

Circles of Support and Accountability: The prison model

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Objectives:

- To be able to explain what prison-based Circles of Support and Accountability are and how they help reintegrate sex offenders successfully back into the community, on release from prison.
- To be able to apply the knowledge learnt about prison-based Circles of Support and Accountability in order to compare the needs of different sex offenders and determine who would be prioritised for a place as a Core Member.
- To be able to describe the benefits and challenges associated with prison-based circles, compared to community models.

Need for Circles in the UK

- Society and media representation.....

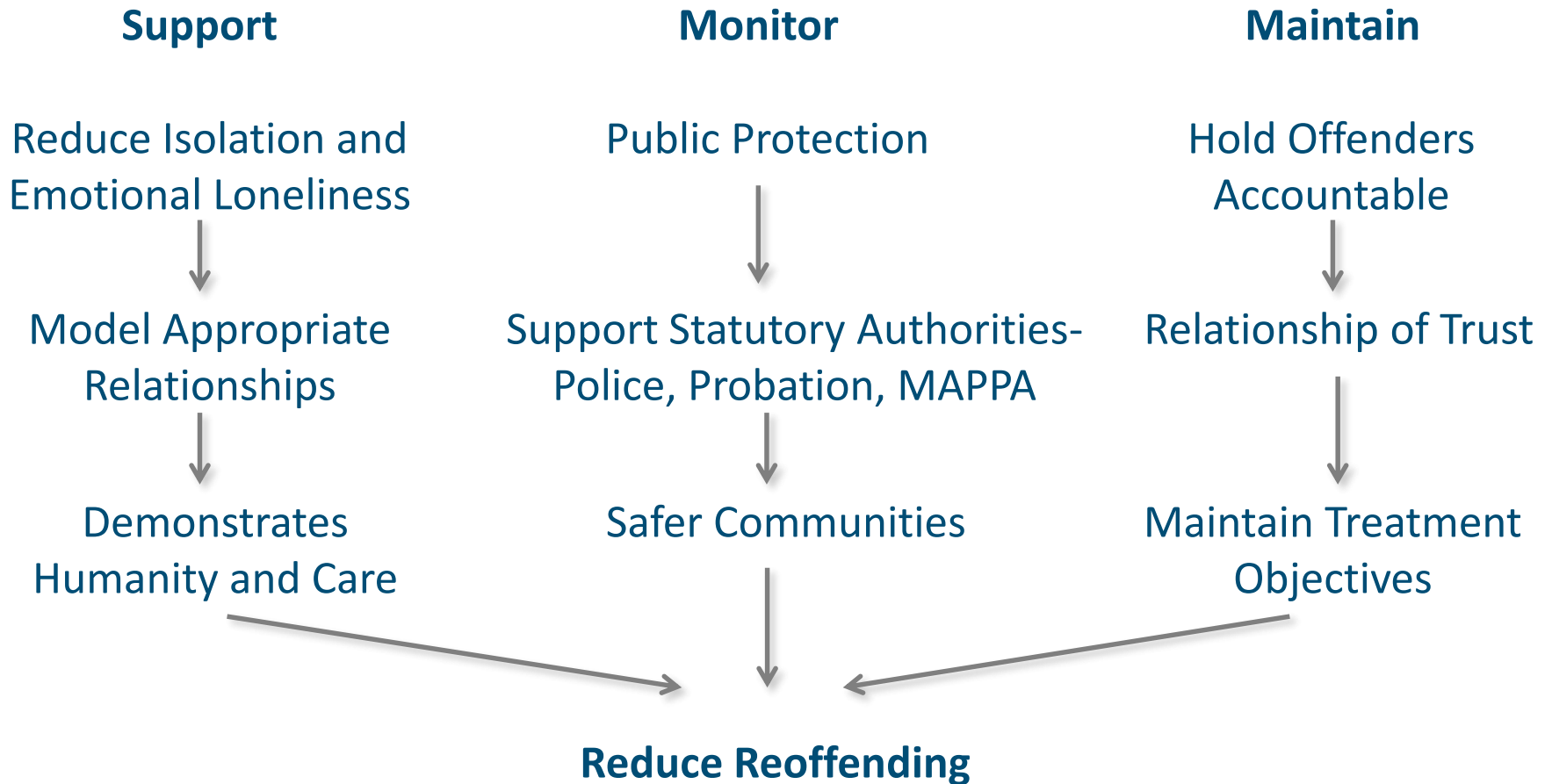
The public's attitudes towards those who commit sexual offences, fuelled by the media hype surrounding such crimes, encourages a punitive response to the offenders responsible.
(McAlinden, 2006)

- Being released from prison can often involve social isolation, loneliness and alienation for offenders, especially if they have been rejected by their friends and family, which can often drive them towards networks of similar individuals and re-offending.
- Based on restorative justice principles Circles can help sex offenders, with little or no pro social support, to overcome these feelings and successfully reintegrate back into society.

What are Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA)?

- A Circle involves 4-6 volunteers who offer support to a high-risk sex offender
 - Screened, selected and trained
 - Meet with a Core Member (sex offender) in the community once a week to offer social support
- Volunteers are supervised by a professionally qualified Project Co-ordinator
 - Provides advice and support through supervision
 - Communicates and shares information with other risk management agencies through the MAPPA process

Theory: The three key principles



(Saunders & Wilson, 2003)

CoSA: The prison-model

- Following the success of the community CoSA projects in the UK, for the first time ever, prison-based Circles were established at HMP Whatton in 2014.
- Established under the **Safer Living Foundation** - a charitable organisation in the UK and a joint venture between:
 - HMP Whatton,
 - Nottingham Trent University
 - National Probation Trust (Nottinghamshire)
 - Nottinghamshire Police
 - Circles UK representatives.

CoSA: The prison-model

- HMP Whatton is one of the largest sex offender treatment prison in Europe.
- Concern some high risk prisoners were leaving Whatton without family or community support.
 - Particularly those with intellectual disabilities and the elderly
 - These type of sex offenders are particularly vulnerable and can often find the transition from prison to the community the most difficult and socially isolating.
 - Known that social isolation is a significant risk factor for further reoffending
 - Those who do not meet the above criteria but who for example have a severe lack of social support on release will still be considered

CoSA: The prison-model

- Core Members consist of high-risk sex offenders who are either **elderly (55+)** and/or **intellectually disabled**
- Those who do not meet the above criteria but who, for example, have a severe lack of social support on release will still be considered
- The Circles begin 3 to 6 months before a prisoner's release and continue with them into the community.

Research and evaluation:

Two strands of research are forming a large evaluation project of the Circles based at HMP Whatton:

Strand One

Questionnaires administered to the core members at different time points of the Circle

Hope Scale, Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale (Short), Personal Growth Initiative scale II, MOS Social Support, UCLA Loneliness Scale

- Evaluate the impact and effect of the Circle on the Core Member
- Compare core members against a matched control group.

Reconviction data collected

- After a sufficient follow-up period

The evaluation project:

Stand Two

Semi-structured interviews with core members at different time points during the Circle.

- To explore their experiences of being in a prison-based circle and compare them to core members on community only circles.

Semi-structured interviews with the volunteers

- To understand their experiences of working on a prison-based circle and compare them to volunteers on community only circles.

Repertory grids administered to the core members at the same time as the interviews above.

- To examine the constructs used by the core members to make sense of their world

Preliminary results (Strand Two):

Superordinate theme	Sub-themes
Benefits of the prison-model	Being prepared In the 'comfort zone' Keeping skills alive Through the gate Assisted desistance
Ambiguous practice	Chaotic practice Doing risk management

Benefits of the prison-model:

From an IPA analysis of the interview transcripts it appears there are several benefits specific to the prison-model.

Being prepared

‘well we’re doing some stuff tomorrow with him about situations he might find himself in, the classic ‘what if I come across a child who’s injured and what will I, and I’m on my own, what will I do?’ so he’s coming out with those things and obviously that is good that he is talking about some of the situations, you know knowing that there is going to be that issue about avoiding contact with children and it’s good that he is talking to us about some of the things he’s, you know like avoiding parks’ ***Volunteer participant 1***

‘Erm and then also just discussing things that he wanted to do as well, which he obviously couldn’t find out whilst he was in prison and sort of getting everything ready for obviously when he came out, trying to get all the paperwork ready for claiming benefits and things and things that he couldn’t do whilst he was in there.’ ***Volunteer participant 3***

Benefits of the prison-model:

In the 'comfort zone'

'Well I'm in comfortable surroundings, I've got used to this place, it's my comfort zone so it will be ideal for me, you know I can always retreat back in (to my cell), sort of thing so I've got my comfort zone, out there it could be a bit more difficult, a bit more erm cause it's going to be a whole shock to the system' ***Core member participant 2***

'Cause it feels like, how do I explain it, you're in a room like this and you know what I mean you feel a bit nervous cause I don't know them and they don't know them and I'll be a bit on edge, a bit thinking 'are you judging me or something' ***Core member participant 5 (pre-prison circle)***

'it's making me feel, how can I explain it, a bit more relaxed and slowly I'm starting to build up that relationship and also that trust and that's how it's gotta be.' ***Core member participant 5 (post-prison circle/ pre-release)***

Benefits of the prison-model:

Keeping skills alive

‘Now I stop and think before I go and do something. Before I didn’t, I’d probably just go and do it where you don’t think of the situation, you stop and think of the situation put yourself in their shoes, if something happened what would you do in their position, it’s things you do on the course that help you to go, like stop and think, put yourself in their shoes. It’s you know, it’s erm I’ve changed me attitude quite a lot I think.’ ***Core member participant 3***

‘he does think things through quite a lot thanks to all the SOTP’s he’s done, he’s done a lot and he’s done a lot of the self-talk, he finds (it) quite helpful so we find it quite helpful to go through the self-talk with him and we’ve actually done some scenarios as well that might happen so obviously if he saw any of the victims family or anything like that’ ***Volunteer participant 3***

Benefits of the prison-model:

Through the gate

‘being released is quite a big thing so two of the members of the circle actually met him (CM) on his release and sort of helped him buy a few things that he needed, they went to the approved premises and sort of got him settled and I think doing that on your own would be quite a scary prospect and having someone that even if you don’t know them that well, having anyone there for you to sort of help guide you through that would just be invaluable.’ ***Volunteer participant 3***

‘we’re gonna do it one step at a time and in the end we’ll get there, lets focus on this step right now’ and we did and it’s made the transition a lot easier for him, I think he worries a lot less now than maybe if he didn’t have us.’ ***Volunteer participant 5***

‘The support, knowing there is that amount of support out there for me, you know, just a like sad, lonely old git with paranoid schizophrenia you know with no where to go, suddenly I don’t need to bury my head in the sand, I know there’s people there to support me.’ ***Core member participant 6***

Benefits of the prison-model:

Assisted desistance

‘Erm somebody to help you out every now and again, talk to and give you advice erm where they, if you’re struggling with something you can ask them and they can point you in the right direction, help you with whatever you’re struggling with, whatever you have a problem with.’ ***Core member participant 2***

‘if say I had a problem, if I felt I had a problem, I could phone them up and ask for their help, but the help and support I’ve got, like before I didn’t have any support whereas in the past I didn’t know what I’d learnt now, I probably wouldn’t be bothered about it or I’ll just go and do it but now if I think comes up I know I’ve got the support there to help me either kick the problem in the butt before it happens so it’s not a risky situation that brings me back in again.’ ***Core member participant 3***

‘like a friend but trying to help me on, stay on the right path if I come off the path, don’t do any crimes or anything like that’ ***Core member participant 5***

Benefits of the prison-model:

Links to the Integrative theory of desistance from sex offending (ITDSO model)

Re-entry is an essential phase of desistance – many vulnerable sex offenders need support and assistance during this time.

Possible that some community models may miss this huge part of the desistance model whereby volunteers can assist

A maintained commitment to change during this phase requires the practical identity as a non-offender to be not only adopted by the individual but also acknowledged and accepted by people in their social environment – this can be difficult particularly for those convicted of sexual offences

Volunteers within the prison model can provide social modelling during this phase but also empathetic support to keep the motivation and hope alive when belief in themselves may waiver.

(Gobbels, Ward and Willis, 2012)

Ambiguous practice:

Previous arguments have suggested that the limitations and issues surrounding CoSA are not always discussed or published.

There are clearly many benefits to CoSA, however the limitations need to be considered in order for them to be learnt from.

The issues under this theme have been fed back to the Safer Living Foundation through their steering group and changes have already been implemented.

Ambiguous practice:

Chaotic practice

‘I don’t feel actually the practical stuff about when he comes out, yeah I feel a bit in the dark about that and how much we do on our own initiative and how much is arranged by the coordinator or whatever, yeah so I think the answer is I don’t feel prepared for that bit.’ ***Volunteer participant 1***

‘the circle itself is quite disjointed erm there’s one member who attends every single one erm and they’re great..... I’m there almost all the time as well, it’s just me and them...the other two are kind of there, not there, a lot of times, it’s just me and the other or three of us, there’s only been one time when there’s been all four of us.’
Volunteer participant 5

‘You know we talk about him until we get there, we spend that time with him, without a plan erm without a real agenda you know, we know maybe a couple of things we want to discuss...it’s, it’s a bit disorganised.’ ***Volunteer participant 5***

Ambiguous practice:

Doing risk management

‘some of the examples I gave about things which you know he could be challenged or he could be encouraged to think about differently, you know I held back partly because I thought well this will highjack the rest of the session and are they necessarily on board with this and we never discussed that sort of thing.’ ***Volunteer participant 1***

‘erm I think just the concern is because if we don’t know a lot about his risk factors then how can we identify them to help him cause like you say ultimately it is also about accountability and protecting him, protecting the public and ourselves erm so I think if we don’t cover much of that then I’m concerned that we won’t know what to pick out, pick up’ ***Volunteer participant 4***

‘Erm knowing more of the risk factors that we’re looking for erm I know it’s been, it was discussed in the training but I probably would have liked a refresher on that before we went back in to the community you know ‘what are we looking for, what are we supposed to be keeping an eye out for in case this happens?’ ***Volunteer participant 5***

Ambiguous practice:

Finding the balance

‘Erm cause I guess as well in part it is really good that we build rapport with him and we get on very well and equally, it hasn’t happened and I don’t think that it will but it’s possible that, that if you have a certain, if you do get on very well and you do have a certain level of rapport then that might lead you to missing certain things’ ***Volunteer participant 2***

‘cause you don’t want to stop people from establishing rapport with someone but saying ‘oh yeah actually it’s great to tell us your problems but you should be wary of us’ ***Volunteer participant 2***

‘it was really sort of difficult to get your head around as to how you’re gonna sort of support this person yet obviously help them be accountable erm have that professional relationship with them’ ***Volunteer participant 3***

Ambiguous practice:

Links to the research

The role of the volunteers includes being able to identify and react to recidivistic behaviour.

(Elliot and Zajac, 2015)

Previous research has found similar confusion surrounding the role of accountability, however despite this volunteers were still found to be holding the core members accountable for their behaviour.

(Thomas, Thompson & Karstedt, 2014)

Contact and risk escalation documents are now in place for each circle and have guidelines specific for each core member's risk factors and what to do should the situations arise - this should provide the extra guidance required by volunteers.

Summary:

As with any new initiative there is an learning curve – with time hopefully the issues that are currently present will be eradicated

‘no amount of prison-based support for change can secure desistance without community-level and broader social and political commitment to ex-prisoner reintegration’

(McNeill, Farrall, Lightowler and Maruna, 2012, p. 10)

There appears to be many benefits to starting CoSA whilst the core member is still in prison.

‘I think anybody gets the chance or gets asked would they like the Circle of Support or support off somebody, I think they should take it, I really do. They’ve helped me a lot, with what we’ve talked about I mean I know they’ll help me again when I get’ ***Core member participant 3***

Thank you for listening

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