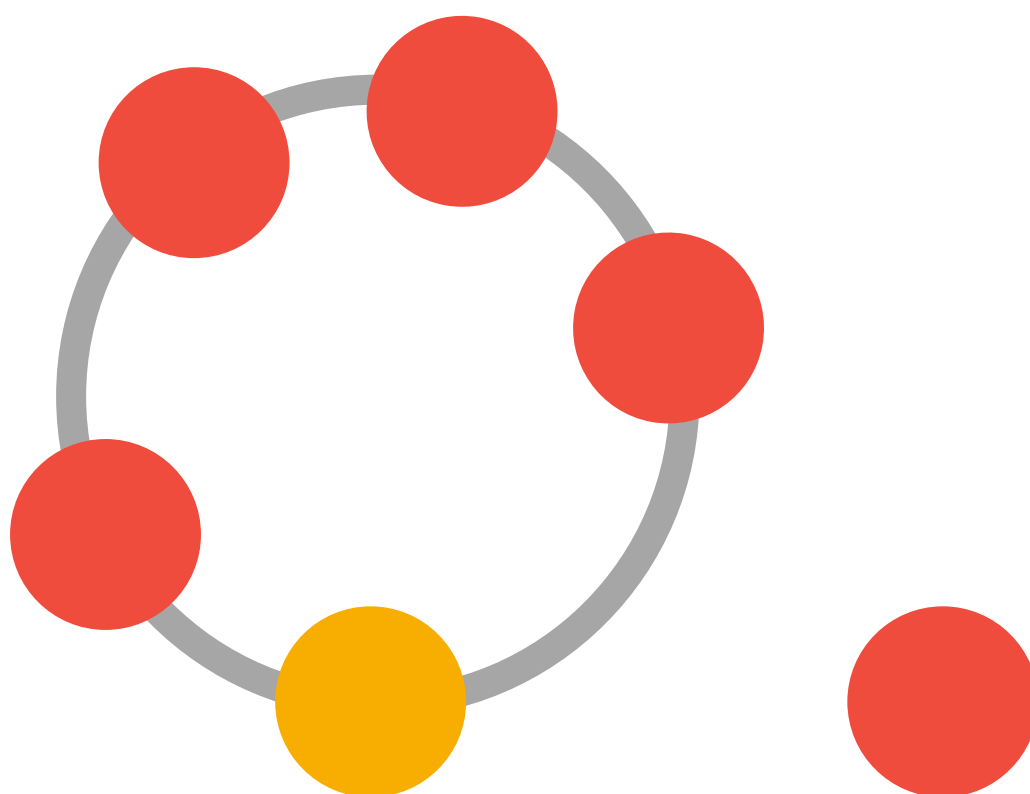


Evaluation of Circles South West

Executive summary: Interim
evaluation report

October 2018



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This report

This is an executive summary of the full interim evaluation report of Circles South West, 2018. The comments and summaries in this report have been condensed for ease of reading. For further explanation of the findings presented here, please refer to the full report and appendices.

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Executive summary

Introduction

Research in Practice (RiP) and Research in Practice for Adults (RiPfa) were commissioned by **Circles South West (CSW)** to undertake an independent evaluation of the **Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA, or 'circles')** that they provide across the South West of England. This evaluation was commissioned as part of CSWs ongoing development and as a requirement of pilot funding for the delivery of circles for three new groups:

- Young people
- People with learning disabilities
- People in prison

The evaluation has run from January 2017 with a final report due March 2019. The initial phase of the evaluation (2017) primarily involved the development of an evaluation framework for CSW and data collection. The second phase of the evaluation, currently underway (2018), involves the collation of available evidence from these tools. And the final phase of evaluation (2018-2019) will involve a final collation of available data, an update of analyses, and interviewing with key stakeholders to assess the impact of circles across multiple stakeholder groups.

The evaluation set out to answer the following questions:

1. How do dynamic risk factors for core members change throughout their circle?
2. To what extent has the circle influenced these changes?
3. What has been the core member's journey throughout the circle and what has been the impact on emotional wellbeing and loneliness?
4. What have been key factors in success (and failure) of circles, and what improvements (if any) can be made?

Methods

This is a mixed methods evaluation, combining qualitative evidence captured via interviews, questionnaires, and submitted evidence; and quantitative evidence captured via routine data submissions, questionnaires, and organisational records, split into two key parts:

- **A process evaluation** – exploring the process of providing CoSA and establishing new circles for young people, people in prison, and people with intellectual disabilities.
- **An outcomes evaluation** – investigating changes in dynamic risk factors for core member reoffending and effect of circles on these factors.

Ethics approval for this evaluation was sought from the HMPPS National Research Committee (NRC). This approval was given on 15th December 2017 (Ref: 2017-337). As

a condition of this, all participants gave written, informed consent before their data was shared with the evaluation team.

In the early stages of the evaluation, RiP conducted a logic modelling exercise with staff at CSW and developed clear models of how CSW intends to improve outcomes for core members and the community. This included the development of a monitoring and evaluation framework and corresponding data collection tools (such as questionnaires) for CSW which have been used throughout the evaluation.

These tools including some new questionnaires (such as for core member self-reporting and a questionnaire for coordinators); some validated tools from existing literature (such as psychometric scales); and some tools which have previously been used by CSW (such as the Dynamic Risk Review – 'DRR'). Data related to core members were captured at multiple time points – the start of their circle, mid-circle review, and end of circle.

The full report identifies several key limitations to this evaluation, including difficulties in reliably measuring dynamic risk and internal constructs such as loneliness and wellbeing. It is also noted that, in the absence of a control group, the evaluation cannot say whether findings indicate an effect of circles specifically; or if a different intervention could have achieved the same outcomes. Furthermore, at this stage, the evaluation is working with interim data so sample sizes are not necessarily large enough to conclude that changes are representative of all CSW-provided circles.

Results

This report includes data submitted up to **September 2018**. Data were submitted for **52 separate circles**: 20 standard circles, 8 intellectual disability circles, 10 prison circles, and 14 young person circles.

Each circle submitted up to 8 different types of questionnaire, which included 229 questions with scored answers. 170 of these questions (74%) could be categorised by primary risk factor from the CSW evaluation framework (such as 'careful decisions' or 'loneliness'). Further qualitative questions provided information about the reasons for changes in dynamic risk factors and contribution of the circle to changes.

Data were analysed based on type of circle, the key risk factor that questions related to, and the questionnaire or 'tool' which data came from.

At this early stage, the evidence from a range of questionnaires from a range of stakeholders appears to show that circles are having primarily positive effects. Outcomes are lower on average at the end of circles compared to the middle and start of circles. Furthermore, many circles are reporting positive changes between reviews, suggesting a wide range of improved outcomes at an individual level.

The scales that were used to measure dynamic risk appear to work well together, and this evaluation has showed correlation between several measures. Encouragingly, the correlation between DRRs and Coordinator questionnaires provides validation for the volunteers rating dynamic risk via DRRs and also supports the use of this new coordinator questionnaire, which was designed for this evaluation.

The UCLA loneliness scale (short version) was a particularly useful tool, correlating significantly with various other outcome scores; highlighting how loneliness as a factor may be a key component in the various other measures of dynamic risk.

Conclusions

The emerging evidence from qualitative and quantitative data suggests that coordinators, volunteers and core members believe that circles are influencing the positive changes seen in outcomes for many core members.

We suggest that self-reported measures (i.e. scores from core members) are valuable in assessing dynamic risk, and that core members are providing clear measures of their own risk without appearing to downplay it. In fact, self-reported risk scores might actually be higher than those assessed by other stakeholders.

There is evidence of adaptations occurring in each of the pilot circle types, where the support is being tailored for different populations. For prison circles, the support for ex-offenders as they transition back into the community has been highlighted. Young person circles appear to be having impacts on education and also on young person confidence. And ID circles have made positive differences in the development of relationships. Across all circles, the central focus on controlling thoughts and actions remains present, and the majority of circles appear to be making positive differences here.

Some challenges have been highlighted, such as difficulties with ending the circle. For some, circles appear to end before the core member is ready, or when the circle or coordinator believe that there could be further benefit in continuing. In a small number of circles, the circle ended for less positive reasons, such as the core member stopping the circle, disengaging, or moving away.

In terms of the volunteers, CSW appears to have developed a valuable community asset. Many volunteers report using their skills outside of circles, wanting to volunteer again, and recommending volunteering to others. The training by CSW was almost entirely met with positive feedback, as was the support that coordinators provided for volunteers. As a conservative estimate, across just the 52 circles that we have data for, if only three volunteers attended a weekly session with each core member, this would equate to over eight thousand volunteering hours over the course of a year, not to mention the additional economic benefits in training and experience of working with this population of ex-offenders.

Overall, although data collection is still ongoing, the emerging findings show that circles are having a positive effect on core members and the community, improving outcomes, and reducing average risk scores for a variety of dynamic risk factors.

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Research in Practice and Research in Practice for Adults are a national charity supporting evidence-informed practice in children's and adults' social care and social justice.

Evaluation at RiP and RiPFA aims to champion our evidence-informed approach, incorporating the voice of lived-experience, practice wisdom, and robust research methodologies. We adopt innovative approaches and aim to improve capacity for the organisations we work with.

Above all else, our ultimate aim is to improve outcomes for young people, families, and people with care and support needs.

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