

# **A Review of the Fife Circles of Support and Accountability Project Commissioned By Sacro – FINAL REPORT**

Sarah Armstrong and Diane Wills  
*Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research  
University of Glasgow*

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## Abbreviations

Circles or CoSA	Circles of Support and Accountability; Circles is capitalised to refer to the overall scheme or model and is written in lower case when referring to individual circles which together constitute the CoSA scheme
CJSW	Criminal Justice Social Work
MAPPA	Multi-agency Public Protection Arrangements
SCCJR	Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research

## Executive Summary

**This report presents an independent review of the Fife Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA or Circles) project run by Sacro.** Circles target people convicted of sex offences who are at high risk of reoffending and social isolation. They bring a group of volunteers from the community together with the offender, called the core member, to support and hold him to account.

**The aims of the research were to document and assess the operation and consider the progress of the Fife Circles project over the four years of its existence.** The research gathered views of those involved in the Circles scheme, observed practices on site and reviewed the available literature and programme documents to assess whether the Fife CoSA supports overall risk management of a concerning group of offenders.

***A key question of this research is whether an offender's risk of reoffending is likely to have been affected by the involvement in a circle.***

**Formal Circles schemes have been running in England for at least 10 years.** Extensive research on existing CoSA has consistently found that offenders in circles have lower rates of offending than similar offenders who have not been involved in circles.

**Sacro runs the Fife Circles project with funding and other support from three partners:** Fife Council, Fife Community Safety Partnership and Fife and Forth Valley Community Justice Authority. Funding is allocated on an annual basis.

**Fife CoSA has operated four circles to date.** Two of these are well-established, with one having completed its formal period of meeting. Two were between six months and a year old at the time of this research.

**The core members in the Fife Circles share a similar profile.** All were convicted of offences related to child sexual abuse, and all are male. The ages of core members range from the early 20s through early 50s.

**As in the largest Circles project in England, the profile of volunteers in Fife is predominantly female.** Volunteers typically had professional or volunteer experience in criminal justice.

**In the Fife CoSA volunteers felt that the support and accountability functions of a circle are intertwined and mutually reinforcing.** The development of trust through support was perceived to facilitate greater awareness of accountability issues. Volunteers also placed value in not being paid professionals in developing a relationship of trust and emotional honesty with the core member.

**Volunteers described their role as managing risk rather than eliminating it.** They described the role of Circles as complementary to rather than independent of the work of statutory agencies.

**Core Members also underlined the value of working with non-professionals.** They felt this allowed for conversations about more than risk and danger to take place, supporting development of a positive self-identity that would allow for participation in healthy activities and relationships.

**Core members gave examples of practical support and sociality in participating in Circles.** Volunteers had helped connect them to useful organisations and hobbies, and had led social outings.

**Core members felt volunteer turnover in their circles undermined or delayed their ability to trust the group.** They also expressed the desire that there be male volunteers in their circles.

**Overall, core members expressed positive views about Circles.** Some claimed they had no doubt they would have reoffended in the absence of the circle.

**External stakeholders (CJSW, police and funders) all had generally positive views of Circles and the CoSA staff.** Many mentioned the need for hard evidence to present a convincing case of their effectiveness and educate the public.

### *Findings*

**Overall, we conclude that: the Fife Circles project makes use of accepted standards of operation; there is strong support for the work and value of Circles among participants and outside agencies; and, the presence of Circles is consistent with the aim of community safety.** Issues to be considered are about strengthening adherence to standards around

volunteer numbers and training opportunities.

**A key issue to be addressed is the dearth of male volunteers and the numbers of volunteers per circle.** At the time of the research this had already been identified as a priority by CoSA staff. The average number of volunteers per circle is lower than found in the larger CoSA schemes in England and Wales or Canada. More volunteers allows for natural attrition and occasional absences without loss of continuity.

**The year to year financial arrangement for Fife CoSA affects longer term planning and optimisation of Circles.** Longer range needs such as ongoing recruitment and training of volunteers and an exit strategy for circles, which typically last at least two years, tend to play out over cycles longer than one year.

**Current information sharing protocols were widely reported to be acceptable, well understood and well employed.** All interviewees identified information sharing as satisfactory, and there were many reported examples of excellent practice.

**There is a cautious realism among participants about the ability of Circles to impact on reoffending.** There were many signs and examples of the subtle and intermediate ways Circles might influence reoffending. This included improving a core member's self confidence and ability to see oneself as more than an offender, and thus potentially a contributing member of society. Many volunteers and core members noted, however, that Circles was not a total 'cure'.

**Regular booster or advanced training to volunteers is recommended by Circles UK.** This is advised to protect against relaxing boundaries and allow for development of expertise in working with sexual offenders.

**CoSA staff and volunteers appear well able to work with the current profile core members; adaptation may be**

**required should this profile change.** A change in the core member profile, particularly the recruitment of offenders with different (e.g. adult) victim profiles or more challenging personalities will require careful management and adaptation.

## 1. Background and Aims

Sacro contracted with SCCJR to conduct an independent review of its Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA or Circles) project currently running in Fife. As of the time of writing, the Fife Circles project has been operating for four years, an adequate period of time to take stock, consider the progress of individual circles and the development of the CoSA pilot in Scotland. This report attempts to provide an independent review of Sacro's Fife Circles; none of the research team has any current affiliation with CoSA.

The team conducting the review comprised Dr Sarah Armstrong, project coordinator; Ms Diane Wills, principal researcher; and Professor Fergus McNeill, consulting investigator. Ms Wills was the primary mover in the fieldwork, conducting all interviews, amassing relevant literature and conducting site visits to observe and meet with participants.

The research was conducted between April 2013 and July 2013. The ethical and risk dimensions of this research have been reviewed and approved by the ethics review board of the College of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Glasgow.

The aims of the research are to:

- Summarise the relevant literature on CoSA, from the UK and beyond;
- Present the background on the origins of Sacro's Circles Project in Fife;
- Document the operation of the four circles now running in Fife, providing baseline detail about their members, meetings and the management of these;
- Gather information from a range of stakeholders, primarily Circle members and associated social workers and police to develop a sense of the perceptions about the model's actual and potential strengths and weaknesses;
- Analyse all this data to produce findings as to the relative progress of Circles and their contribution to the overall management of risk and prevention of victimisation.

It is important to clarify in addition to these aims what the research does not do. First of all, this research does not constitute an outcome evaluation of the Fife Circles project. Such an evaluation would entail a much larger and longer term research effort, likely involving a comparison or control group. Second, this research does not assess the risk or progress of any individual core member.

The key questions guiding this review are:

1. Does the CoSA project in Fife operate according to accepted principles of management of Circles elsewhere?
2. What do participants and those responsible for its operation feel about the mode and effectiveness of current operations?
3. Are there any areas where the CoSA project might develop or improve its operations?
4. And finally, on the basis of available information and observation, is it likely that the risk of reoffending for those participating is less than if the Circles project did not exist?

## 2. Methodology and Research Activities

The research was conducted using a qualitative methodology relying mainly on semi-structured interviews of the members of Fife's four circles as well as key stakeholders connected to these. In addition to interviews, the research involved documentary analysis and on-site observation of operations.

A qualitative methodology, which involves the objective analysis of participants' situation and subjective impressions, is best suited to capturing a contemporaneous and holistic picture of practice. Although the numbers involved in the Fife Circles pilot are too small and too new to support a longitudinal statistical analysis (i.e. quantitative evaluation), there is good reason to believe that a quantitative methodology is not best suited to this setting in any case. Questions have been raised generally about quantitative analysis and about randomised controlled trials (RCTs) of community-based programmes (see Armstrong et al., 2008). The crucial issue is that where the community is both a setting and mode of intervention it is impossible to identify and disentangle the independent effects of a variety of factors that may be at work while a person is in the community. Communities are described as integral to the approach of CoSA.

Moreover, at least in the UK, CoSA are not generally employed as an independent and sole tool of risk management, which means it is neither possible nor sensible to 'measure' statistically its result. For these reasons, this review adopts a mode of inquiry which can identify and relate a variety of data sources of supporting and working with offenders. It emphasises the perceptions of participants, the extent to which these perceptions could be validated through researcher observation, and the degree to which operations are consistent with projects where research has shown there to be reduced levels of risk or reoffending. This is not to say that quantitative information is not relevant, and where available and meaningful is referred to in this report.

Research activities undertaken for this review are summarised as follows:

### *Documentary Analysis*

Published literature on CoSA: the researchers attempted to source published reports, books and articles specifically on Circles of Support and Accountability. This included articles in academic journals, mentions of CoSA in books, as well as materials produced by Circles projects themselves. The literature review establishes the origins of CoSA and documents the state of research on this approach, clarifying key issues relevant for this review.

Relevant guidelines and standards: Circles UK is establishing itself as a UK-wide accrediting and training body for Circles projects. The Circles UK handbook was reviewed and, as these are the guidelines adopted by Fife Circles Project serves as a point of reference for the present research.

Analysis of Fife CoSA files: As part of this review, case files and meeting minutes were made available to the SCCJR research team. The analysis of this material focused on gaining a sense of how these fed into the larger management and governance of Circles. These materials were not analysed to assess risk or individual management of any particular core member.

### *Interviews*

SCCJR conducted interviews with three groups: (1) *core members*, or the offenders who are at the heart of the CoSA; (2) *volunteers* from the community who complete the circles; (3) other *stakeholders* including key Sacro staff members with responsibility for managing or overseeing CoSA and representatives of statutory agencies (CJSW, Police, Local Authorities) with responsibility for core members or other involvement in CoSA.

Most interviews were conducted in person, digitally recorded and professionally transcribed. A small number of stakeholder interviews were conducted by telephone with manual notes taken as a record of the conversation. Interview topics and questions are included as an appendix to this report.

To protect the confidentiality of research participants, interviewees and quotations are referred to by a code that assigns a number and a letter to each. 'CM' refers to core members; 'V' refers to volunteer; 'S' refers to Fife CoSA staff or other stakeholder. SCCJR interviewed all four core members; three volunteers from two different circles; and five stakeholders.

### *Observation*

The principal researcher undertook two two-day visits to the Fife offices in which Circles staff conduct operations and where circles meet. These visits allowed for face to face interviews, observation of on-site practices, identification and collection of relevant documents and attendance at one circle meeting.

### 3. Literature and Background on Circles

Circles of Support and Accountability originated in the late 1990s from an initiative of the Mennonite church in Canada to address the typically extreme social isolation and risk of some sex offenders, particularly those whose victims are children. These original circles operated where an offender was completing a sentence and thus exiting all forms of criminal justice supervision and control. In the UK Circles tend to be used with offenders who remain under some existing criminal justice control, i.e. licence conditions and active probation supervision. However, participation in Circles is voluntary rather than a condition of a licence in England and Wales or Scotland.

Circles have become a relatively well known initiative in the UK among those working with perpetrators of sexual offences (e.g. included in general textbooks on working with sex offenders, e.g., Brayford et al., 2012). Briefly, CoSA aim to provide a means of mentoring and monitoring high risk offenders in the community. Its defining, and sometimes controversial, feature is the use of lay volunteers drawn from the surrounding community who form a 'circle' around the offender, referred to as the 'core member'. Volunteers regularly meet with, support and confront core members, assisting them with and modelling positive social interaction and challenging concerning thoughts and behaviour patterns. The ideal or typical number of volunteers participating in a given Circle has been listed in the literature as between four and six (e.g. C. Wilson et al., 2010). It has been identified as working in line with restorative justice principles (Id.). CoSA also have been described as a 'public health' model of working with high risk offenders, by addressing their risk while in the community and focusing on holistic and reintegrative strategies rather than exclusionary ones (e.g. prison) (Kemshall, 2007).

The Canadian Circles led to Home Office funding of pilot schemes in the UK run by a number of organisations and according to different models (of working in partnership or under statutory bodies; the origins and different approaches of Circles schemes in the UK are reviewed in Nellis, 2009). One of the original pilots, funded by the Home Office and led by a collaboration between Thames Valley Probation and the Quaker church, eventually merged with a pilot run by Hampshire Probation. This project, now referred to as Circles South East, is the largest CoSA operation in the UK and has recently published its ten year review (Circles South East, 2012). A separate organisation was spun off from this regional Circle project under the name Circles UK, to offer training, consultancy and accreditation of CoSA projects around the UK and beyond. The Sacro Fife CoSA was set up and is organised based on the Circles UK model. Although the Fife Circles project is not yet accredited by Circles UK, their staff have undergone training from and use the operations manual of Circles UK (referred to in this report as the Circles UK Handbook).

There have been some informal Circles operating in Scotland, where community-based mentors have been recruited to support an isolated offender, but there have been no central government funded pilots as was the case in England and Wales (Nellis, 2009). In

2008, in response to requests from Sacro among others to fund CoSA in Scotland the Scottish Government authorised a feasibility study of establishing Circles pilots (Armstrong et al., 2008). Although that study reported high levels of support for CoSA pilots in Scotland, the Government declined at that stage to fund them. One of the reasons given for this was the need of allowing the recently implemented MAPPA arrangements to bed in before introducing new schemes for dealing with a concerning form of offending (MacAskill, 2008).

The empirical evidence cited in the literature on Circles continues to come from two main sources: research on Canadian Circles (mainly by Robin Wilson and colleagues based on evidence collected in the late 1990s/early 2000s; see also Cesaroni, 2001) and research on the Thames Valley (and latterly Hampshire area) Circles, by those affiliated with it (e.g. Circles South East, 2012; Bates et al., 2007). The research on Circles has provided information about: descriptive data on the operation of circles, such as the number of meetings and duration; the views of core members (i.e. offenders), volunteers and, to a lesser extent, general members of the public; the profile and background of volunteers in Circle projects; information about the history and nature of offending among those involved in circles; and, crucially, the reoffending trends of those who have participated in CoSA. This section summarises key issues in the existing research.

Circle Numbers: CoSA have now been used and studied with a reasonably large number of people involved in sexual offending, including around 100 sex offenders over 10 years in the Circles South East (UK) project, and 150 offenders over 15 years (in 18 different sites) in Canada (C. Wilson et al., 2010). The Circles South East 10 year report (2012, hereafter the CSE 10) included 71 Circles which had operated in its catchment area. The average duration of a Circle in this study was 15.9 months with the longest active Circle lasting over five years (Id., p. 45).

Core Members: Research shows CoSA have been used with offenders engaged in particularly concerning and serious forms of sexual offending, often involving contact offences against children (C. Wilson et al., 2010). For example, the core member profile of the CSE 10 study (2012) comprised predominantly male offenders who had committed contact sexual offences (80.5%), the majority of which were against children (86.2%). Reflecting the severity of their offending, nearly 80% had received a custodial sentence. The same study noted 65 of 71 core members were assessed at MAPPA level 2 or 3, levels at which offenders are considered to require active, multi-agency involvement due to a high risk of reoffending.<sup>1</sup> The core members' average age in the CSE 10 was nearly 48 years old. In the Canadian research the group of offenders participating in Circles as a group tended to rank high on applicable risk scales (R. Wilson, et al., 2005).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> MAPPA are Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements for managing offenders brought into being through Scottish legislation in 2005, and earlier in England and Wales. Its three levels of risk from 1 (lowest) to 3 (highest) have implications for the intensity with which an offender is monitored. At levels 2 or 3 an offender is considered to be at high enough risk of causing serious harm to require regular supervision and involvement of statutory agencies.

<sup>2</sup> The Canadian research measured risk using two tools: the Static-99, a tool for measuring violent or sexual reoffending risk using static risk factors and Rapid Risk Assessment for Sexual Offense Recidivism (RRASOR) (see Wilson et al., 2005).

Surveys of core member perceptions shows a pattern of uncertainty and scepticism about Circles that has tended to dissipate the longer one is involved in them. Research has picked up anecdotally on rumours circulating among prisoners and offender groups that Circles is staffed by judges and police with the aim of sending one back to prison (Cesaroni, 2001). Generally though, core members participating in Circles have been positive about their involvement and expressed growing trust in the volunteers of their group (e.g. Wilson et al., 2007). Often, participation in Circles has been the only sustained social contact, beyond contact with criminal justice agencies, for offenders (e.g. Wilson et al., 2007).

Volunteer Profile: In contrast to the demographic profile of core members, volunteers in the Circles South East region tend to be female (nearly 74%) and younger as a group than the core members (49 of 161 volunteers, or around 30% were 26 years old at the time of the CSE 10 research). Many of the CSE 10 volunteers are students, often at the postgraduate level working in criminology or a related field (e.g. psychology) at nearby universities and colleges. However, despite skewing more female and younger than the typical core member, the overall group of volunteers in the CSE 10 study and in earlier research on this region showed a great deal of diversity in terms of age and professional and educational background (Hampshire & Thames Valley Circles, 2008). Interviews of staff at the Thames Valley Circles project also revealed that Circles' staff aimed to maximise appropriate diversity and responsiveness to the core member's profile (Armstrong et al., 2008). A Circle comprising younger volunteers was likely to be balanced by the addition of an older volunteer, according to staff reports. The CSE 10 research noted that the volunteer profile has been shifting from an older age band, recruited often through religious networks, reflecting perhaps the involvement of the Quaker church in the founding of the Thames Valley pilot CoSA, towards one drawing more on tertiary educational institutions, and therefore younger people. The profile of volunteers in the Canadian research has shown more consistent and steady involvement of those recruited through or motivated by religious beliefs, again likely reflecting the movement's origin in the work of a religious organisation (e.g., Cesaroni, 2001).

Volunteer Experience: The Canadian and English research showed some similarities among volunteers in that many had had a professional or volunteering experience in criminal justice. There were also some overlapping motivations for volunteering across jurisdictions and research. These included wanting to make a difference, feeling strongly about social inclusion, religious or moral conviction, gaining additional experience and helping others. In other words, the research conveys that volunteers rather than coming directly from the community with no experience of crime or justice issues often have backgrounds working or volunteering with offenders or in criminal/youth justice.

Volunteer Risk: One of the more prominent concerns about Circles as they have developed in the UK is about the risk to volunteers recruited from the community. However, to date, the published literature has revealed no reported offences against volunteers by core members. Concerns have also been expressed about the

motivation and ability of volunteers to work with sex offenders. There have been sexual abuse survivors among volunteers (in Canada, see Cesaroni, 2001), though the CSE 10 research reported that of 320 volunteers who completed training, only six were formally deselected one of the reasons for which included being a sexual abuse survivor where a coping issue might arise in working with offenders (Circles South East, 2012: 67).

There remains a gap in the research on volunteers who have dropped out of the process at recruitment and training stages. Existing research tends to include volunteers of relatively long standing, which may produce a self selecting group of those committed to the approach (e.g., Drewery, 2003; Wilson et al., 2007).

Reoffending and Other Outcomes: Reoffending rates, i.e. the rates of re-arrest or reconviction, for those involved in Circles have been lower in both English and Canadian research. 'Overall, the reconviction data for Circles South East remains very positive – the key finding being that no Circles South East core member has been convicted of a contact sexual offence since being involved in a circle' (Circles South East, 2012: 45). Unlike a comparison group, the CSE 10 found that 'no Circles South East core member was reconvicted of a violent offence' nor 'a new contact sexual offence'. (Id: 54) The Canadian research (Wilson et al., 2005) found that the 60 studied offenders who participated in Circles had significantly lower rates of general reoffending than a matched comparison group of 60 offenders. They also had a 70% reduction in sexual recidivism in contrast to the matched comparison group (3 cases of recidivism in the CoSA group compared to 10 cases in the non-CoSA group) and a 57% reduction in all types of violent recidivism and an overall reduction of 35% in all types of recidivism (Id.).<sup>3</sup> Where further sexual offending did occur, these offences were reported to be less severe than prior offences by the same individuals (Id.).

In addition to basic reoffending data, the feasibility study for Scottish CoSA pilots picked up on several other ways that people talked about the success of Circles in the existing research (Armstrong et al., 2008). For offenders, positive impressions of Circles included their ability to boost self esteem which in turn aided coping skills against reoffending or facilitated development of social relationships and employment. For volunteers, there was an expressed sense of taking back control of community safety and being able to directly influence a serious and damaging kind of offending. For staff of Circles projects as well as statutory agencies, there was a morale boost in having an auxiliary service able to carry out some of the activities known to be linked to desistance (social support, employment, confidence, etc.) but which were beyond the remit or resources of official actors. These outward rippling effects of CoSA have become an important area of research in their own right (Wilson et al., 2007).

The body of research on Circles has now reached a considerable size, and continues to grow. Some of the early issues around Circles as they were implemented in the UK have moved

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<sup>3</sup> Recidivism was defined in the Wilson et al., 2005, study as instances of re-conviction or breach of a probation/parole condition.

from being live concerns to issues that are generally accepted to be manageable. This review of the background and existing evidence provides the context for considering the Fife Circles. Though the Fife CoSA project by comparison is new and small, the developing research base can identify how the Fife Circles are or are not similar in their profile or progress.

## **4. Organisation of the Fife Circles Project**

### **A. Circles in Fife**

Following the decision of the Scottish Government not to fund CoSA pilots in Scotland, Sacro found partners to develop its own pilot in Fife. Sacro has a local background in working with sexual offenders in the context of assisting with supported accommodation. Sacro developed the Circles scheme through funding and support from the Fife Council, Fife Community Safety Partnership and Fife & Forth Valley Community Justice Authority. According to interviews funding is allocated and reviewed on an annual basis.

Establishment and approval of the Circles pilot by all accounts required extensive preparatory legwork, primarily by the project's first coordinator. The Fife Circles adopted at the outset the model designed by Circles UK, and has purchased their training programme and handbook. Fife Circles is not yet accredited by Circles UK but adheres to its approach. Pursuing accreditation may depend on securing longer term funding that would sustain the project for a longer period of time.

Recruitment of core members through Criminal Justice Social Workers initially resulted in the establishment of two circles which began formally meeting in 2010. Two more, for a total of four circles to date, were established more recently, one over a year ago and one within the last six months. One of the circles has had its final meeting as a formal group in the midst of this research, although the volunteers and core member plan to continue meeting informally on a regular basis.

### **B. Organisation, management and governance**

Sacro staffs the Fife Circles project and provides office and meeting space supported by funding from its three partners. The Circles Coordinator position has seen three people in post so far, with a Sacro Service Manager taking up the position in addition to other duties on an interim basis until the recent hiring of the current full-time Coordinator. The Coordinator reports to the local Service Manager.

The Coordinator role is central to the day to day management of Circles and the overall governance of the CoSA project. The Coordinator is involved at all stages and levels of CoSA from recruitment and training of volunteers to oversight of Circle meetings to information sharing with statutory agencies. The Coordinator may, and currently does, fill in as a volunteer member of a Circle when circumstances dictate. Turnover in the Coordinator role, in which three people have filled the position over four years, was noted by interviewees as a cause of some loss of continuity. In the past, the Coordinator post was not a full-time position. At the time of the research the current Coordinator was fairly new in post, though the position now operates on a full-time basis.

According to interviews the core members are initially identified by Fife Council's Criminal Justice Social Workers. The target criteria are those offenders who are deemed at high risk of reoffending, as well as socially isolated and motivated. Fife Circles staff then assesses that person to determine whether it is deemed to be an appropriate referral. Staff interviewed suggested that there is an under supply of referrals. A circle can be formed when a person agrees to participate as a core member. Once this has happened a group of volunteers is assigned and will be given limited, relevant background information about the person's offending prior to the circle's first meeting. For example, the volunteers would be briefed about specific licence conditions, the general category of offence and custody status and offending history. A police liaison may attend this meeting along with the social worker of the core member to provide this information and discuss it with the group of new volunteers. The circle, comprising volunteers and core member, then meets and engages in introductions, and the core member will often discuss their conviction and sentence. Going over details of offending is discouraged and interviewed volunteers consistently reported this boundary was respected by all circle members.

The Circle itself consists as noted of the core member and a group of volunteers. The number of volunteers across Fife CoSA appears to average around three per circle. Occasionally there have been four, and the number has also dipped down temporarily to two, for example in the case of long term sick leave of a volunteer or a periodic inability of a volunteer to attend a meeting.

In accordance with the Circles UK model, there are two phases of operation. In Phase 1, the Circle meets weekly. This provides the opportunity for getting to know each other and developing a rapport which might facilitate targeting of support and also monitoring. While Phase 1 provisionally is set to last for the first six months, this period may be extended as has happened with some of the Circles in Fife. In Phase 2, meetings may occur less frequently shifting from weekly to bi-monthly to monthly. The researchers note that in Fife, however, interviewed Circles members reported meeting on a weekly basis even into Phase 2.

In addition to a circle's regular meetings, Fife CoSA's current policy under its recently hired Coordinator, and echoing the guidance in the Circles UK Handbook, is to conduct quarterly reviews for each circle. Interviewees at the time of research were not entirely clear about the frequency of reviews though reported these happening at least twice per year. The review meetings provide an opportunity to check in formally with the Coordinator and to involve the core member's social worker as well as the police. One of the purposes of such meetings is to guard against the Circle becoming complacent or overly informal and remaining vigilant of the needs and risks of offenders.

Two years was mentioned as a rough guideline to the duration of a circle though there appears to be no set period when the circle must end. The exit point appears to emerge through consensus among the circle's members in consultation with the Coordinator and outside agencies. One circle had its last official meeting during the course of this research, after meeting for about two and a half years.

Minutes are taken of every meeting of a circle. Interviewees reported that the responsibility for this generally rotates among the Circle's volunteers. Minutes are submitted to the Coordinator who reviews them and distributes them to the core member's social worker, the police (and thence reportedly also to ViSOR<sup>4</sup>) and MAPPA. Any issues in the minutes then can be flagged for discussion or action. Issues that any member of the Circle, including the core member, feels requires action do not require to be minuted first; they may be directly referred to the Coordinator or other agent including the police or Criminal Justice Social Work. An example of how information sharing works is this: one core member admitted to his Circle that being housed across from school had led to some 'bad thoughts'. This was passed on to the core member's social worker, to whom he then went into more detail when the social worker raised it. This led to a conversation between core member and social worker about strengthening the relapse prevention plan and identifying specific strategies for addressing dangerous thoughts. The Coordinator takes an active role in information sharing and may follow up distribution of minutes with a phone call to volunteers or outside agencies to discuss pertinent issues raised in them.

Information sharing appears to work in both directions in that not only does information flow from the Circle to other people but information about the core member has been shared with the Coordinator and involved circle.

### **C. Volunteers: recruitment, training, profile**

Sacro staff reported active recruitment of volunteers through a range of methods. Sacro has received volunteer applications following presentations at conferences and workshops and in other contacts where a person may have heard indirectly about the possibility of the pilot project developing in Fife. Circles staff report they, like Circles South East have recruited through universities. Church recruitment does not appear to be particularly significant or prioritised as in other CoSA schemes, such as in Canada and in the early days of the Thames Valley Circles, two places where religious groups played a central role in establishing Circles. Recruitment is reportedly going well with excess numbers requesting or applying to become Circle volunteers. However, there is a reported dearth of male volunteers. There has been some volunteer turnover and attrition in Circles which has not been fully rectified as yet (see also the next chapter on participant perspectives), though this could be a function of screening, ensuring the right mix of age and gender among Circle volunteers and training schedules than lack of volunteer supply.

Stakeholder interviews suggested a desire to keep a balance between providing the right set of skills to the volunteers but not 'professionalising' them. The need to match volunteers to core members also came up in interviews in that respondents felt a mixture of people who will be empathic with the core member as well as those who will be very challenging was important.

Training of volunteers follows the Circles UK Handbook protocol and was delivered at least to the first round of volunteers by Circles UK staff. It involves an intensive full weekend session in which there is role playing, professional presentations on the etiology of sex

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<sup>4</sup> Violent and Sexual Offenders' Register.

offending and behaviour of sex offenders. The Circles UK Handbook recommends annual training sessions be offered to volunteers, though it is not clear whether this is offered or taken up in the Fife Circles project. Volunteers in Fife do have the opportunity of one on one meetings with the Coordinator to check in on coping and management of their Circles participation. Volunteers reported there is the constant opportunity for informal contact with the Coordinator. As the Coordinator was new in post at the time of interview, formal supervision arrangements were not covered. Sacro report that the current Coordinator has actively pursued development of a training programme involving a broad range of opportunities both specific and beyond management of sexual offenders.

Volunteer and staff interviewees reported that volunteer departures from Circles were the result of unrelated changes in life circumstances – such as moving out of the area, changing jobs or taking up incompatible responsibilities (working as a foster carer). An exit interview is conducted when a volunteer departs, during which the reason for departure can be noted and support offered.

Similar to the volunteers in Circles South East (CSE 10, 2012), interviewed volunteers had a background in criminal justice or social inclusion (either professionally or through prior volunteer experience). As in other places there appears to be a gender balance towards women among volunteers. During the five month fieldwork period of this research three of the four circles had no male volunteers, although there had been males at some point during the tenure of these circles.

The motivation to participate in Circles among interviewed volunteers was driven largely by two stated factors: (a) a desire for no more victims and (b) a personal conviction in the need of social inclusion of this group of offenders. Further detail about volunteer perspectives is provided in the chapter on participant perspectives.

#### **D. Core members: recruitment, background, profile**

All the core members in the Fife Circles are men and all have convictions for contact offences against under age males (in one case the contact offence is historical and the present offence involved downloading child pornography). According to interviews of stakeholders, the core members are all categorised under MAPPA Level 2. This is broadly consistent with the profile of offenders in the Circles South East cohort, and predictable given that offending against children tends to be associated with the highest levels of social isolation. The core members show diversity in terms of age, specific offending details and criminal justice experience, though somewhat surprisingly only one of the core members reports having any prior convictions to their current offences. All four were invited to participate in a circle following time in prison and a perception of need based on potential social isolation. The core members all participated in circles while under licence, though participation was not a condition of this.

All the core members reported learning about Circles from their Criminal Justice Social Workers. Some of the core members had previously participated in treatment programmes whilst in custody. When the notion of Circles was put to them, all the core members felt

that it sounded like something which might help them to live in their community. One remembered initially feeling nervous that the volunteers might be vigilantes wanting to physically assault him.

With regard to close and family relationships, two core members reported maintaining regular contact with one or both parents. Two core members reported no longer having contact with family members. All of the core members have experienced extreme social isolation, in one case the social worker was the only person with whom they were in contact. One or two had become estranged from all family members, while the others were in contact with only one or a small number of family members. This social isolation is exacerbated by the lack of employment for most of the men, though some have found volunteering opportunities.

Not unlike research on criminal justice populations in Scotland and generally, alcohol and mental health issues as well as childhood abuse arose in nearly all interviews with core members. Two stated having a diagnosis of, or described themselves as having, a significant mental health issue such as depression. Two reported using or having a problem with alcohol at the time of their offence. A number of the core members reported experiences of sexual abuse as children. Confidence and self esteem issues were raised in most interviews and is elaborated in the chapter describing participant perspectives.

In sum, the Fife Circles core member profile is similar to that found in CoSA programmes elsewhere. Core members possess a higher level of risk and higher degree of social isolation than many other kinds of offenders. There is a mix of ages and stages of participation in Circles.

## 4. The Fife Circles

This chapter briefly describes the four circles underway in Fife at the time of this research.<sup>5</sup> It is based on interviews of participants and stakeholders, and one observation of a circle's meeting. Description of the circles overall, supplemented by detail about an observed meeting offers a lens into the holistic and group dynamic qualities of CoSA as they are operated in Fife.

Two of the circles are far along the process, with one having closed formally at the time of the initial field visit. Two circles are still establishing ground.

There was only opportunity to observe one circle meeting during the process of this review; this was of one of the newer circles. It was attended by the core member, one male and one female volunteer. Both volunteers demonstrated considerable respect for each other and the core member, with each volunteer bringing different ideas to the meeting. The meeting had an informal feel, and was at a very relaxed pace. The volunteers were gently probing in their responses to the core member, for example, asking a scaling question when he responded he felt very isolated. There was a focus on allowing the core member to identify the skills he has which might be useful in an employment situation. There was also some practical advice about buying goods for his home.

The dynamic of this observed circle meeting was one of the core member presenting as unconfident and unassertive in general life situations but having a safe space to check out socially appropriate responses in given situations, for example being told it is OK to browse round a shop without buying anything. The two volunteers were gently encouraging, probing, always maintaining respect and sensitivity, challenging the core member when he had not done what he said he would. The core member participated in the discussion about what had been discussed and what would be recorded in the minutes.

### Circle 1

This circle is well established, in Phase 2 (having been meeting for around two years). The core member is in his late 40s to early 50s. The volunteers currently consist of three women. The circle formerly had two men and two women; one of the male volunteers left at some point after the first six months. One female volunteer has been the consistent presence since the establishment of this circle. In addition, one of the three female volunteers is reported to be on long-term sick leave, so the circle has operated during the last three months with three volunteers. Two of the female volunteers were interviewed. Despite volunteer turnover, interviewed members of the existing circle report strong rapport and commitment, and state their intention to continue meeting after circle has ended. Volunteers have occasionally met with the core member on outings outside of circle meetings. There has been lots of assistance and support emotional and material in

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<sup>5</sup> Towards the end of this research project, recruitment and planning for a fifth circle was underway.

facilitating core member's making social connections and accessing volunteer opportunities and connections to support groups outside the circle.

## **Circle 2**

This circle has been meeting for around two and a half years and has now ended its formal meetings. The core member is in his early to mid 30s. The circle initially began with one male volunteer (also the CoSA Coordinator at the time) and two women. The circle continued with two women following the departure of the male Coordinator, recruited a third, female, volunteer who did not develop a rapport with the group and eventually left CoSA. This circle is tightly knit with a close sense of mutual friendship emerging from the group. Its atmosphere was not infrequently described by its members as fun, informal, enjoyable. Volunteers have continued to meet with the core members following the end of their circle and state they intend to continue on a regular basis. The core member expressed a strong sense of feeling cared for, of 'having [my] faith in humanity restored'.

## **Circle 3**

This Circle is reaching the end of Phase 1, at the time of writing it had been meeting for approximately a year. The core member is in his early to mid 20s. It has been running long enough for the core member, who entered the Circle with some scepticism and shyness to have developed a positive sense of its role. The core member expressed the circle's advantage of having people to talk with about non-offence related topics and to have a group of mixed age, gender and experience to turn to as needed. It was noted, however, that in its early days the Circle seating arrangement, with volunteers on one side and the core member on the other, felt akin to an interview situation than a less hierarchical group. Practical examples of Circle intervention and assistance include discussing and educating the core member about the risks of online gaming leading to the core member's own choice to refrain from this given inability to verify ages of people online. The Circle has played a role in encouraging an interest in cycling and offering support and ideas around pursuing this within licence conditions.

## **Circle 4**

This is the newest of the four circles and is still in its first phase. The core member is in his early to mid 40s. It experienced a good deal of volunteer turnover at the beginning, though it has retained two of its four original volunteers. One female and one male volunteer have left this circle. Currently the CoSA Coordinator participates as the third volunteer. The core member has expressed a desire for there to be a male volunteer, and reports the project is attempting to provide one. At the time of writing the core member stated he would feel more comfortable talking about his offending and risk of reoffending with his social worker, and the circle members about the day to day issues of his life.

## 5. Participant Perspectives

In this chapter we present perceptions of Fife CoSA organised by participant type and by theme or issue.

### E. Volunteer Perspectives

#### The decision to volunteer

All volunteers interviewed reported being proactive in seeking volunteering opportunities with Sacro Circles. Two of the volunteers are mature students in related fields and one volunteer had a professional background which included knowledge of Sacro. All seemed to share a similar value system of supporting approaches which promote social justice and inclusion. There was an expression of interest in working with and supporting the most socially maligned people in the wider context of it contributing to public protection.

*'my Dad was a policeman, and I think I've always been interested in how law works, and reducing re-offending, I suppose, is a huge interest for me too, because I know that there's not huge effective ways of doing that, of stopping each problem, and I read about this and I sent an email to a contact' (V0009)*

#### Views on training

All three volunteers spoke very positively about their training experiences with Circles UK and felt it had a good balance of providing information and experiential work. It was felt that the training enabled the volunteers to feel well equipped to work with sexual offenders in the context of Circles. Some volunteers thought it would be helpful to have a bi-annual or annual training event. The Circles UK Handbook advises that booster or advanced training should be made available for volunteers who have been volunteering for more than a year. 'Over time volunteers can allow their personal boundaries to slip resulting in the possibility of manipulation and collusion by the core member' (Circles UK, 2012: 11).

#### Supervision of volunteers

With regards to supervision arrangements for volunteers, these appear to have varied with changes of Coordinator. The Circles UK Handbook does not provide for prescribed supervision arrangements. Sacro Circles volunteers have talked variously about having no formal or 'semi-formal' supervision to having supervision every four to six months with a previous Coordinator. As noted, given the current Coordinator was fairly new in post supervision arrangements had not yet been put into place at the time of interviews. All volunteers described arrangements as being wholly adequate for their role and they all appeared comfortable to contact the Coordinator at any time.

## **Developing a rapport within the Circle**

Volunteers described a similar process of their circles evolving: initially feeling unsure about how the meetings should be managed and then gradually relaxing into a dynamic which feels comfortable for everyone. In a sense, although the meetings run to a formal initial format, they appear to develop more organically with a rhythm and pace created by those involved as they go along.

There have inevitably been some changes with the volunteer contingent. The volunteers talked about previous Circle members including some who appeared not to be suitable for this type of work and some who have left due to other reasons. One volunteer described this process as fluid and something which can be viewed as an experience which can enhance the core member's ability to be adaptable. Volunteers did not talk about the process of matching volunteers to core members but they shared a sense of their own circle being made up of volunteers whose styles are complementary to each other. There was a clear expression from one volunteer about the benefit of having male volunteers acting as role models for the (male) core member. It is to be noted that the three volunteers interviewed are far into the process of being a Circle member. This meant that they were able to talk reflectively about their circle forming as a group, the subsequent comings and goings and the group settling down. There have clearly been strong friendships formed between volunteers.

The volunteers describe their relationship with their core member as having developed into friendship or 'qualified friendship'. They feel comfortable with the amount of personal disclosure they have given to the core members. One volunteer was part of a circle whose formal time was about to end and this person seemed comfortable with greater personal disclosure and this circle was hoping to maintain weekly contact. The other two volunteers were a little more cautious, particularly one who has a child.

## **The value of being non-professionals**

The volunteers all emphasised the non-professional relationship or 'real people' as being the strength of Circles. This was contrasted with the situation of the core member previously only having had contact with professionals. One volunteer felt having contact only with professionals allowed the core member to remain distant and only superficially engaged, using treatment jargon rather than expressing true feelings. The volunteer considers that the authenticity of the Circle process has supported the ability of the core member to develop empathy with others. An example mentioned was when two volunteers became visibly upset upon hearing about the nature of the person's offending, an emotional reaction that a criminal justice professional would not have been able to show:

*'But to see that very clearly on people's faces in some way I think drove it home for [the core member], just how serious his offending has been' (S0010).*

In another example the core member of a well established Circle asked the volunteers how their week had been. This was noted as a novel and significant demonstration of awareness and interest in others and demonstrated a shift in perspective for the core member.

Being part of a non-professional setting was seen as a space for a greater range of conversations that could support desistance and development of positive self-identity:

*'[T]he only people [the core member] really had any contact with were statutory agencies. And that's it. And the only conversation he had with them was around his risk behaviour and his sexual fantasies. Now I think that helped to, well it encouraged an emotional detachment from [core member], he sort of internalised a lot of that discourse, so it took a long time to get him to speak in an everyday way about everyday things and it also took a long time to get him to see himself as anything other than a sex offender, because his only contact with others was about that.'* (V0013)

### **Balancing support and accountability**

Volunteers often described the support and accountability functions of a Circle as intertwined, feeding into each other. The long-term development of relationships were seen to allow for awareness of patterns and routines, deviation from which might signal an issue to be raised or identified as risky. In addition, the commitment of being in the Circle over a period of time allowed for trust and openness that would allow the core member to discuss something that otherwise would have been bottled up:

*'I don't adhere to the view that [support and accountability] are separate, I think in practice and conceptually they are the same thing anyway. Because being accountable just means that you're taking responsibility for what you're doing, you're being held responsible and I think we're best able to do that by him trusting us ..... Because [volunteers] knew the routines and moves and activities of the core member, they can recognise the signs, and also the core member can be honest enough with them, expose things against their will even, without realising it because they don't have this guard up.'*(V0013)

Most of the volunteers talked about accountability being created out of their support, in the sense that the Circle invested the core member with a set of friends or people he respected and would not want to let down:

*'[H]e has something massive to lose. So there's that relationship with him and our views of him, I don't doubt whatsoever. So I think it's that relationship that really holds people accountable because they're accountable to the relationship, not because of what we say but because of what we have.'* (V0012)

The long-term nature and regularity of Circle meetings allowed for the reinforcement of messages and a consistent check-in:

*'Every Thursday he gets a consistent message of what's OK and what's not OK. He can re-calibrate on a Thursday night. All those distortions and all those decisions and all those fantasies are actually not OK, and he does, he uses the time. He's very good at just getting it out there. That's what I was thinking, this is what I'm going to do, this is what I'm angry about, this is what I'm going to buy. This is what I'm going take a*

*picture of. And it comes out, and it's talked through and that's just so helpful for him to do. ... [H]e's got that safety valve during the week, occasionally he bungs off a text saying "Actually, I'm stuck." About money, about what he's thinking, about what he's done, but he's got that kind of on-going connection.'* (V0012)

However, feeling a sense of accountability to the group may be supplemented by a powerful desire not to return to custody:

*'So I think the responsibility that he feels to the Circle really drives him. And that he doesn't want to go back to jail, that's a huge driver.'* (V0009)

### **Managing vs. eliminating risk**

With regard to whether Circles reduces the risk of reoffending, the volunteers were cautiously optimistic about this possibility. Interviewed volunteers appeared to see their influence as supporting the management rather than elimination of risk. No one felt the Circle would permanently eradicate the risk of reoffending.

*'Well, I think that people who have sexual attraction for children may always have sexual attraction for children so any intervention is limited.'* (V0013)

*'It's always a possibility with someone like [core member], and that's what really we're so aware of and it's something that never leaves you. Although I could say I [would be] surprised, I would also be really disappointed and he knows that. He knows how much of a let-down that would be for himself and also for the rest of the Circle.'* (V0009)

*'No miracle has happened. He's not 'cured'. There is no cure available for him. However I think that he manages it full stop, and that's pretty much as good as it's going to get for him.'* (V0012)

### **Supporting the work of statutory agencies**

All the volunteers saw Circles as working alongside and supporting the efforts of the statutory services. There was a theme of the volunteers having an awareness that Circles are limited in their intervention. The volunteers also gave specific examples of when Circles have directly contributed to the risk management of the core member, including one example of alerting the statutory services when the core member downloaded pornography onto a smart phone which is not itself illegal, but as he was subject to statutory supervision raised a concern about his future behaviour. In this case, the core member himself had confided the activity to the circle, which forwarded the information to CJSW.

All volunteers were very clear about their strategy for managing a high risk situation in terms of informing the Coordinator, police and other relevant agencies.

*'I would call the police, that would be the first port of call. Because there's no point in taking any risks with that.'* (V0009)

*'If something comes up in the Circle, we will record it and forward it to the police. There is no hiding in the Circle, so if you want to say something, then you know that this is going back to the police so there you go, that's just really nice and neat.'* (V0012)

The connection to the statutory agencies also provided a sense of support to volunteers:

*'when we were meeting every week at a Circle, we were sending our notes to MAPPa via [the] social worker and our coordinator, and I suppose I did feel a sense of support from that, and knowing that if there were any issues that we hadn't caught, that it would be caught somewhere along those lines and filtered back to us, so that kind of took a pressure off and was another layer of support.'* (V0013)

## **A sense of making a difference**

Volunteers expressed a strong sense of commitment to Circles and believed that their work was playing a tangible role in protecting communities.

*'I feel really positive about the whole process, it's been really valuable, I do feel that my hour a week has really given something back, I do feel it's about protecting children, but really stopping some quite dangerous behaviour in society and that's something that feels really worthwhile.'* (V0009)

*'All I can say is that the Circle has contributed to his re-integration, and if I didn't know anything about protective factors, then that would be as much as I could say. But given that I do, I think that in some way minimised his risk.'* (V0013)

## **F. Core Member Perspectives**

### **Learning about Circles**

All four core members heard about Circles via their supervising Social Workers or Personal Officers within the prison. Two core members were hopeful that Circles could assist them in reintegrating back into the community and would be someone to talk to if they were worried about something. One core member felt that he would have the opportunity to get a whole new perspective about offending behaviour from someone who was not a professional. Only one core member expressed concern in becoming involved in Circles prior to joining one.

*'The social worker said it was about a group of volunteers and they would try and...I don't know, support you and reintegrate you into society, when you feel that there's something that you're worrying about or something, you've to speak about it, and perhaps you don't want to tell anybody else....you've got an opportunity to get, not just one person's viewpoint, but maybe a few people's viewpoints, from different backgrounds and stuff.'* (CM0007)

*'Well it was a way of making sure that I had as many tools in my toolbox to avoid reoffending as possible and if I gained anything else out of it, great. And I have....'* (CM0014)

All core members expressed awareness of the information sharing protocols between their circle and the police and CJSW. This did not appear to affect their willingness to be open and share information about themselves and their circumstances. Core members expressed a feeling of safety and reassurance that the volunteers knew them well enough to sense that something might be wrong. However, one core member had not initially made the connection that the information he provided to the circle could potentially lead to his recall to prison and he only realised this when he was some way through the process.

## **Diversity of volunteers a good thing; volunteer turnover can be unsettling**

The core members clearly value the volunteers who work for them and like any relationship, they relate to different people in different ways and value a range of perspectives. There is a sense of instability from the core members when volunteers leave. The core members expressed understanding about why this has happened on an intellectual level, but have had to manage feelings of loss at an emotional level. The core member who had just finished his formal Circle expressed that he felt upset that it had come to an end. This appears to demonstrate considerable emotional investment by the core members. From the core members perspective, the volunteers have become friends and for some, the only people they see outside of the statutory services.

*'I like that, because it's good for different people of different age groups to talk about stuff because obviously we...well when you're not actually talking about offence stuff and that, we just talk about different stuff, obviously you've got different people to talk about different stuff.'* (CM0007)

*'You've got an opportunity to get, not just one person's viewpoint, but maybe a few people's viewpoints, from different backgrounds and stuff.'* (CM0007)

*'Well, when I came in, there was four of them [volunteers]. X left, I can't remember her second name. And Y left and then it went basically downhill, then a couple of weeks later Z came in and basically it's starting to go back on track, because I think we were going off-track. But now we're on-track. Basically everything was just losing, because two people had left, I'd gotten to know them, then all of a sudden they'd gone. It's like getting to know X, then all of a sudden I've got to make another relationship...build another relationship, but with A.'* (CM0008)

## **Practical assistance and a sense of security**

Some practical ways in which being part of a circle had helped core members are that one Circle has provided advice about purchasing a bike, another focussed on the practical help around dealing with everyday issues, while a third assisted the core member in accessing a mental health organisation. One core member described how he would previously manage the emotions associated with inappropriate sexual thoughts by smashing his house up or self-harming and that he now feels more able to contact a circle member or a member of his family when this occurs. He described this in the context of having an extremely negative world view, which he says is now slowly shifting. He talked about the pleasure of being able to experience going on day trips with the volunteers. These relatively modest outings clearly are highly significant for this particular core member with regards to increasing his sense of being part of a larger community.

With regards to living in the community, a core member commented that it had made him feel more a part of his community. This seemed to be about him making sense of the fact that the volunteers are there because they want to be, rather than because it is their job

and he has applied this sense of feeling able to communicate more widely to his general community. Another core member talked of being part of a circle having increased his confidence although this person has not yet applied this more generally. One core member noted that his offences had been widely featured in the media and experienced the associated fears which come with that profile. He commented that being part of a circle had enabled him to feel a little safer in his community. Similarly, another core member said he felt safer with regard to undertaking daily tasks, such as shopping, whereas before, he described feeling 'paranoid' that people would know what he had done.

### **Developing self confidence and speaking honestly**

The core members reflected that being part of a Circle had positively changed their relationships with others, including their supervising Social Workers and increased their confidence in talking to other people generally.

*'[The Circle's] making me feel more confident....It's basically [learning learning about] speaking out....Well, it's helped me to make new friends [in the Circle's volunteers].'*  
(CM0008)

*'I've gained friendship. \_\_\_ and \_\_\_ are both friends as well as support us. And that's great. Because the only friends I've ever had in my life have been work colleagues. For me that's a whole new thing, friends that aren't work colleagues, a whole new concept for me.'* (CM0014)

When discussing what changes others might see, one core member talked about being more chatty and also being more able to talk about his feelings. Another core member had not discussed Circles with his family. Another core member talked about how his family saw Circles as helpful as he had someone else to talk to about his problems.

*'Basically talking about it now is helping me to deal with it so I don't bottle it all up.'*(CM0008)

*'Maybe more talking about how I feel about stuff and that....And maybe honesty as well. Not pretending things are a certain way, I don't know, like pretending that you're alright and stuff when maybe you're not alright....It's helping, when I was in jail and that, I realised how I lived my life before that and it wasn't helping me, and that's what lead me to offend and stuff like that, I was obviously lying to people about how I was feeling and not telling them how I felt either and that's when I realised that it helped me...well, it didn't help me but I don't know, led to me offending and that. And it's with other things as well and that. And after I realised, I thought it's not going to help me, it's not going to help anybody who's trying to help me, lying about how I feel or the past and stuff, so it's better to be honest about it.'* (CM0007)

## **Recognising risky behaviour and being held to account**

With regard to how the core members feel the Circle has impacted upon their offending behaviour, one core member talked about how he had not perceived himself as a threat to the public but that the Circle had enabled him to realise that he still should not visit prohibited places, even though he feels he presents no risk. Another core member felt that the Circle was keeping him safe from reoffending. One core member discussed that being part of a Circle enabled him to see that his offending was really hurting people. Some of this realisation appeared to stem from some of the volunteers crying when he was talking about his offending behaviour. This seemed to have a significant effect on the core member, who had not previously had that kind of response as all of his contact had been with professionals. The other core member appreciates the manner by which the volunteers explained things to him, which he differentiates from the approach of the police.

When asked to provide specific examples of when the Circle had intervened in risky behaviour, one core member gave the example of the volunteers had challenged him about playing online games in the sense that he might be unknowingly connecting with children. One core member felt that his violent behaviour had lessened since being in a Circle and he also spoke about the core members keeping a close eye on his licence conditions, such as being near schools at certain times of the day. Another core member spoke about how the volunteers challenge him when he talks about seeing someone attractive on the street, in terms of whether they are an age-appropriate person or not. One core member explained that he actually contacted a Circle volunteer when he felt out of control and had accessed pornography via a mobile phone.

## **Reaching out to the Circle to manage risk of reoffending**

When asked whether he would talk to a volunteer if he felt like he was about to reoffend, one core member was unsure, worried that this would potentially jeopardise the relationship he had built up with the volunteers. One core member was clear that he could telephone the volunteers but that he was not allowed to talk about what he was thinking, but that they would be there in order to provide a distraction. Another core member saw the fact he could contact the volunteers at any time as a safety net, and one which would provide a different response to that of the police.

*'I'd like to think so, but I'm not sure if I'd tell one of them. Maybe I'd tell my social worker or something like that. Maybe I'd feel more comfortable talking about it with my social worker, maybe it's because they're members of the public and stuff like that, maybe they feel more comfortable talking about...I don't know, maybe it would depend on what my thoughts were, so if it was really bad or something that I felt it was something that's not nice to talk to anybody about, I wouldn't feel comfortable talking about it with any of them.'* (CM0007)

*'I'm not going to lie. I still have inappropriate thoughts, I'm not going to lie, but they are less. They are less than what they used to be, but I can cope with them a lot better now. I would smash my house up. The amount of TVs I've gone through is beyond a joke. ... [Now] I just phone my parents or I 'phone somebody from the circles, phone the*

*police if I can and if I can't get a hold of them I phone Breathing Space. Obviously I don't tell them about my thoughts and that, but I cope with it different. I don't destroy my house anymore which is a good thing....I used to cut my arms as well.'* (CM0015)

### **Overall a positive view of Circles**

Overall, the core members as a group felt that involvement in Circles had been a positive experience. Their positive views ranged in intensity from feeling certain the circle had prevented reoffending to feeling slightly hopeful and less isolated. These feelings tended to vary in intensity in direct proportion to the length of time a core member had been involved in the circle. One of the newer core members noted there were parts he did not enjoy and he still very much feels a sense of isolation. He values the role of the volunteers and feels they are there for an important reason. Other core members felt that it would be a project they would recommend to others in a similar position although with a caveat that it only works if the core member is prepared to be honest. One core member felt that the volunteers were performing an extremely important role in keeping children safe and felt that this understanding should be increased in the general public and the media.

*'I would say the Circles have helped and I've always said if it wasn't for the Circles I'd be back in prison without a doubt.... Because I know I would because when I came out of prison my attitude was I don't care, I'm doing it again. I don't care what anybody thinks of me, it's who I am, I'm an evil person, but the Circles helped me understand you're not an evil person, you've done an evil thing, but you're not an evil person.'* (CM0015)

## **G. Others' Perspectives**

As noted in the discussion of methodology and research activities, we have grouped respondents into three broad categories of core members, volunteers and other stakeholders. Because of the small number of people involved in this last group we have merged their interview responses into a single subsection rather than parsing particular organisational views (e.g. CJSW, Police, Sacro, Local Authority).

### **Prior knowledge of Circles**

Most stakeholders had little or no prior knowledge of Circles before their current involvement in Fife Circles. Sacro staff have regular involvement with Circles, while others have intermittent involvement through attendance at reviews, discussions with core members in other contexts or through being contacted when a particular issue arises.

### **Sacro's role operating Circles**

Most stakeholder respondents felt that Sacro is a trusted organisation and had confidence in its ability to deliver this service. There were, however, some concerns about the nature of the funding in running Circles in Scotland, the danger being that the accessibility of services

will amount to a 'postcode lottery'. The fact that funding is awarded annually is perceived as limiting future planning. Most interviewees felt that Circles provide a value for money service.

## **Information Sharing**

Interviewees felt that Circles has had to build up and nurture professional relationships with statutory agencies and these are described as now being excellent. Information sharing protocols were perceived to be now adequate by stakeholder respondents, having improved since the current Coordinator took up her post. Confidence was expressed in the Coordinator's ability to know what information needs to be shared and when a telephone call as well as the written minutes should be employed.

A number of respondents pointed to positive professional relationships as leading to tight information sharing protocols between Circles and other agencies. Five Circles was felt to be firmly integrated within local MAPPAs by a number of interviewees. The perceived emphasis on close information sharing supported in the minds of many respondents the project's credibility.

Staff were able to provide specific examples of a Circle picking up on recidivist behaviour, before other agencies, which could have resulted in recall to prison. In the case where the circle had been alerted to the issue of downloading pornography, it was managed with the core member being supported by the volunteers, the issue alerted to the police and CJSW, and the core member made subject to a Sex Offender Prevention Order (SOPO). The management of this incident was widely seen as an example of effective communication and working with other agencies in managing this incident.

## **Use of volunteers**

All interviewees in this group generally endorsed the use of volunteers as long as they are appropriately trained and supervised. Several respondents felt that volunteers need to be managed very carefully by Sacro and the Coordinator's role is crucial to this. Those with direct experience noted that working with sex offenders can be overwhelming at times and a skilful Coordinator is required to deal with this. Additionally, it was felt to be very important that the volunteers understand their role and the boundaries of this in terms of what they should or should not be discussing with the core member, balanced with the need of the volunteers to be challenging. It was felt by some respondents that there had been teething problems in the early stages of Circles, with an example given of volunteers planning an outing that inadvertently allowed for the breach of the core member's SOPO.<sup>6</sup>

It is felt that the key to success is in the forming of a relationship between the core member and volunteers in order that they become so familiar with each other that the volunteers will be able to pick up nuanced or subtle signals when something is awry. A respondent with

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<sup>6</sup> The incident involved a core member and two female volunteers attending the cinema but belatedly becoming aware that the core member was barred from entering a public toilet unescorted, which they were unable to do.

familiarity of two circles noted that the one in an early stage had required intervention from the Coordinator (who began to sit in as an extra volunteer) as it was felt the volunteers required some direction. However, the same interviewee gave another example of a specific situation where another circle was able to identify some potentially recidivist behaviour by its core member, and contacted the Social Worker about this.

One respondent expressed concern if the volunteer profile became mainly dominated by university students pointing to the importance of general life experience in providing appropriate support to core members. Retired criminal justice professionals were listed by some respondents as an ideal profile for volunteers, having both professional and life experience.

### **Relationship to other modes of offender management**

With regard to the distinctive contribution of a Circle compared to a statutory agency, stakeholder views echoed those of volunteers and core members in terms of perceiving Circles to foster positive and genuine individual relationships between the core members and the volunteers. Most saw the value of a service like Circles being volunteer led to stop it from turning into another statutory agency. One core member's life was described in interview as having been 'transformed' as a result of being in a circle:

*'...it's a genuine relationship, knowing exactly where the boundaries are and knowing that the core member is a really vulnerable person...and it's like keeping an eye on a close friend because they are maybe vulnerable and susceptible to maybe doing really horrible things, but at the same time they feel really engaged in that process and they're 100% committed to it.'* (S0005)

Circles were seen as having the opportunity to intervene in areas that statutory services cannot due to limited resources or professional mission, such as being socially isolated and lacking skills in appropriate relationship development. It was felt Circles are able to act on these issues in innovative and creative ways. Interviewees felt that working on these areas supported core criminal justice aims in that Circles allow core members to take greater responsibility for their lives.

Many interviewed from this group felt it is beneficial for an independent organisation to be running Circles as it allows a distinction of role allowing for statutory agencies to focus on risk management while the Circle can take a more strengths-based approach. These two sides of risk management and strengths development were perceived as complementary and mutually reinforcing.

Interviewees in this group often referred to Circles as an important part of the 'toolbox' used to address sexual offending.

## **Circles as a non-compulsory option for offenders**

One respondent felt that participation in a Circle might be better as part of a licence condition or a SOPO. All other respondents strongly stated a belief that Circles' value depends on its non-compulsory nature.

## **Appropriate and beneficial activities of Circles**

Interviewees described numerous activities and appropriate roles for Circles. These included offering a balanced mix of support and accountability; providing a forum for relationships of trust and disclosure to develop; working towards social reintegration with social activities and hobby development; encouraging empathy in a core member; and breaking down the social isolation of offenders.

With regard to the balance of support and accountability, the perception is that it is right in three out of the four Circles, with the fourth one still in its early stages and establishing boundaries and volunteers continuing to develop the confidence to challenge particular behaviours. Partly as a result of this, the Coordinator has been brought in to this Circle as a third volunteer. Those interviewed with the most regular involvement in Circles recognised it is an ongoing process finding the right balance between allowing the Circles to develop organically and develop an informal rapport alongside the need to manage risk, boundaries and any statutory restrictions.

One interviewee expressed the view that Circles allows the community to become involved and is handed back a role in accountability for a serious form of social harm. The interviewee further felt that Circles contributes to the reduction of risk via the relationships which have developed in order that information can be shared in a way which is honest and open.

Social isolation was described as being a key factor in the cycle of offending, a factor in which respondents felt Circles could be particularly helpful. Some interviewees emphasised the importance of social activities as a way for a Circle to aid social reintegration.

An example of the power of volunteers is given by an interviewee who described the impact on the core member of the volunteers having a visibly distressed reaction to his offences. The respondent noted that previously, the core member had not fully understood the impact of his offending on the general public but that this very genuine response, which statutory agents would not be at liberty to share, had significant meaning and may have encouraged a sense of empathy and awareness of the impact of one's offending.

## **Evidence of outcomes and success**

Stakeholder respondents both wanted and saw the importance of evidence of outcomes and success for developing the service in Fife and elsewhere. Such information was felt to be useful in establishing effectiveness and identifying areas for improvement.

Interviewees felt that empirical evidence would be useful in order to consolidate the existing information that exists about Circles. This would form an important element of demonstrating whether Circles is an effective approach. Overall, there is a question of being able to quantify the effectiveness of Circles to the satisfaction of funders and the community.

However, respondents, particularly those with more regular involvement in Circles felt strongly positive about the impact of Circles on core members. It was felt that the core members who were furthest through the process had had undergone observably positive changes as a result of being in a circle. This was particularly the case for the social isolation factor and praise was given to Circles in providing the opportunity to practice social skills and improve independence. A number of respondents believed that Circles had contributed to the reduction of risk of reoffending for those core members furthest along in their circles and that this would likely be reflected in standard assessment tools.

By empirical evidence, respondents tended to understand this as statistics on reoffending at the same time they questioned how complete a picture these would give. For example one interviewee said they had not seen any statistics about measurable effectiveness but noted that a decrease in (actual as opposed to officially recorded) reoffending would not be able to be seen.

Those interviewed felt evidence of success is important also as a tool of public awareness and education.

Overall, stakeholders expressed positive views of Circles with especially strong support for their value in reducing social isolation, assisting development of empathy and sharing information appropriately with agencies. Concerns focussed on teething problems in the early days of Five Circles, managing volunteers carefully and documenting effectiveness.

## 6. Key Themes & Findings

### A. Overall Comment

The Fife Circles project is organised along well established guidelines (i.e. the Circles UK model) employed in CoSA schemes in England and Wales that have demonstrated reduced levels of reoffending by those presenting at high or moderate (CSE 10, 2012). The review team felt confident that there was broad awareness of the key elements of this model and endorsement by all interviewees of the professional and organisational abilities of the staff. Of particular value, all stakeholders – from Circle members, to CoSA staff to external statutory agencies – expressed confidence in information sharing protocols currently being followed. A number of examples were given of specific instances where these protocols meant an issue that might have developed into a breach of licence or new offence were managed effectively and with the cooperation of core members.

Those involved most directly involved in Circles including volunteers, core members, CoSA staff, supervising social workers and police expressed support of Circles and a belief that they were useful and had contributed to management of risk. Indeed it would be difficult to overstate the enthusiasm and commitment that volunteers and Circle staff, as well as core members in the more established Circles, have for this approach.

There are three issues the research team considers worth further reflection and possible action.

- First is the issue of volunteer numbers and gender balance. Circles are currently averaging three volunteers each and there has been some significant turnover. Three volunteers falls slightly below observed and recommended averages of volunteers used in other places (typically 4-6). In addition, turnover has, according to the interviews of core members, affected or delayed the development of a group rapport and reaching a level of trust that would allow the core member to reach out easily in the case of concern. Some core members commented on the lack or loss of male volunteers, an issue to which staff are also attuned.
- Second, there was lack of clarity on the provision of ongoing training for volunteers. The Circles UK Handbook advises booster training should be offered at least on an annual basis. The reasons for ongoing training, in addition to other volunteer supports currently offered in Fife, include advancing the skills of volunteers working with an often complex offender situation. As quasi-friendships develop, a feature of Circles which can support social reintegration activities, there remains the need to be vigilant of boundaries and risk tendencies.
- Third, the provision of ongoing training or education of volunteers is particularly crucial given changes in the Coordinator role over the course of the project. The post is now filled with a full-time staff member, who is uniformly well-regarded. This bodes well for the project, but because the job description has not required a

background in working with sex offenders, instead emphasising organisational and administrative skills, there may be scope for developing this expertise within the Coordinator role as well as diffusing education to volunteers through training or additional involvement of experts in this area.

A key guiding question of this research was this: Is it likely that the risk of reoffending would be lower for the four men involved here had they not participated in a Circle? It is almost inconceivable to conclude that these men would have fared better – there have as yet been no reconvictions of the current group of core members – had they been left to their own devices. The core members themselves have stated that they would certainly have ended up back in prison or reoffended in the absence of their Circle. It might be possible that in the absence of a Circle that the group of core members could have managed, as they have done, between two and four years without any further convictions. The examples mentioned by a number of people – taking a core member to a cinema which breached a SOPO or of learning of the inappropriate use of a phone – might not have occurred or been discovered in the absence of a Circle. However, the presence of a Circle offered an early stage at which these issues were raised and in turn were used as an opportunity to confront, manage and possibly divert a path of action from which would have led to re-imprisonment. In addition to merely being associated with no further convictions, the discussion below suggests that participants have gotten additional benefit out of the Circles which will support desistance from offending outside and beyond the Circle.

*Overall, we conclude that: the Circles project makes use of appropriate standards and models of operation; there is strong support for the work and value of Circles among participants and outside agencies; and the presence of Circles is consistent with the aim of community safety. Issues to be considered or addressed are about strengthening adherence to already accepted goals for the Fife CoSA project.*

## **B. Reoffending**

At the time of this research, none of the four core members, who have been involved in Fife Circles between approximately nine months up to nearly three years, had been reconvicted of any offence or recalled on licence. The positive finding of no new convictions cannot be analysed a statistically significant sign of effectiveness. However, it is a hopeful sign that may reinforce the perceptions of participants and stakeholders that the presence of a circle has offered some value in managing risk and reinforcing community safety. In addition, several examples were given of thoughts or pre-criminal behaviour being brought to a circle's attention and addressed within the circle and with statutory agencies to prevent progression to an actionable offence. We note that behaviour which in the absence of a circle might have escalated to a serious offence was used as an opportunity to strengthen or tailor the risk management of the offender.

## **C. Governance and management**

The organisational structure of Fife CoSA, following the Circles UK approach appears to serve well the needs of the Circles in operation. Recent turnover of Coordinators has already

been mentioned and the recent securing of a person in post and designation of the Coordinator as a full-time position have been beneficial developments and in line with the Circles UK Handbook. The current and precarious annual funding arrangement of the project may present a concern as it prevents longer term planning and career development for those involved.

Again, we mention a high level of satisfaction among all stakeholders with information sharing protocols and activism of Circle members to reach out when there are questions or issues to be followed up.

#### **D. Volunteer experience and safety**

Turnover of volunteers in Circles is natural, and may be due to failure to establish a rapport with the group or core member, to volunteer recognising belatedly that Circles not going to work for them, or life and family commitments making it impossible to continue. There were examples of all of these among Fife Circles, and these appear to have been managed well. When a volunteer rapport was not working the group was quick to identify this and refer to the Coordinator or Sacro staff for addressing. Core members appear to have been aware and at least in the first instance involved in raising the issue with Sacro.

Interviewed volunteers showed high levels of satisfaction with their experience in Circles as well as commitment to its continuation. The victim/offence profile of the current group of core members, along with a sense that there are real relationships of trust between core members and volunteers encourages the sense that volunteers are working in an adequately safe environment. There are occasions where some Circles go on social outings beyond regular meetings, but these appear to involve multiple volunteers. Sacro staff report that written protocols exist for planning outings which involve risk assessment of the activity.

#### **E. Circles as an effective monitoring and accountability tool**

Circles develop their own culture as a group and may come to feel, rightly, that they are the experts of their own core member. Strong supervision and governance of circles ensures that this particular expertise – on the ground, over a period of time through informal social interaction – is set in the context of equally important expertise such as the professional training of social workers and the legal framework governing a person's licence condition and MAPPA status. There is a need, of which interviewed Circle members expressed clear awareness, to guard against informality and growing familiarity of the group leading to less stringency in following formal supervision needs of managing CoSA. There were many examples, however, listed by volunteers of confronting, challenging and probing statements of core members in ways consistent with encouraging accountability for one's choices and behaviour.

Accountability was connected to the support and mentoring function of CoSA. Having a significant social relationship (of support and care) means the core member has something to lose. Not wanting to let down volunteers becomes a stake in society, though volunteers

and staff were wary of overestimating the effects of this in neutralising all triggers and crises. One core member was not sure he would be able to contact volunteers should he be thinking about reoffending as this might affect their perceptions of him, showing one way that not wanting to let someone down might not always act as a protective factor.

On the whole, core members and volunteers expressed awareness that their Circle was not a guarantee against reoffending, but most felt that without the Circle their chances of reoffending ranged from more likely to 'guaranteed'. The perceived protective quality of the Circles occurred through a variety of mechanisms such as previously stated of creating a relationship and thus a stake that provided an incentive for a person not to let others down. In addition, the regularity of a weekly meeting offered a safety valve to let off or resolve pressure in a setting that, unlike a police or social work office, offered a 'safe space' for talking about feelings. The Circles seemed to pursue accountability in slightly different ways than statutory agencies, encouraging a core member to reflect on and question his own rationale to reach a judgment of it.

## **F. Circles as an effective mentoring and support tool**

As noted, Core members attributed their success so far in avoiding reoffending to a combination of factors including their own desire not to end up back in prison or permanently lose relationships with family; to their desire not to let Circle volunteers down; to their own hopes of becoming ordinary law abiding citizens. Also already noted was the sense among volunteers that support and accountability were not separate roles, but worked together. Genuine trust created through a sense of mutual respect and care allowed for some core members to open up and in their own words be more honest in owning up to particular thought patterns, which could then be addressed within the Circle or referred outside of it. For core members, Circles offered an opportunity to talk about more than their offending which allowed them to begin seeing themselves as more than offenders. This was connected to developing social confidence and self belief in the ability to become functioning and contributing members of society.

These positive views do not entirely offset the sense among core members and volunteers that risks remain, and that the entrenched isolation of core members will require long-term work and assistance from many others. Most of the core members had almost no social relationships outside criminal justice agencies and a parent or two. The core members also continue to struggle with employment. The Circles appear to have been successful in identifying or supporting access to appropriate hobbies and volunteering opportunities. The challenge may be in translating the positive experience of a circle to an independent ability to manage the social and employment world independently once the circle has ended.

Core members consistently said, however, that being part of the Circle had improved their self-esteem and social shyness issues. This may support the ability of core members to develop new positive social relationships. There were many examples of volunteers providing practical support as well as social activities.

The word 'friendship' was used in a number of interviews of core members and volunteers. This may connote for some an overly comfortable relationship in which boundaries are blurred. Volunteers that were interviewed, however, appeared very clear on recognising the limits of their relationship with core members and that this relationship was governed overall by an interest in managing risk and working collaboratively with others, including statutory agencies to do so. We have included these references to qualified friendships forming to capture the distinctive approach of Circles and their evolution over time to create a situation in which a social isolated person comes to trust a group of individuals. As the circle progresses both the core member and the volunteers appear to be affected in a positive way that is not inconsistent with public protection.

## **G. Management of risk among current and future Circle cohorts**

Ultimately we have answered the question whether a core member's risk have been lower in the absence of Circle, with the professional judgment that it would not. However, most interviewees recognised that CoSA alone is not sufficient to reduce reoffending, but is one part among many of a 'toolbox' for addressing the complex needs and risks of core members. Other crucial factors in managing risk – employment, housing, family and other social relationships – may be addressed through but will never entirely be within the control of a Circle or statutory agency.

We also raise risk management as an issue for future Circle cohorts which may present a different risk and offending profile than the current one. The existing core members have a similar victim profile of children, and except in one case a limited offending history. The core members in the current cohort did not strike the review team as operating at the most sophisticated or manipulative end of the continuum for sex offenders. Were offenders at higher levels of manipulation and sophistication, or with a victim profile of adults and a history of violence, to be recruited to the Circle, attention would be required to manage these different and in some ways more challenging factors. These are not insurmountable issues for a CoSA project, but it is important for those currently involved to be aware of shifting and new challenges on the horizon. Continuing to review and research Fife Circles, collecting and analysing data that would assist understanding and managing the scheme's operations, core member profile and impact are recommended.

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## Appendix

### **Interview questions for Criminal Justice Social Worker**

- How long have you been a social worker?
- How long have you worked with sexual offenders?
- When did you first hear about CoSA?
- What did you think about the idea?
- Are you aware of Circles UK?
- Tell me about your current involvement?
- What impact do you think its having on the core member?
- How do you feel about Sacro overseeing CoSA?
- How do you feel about the use of volunteers?
- What do the circles provide that statutory agencies don't?
- Are the information sharing arrangements adequate?
- What contact do you have with the volunteers?
- Do you have any specific examples of when the circle has been particularly effective?
- Do you feel circles are worthwhile?
- What are your concerns?
- Do you believe the core member's risk of reoffending has been reduced?
- What evidence do you have to support this view?
- Do your family/friends know about CoSA?
- Is there anything else you wish to say?

### **Interview questions for CoSA Coordinator**

- How long have you been the coordinator?
- When did you first hear about CoSA?
- Are you clear about information sharing protocols?
- What do you think CoSA provides that statutory agencies don't?
- Are there particular issues for Scotland?
- How do you recruit volunteers?
- What do you think of the volunteer training?
- How do you match volunteers to core members and to each other?
- Tell me about the process of a circle beginning/ending?
- What are the volunteers told about the core member?
- What is the quality of the supervision for volunteers?
- Is the balance of support and accountability right?
- How do you select core members?

- What is your background in working with sexual offenders?
- Is this important?
- What is the most crucial aspect of your role?
- How do you feel about Sacro having oversight of CoSA?
- Do you feel CoSA contributes to risk reduction?
- Have you any specific examples of effectiveness?
- What has surprised you about CoSA?
- What lessons have you learned?
- Do your family and friends know what you do?
- Is there anything else you wish to say?

### **Interview questions for Core Members**

- Can you tell me about your offending history and the offence that led you to be here?
- What sentence did you get and what is your current legal status?
- Have you done SOTP?
- Had you heard of circles before?
- How was circles explained to you?
- Are you aware of Circles UK?
- What was your motivation for agreeing to attend?
- What did you think about Circles before you joined?
- How has that view changed?
- What are the volunteers like?
- What were you told about them before you met them?
- Do you have much contact with Sacro?
- How has being part of a circle changed your relationship with your SW?
- What difference has it made to your life?
- How has it impacted upon your offending behaviour?
- Do you think circles are effective in reducing reoffending?
- Are those close to you aware that you're part of a circle?
- How has it changed the way you experience living in the community?
- Can you provide any examples of how being part of a circle has helped you?
- Have there been any surprises?
- Would you recommend joining a circle to others in a similar position?

### **Interview questions for volunteers**

- When did you first hear about CoSA?
- Why did you want to be part of it?
- Tell me about your background?
- Are you aware of Circles UK?
- How were you recruited?

- What was the training like?
- Can you identify any gaps in the training?
- What are your supervision arrangements? Are these adequate?
- Are you clear about the sharing of information?
- Tell me about your circle?
- How do you feel about the core member?
- How do you feel about the other volunteers?
- What information are you given prior to joining a circle?
- What's it like for you to listen to details of sexual offending/fantasy etc?
- Do you know what to do if a core member rings saying he feels at risk of reoffending?
- Is the balance of support and accountability right?
- What activities do you as a group do together?
- Do your family and friends know about CoSA?
- How do they feel about you being part of it?
- Do you have any concerns about being involved?
- How could the experience be improved for you?
- Do you feel circles are effective in reducing reoffending?
- Have you any specific examples of effectiveness?
- What do you think about using volunteers to perform this function?
- What does the core member know about you?
- Do you feel you contribute to public protection?
- What are the benefits/limitations of CoSA?
- Is there anything else you would like to say about your experience?

#### **Interview questions for Sacro Service Manager**

- What is the relationship like between Sacro and other CJ agencies and how has that changed since CoSA?
- How did Sacro develop and what is its background in working with sexual offenders?
- Is Sacro affiliated to Circles UK?
- Tell me about the structure of CoSA here and what circles are in operation?
- Are you integrated within MAPPA?
- What are your information sharing protocols?
- What do you think CoSA provides that statutory agencies don't?
- Do you consider that there are specific issues for Scotland in implementing CoSA?
- Tell me about the process of the circles?
- What is the legal status of the core members?
- How do you identify and select them?
- Have you any specific examples of the effectiveness of the circles?
- How do you recruit volunteers and are there any specific targeting issues?

- Tell me about the process of selection of volunteers?
- Are there enough volunteers?
- What is the demographic of the volunteers?
- How do you train the volunteers?
- What are the supervision arrangements for volunteers?
- What is the attrition like?
- Do you have an exit interview for those who are leaving?
- Tell me about the balance of support and accountability in a circle?
- What are your views about the overall quality of the volunteers?
- What is your background in working with sexual offenders?
- When did you first hear about CoSA and Sacro's involvement?
- How did you feel about it then?
- How do you feel about CoSA now?
- In your view, is it effective?
- What has surprised you about CoSA?
- Has Sacro an exit strategy?
- Have any other evaluations been undertaken?
- What does the cost/benefit analysis look like?
- Have you had any contact with victim organisations?
- What lessons have been learned?
- Is there anything else you feel you would like to say?