting to find ways of ensuring a more accurate way of following up offender treatment programmes in order to evidence their efficacy or otherwise.

Circles have now been running for three years in the Thames Valley. This year the focus of evaluation reflects and includes the extensive amount of “soft data” about, among other things, recidivist behaviours that core members have demonstrated during this time. This information collates much detail about the community existences of core members including, in many cases, the challenges they have met in maintaining a pro-social lifestyle. In certain cases these attempts have failed and further interventions such as breach of parole licence, recall to prison or new charges have been the result. Such outcomes are indicative of the very high levels of risk of reconviction and harm that are presented by the core members and are a reminder of the “Accountability” aspect of Circles’ work. Support and guidance may assist core members to live offence-free lives. However, where long entrenched deviant tendencies lead to a resurgence of problem or illegal behaviours (e.g. recidivism) then the Circles input can lead to vital information that enhances public protection by means of activating recall and other offence-limiting strategies. The Circles process provides unique

insights into the details of core members' behaviours and lifestyles well beyond statutory supervision by agencies such as the police, probation and treatment services. It is these insights and their subsequent application in case management of high-risk sex offenders that are the current focus of evaluation of the programme.

The graph below refers only to the eight core members, out of a total of twenty, who were identified as displaying problem or "recidivist" behaviours (detailed below).

Outcomes of recidivist behaviours displayed by core members



Some statistics:

- No core member has been reconvicted of any new sexual offence.
- One core member has been reconvicted for breach of a Sex Offence Prevention Order.
- Three core members have been recalled to prison on breach of parole licence.
- In four other cases recidivist behaviour in the core member was identified. This information was passed to the local MARM (Multi Agency Risk Manager) and there discussed. The situation was managed within the MAPPP auspices and the core member was held to account within the circle.

In seven of the eight cases it was the activities of the Circle that identified the recidivist behaviour.

The recidivist behaviours identified by Circle activity are as follows:

- Core member drinking more heavily than reported to Circle and case manager. Attempted burglary, following modus operandi (MO) used in the past to access adult female victims for the purpose of sexual assault. This resulted in the core member being recalled to prison on licence.
- Core member found to be grooming girls under 16 in Internet Chat Rooms. This resulted in the core member being recalled to prison on licence.
- Core member identified as being in possession of inappropriate pornographic videos featuring adults dressed as children. He then developed a relationship with a young boy, the nephew of a neighbour. This resulted in the core member being recalled to prison on licence.
- Core member secretly purchased a car, part of his modus operandi for previous sexual offences of abduction. Two girls aged 6 and 14 were found in his flat. This resulted in breach of a Sex Offence Prevention Order (SOPO) and imposition of a new Community Rehabilitation Order.
- Core member developed a relationship with a vulnerable single mother with three children aged under 16 and breached contact with circle and statutory agencies on a number of occasions. This resulted in suspension from the Circle for three months although following this period Circle contact was reinstated successfully.
- One core member exhibited inappropriate behaviour involving a pornographic video. This situation was managed within the MAPPA auspices and the core member was held to account within the circle.
- One core member was identified as keeping an account of his offending behaviour that he regularly edited and updated and photographs of his victims around his bed. This situation was managed within the MAPPA auspices and the core member was held to account within the circle.
- Core member interviewed by the police for inappropriate sexual behaviour with a fellow hostel resident. (Note: this behaviour was *not* identified within the context of Circle activity). This situation was managed within the MAPPA auspices and the core member was held to account within the circle.

While at first sight this level of problem behaviour might appear to be a negative outcome for the eight core members involved, it must be remembered that their actuarial (statistically-derived) risk level is very high and the probability of further problem behaviours is therefore great. In the past such problem behaviour, gone unchecked, might have eventually involved the further sexual abuse of children or adults. Without the intervention of the Circle at such an early stage (of “recidivism”) progression to full-blown reoffence and reconviction might have ensued. These statistics demonstrate the vital role that Circles has in managing the risk of dangerous sex offenders in the community. Future, more extensive research will add to our knowledge and understanding of this aspect of community safety.

**Andrew Bates,
Principal Forensic Psychologist
Thames Valley Probation Area**

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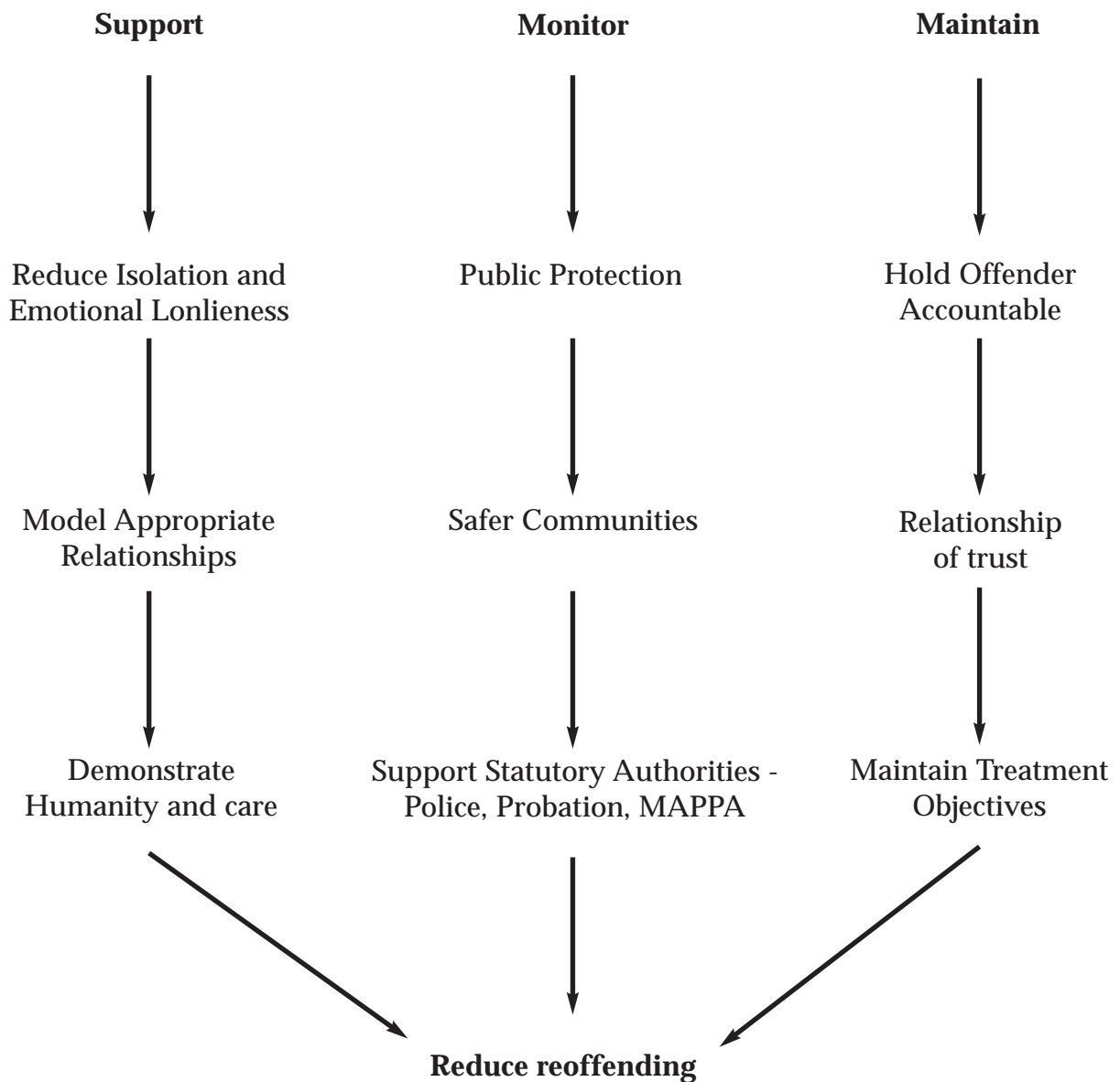
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Four Circles Stories

The following four case stories highlight a number of issues related to the community's involvement in working with men who have a history of sexual offending. The Three Key Principles developed by the Thames Valley Circles staff in 2002 have remained a constant reference point for the work of Circles in the Thames Valley over the past three years and are reflected throughout these case stories.

The Three Key Principles



The first three accounts of Harry, John and Jack are combined with personal accounts and reflections from one volunteer in each of their Circles. These accounts draw attention to the fact that those who have volunteered to work in Circles are ordinary people with extraordinary talents. At a Circles conference in January 2005 at Woodbrooke, the Quaker Study Centre, Monica Hazell, a Quaker Prison Minister at HMP Channings Wood, gave me some thoughts on the qualities that are needed by those who volunteer to work in Circles. These thoughts had been written by David Tomlin, a prisoner who has served 27 years of a life sentence. David agreed to share these thoughts with us and initially asks:

What levels of support are being offered? Because in something so important there can be no half measures... There has to be included levels of trust that goes beyond anything you have ever given before, bearing in mind that the individuals you are likely to be helping and supporting often have very specific needs, problems and anxieties... There is a fine balance that has to be found, achieved and maintained. Concerns have to be expressed but without fear or judgement. Of course this fine balance has to be present in all your interactions. You have to lead by example without being overbearing or condemning... You'll have to remember that the people you're going to be dealing with have had little in the way of tenderness, trust, intimacy and so they may say or do things that maybe you wouldn't expect and you have to have the willingness and freedom in yourself to respond to these things without anger, judgement or indeed embarrassment; you're going to be dealing with people who have spent their lives guarding against letting people close to them because of the fear that has been instilled into them.

David's insight into the qualities needed by those people volunteering is very discerning and demonstrates an understanding related to the nature of relationships between core members and volunteers. These insights are reflected in the first three of the four case stories. Both Harry and John have also contributed to their case story in the hope that the reader will gain a deeper understanding of the true experience of being in a 'Circle'. The fourth and final story of Peter, our very first core member, is followed by a reflective account on the work between Circles and Thames Valley Probation Service written by Sheila Perry, a Senior Probation Officer and manager of a Probation Hostel, who has worked with Peter and his Circle throughout the three-year pilot period.



Harry's Circle

Harry is a 60-year-old child sex offender who describes himself as a paedophile. He is an intelligent man whose index offence resulted in him serving six years of an eight-year custodial sentence. The offence consisted of sexually abusing a nine-year-old girl. Unusually (for a man with such an offending profile) Harry was a married man with two daughters. His victim was a close friend of his daughters and he had cynically used his daughters to access his victim. The abuse was both sustained and intrusive and he rationalised his behaviour by believing he was indulging in a loving caring relationship in which he was teaching her about sex. Having been convicted for this offence he was divorced by his wife and upon release he relocated to a new area, emotionally lonely and isolated.

Having completed extensive sex offender treatment programmes both in prison and in the community (treatment which failed to impact in any meaningful way), he heard about the Circles programme while resident at the Probation Hostel. His motivation to join a Circle was not born out of a desire to take responsibility for his offending behaviour: quite the contrary. Harry is a man who believes that society discriminates against child sexual offenders and exemplifies the decriminalisation of homosexuality to legitimise his thinking. His motivation to be in a Circle was a desire not to reoffend, recognising that next time he would receive a life sentence. The decision to provide him with a Circle was based on two key factors:

- a) He presented a significant risk (MAPPA level three) to the community
- b) He was motivated not to reoffend and was requesting help to live an offence free life.

Four volunteers were assigned to his Circle:

- 1) Head-teacher (Male aged 50+)
- 2) Psychoanalyst (female aged 50+)
- 3) Housing manager (Male aged 40)
- 4) Social worker (female aged 34)

A Volunteer's perspective of Harry's Circle

When our Circle was formed in the autumn of 2003 our core member classified himself as a paedophile and was assessed by the police as High Risk. It was clear from the start that Harry had very low self-esteem. Although he acknowledged that his relationship with his youngest daughter was emotionally abusive and exploitative he struggled acknowledging the same in relation to his victim, who was his daughter's friend. While acknowledging that the sexual relationship was inappropriate, given her age (she was 9 years old) he could not accept it was abusive as he "loved her and the feelings were reciprocal". He stated he was still "in love" with her and had photos of her up on the wall of his flat. He also continued to entertain fantasies of getting back together with her when she was an "adult". Harry was a very intelligent man who justified his offending by intellectualising it. He saw children as not always sexually innocent and insisted that he would never harm a child because he loved them. The truth was that he felt safe and unthreatened in the company of children. Harry was a very private person and tended not to volunteer information unasked, making it often difficult to gauge his progress or what he was thinking and feeling. Conversely he never ducked answering questions, however difficult or contentious, and responded candidly and in detail. He showed no inclination to evade the issue or soften his answer. Harry was horrified by the idea of sexual abuse within the family and seemed to be unaware of the inconsistency of this position in relation to his own offending.

The background to Harry's situation was that he was clearly an isolated individual who felt threatened by the outside world. Spending much of his time on his own he had claustrophobia with regard to travelling on public transport. He held very negative and blaming attitudes towards his ex-wife and had limited telephone contact with his eldest daughter who was then 20 years old but had been forbidden any contact with his younger daughter, whom he described as being a difficult child and her friend, his victim, then 15

years of age. Reports from the family had described how distressed his younger daughter was at not being allowed contact with her father.

However Harry is also a very talented and creative person. He is a competent guitarist and has during the course of his life played in a number of bands. He has a passion for the Blues and is also a good creative writer. He had in the past written a number of novels but was always rejected by publishers, a fact that he used to justify his low self-worth.

Harry had undertaken Sex Offender Treatment Programmes both during his prison sentence and also while on licence after his release. He was always critical of these programmes as being too generalised and non-specific: “a blunt instrument that took no account of individual differences”. He resented being “tarred by the institutional definition of Sex Offenders”, which he felt did not apply to him. He was also critical of the ease with which an intelligent offender could supply the answers he knew were the right ones.

One of the more difficult issues the Circle has had to contend with was an awareness that Harry kept a diary and was in the process of editing those sections of the diary that related to his offending behaviour.

The Process: Autumn 2003 to the end of 2004

Initially we met weekly as a Circle – there were four volunteers and the core member. Latterly monthly Circle meetings were interspersed with weekly meetings with individual volunteers. Harry was encouraged to attend a creative writing course at a local college, which he has done and enjoyed. A Circle volunteer read one of Harry’s novels about Drake and encouraged him to continue with his writing and to submit his manuscripts to a publisher. At this time his Circle challenged Harry with regard to his motives for editing his diary. He denied he was rewriting history but insisted it was providing him with insights about his offending and the extent to which he was deluding himself at the time in relation to his offending. Such was the concern over this issue that the Circle consulted with the local Public Protection Officer.

Nine months into the Circle there was a general feeling that Harry was not really moving forward, was still too attached to his old life and was not really putting down any roots. When challenged he reacted indignantly, insisting that he was making progress. It was something of a revelation to Harry when the Circle pointed out to him that they could not be expected to know what progress he was making if he did not reveal his thoughts and feelings openly about his progress or tell them what had been happening. From that point on he was much more open and was able to demonstrate that he was actually moving forward, albeit slowly. His answers to the question, “What are you not telling us?” revealed quite significant changes of thinking and feeling that he had previously not thought of sufficient importance to mention. This allowed us as a Circle to give him the recognition of change and encourage him to take further steps forward.

The editing of the diary remained a serious concern for the Circle and I asked if I could read it. Harry agreed, although as it turned out he had many misgivings about it; namely, that I would be “corrupted” by it, or so revolted by it I would not wish to have anything further to do with him. On handing it over he said, “When you read this you will know more about me than any one else on earth.” Given that he knew I would share everything I read with the other volunteers in the Circle, this was testament to the depth of trust that had been built up between him and the Circle over the past months. In the event the reading of the diary and what it revealed was the turning point in Harry’s rehabilitation and led to a

large number of changes in his life and his thinking. The reading of the diary did not have the effect on me that Harry had feared. My lack of interest or reaction to the graphic detail in the diary and the fact that the Circle continued to support and encourage him was a unique and important affirmation for Harry, in that there were those who would not reject him as a pariah and believed in his worth as a human being. What came out of the diary was the depth of obsession for his victim and the extent to which his own children, apart from their usefulness as a means of procuring his victim's presence, were greatly sidelined. Such was the extent of distortion relating to his supposed love for this child that there appeared no room for loving feelings towards his own children. Indeed he seemed irritated by them, particularly his youngest daughter, who he perceived as a difficult nuisance. The Circle discussed these issues with Harry for whom these observations appeared a revelation. It had not occurred to him that the reason for his younger daughter's difficult behaviour could be that she felt rejected by her father and also knew what was going on. He had not been consciously aware of the extent to which he had ignored his own children. The Circle encouraged Harry to build bridges with his family, most particularly with his children.

The ongoing battle over the contentious issue of his victim's photos on his wall was raised again. This time he conceded, recognising that they fed his continuing obsession with her and removed them. Not only did he do this but on his own initiative replaced them with photos of his own children. The shift of focus from his victim to his children proved hugely significant and the symbolic importance of it was further brought home to him when he told his eldest daughter what he had done with the photographs. She said, "Dad, I wish you could see my face." When Harry asked her why, she replied, "Because I have the biggest smile on my face you have ever seen". Harry was shocked by the reaction but it brought home to him for the first time the extent to which his children had felt rejected. Shortly after this Harry paid a visit to his family and an incident occurred that further reinforced for him how strongly his children felt. He told his eldest daughter that he felt he should make amends by making his will in favour of his victim, as a way of saying sorry. His daughter reacted angrily and instantly saying "If you do that you will lose us forever. You should make your will out in favour of us." Harry was shocked and chastened by the strength of her reaction but the lesson was learnt. Following this Harry was allowed to have telephone contact with his youngest daughter and she became relaxed and chatty with him.

When Harry's birthday came round a celebration was planned by the Circle volunteers, to which his daughters were invited. At the end of a very relaxed evening his eldest daughter suddenly said, "I'm really happy" and when asked why she told us all, "Because we've got our dad back". Harry was visibly moved. Relations with his family continued to improve and Harry was even able to develop fairly cordial relations with his ex-wife and her partner, albeit fairly superficial. Most significantly as family relationships improved, Harry's obsession with his victim began to fade and he started to look forward rather than harking back or indulging in futuristic fantasies and started to make a new life for himself. He has started to show real concern about his youngest daughter's wellbeing and what issues she may be wrestling with inside, and her future education, although he finds it frustrating that there is little he can do to help her. His caring about her welfare was in stark contrast to his former dismissal of her. Harry has paid a two week visit to his family which went very well and further strengthened his relationship with his children. During this visit his eldest daughter made it abundantly clear to him that if he had any further contact with his victim then he would lose his family. The love and support of his family has become very important to him.

One of the female volunteers in our Circle initially found it very difficult to deal with, but

over time had worked through this and has formed a very good relationship with Harry. Following a recent Christmas celebration with the Circle, she quite spontaneously gave Harry a big hug, planted a kiss on both cheeks and wished him a Happy Christmas. Harry reported at the next Circle meeting how moved he'd been by this show of affection. It is still a surprise to him that it is possible for anyone to like him but incidents like this are gradually bringing home to him the extent to which people do care and this in turn is helping his self esteem as well as placing on him an obligation not to betray the faith and trust that both family and volunteers have placed in him. It is my conviction that he feels this quite keenly and is determined not to reoffend. Harry has become noticeably less self-obsessed and now shows greater understanding and appreciation of the feelings of others, not only his children but his ex-wife too. He thinks a lot about how his offending has affected their lives.

January 2005: What is left to do?

The Circle still needs to help Harry measure his self worth using positive criteria. When asked recently how he would gauge his self-esteem on a scale of 0-10, he replied 3. Actually that's progress. At the start of the Circle it would have been 0, but there is a considerable way to go. Harry still has a tendency to "bottle up" his thoughts and feelings and it is sometimes still necessary to prise things out of him, probably based on fear of reaction. He needs to be encouraged to open up and talk more freely about things, instead of waiting for the question to be asked. His children need to be made aware of his love for them. Although Harry finds being demonstrative quite difficult, he is aware of this and is working on it.

Harry has come a long way since the start of the Circle and there is every reason to believe he will continue to move forward.

**Laurence Clark
Circle Volunteer**

Harry's Perspective

Circles, I heard, was run under the auspices of the Quakers, an organisation I have long admired and in whom I felt I could have trust owing to their philanthropic, altruistic, non-judgemental attitude.

I waited nearly a year to get a place, mainly due to the fact that the project was in its infancy and was on a steep learning curve and needed to be very selective as to who was recruited, both core members (me) and volunteers. However, I can only say that, despite a period of adjustment as we got to know one another, I felt a great sense of relief and security once I settled into place. The most important thing was that I *wanted* to be honest with these people. They are not fools, neither are they "official" – nor are they "do-gooders" – but rather they are the typical man/woman one might meet in the street; neither are they a soft touch. The very name of the organisation gives a clue to this. One may get "support" but in return one must exercise "responsibility" and be held "accountable". This includes telling the whole truth rather than the self-protecting half-truths one has been living with; to be able to say that all my life, although no offences resulted previously, I have been an accident waiting to happen; that I shall always be what I am and if I don't put into place

pretty powerful engines of self-policing and thought control, I shall be at risk of offending again – it's been a long road from Mr. Nice Guy to this but I'm getting there. And it's for life, not just until the treatment or my License ends.

When I had my first few meetings with my Circle I was apprehensive – not so much about the set-up but at meeting strangers and having to be open with them. One knows that in prison the officers etc are, to one degree or another, hardened to hearing the details of sex offences against children and one knows they won't be shocked. With the volunteers in Circles I found myself nervous about how to open up at first. How much detail could I reveal without them holding up their hands in horror? Would they not revile me or reject me when they heard details of my offences? It takes a while but we soon reached a level where I had a fair idea of their sensibilities and how to talk to each as an individual, to be aware of what language or degree of detail to talk about. Then, when we meet as a group, any inconsistencies they may feel exist between what I may have told them individually can be confronted.

The four members are of all ages and backgrounds and I found myself assessing them in the same way I guess that they were assessing me and it was a little uncomfortable, especially as at our initial meeting they were quite confrontational, asking many searching questions, and I found myself having to struggle hard not to get defensive but to be honest and keep an open mind as to how we would all progress. I came away feeling "Is this really for me? Do I want to come back here again?" I decided to persevere and it was worth it, for over the months I have been with them they have proved to be staunch allies, people I can trust and rely on. That, to a man in my position, given my offences, is not quantifiable in the value of restoring my self-esteem, lack of which is a huge factor in sex offending against children. I really feel now that I am becoming a part of the community again and that is a powerful tool to keep me on the straight and narrow – something to live up to – a commitment which I cannot, must not, revoke.

We meet all together and share personal experiences, discuss how I am coping in general, offence-related stuff which gives (hopefully) the volunteers a better understanding of the way offenders think and feel, while I gain the support and comradeship of people I feel I can trust and respect. I have been able to discuss and relate stuff about my past life, my feeling towards children, and many other things that, until now, I have still kept to myself. It is a very cathartic experience for me and I really feel that I have made more progress in understanding both myself and my offending, than I did throughout all the years in prison or on the Programmes, essential though they were.

We also have one-on-one meetings between the "Circle" get-togethers and I have now come to feel comfortable, in varying degrees, with them all as individuals. Sometimes the volunteer will come, individually, to my flat and we talk about all sorts of things. At other times I will meet one or the other in the town for coffee and conversation. One of the Circle, whose profession makes daytime meeting difficult, meets me in the evening and we go to a pub or restaurant and also have much meaningful conversation. They all take an interest in "socialising" me – getting me out or encouraging me to start or continue with projects such as my novel writing. One member has been continually encouraging me to the extent that I have now, at last, put my work out to publishers again after nearly five years gathering dust. All this is of inestimable value to me to return me to a way of life in which offending is kept far from my mind.

As individuals the volunteers are about as diverse a group as one could find. Two are of similar age to myself while two are younger. This I found hard to begin with. The two older members I was rather in awe of due to their standing in the community and their University

backgrounds – my inferiority complex came to the fore! The younger woman I found it hard to relate to at first both because of the age difference and what I perceived as a very “professional” and somewhat formal manner. But I persevered and told the group of my difficulty, and the matter resolved itself for being aired between us and I learned something – that I can say things about people without giving offence and that progress results rather than bottling up feelings, resulting in confrontation or misunderstanding. Another new skill I never knew I had! Surprising me, this relationship has developed to the point where we are both now able to discuss and dissect many aspects of my offending, my childhood and my current doubts, fears and desires. Being younger, she has been able to give me some insights into the mind of an abused young girl and has convinced me for the first time that the harm I have done is far greater than I had wanted to own to. A hard thing to face and very uncomfortable but she has been of great help to me in this, shattering some foolish illusions I have been harbouring for years – hoping my victims were OK to make myself feel better. It isn't so!

I sometimes wonder what life would be like had I not been accepted into Circles. From a practical point of view, pretty bleak! I keep on my wall a calendar, PC-generated, of the coming month's events. Without my regular meetings with Circles it would be almost blank. Therefore, when I look up I can have something to look forward to – a meeting of minds and a point of human contact. Without this I should seldom leave the flat and would be prey once more to depression and paranoia.

One further aspect of Circles and what it represents is, at present, to be proved in the future, hopefully. If it succeeds – and if it doesn't I don't know where we go next – the success should go some way to dispelling the current hysteria and vilification of the paedophile in the media and the public's mind. If they can be shown a means by which guys like me can be allowed to live in the community without reoffending, then everybody will benefit. More resources need to be allocated so that newly convicted offenders can get into treatment programmes from the start of their sentence, rather than, as in my own experience, having to wait almost a year, making no progress, before being allocated a place on a group. Just having an offender locked away behind a door is a waste of public money and time and can, in many cases, reinforce the very feelings of not being valued that contributed to offending in the first place. Rather like beating a dog that bites and expecting its behaviour to improve! What is needed is a more humanitarian approach and this, to me, is what Circles represents. A cost-effective, productive, humane method of monitoring released offenders to assuage many of the fears the public have about released paedophiles in the community and which will, I believe, do more to prevent further victims and that, in the end, is all that matters.

Harry
A Core Member

Harry still perceives himself as a paedophile and will always remain a significant risk and that risk needs to be monitored. However there is no question that the work of the Circle, tough, challenging and modelling appropriate adult relationships, has achieved what treatment failed to touch. It was the relationship with his daughters that was the key to developing a degree of empathy towards others. Over a year later the Circle continues with the lives of all involved enriched by the experience, while the safety of the community is enhanced.



John's Circle

John is a man in his fifties and has served four years in prison for indecent assault against his own two daughters. John had heard about the Circles of Support and Accountability project from his Quaker Prison Minister and having arrived alone and isolated in the Thames Valley area upon release, referred himself to the project. Although John had committed acts of incest and was assessed as a MAPPA level 2 category of risk, his psychometric profile relating to deviancy was significantly high. This high deviancy profile fitted with the history of the abuse in that it began when his children were babies and continued until the eldest was twenty-one. John had undertaken extensive sex offender treatment while in prison and was involved in a community based treatment programme. He had appeared to take full responsibility for his offending and had good awareness relating to victim damage. John's Circle consisted of:

- 1) Youth worker (Male aged 40)
- 2) Housing officer (Female aged 20+)
- 3) Therapist (Male aged 75)
- 4) Student social worker (Female aged 30+)

While in prison John discovered he had a talent for art and during his sentence had won an award for his artwork. The first time the volunteers met John he brought with him his portfolio. Feedback from volunteers had been that this had helped allay their fears over this initial meeting (most of them had never knowingly met a sex offender before). It allowed them to immediately see John as a person with talent and qualities. Meeting regularly, John shared the work he had undertaken in prison and was currently undertaking in the community-based programme. The Circle identified issues relating to John's underassertive nature and discussions followed relating to the pertinent issue of passive aggression that had been a feature of his offending behaviour. John enrolled in a number of courses at a local college and found he had a skill for creative writing. The Circle began individual contact with John and it was clear that a basis of trust and friendship was being established.

After a year of the Circles' work project staff conducted a review. During this review one of the volunteers stated that a long-term relationship had recently ended and in recent weeks John had been a source of great support to her. Project staff, initially alarmed at the possible implications of such a statement, found upon further exploration that appropriate boundaries were being adhered to and that what was taking place was a genuine positive relationship. The fact that she had confided in John and allowed him to support her emotionally in an appropriate manner had validated the relationship as real and gave him a feeling of self worth.

The relationship John had with all his Circle volunteers was a close one and was particularly meaningful to the 75 year-old therapist. This volunteer openly admits that his motivation for becoming a Circles volunteer was a mixture of factors. Abused himself as a child he was interested in the subject matter both professionally and personally. He perceived himself as a humanist and believes in the principles of inclusion and restorative justice. He also stated he was lonely.

A Volunteer's Perspective of John's Circle

Joining Circles was a step in the dark. Although I have worked in a voluntary capacity with a number of groups such as people who are homeless, individuals with AIDS and HIV, and those who are suicidal, I have never worked with offenders, least of all sex offenders.

Training, which took place over two days, gave a good understanding of the issue and law around sex offending and the purpose of Circles. This was very helpful but the one thing I have found about training is that however good it is it never quite prepares you for the real thing.

Joining Circles was therefore quite daunting. Meeting new people can be difficult and from experience I know sometimes groups just don't gel. Because Circles was new, and given the area we are working in, I was conscious that there was a level of responsibility and maybe expectation not just for the core member but also in a broader sense for society. I was also aware that given the hostility of the media and society towards sex offenders, to some extent I was risking my own personal safety. The likelihood may be minimal but the thought was there.

The concerns around the Circle disappeared, however, from the first meeting. It seemed to me from the beginning that this was a good Circle to be in and that we would work together well. While this helped, the first meeting with John was still somewhat daunting. A bit like jumping into the unknown. It did occur to me how much more daunting it may be for John. "Who are these people, what are they like, can I trust them and perhaps why are they doing this," were thoughts I had from John's point of view. The thing I remember most, which I wrote up after I got home from the first meeting, was my own reaction of surprise.

Now, I like to think that I have wonderful virtuous qualities that lead me not to judge or prejudge anyone. Clearly this was not the case, as John didn't represent what I was expecting. The question, which I thought about afterwards, was that even though I didn't think I had any preconceived notions about what John would be like, clearly I must have. It seemed to me that had John been quiet and withdrawn he would have more accurately met my own expectation of him.

John was, however, completely the opposite. He was outgoing and pleasant and I felt an immediate affinity with him. John brought along his paintings and drawings, which I thought were wonderful. His talent for art is remarkable and I wrote afterwards: "John has an amazing talent for art. It struck me how odd life is. If he hadn't gone to prison for abusing his children he may never have found this talent."

Initially the Circle met weekly. In the first few meetings John went through his life story. Some of this was difficult. At one point I remember thinking: "How could you do this to a child," but generally, my feeling was just one of sorrow for everyone involved, John included. After these first few meetings the pattern was more of John going through what had come up for him in his relapse prevention programme the night before, with Circle members asking him and questioning him about this. We also talked about his week and issues that may be affecting or worrying him. I always felt that the Circle around John was strong. Individually and collectively our aim was to give John our belief and support to help him make a new life and not to reoffend. It seems to me that within the Circle there have been two equally positive factors that have made it a success. One has been based upon seeing John and caring about him as a human being and acknowledging all that is both good and bad within him. The second has been the strength of the Circle to challenge him over his thoughts and actions, holding him to account over what he has done and aiming to

ensure that he does not reoffend.

As a Circle we have worked together to help John. At no point I can recall has there ever been a disagreement as to how should this be done. When we moved to individual meetings, information was shared between members. If anything of concern came up, John was challenged at the group meetings on these matters. The meetings we have had, as a result, have always been open and honest and as a Circle we have been in a position to know whether John was lying or trying to play us off against each other.

John's honesty and bravery to acknowledge his past and his desire to make a new life for himself has made the process easy for us as a Circle. However, it seems to me that even if this had not been the case, as a Circle we would have coped with whatever the core member was like. Overall I believe the Circle has played an important role in helping John rehabilitate back into the community. It has also played an important role in protecting society. As a Circle we have given John our belief in his self-worth, and given him our trust, but we have also monitored his actions and been in a position to inform Circle Coordinators had there been any area of concern.

The kind of relationship that has developed between John and me has built slowly. Initially at the outset it was more of a friendly professional one than that of friends. It seems to me that there needs to be a willingness to give someone your 100% trust and belief that they can rebuild their lives and not reoffend, while at the same time being aware that this may be very difficult for them or not possible at all. It is the two sides of what Circles is set up to do.

The friendship with John has grown over the past 18 months. John is an easy person to like. I came away from the first meeting liking him and have continued to do so. He is a caring and understanding person, aspects that have always been within him, yet it has taken a process of abuse and suffering, his and others', to reach this point. Our meetings, both individually and group meetings, have changed into much more social occasions, going for a drink, or for a meal, or for social group meetings of the Circle. Through these, the subjects discussed have become wider and broader which adds to the person I already know.

Something that I have increasingly become aware of is how dehumanising labelling someone is. Calling John or anyone a "sex offender" (the same principle applies to anyone who is labelled) sets up stereotypical, negative images from which someone is judged and reacted to. This takes away the ability to relate to people as individual human beings.

Sex offending is simply one aspect of John's life. This is not to understate the seriousness of what he has done or the dramatic effect it has had on his children, his wife and himself. But John is many things: a painter; a student; a writer; a builder; a father; a victim of abuse; someone who has spiritual beliefs; an offender. All of these things and more make up the person John is.

What Circles has helped remind me is that we are all human beings made up of many facets of interests, skills and personalities. John isn't a sex offender; he is someone who as one part of his life has committed sex offences. There is a substantive difference in these views. The former denies someone's humanity, the later affirms it.

The other thing I have also found as the relationship with John has developed is that I have given more thought to his children and his former wife. What their lives are like, and what help or support they have received. I am happy that I can play a small part in helping John change his life, but the motivation in being part of Circles and helping John leads me to think of, hope and pray, that his children and wife equally have, and have had, all the help

and support they need in their lives. As Tany Alexander, the Thames Valley Stop it Now! Coordinator has said, it seems to me that the concept of Circles could have a much wider role in society as a means of support and help not just to offenders but to victims as well.

For me Circles has been a wonderful positive experience. It has been a pleasure to have been in the Circle with Sara, Emma, Dennis and John. Other benefits it has given have been: enjoyment at helping another person; helping to play a part in showing the concept of restorative justice works in practice; a gratitude to John for his acceptance of me.

For John it seems to me the most significant thing he has gained from our relationship has been the fact it is based upon honesty. He doesn't have to hide what he has done or lie about it. The friendship is based upon this openness. The use of volunteers within Circles is I think crucial. As volunteers we are not paid and are not involved because we have to be, but because we choose to be. This changes the context of the relationships that are developed, enabling them to become real friendships rather than just professional relationships.

For John he has friends he can turn to and talk to if he needs support. He has a support mechanism to rely on when and if life becomes difficult. People he knows care about him.

A number of things led me to become involved in Circles. But simply helping to give someone like John the chance to make a new life was the primary reason. Overarching this however is my belief that positive values of love, tolerance, empathy and self-responsibility create better and safer societies and happier and better people.

Negative values displayed so virulently against people who commit sex offences by the media based upon intolerance, hate, punishment and the desire for vengeance create frightened and dangerous societies and people. Hate is corrosive and ruins lives.

The Circles Project shows not only that there is another way, but the values upon which it is based of restorative justice keep societies safer as a result.

David Beck
Volunteer in John's Circle

John's Perspective

It is now just over two years since I attended my first Circles group meeting; at the time Circles was in its infancy, our group was one of the first. I was informed of the supporting group being set up by a member of the Quakers, in the last year of my sentence and was keen to find out more about it.

The group, I found, was well chosen, the members were a balanced variety of ages ranging from late twenties to mid seventies, their life styles and professions varied to. As soon as I met them I felt at ease, a little apprehensive but that was only to be expected. In the next few weeks I was going to tell them about all my offending behaviour; my thoughts, feelings and plans for the future.

I found it easy to talk to the group once I knew the confidentiality was in place. Some of the confidence came from knowing the support members are volunteers, ordinary members of the public. This is by no means a slight on the agencies, for example, Probation Service etc. Having the opportunity to talk to members of the public and confide in them can help build confidence and self-respect. The group means a lot in my new life, giving me support

and at the same time ever-watchful for signs of complacency, the beginnings of reoffending. The weeks passed and I found the confidence and trust growing in the group, I could discuss any item knowing they were not being judgmental towards me. After all they were there to support me but more important to protect the public.

At first we met on a weekly basis as a group, also once a week a volunteer and myself would have coffee in a local café or go for a walk if the weather was fine.

After the first six months the group meetings were reduced to a fortnightly date and the individual meetings increased, therefore I was meeting two volunteers in the middle week when there was no group session. I found this helpful, getting to know each volunteer individually and it gave more time for questions to be asked and, more important, to be answered. The group I think was gelling well by this time, a friendship was forming and a social side to the support was in hand.

One of the volunteers I found was a keen theatre fan like myself, so whenever there was a play showing, which we both wanted to see, a visit was arranged. Visits to the cinema, museums and the occasional meal in a restaurant to celebrate a birthday or Christmas helped to fill the groups' social calendar. A trip to London with the group was a day to remember. I mentioned I had never been on the Underground; in fact I had never been to London properly, having only driven through it. So off we went; we visited Greenwich using the Underground; having the team with me was reassuring, I would never have attempted it otherwise.

One of the most daunting hurdles, for me, since being released, was the realisation that the fast approaching Christmas would be my first alone, ever. It came to light while completing my final treatment course, the Relapse Prevention Programme. We were discussing future plans and the thought of Christmas alone hit me hard. I discussed this with my Circle at length and one volunteer came up with a solution, charity work for the "homeless" in London: "Crisis at Christmas". This was prior to our day trips to the capital. So the day before Christmas Eve, my huge bags packed, sleeping bag under my arm the said volunteer tapping me on the back and wishing me "Good luck". I felt like a schoolboy on his first day at school. A whole week of looking after fellow human beings less fortunate than myself. With three thousand volunteers and hundreds of "Guests", as we refer to the "homeless", it turned out to be the biggest and best Christmas I have ever celebrated. No drinking and eating just for the sake of it, just hard work and good will to our fellow man. I would have missed all this but for the Circles with their support and advice.

On one occasion during my first year, one of the volunteers, a little younger than myself, was experiencing personal problems and couldn't find a solution. I felt privileged and a little proud that we had reached a point in our relationship when she felt she could confide in me with the problem and seek my advice. With the courses I had taken, I used the skills which I had gained to help to solve the difficulty. The Circles management had not envisaged this scenario where the role was reversed, the "core" member was actually supporting the "volunteer". I think this is a prime example of how the Circles can form not only a support network, but also in friendship.

The professional side of the volunteer's role is still the important part of the network, the protection of the public. I know and accept that if at any time I become complacent and move in any way towards reoffending, then the Circle will hold me accountable for my actions and if they are serious enough will report them to the police, which they are legally bound to do. As I have already stated, I accept all these points and welcome them. I have confidence in the future knowing that there are groups of people who are supporting me

and willing to befriend me with knowledge of my past offending. The confidence in the public will grow when they acknowledge that the Circles programme does work and there is a competent protective network in place.

What is the alternative, a Society without Circles of Support and Accountability? For me it is not worth thinking about. Offenders leaving prison after long sentences, a short period in a Probation Hostel and then they are on their own. Even worse in some cases, offenders who have completed their whole sentence will be led to the Prison gate and waved “Goodbye”. The public will have no protection at all, only the signature of an offender in a register once a year and a visit every six months by a member of the police force.

In my Circle we have become friends and will meet when work and time allow. Keeping in touch approximately every two weeks with meetings for coffee either in town or at my place, I have a confident and positive feeling for the future. I thank the Circles of Support and Accountability for that future.

John
A Core Member

After two years of the Circles’ life John completed his course in creative writing and secured a place at university to undertake a degree in the same subject. Following this news, project staff received an email from one of John’s Circle volunteers, questioning whether the move from college to university would affect John’s contextual risk. Such a question within the context of such a strong Circle highlights and validates the effectiveness of what a Circle can achieve. The result was that arrangements were made for the Circle to meet again on a formal basis (if needed) to help support John make the transition.



Jack’s Circle

Jack had been sentenced to a three year Community Rehabilitation Order (Probation Order) for Indecent Assault on a post-pubescent female. He had also been prosecuted for failure to register on the Sex Offender Register. Jack had undertaken a community based sex offender treatment programme and the post-programme psychometrics highlighted a continued high deviancy profile. He was isolated and alone. Jack struggles with literacy and has very low self-esteem. He had an inability to respond appropriately in relationships e.g. he meets a woman in a pub and is immediately going to marry her. Treatment providers assessed him as a high risk of reoffending. His Circle consisted of five volunteers:

- 1) University professor (Male 50+)
- 2) Head teacher (Male 50+)
- 3) Therapist (Female 50+)
- 4) Freelance journalist (Female 40+)
- 5) Housewife (Female 40+)

Essentially a very professional middle class group of volunteers that over a nine month period overwhelmed the core member. Initially they worked hard and creatively with Jack, role-playing issues of disclosure etc. During the first few months of the Circles' life an example of the importance of communication and confidentiality was highlighted. Project staff received reports from Probation/Police that a Quaker member of Jack's Circle was employing him to paint and decorate in houses where children were living. Project staff took the issue to the Circle and it transpired that one of the volunteers had a friend who was a painter and decorator who employed offenders on behalf of the Probation Service. During a conversation the volunteer recognised whom the friend was talking about and disclosed that he was working with him in a Circle. The volunteer felt dreadful and humiliated that he had been so indiscreet – a lesson learnt.

After a nine-month period the Circle was struggling, dynamics between volunteers were at an all time low (particular tension between two volunteers affecting the whole Circle) and they lost the focus of what their role was. Project staff (with Jack's permission) went into the Circle and read the volunteers extracts from Jack's diary that highlighted how unhappy he was with the Circle. Jack began to miss appointments with all agencies involved and eventually disappeared altogether. He had previously disclosed to the Circle that he had met a woman and wanted to marry her. He told the Circle where she lived but stated that there were no children in the house. This information was passed to Police and Probation who contacted Social Services. They checked their records and found the address to be that of a client of theirs who was a vulnerable single mother with a number of children living with her. A visit from the statutory agencies found that Jack had moved in with her. Disclosure of his offences was made to the woman and she finished the relationship. Two further Circle meetings were held but all but one of the volunteers felt that such had been the breach of trust they could no longer continue working with him.

Given the difficulty with the functioning of the Circle, a renewed commitment by Jack and the fact that one volunteer from the Circle wanted to continue supporting and monitoring him, project staff looked to re-forming the Circle with a more appropriate and reduced number of volunteers. They were:

- 1) Former member of the original Circle – who writes about the experience
- 2) Therapist (Male aged 75 single)
- 3) Housing officer (Female aged 30+ with children)

Jack responded well to his new Circle; however it has not been without its difficulties. When things don't go well for Jack he dives into a totally negative mood. (He has to cope with living in a halfway house full of chaotic drinkers, himself having a previous drink problem.) Not wishing to repeat the previous experience, the Circle, working with Jack's Probation Officer, mandated him through the Probation Order to attend a meeting. This he did and the issues were worked through, resulting in positive outcomes. Jack, due to the persistence and hard work of this Circle, is now in full time employment and is due to move into independent accommodation.

A Volunteer's Perspective on Jack's Circle

Long before volunteering as a Circle member I had become interested in creative approaches to offending behaviour after reading about the work of the Prison Phoenix Trust, an Oxford-based charity which encourages prisoners' spiritual growth through the practice of yoga and meditation, and for which I now also work as a volunteer. As my own

children grew older I began to find ways of developing this interest by volunteering as a prison visitor, a basic skills mentor with the Probation Service and by becoming a regular attendee at the Quaker Meeting held at Grendon Prison on Friday evenings.

The concept of Restorative Justice had caught my attention in the book *Forgiving Justice* by Tim Newell, former Governor of Grendon Prison and himself a Quaker. Looking back at this book, I realise that it in fact contained a description of the embryonic work in Canada from which the Circles sprang. I asked the Quaker Prison Minister at Grendon if she knew of any Restorative Justice work locally and she put me in touch with Circles of Support and Accountability.

I don't have a clear memory of expecting this work to be exclusively with sex offenders. I had thought that Restorative Justice work would be about bringing victims and offenders of various kinds together to engage in a process of reconciliation, so when the Circles information pack arrived I was slightly shocked by the description of the core members as "high-risk sex offenders", wondering if it was more than I could cope with. My husband was distinctly unenthusiastic about it, saying he was fearful for my safety and thought the project sounded uninviting.

I embarked on the initial two days' training and found that it allayed many of my fears, so I offered to become a Circle member. The normal procedure would then have been to complete another three days' training with other volunteers with whom I would have gone on to form a Circle. I was, in fact, "thrown in at the deep end" when a newly formed Circle lost one of its volunteers, who wanted to work in a different geographic area, and I was invited to fill the gap and to maintain a gender balance in the group.

I went along with high hopes to my first Circle meeting, but felt immediately uneasy. I was not particularly welcomed by the group and was worried by the high levels of expressed emotion and almost complete domination of the discourse by two personalities. This distracted me from giving much attention to our Core member, Jack, whose main concern during this meeting seemed to be his accommodation problems. In the second meeting, Jack described a problematic encounter with another resident at his Bail Hostel over meal bookings and how he had felt humiliated and angry when he gave the person his own meal rather than provoke a confrontation. I suggested acting out a role-play of this incident, which seemed helpful, and I felt a little better than I had at the first meeting.

By the third meeting, though, the Circle was already in crisis and my journal entries remind me of just how stressful this evening was. One of our supervisors spent some time with us before the meeting as there had been a suspicion that a Circle member had acted beyond the remit of the group in privately trying to arrange work for Jack. Fortunately this turned out to be unfounded. I was then embarrassed when another Circle member had an unnecessary dispute over room allocations with the Warden of the premises where we met, and throughout the meeting I felt intimidated by the uncompromising "all or nothing" approach when two Members wanted to discuss different issues. I was worried to hear that Jack had insulted his Probation Officer during a difficult interview over the misunderstanding about illicit work and in the end I plucked up courage to tell the group how frightened I was feeling, especially as we were ostensibly trying to model appropriate boundaries and co-operation with authority figures. The evening reached a climax when one of the Circle members became tearful and abruptly disclosed her own issues as a victim. I went home that night feeling utterly exhausted and hopeless – frankly, I had experienced the whole group process as being "abusive" in its own right.

With some support from our supervisors we got back on track but we never seemed to be dealing with the real issues, instead having lengthy discussions about the finer points of

Hamlet, a play which Jack was reading with his basic skills mentor. I had become wary of discussing Jack's previous offending behaviour because I was afraid of provoking more emotional outbursts and I noticed myself slipping uncomfortably into a role familiar from my own childhood, that of peacemaker, and feeling acutely responsible for other people's feelings and reactions.

In some sessions Jack tried to talk about the autobiographical Lifeline he had constructed during therapy, or the assertiveness training and strategies for avoidance of relapse that he had learnt both in therapy and on an alcohol recovery programme he had enrolled on at his own initiative. One member of the Circle, perhaps because of her own different therapeutic training, expressed impatience and irritation at his somewhat formulaic use of the cognitive-behavioural idiom that he had acquired on the Sex Offenders Treatment Programme. My own background training in Non-Violent Communication and Adlerian counselling, with its emphasis on specific encouragement techniques and the development of social interest as a model for growth, were perhaps less at variance with this. Instead, I often felt admiration and compassion for this person who, with few early experiences of educational success, had made enormous efforts to learn what was, in effect, a new language: that of feeling and motivation, and one that can be hard for many of us at the best of times.

The two other women in the Circle seemed keen to press hard for expressions of remorse, but I was deeply uncertain as to whether this was our primary objective, given that Jack had already confronted so much during his extensive group therapy and was now looking to the future to rebuild his life with the help of supportive, non-judgmental members of the community. From his voice and body language I sensed that he probably felt considerable personal shame and I wondered what it must be like trying to exercise trust and talk about sensitive issues with this group of highly educated and sometimes hostile inquisitors.

The next crisis that hit the group was more serious and eventually led to its dissolution. We had reached the point of moving on to individual contact with Jack rather than the weekly group meetings. We all made our individual appointments with Jack and he did not turn up for any of them. It transpired that he had struck up a relationship with a woman and was visiting her home where children were frequently present. Representatives of the Multi-Agency Protection Panel explained to the woman the risks she was facing and she terminated her relationship. Those of us in the Circle experienced a range of strong emotions at Jack's deception and betrayal of our trust and, at a special meeting with our supervisors present; we conveyed our feelings to Jack before he stormed out of the room.

Our supervisors then convened a final meeting for us to decide on our future as a Circle. The other Circle members were ready for closure, preferring to form another Circle or take a break from the work altogether. My own thinking was that this was precisely not the point at which to abandon Jack and so I offered to carry on seeing him individually until a new Circle could be formed to work with me. Jack came in at the end to have this decision explained to him and he and I made our first appointment to meet each other.

On the first occasion that I spent with Jack on my own I remember thinking, "At last I can just listen – I might even get to know this person a little." I spent several summer afternoons with him exploring the city where he lives and talking about the life he had led sleeping on the streets after leaving prison and the toll it had taken on his health. He talked about the problems he had had with alcohol and how he wanted to reduce the dose of antidepressants he was taking. I also learnt to appreciate his wry sense of humor and deep knowledge and love of the countryside and agricultural work. In the early autumn we met up for his birthday lunch and he said that he had not received a birthday card for six years since losing contact with his family and had never been in a restaurant before.

My patience was tried again, though, when Jack missed a couple of appointments just when we were about to form a new Circle. He had lapsed into drinking again after nine months' abstinence and had been too intoxicated to meet up with me.

In the meantime I met the two fellow members of my new Circle. One was a humorous and outspoken older man and the other a woman, younger than me, who was expecting her fourth child. The new Circle had been designed to be smaller than the first so that Jack would be less intimidated and given more space to speak for himself. When we first met with Jack as a group, he appeared sheepish but determined to make a fresh start and talk openly about his problems. It seemed clear that we were all going to get along together.

Although her pregnancy prevented her from attending many of our meetings, the young woman in our group was very helpful to us even in her absence. Jack was keen to stay in contact with her, which encouraged him to become more proficient using the mobile phone, something he had had rather a block with. It was gratifying to be able to reflect this back to him as a measurable sign of his improved communication skills. The remaining two of us had some very productive meetings with him, learning more about his early experiences as a deaf child and talking frankly about feelings of sexual rejection and dealing with unfulfilled sexual desire. I would not have felt comfortable discussing these topics alone with Jack for fear of misunderstandings over boundaries and was glad to be part of a group again.

I ended my first year as a Circle volunteer with an enjoyable Christmas meal after which we agreed to keep in contact with Jack over Christmas and the New Year, especially because he now lived in a shared house with single men who were likely to spend much of the time drinking – and did! When we met up again in January Jack had kept his individual appointments, stayed off alcohol, and reduced his smoking from 60 to 10 cigarettes a day. He was full of resolve, intending to seek employment whereas previously he had made rather a lot of fatalistic excuses for not doing this. I spent a couple of hours with him one Sunday morning drafting his CV, a process that he seemed to find “therapeutic” in itself. My fellow Circle volunteer, as he was a man living on his own, was given approval by our supervisors to let Jack carry out some paid garden maintenance work at his own home, which was a great boost to Jack's confidence and pocket! Because of my own situation as a mother of three teenage daughters, this was a particular boundary that I would never have been prepared to relax and so again I was glad to have the support of another volunteer with complementary skills and resources.

At this point in the Circle's work, Jack has stayed off alcohol for six months. He has been to a job interview at which he made a full disclosure of his offence and prison sentence. He had to face up to the employer's shocked reaction and subsequent refusal of an employment offer. But as a Circle we are looking at ways of engineering a discussion with the employer and also preparing Jack for this kind of situation in the future. Jack showed a mature level of thinking when he chose to look at positive aspects of the experience, such as being offered an interview after just one application with his new CV.

I'm glad I stayed with Jack “for the long haul” and shall continue to do so to the point where the benefits he has gained from our Circle mean that he can become independent of us. I am certain that Jack is less of a risk to society now, because his self-esteem and ability to trust and communicate more effectively with people whose company he enjoys mean that, in his own words, he has “too much to lose now”.

Yvonne Dixon
Volunteer in Jack's Circle



Peter's Circle

Peter is a man in his fifties. Despite a long history of abusing children that included offences of child abduction, he has never received any treatment due to learning difficulties. His last custodial sentence was due to the breach of a Sex Offender Order. The risk he posed upon release was such that the Home Office organised a bed at a local Probation Hostel and tagged him electronically, on a voluntary basis. At this point he was not under any statutory supervision. The Home Office contacted Circles of Support and Accountability asking whether a Circle could also be provided for him. Although Peter was the first person to receive a Circle in the Thames Valley he did not meet the requirement for inclusion in a Circle given that he was in denial with regards to much of his offending and had received no sex offender treatment. The decision to place him in a Circle was based on two key factors.

- a) It was discriminatory to deny him a Circle because he had received no treatment, given that treatment had been denied because of his low IQ
- b) Secondly the risk he posed (MAPPA level 3) to the community was so high (a psychologist's report had expressed the fear that future offending could result in the death of a child) the Project decided that a Circle was appropriate.

Four volunteers for this Circle were carefully chosen, given the nature of the task, and the Circle began to support and monitor Peter:

- 1) Charity worker (Male aged 40. This volunteer was experienced in working with people who were learning disabled)
- 2) Housing officer (Male aged 40)
- 3) Circles Project Co-ordinator (Female aged 30)
- 4) Retired farmer (Male aged 55)

Given the special nature of this Circle it was decided that the Circles Project Co-ordinator should be part of it. Initially the Circle spent time with Peter ensuring that he understood the conditions of the sex offender order and working on a basic relapse prevention plan. The need for this was immediately apparent when volunteers would accompany Peter into town and observe his reaction to children. On one occasion a volunteer reported being in a shop with Peter, when children entered the shop and he in a state of terror hid behind the volunteer. As time progressed Peter became more confident (to the point of seeking advice from a solicitor about the legitimacy of being tagged!) and began to form relationships with other hostel residents. The Circle worked tirelessly through the MAPPA and helped facilitate both employment (cleaning offices) and housing. The housing was with a local association. The warden of the sheltered accommodation had herself been abused as a child and much work was done between her and the Circle on this issue resulting in her being part of the support network.

After a year of working with this man the changes that had occurred were quite overt. His self-esteem, confidence, personal hygiene and appearance had all improved. He had begun to talk about his past offending with the Circle, acknowledging issues he had previously denied. After a year of being in the Circle Peter spent Christmas Day with one of his Circle volunteers. He reported that it was the best Christmas he had ever had.

At the beginning of the Circle's second year Peter was interviewed with regard to other historical offences. He was released on Police bail pending a decision from the Crown Prosecution Service. The regional CPS could not decide whether it was in the public interest and referred it to their national office. A year later no decision has been reached, despite Circles advocating for a decision. This situation has caused a deal of stress to all involved in the management of Peter and has not been helpful in his overall maintenance as the following highlights.

The second and third year of the Circle has been a lesson learnt in the need to be ever vigilant. The Circle had worked hard with Peter and he was finally allocated a small flat on a local housing estate. However with the growth of Peter's confidence came complacency. The Circle began to detect renewed manipulation and deviant behaviour. He had made friendships at his former hostel with two other residents (both sex offenders). With one resident (a vulnerable gay man who also had his own Circle) he started to have a sexual relationship. This relationship was problematic in that it replicated some of the issues evident in past offending behaviour. The friendship with the second man resulted in the purchase of a car (no tax, MOT or insurance). Peter's past modus operandi involved using a vehicle to abduct children. (Not owning a car was a previous licence condition but not a condition included on his Sex Offender Order). He used/coerced the man as a cover for this vehicle: the man, worried and feeling used, informed the Circle. This information was then passed to both Police and Probation and discussed at the MAPPA. Further problems came to light when Circle volunteers discovered that Peter had begun to groom young girls living near by. He was recalled immediately to the hostel while the Police carried out further investigations. This raises serious issues relating to the future accommodation of Peter as any private space, be it a car or a flat/room, facilitates him being able to slip into his old modus operandi and poses serious risk to the community. However it is clear that the work of his Circle has achieved an enormous amount of positive gains. He went three years without reoffending and the Circles involvement played no small part in the protection of the local community. The Circle continues to support and monitor Peter.

A Probation Hostel Manager's Perspective of Peter's Circle

Approved Hostel Premises specialise in the housing and management of offenders who present a high risk of harm to the public. Such offenders are managed in a multi agency capacity and the hostel is highly reliant on other agencies such as police, social services and community mental health teams to assist in the risk management process. Together with the other agencies Circles of Support and Accountability are now playing a major role in managing risk. The majority of offenders are released to the hostel from prison, most of them subject to licence conditions with which the offender must comply. Failure to adhere to these conditions could result in the individual being recalled to prison. In addition they will also be subject to stringent monitoring, the level of which is determined by the level of risk they pose. Such conditions could include electronic tagging, regular reporting, and movement logs. These restrictions help to provide evidence of how and where they are spending time when out of the hostel. For example they will be asked to produce bus tickets to evidence any journeys they have undertaken. They will also be held to account for their hourly movements. However, whatever restrictions are put in place there will be periods when monitoring by the hostel is insufficient. This is where Circles have provided a valuable resource in working with some of the hostel's highest risk offenders. They have supported and enhanced the risk management process by developing a supportive relationship with the offender and helping to assist their safe reintegration into the community.

A good example of how Circles have worked effectively with the hostel is the case of Peter, a 60-year-old entrenched predatory paedophile. Peter has convictions for sexually offending against children over a period of 25 years. His offences ranged from inappropriate touching of young girls to child abduction and rape. Due to his high risk of reoffending Peter had been made the subject of a Sex Offender Order, which contained many conditions to protect the public. Peter breached this order and was sent to prison. It was upon release from this sentence that he arrived at the hostel. It soon became evident that Peter had a low IQ. One of the conditions of Peter's order was not to go within 40 metres of a children's playground. When asked to demonstrate how far 40 metres was, Peter was unable to do so, therefore staff gave him a visible demonstration of the distance. However, his powers of retention were somewhat limited and all information given to him needed to be constantly reinforced. Circles were approached as it was obvious Peter's level of risk would necessitate a very high degree of monitoring. It was also evident that he needed a high level of support if his risk was to be managed effectively. Peter was extremely receptive to the idea of a Circle as he identified loneliness, and an inability to form appropriate adult relationships, as a major trigger to his offending. Circle managers and volunteers spent time getting to know Peter in the hostel, which enabled hostel staff to share relevant information with them. Circle volunteers were very anxious to learn, although initially some members of the Circle were understandably a little naïve in their risk assessment. It was through these joint meetings that greater understanding of the needs of volunteers was identified and further training was put in place.

It is acknowledged that experiential learning, combined with good supervision and training, is essential for volunteers who are dealing with high-risk sex offenders. An example of this is that although one volunteer was conversant with the conditions on Peter's sex offender order, he thought it was okay to park his car within 40 metres of a children's park with Peter as his passenger. He saw himself as being in authority and therefore sufficiently responsible to manage Peter's risk. It was explained to him that although Peter would be strictly monitored during this process, the conditions of his order must be adhered to at all times. Also when dealing with offenders like Peter, who have an inability to fully comprehend instructions, giving mixed messages can prove to be particularly dangerous. The Circles volunteer subsequently realised that giving consistent messages to offenders plays a vital part in their risk management. He stated that this incident had provided him with a valuable learning experience, which enhanced his ability to manage risk.

Following a lengthy stay in the hostel, Circles supported Peter in his move to independent living in the community. The Multi Agency Public Protection Panel identified the risks involved in the move and a risk management plan was put in place. Circles would play a pivotal role in managing his move from the hostel by visiting Peter in his new home on a regular basis. This would help to ensure he was adhering to the conditions of his order, and also provide support to ensure he did not become isolated. As it was acknowledged that Peter could not be monitored 24 hours a day, a decision was taken that the police and Circles would disclose the risk he posed to the warden at the property where Peter was to be housed. The warden would then be in a good position to ensure that children were not visiting the premises. Peter initially settled down well and for the first year he appeared to stringently adhere to the conditions of his order. However, after that period Circle volunteers raised concerns with the police that they had heard that Peter had a car. This was deemed to be a major risk factor and Circle members and the police confronted Peter. He admitted to having previously owned a car but stated he had subsequently sold it. Police and Circles reinforced that it was inappropriate for him to have owned a car due to the

potential risk of him giving lifts to children. Owing to concerns that Peter appeared to be experiencing difficulty in thinking through the consequences of his behaviour, surveillance was stepped up. The warden at Peter's premises was requested by Circle volunteers to be particularly vigilant in monitoring visitors to his flat and ensuring that any concerns were logged and reported immediately. When the warden subsequently contacted one of Peter's Circle to advise that two teenage girls had called at the flats asking for Peter by name, an emergency Multi Agency Public Protection Meeting was held. A decision was taken to move Peter back to the hostel while the matter was investigated. While two Circle volunteers were at Peter's flat collecting his property, two teenage girls and a six-year-old girl knocked on his door. Peter was asked for by name, indicating that he had already had contact with the girls, and a grooming process was already under way. This information provided the Police with tangible evidence that Peter had breached his Sex Offender Order.

The good relationship between Circles and the Warden of the flats had resulted in concerns being raised immediately. This led to prompt intervention, which could well have prevented a serious sexual offence taking place.

Feedback from Peter's volunteers indicates that this case has provided them with valuable experience from which they have derived considerable knowledge. They have understandably been disappointed that someone they worked with for a considerable period was on the verge of committing a sexual offence. However, they can see that their intervention has played an invaluable role in holding Peter to account for his behaviour and also in protecting the public. It has also enabled volunteers to see that a multi agency approach to risk management is essential if high-risk sex offenders are to be managed effectively in the community.

To conclude, Circles of Support and Accountability have been enormously supportive to the hostel in helping to manage the risk of high-risk sex offenders. Indeed staff at the hostel have been so impressed by their input that two members of staff have now undertaken Circles training and have themselves become volunteers. We are currently engaged in more pioneering partnership work with Circles and together we continue to strive towards further improvements in practice to enhance public safety.

Sheila C. Perry
Senior Probation Officer



The Future of Circles of Support and Accountability

Attempting to predict the future is usually unwise if the predictions are going to be published in anything more lasting than a newspaper. Either things turn out more or less as forecast, in which case the reader who picks up the publication in times to come will just think “well it was bound to turn out like that”, or it will all look laughably inaccurate. Nevertheless, there are so many people willing to put serious work and enthusiasm into it that I am willing to say that Circles of Support and Accountability is now virtually unstoppable in Britain. I not only hope but expect that within five years there will be a strong network of Circles projects covering a significant proportion of the country, with more developing all the time. And in ten years time, a high-risk sex offender who wants to live an offence-free life and who is coming up to a release date will have a reasonable expectation that he or she will be able to have a Circle, wherever they will be living. And I dare to suggest that reoffending rates will be reflecting the success of this work.

That’s a lot to predict and I’m not saying any of it will be easy. Prediction doesn’t make things happen, as weather-forecasters know all too well. It will only happen because of the deep commitment of some extraordinary people – Circle members, staff and many others who will do their best to smooth the way. There will no doubt go on being some people who are resistant to the idea. And not every Circle will succeed – we are claiming to significantly reduce the chances of reoffending, not to prevent all reoffending. There will no doubt be disappointments and setbacks. But as Circles increasingly shows that it can help offenders to lead healthier lives, change public perceptions and above all reduce reoffending, opposition will be harder to sustain.

But how will we get there from here? As I write, there are altogether perhaps a dozen formal Circles running in Britain, with a similar number having been officially wound up (though in many cases still operating as informal contacts) and a few others in the process of formation. The three projects funded by the Home Office from 2002 to 2005 have completed their initial pilot periods, with two being given further funding for the coming 12 months and one being in the process of carefully winding up its involvement. A new project in Manchester is receiving some statutory funding and is well on its way to setting up its first Circle. The National Circles Meeting, convened by the Quakers, is moving from being a place where interested parties hear about the work of the pilots to being a forum for a wide variety of organisations to share news of their own moves towards getting work going. Some of those agencies are moving fast, drawing on the experience of the pilots.

The 2005/2006 funding for the Quaker-managed project, based in the Thames Valley, allows for employing two extra staff, one to expand work in the Thames Valley and one to develop an extension into Hampshire. The new staff are already in post. With the office manager, that brings the staff group up to five. In addition, there is funding to enable a new organisation to be launched which can take over from Quaker Peace & Social Witness, whose intention from the start has been to help to establish Circles of Support and Accountability in Britain and then to hand it over, before the work outgrows their capacity to look after it. As I write, we are recruiting for someone to take this forward. Quakers (the Religious Society of Friends) are a small church with under 17,000 members in Britain, but with a tradition of initiating things in the field of social change and then handing them on to others to run in the longer term. One fairly recent example was the Alternatives to Violence

Project (AVP) which runs workshops in prisons and in the community to help people to develop strategies for avoiding all forms of inter-personal violence. It was administered from Quaker central offices and then, as it expanded, launched as an independent charity.

Meanwhile, as many readers will know, the prisons and probation services are themselves going through a major reorganisation. The National Offender Management Service, bringing together both services, is expecting to be operational by April 2006, with most budgets moving to regional level. The plan is that funding for projects like Circles will work on a purchaser-provider basis, being bought as a service by the Regional Offender Managers, rather than the grant-funding we are working with at present. So we need to devise effective ways of working with this new structure. We are in the fortunate position of being able to devise a structure which will fit the new NOMS arrangements. But the other side of that coin is that we don't yet know very much about the details of how the NOMS system will operate and there seem to be slightly too many unknowns in the equation at present. There is much interesting work ahead as we learn from the experiences of other organisations and bring to bear as much creativity as possible to invent a structure that will balance the voluntary with the statutory, be capable of rapid expansion and be flexible while holding firmly to the essentials of the Circles approach. It needs to be a structure which supports a wide variety of initiatives without taking them over.

Alongside the development of formal Circles of Support and Accountability we are increasingly seeing that the basic concept is inspiring people to set up informal "circles". This is most obvious in churches and other faith groups when a congregation becomes aware of a sex offender in their midst – either an existing member or someone who has come to worship with them after release from prison. Some will have a new-found faith as a result of the work of prison chaplains or Alpha courses. Or they may have been transplanted from the area where they used to worship because of the need for them to live away from where their victims live. Most churches have been developing or reworking their child protection policies over the last few years and many are now coming to focus on how those policies connect and balance with their calling to welcome the stranger, to forgive the wrongdoer and to be a place of reconciliation and living community. There are tough issues here and no easy answers. Working them through in practice has led to much pain. Parents, survivors of childhood sexual abuse, offenders and the friends and relatives of everyone involved will have deep-seated responses which are often difficult to articulate, let alone to reconcile.

There is a challenge here for Circles of Support and Accountability. How can we make a constructive contribution? Should we encourage the setting up of informal circles, even though they may lack the careful selection, training and support which we offer to our Circle members? Can – and should – we provide resources, such as manuals and training events to help faith groups to "do circles" as well as possible? Is the risk of something going wrong too great – or would the risks of not offering that support be greater? We need to remember that Circles of Support and Accountability originated in Canada when local churches responded to immediate need – they had no structures of support at the start.

And so one might say Circles is coming full circle. In Britain we have set up a robust relationship between the voluntary and the statutory which is working well, but in the end the work is about the community taking responsibility for its own members. Perhaps it is appropriate to end by echoing the Home Office slogan – "Together we can".

Helen Drewery
Assistant General Secretary, Quaker Peace & Social Witness

Circles of Support and Accountability staff

Shown here are the five staff of the Quaker Peace and Social Witness Circles of Support and Accountability project in the Thames Valley/Hampshire, plus the project's volunteer representative.



Anne Holmes
Office Manager



Ron Macrae
Circles Coordinator



Rebekah (Becky) Saunders
Project Coordinator



Domonic Williams
Circles Coordinator



Chris Wilson
Project Manager



Laurence Clark
Volunteer Representative

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