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## **Circles of Support and Accountability: A Safe Place to Change**



**By Kerry Earnshaw**

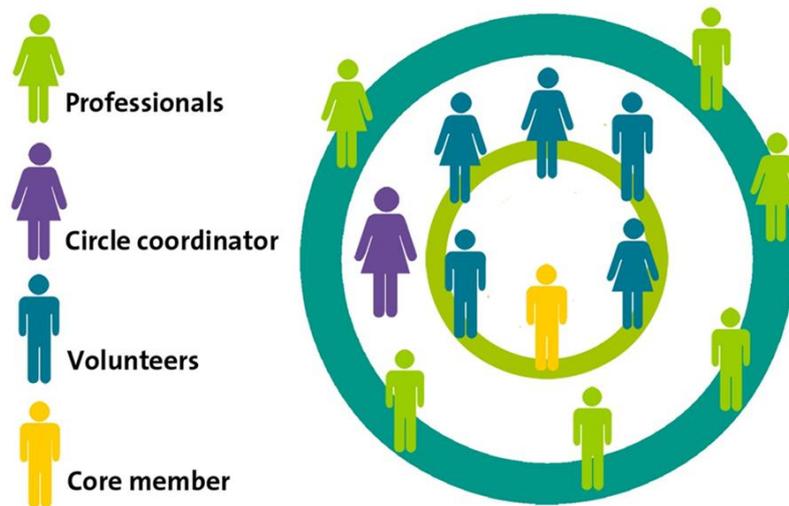
Sexual offending has received considerable media attention in light of recent high-profile cases, and sexual crime continues to provoke high levels of public anxiety. The resulting public perceptions can make returning to the community a daunting prospect for those convicted of sexual offences, and lead them to isolate themselves rather than building protective factors that may prevent future offending (Thomas *et al.* 2014).

Circles of Support and Accountability provide an opportunity for members of the community to take an active role in public protection, by helping individuals to build the practical and interpersonal skills needed for an offence-free future.

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

A Circle is a group of four or five community Volunteers who form a supportive network around an individual who has caused sexual harm (the 'Core Member'). The concept originated in Canada, as a community-led response to support high risk sexual offenders being released from custody with no statutory oversight. This model was adapted for the context of England and Wales, where Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements and Sex Offender Registration ensure oversight of those convicted of sexual offences. A Circle,

therefore, works in collaboration with criminal justice partners such as Police and Probation, supporting and complementing statutory interventions, including treatment programmes.



Graphic by Dutch Probation Service\_M&C\_2012

All Volunteers are vetted, trained and professionally supervised by a Circle Coordinator, who liaises with statutory partners throughout. The Circle meets regularly, initially once a week, and the contact gradually reduces over time as the Core Member is encouraged to build a productive life and establish their own support networks.

### **How can a Circle support change?**

The voluntary nature of the Circle is central: participation by the Core Member cannot be mandated. By agreeing to be part of a Circle, a Core Member agrees to work with the Volunteers, who will support and champion their successes, while helping them to keep on track. For the Core Member, that this support is offered by volunteers has particular weight. It can form the foundation of a relationship in which all participants have value, where Volunteers can model appropriate relationships through their interactions with the Core Member and each other, and the Core Member has a safe space where they can develop and practise the skills needed to build and maintain their own social support networks.

Accountability is also an essential component of a Circle. Volunteers are informed of the Core Member's offending history and relevant risk factors, and are alert to any changes in

the Core Member's presentation and behaviour which may indicate increased risk. Core Members know that any concerns will be shared with statutory partners through the Circle Coordinator. In the context of a supportive relationship, this accountability can be perceived by Core Members as positive and protective, rather than punitive.

The Good Lives Model (Ward & Marshall, 2004), integrated into many sex offender treatment programmes, is useful in understanding how a Circle can support change. It identifies fundamental goals which we all seek in order to achieve well-being. Harmful sexual behaviour can be understood as a dysfunctional approach to seeking these legitimate goals. Circle Volunteers can support a Core Member to achieve goals through pro-social approaches and put into practice the plans they may have developed in treatment. When they encounter obstacles, Core Members can draw on the support of Volunteers to develop strategies to overcome them, rather than resort to previous patterns of risky behaviour.

### **Evidence of Effectiveness**

Qualitative research evidence demonstrates the positive impact Circles have upon Core Members, who report increased confidence, a wider social circle and an improved relationship with statutory agencies (Thomas *et al.* 2014). Larger scale, controlled trials are needed to establish that the positive outcomes observed thus far can be directly attributed to the impact of a Circle. In terms of reoffending rates, studies in Canada and the UK have shown that individuals who received a Circle had lower levels of sexual and violent reoffending than similar groups of offenders who did not (Wilson *et al.* 2007; Bates *et al.* 2013). A detailed critique of studies and reports investigating the effectiveness of Circles on relevant outcomes is offered by Clarke *et al.* (2015).

### **Adapted Circles**

Circles are currently being adapted for individuals with Intellectual Disabilities and Autistic Spectrum Conditions, and young people displaying harmful sexual behaviour. For more information about Circle Providers across England and Wales and the services they currently offer, visit [www.circles-uk.org.uk](http://www.circles-uk.org.uk).

## References

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## KERRY EARNSHAW BIOGRAPHY

Kerry Earnshaw, National Evidence Manager, Circles UK. As National Evidence Manager for Circles UK, the umbrella charity for Circles of Support and Accountability in England and Wales, Kerry is responsible for building the evidence base for Circles and ensuring that this evidence informs Circles practice. She joined Circles UK in 2009, having previously worked for Probation as an Offender Manager and Senior Offender Manager, assessing and supervising individuals convicted of sexual and violent offences.