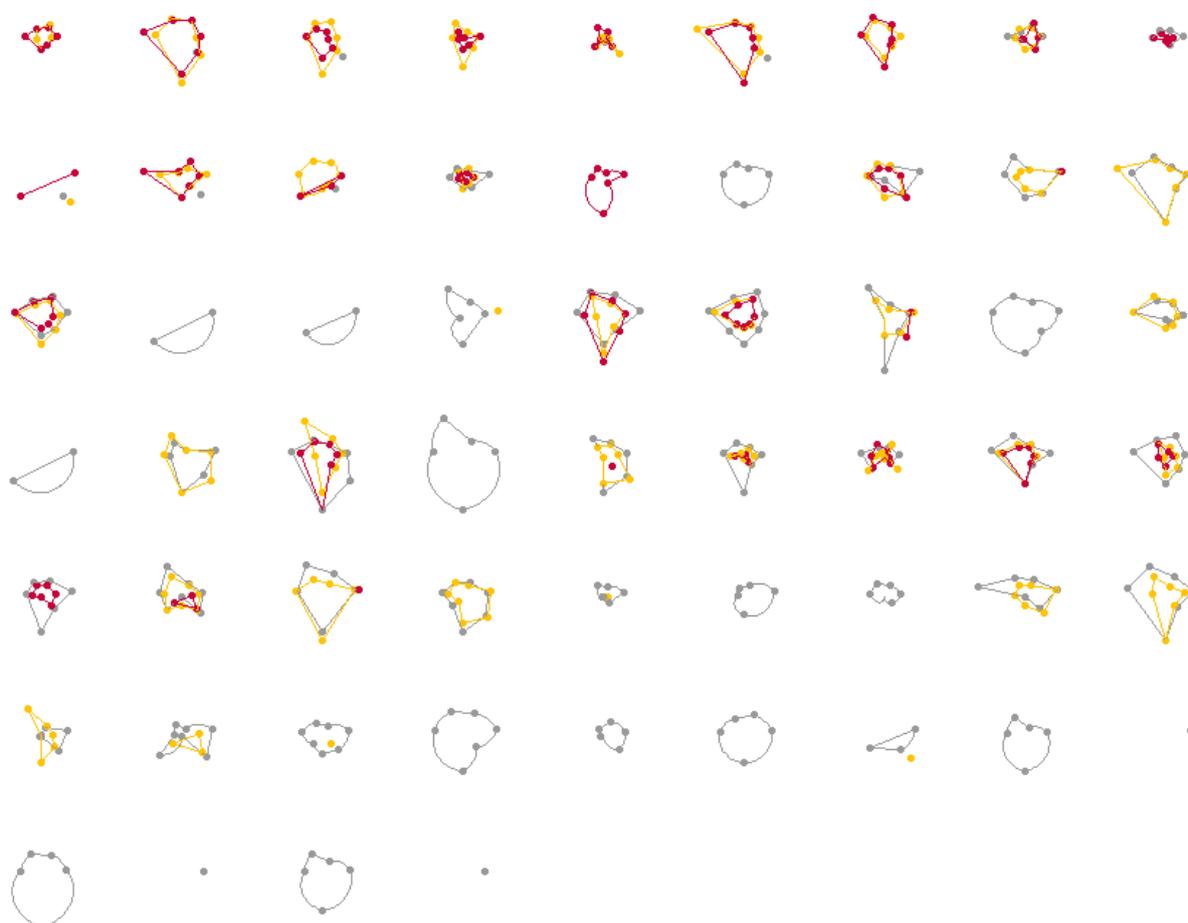


Evaluation of Circles South West

Final evaluation report: **Executive summary**

March 2019



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Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the volunteers and coordinators at Circles South West for the time they have dedicated to collecting the evidence in this report, and particularly to Pauline Rousseau for her hard work and patience collating all the questionnaire data.

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Cover image

Risk radars for all circles in the dataset

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This summary accompanies the full report of the evaluation of Circles South West over the period January 2017 to March 2019. It covers key conclusions from this report and summarises the evidence gathered. For further explanation on these points, please refer to the full report.

1. Between 2017 and 2019, Research in Practice (RiP) have partnered with Circles South West to support evidence collection and analysis of the Circles of Support and Accountability that they provide, which aim to reduce offending by people who are at risk of sexually harming others. This has included a number of pilot circles which work with people before they leave prison, with young people with harmful sexual behaviour, and with people with intellectual disabilities.
2. The evaluation set out to explore whether dynamic risk factors for core members change throughout their circle; the extent has the circle influenced these changes; core members' journeys throughout the circle; the impact on emotional wellbeing and loneliness; and key factors in success (and failure) of circles.
3. The evaluation collected a large volume of evidence from across Circles South West's activities, including a large dataset of questionnaires completed by core members, volunteers and coordinators. Questionnaires focused on measuring a range of dynamic risk factors, as well as utilising standardised measures of wellbeing, loneliness and social support. This data was explored using statistical analyses and via a case study format. In addition, interviews with a range of stakeholders were completed to explore the establishment of new pilot circles.
4. Overall, the evaluation demonstrated a marked difference in a balanced measure of dynamic risk between the start and end of circles. In other words, during the time that circles are active, a measure of risk related to dynamic factors reduces for core members. Further evidence from across this evaluations suggests that the circle has had a large contributory effect in this reduction of risk.
5. We cannot say from the evidence whether or not changes in risk factors are sustained over time, or whether similar changes would have been achieved through an alternative programme, however qualitative evidence suggests that circles are supporting changes in dynamic risk in a range of ways, and that circles are supporting and complementing (without duplicating) wider statutory with core members.
6. The evaluation identifies a general agreement between various views of dynamic risk (i.e. between coordinators, core members, and volunteers). Several measures of risk correlate with each other, and offer some validation of measures developed or used in this evaluation.
7. Loneliness was identified as a key factor in the evaluation. As well as correlating positively with a range of dynamic risk factors, stakeholders also noted the importance of circles in supporting isolated core members, particularly at transitional periods of their life.
8. Transitions were a feature of many of the circles analysed, and are a key part of the pilot circle models as well. Whether core members were transitioning from prison back to the community, from secure children's homes back to family

settings, or from intensive probation and social service support to a more routine life, there is a certain loss of support and structure at these points in life. Circles were seen as offering a structured, positive, and risk-informed social support structure for core members, which complemented more formal statutory probation and prevention work.

9. Circles South West volunteers are not only contributing to the core members lives, but are also an important asset to the wider community. Volunteers gain high-quality training and experience in social and criminal justice work, and contribute thousands of hours to supporting people who have offended to change their behaviours and dynamic risk factors.
10. Multiagency partners, including those from prisons and social care, spoke warmly of Circles South West and the support they provide, and the communication of coordinators and value of circles was praised. Circles were considered by many partners as reinforcing key messages from other professionals in the core members' lives. The review meetings also appear to have a high value, providing a multi-agency touch-point for those working with the core member that might otherwise not happen.
11. There were some, perhaps expected difficulties highlighted by coordinators regarding the establishment of some pilot circles. Prison circles in particular were difficult to establish at times due to the difficulty of getting volunteers into prisons to meet with the core member, prisoner relocation, and short notice of release. This process varies from prison to prison due to local variation in vetting and staffing. However, despite the challenges, feedback from stakeholders suggest that prison circles were extremely beneficial to core members.
12. Young person and intellectual disability circles reported a degree of adaptation to the standard model based on the core members. Importantly, these required extra relationship building and flexibility prior to discussions about offending and the ongoing management of thoughts and behaviour. In particular, these core members seemed to benefit greatly from the social elements of circles. Circle meetings provided a positive social activity which got core members out of the house and reduced isolation in an appropriate way.
13. Several areas for future consideration are discussed in the full report. An area for future consideration is the ending of circles and the potential for increased loneliness as the circle ends. Furthermore, in a few circles, there were some concerns that the circle should have continued further and some risk-related concerns due to this. Understandably, there are some limitations related to funding of circles which might affect this ability to continue longer than planned with core members.
14. The relationships between core members and circles was a central theme. These relationships did not always play out smoothly, but the format of having 2 or more volunteers in circles (as opposed to 1-to-1 work) appears to be key. The volunteers are able to support one another, and can address when the core members attitudes or behaviours are not working. This positive relationship within circles was also noted in terms of the function of circles reinforcing message that the core member is receiving from other services.

15. We conclude by saying that Circles South West has provided a large and valuable service to the region throughout the duration of this evaluation. The majority of core members appear to have reduced dynamic risk of reoffending at the end of their circle compared to the beginning. Partners in prison, probation and youth services have a positive view of this work, and CSW are complementing wider work in the criminal justice sector. Circles of Support and Accountability are an important provision in reducing reoffending and should be considered a valuable part of a community-led, strengths-based and restorative approach to reducing the risk of future sexual abuse.



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