

Summary Evaluation Volunteering 2021

Independent Evaluation by Research in Practice



research in practice

“Volunteers’ feedback presents a positive picture of volunteering with Circles South West, describing how organisational values align those of the individual, providing vital support from the community, helping rehabilitate people who have committed sexual offences and furthering the goal of ‘No More Victims’”

Circles South West provides Circles of Support & Accountability (CoSA) across South West England, an innovative community approach to preventing further sexual abuse by reducing the risk of sexual reoffending. Working in close partnership with the public protection agencies, CoSA engages local volunteers to provide an additional layer of risk management in the community.

Each group of 4 or 5 local volunteers are trained and supported to work directly and intensively with an individual convicted of serious sexual offences who has been assessed as high risk of reoffending and high risk of causing serious harm. CoSA meet regularly (initially weekly) for 12-18 months. This strengths-based approach holds the individual ‘core member’ to account for their behaviour and supports their safe integration in the local community.

Since 2017, Research in Practice <https://www.rip.org.uk/> has independently evaluated CoSA. This year they have specifically evaluated the volunteering aspect of Circles producing a separate ‘Volunteering Experience’ report summarising the feedback of 154 Volunteers involved in 64 separate Circles. They have also captured and reported on volunteering hours. This paper provides a summary of their findings. The full evaluation reports can be found here [Making a difference - Circles South West \(circles-southwest.org.uk\)](https://www.circles-southwest.org.uk/)

Volunteering Hours

“The substantial number of volunteering hours reported by Circles South West is a testament to the hard work of the volunteers and professionals involved. Volunteers’ external use of the knowledge and skills learned through Circles, and their increased awareness of and advocacy for the potential community role in rehabilitation, also highlights the broader impact of Circles” (Research in Practice)

Individual volunteering hours are recorded for each individual volunteer in every Circle:

- **Direct volunteering** involves contact between the volunteer and Core Member.
- **Indirect volunteering** involves Circle work when the Core Member is not present, such as training and supervision.

It is important to note that these figures *include data for completed Circles only* and the numbers would be substantially higher were active Circles included.

Reporting on 78 Circles there were:

- a total of 17,674 volunteering hours
- 7,438.5 direct volunteering hours plus 10,235.5 indirect volunteering hours
- This equates to 227 volunteering hours per Circle
- This represents a staggering £293,035 overall, or £3756 per Circle¹

Volunteering Experience

Table 1: Aggregate responses to from 154 volunteers representing 64 Circles

%age Volunteers (n=154)	category
100%	Volunteer felt able to cope with the emotional pressure of volunteering for Circles
99%	Volunteers thought the training adequately prepared them for their Circles
99%	Volunteers felt supported by Circles South West throughout their time volunteering
99%	Volunteers felt safe volunteering with Circles
99%	Volunteering expectations were met
96%	Volunteers recommend volunteering with Circles South West
92%	Volunteers found their experiences volunteering with Circles rewarding
88%	Volunteers believed their Circle had a positive relationship with the core member
86%	Volunteers thought their Circle Volunteers were well matched to the needs of the core member
83%	Volunteers intend to volunteer in another Circle in the future
75%	Volunteers reported learning valuable new skills through volunteering with Circles
66%	Volunteers said they had applied new skills gained outside of Circles
61%	Volunteers thought their core member was accountable to the Circle
49%	Volunteers through the Circle had significantly reduced the core member's risk of reoffending

“As an organisation, Circles South West was described as “supportive”, “friendly”, “professionally run”, “remarkably able”, “efficient” and “well organised”, with an important mission. It was felt to be making a difference. It is considered welcoming and inclusive with volunteers feeling appreciated and supportive” (Research in Practice)

What Volunteers said

Volunteer comments relating to the above responses include those below. The full evaluation reports can be found on our website here [Making a difference - Circles South West \(circles-southwest.org.uk\)](https://circles-southwest.org.uk)

99% Volunteers felt supported by Circles South West throughout their time volunteering

“Support from Circles South West and coordinators in particular was highly regarded, with

¹ Using £16.58 per hour as the UK median hourly wage for “Business and public service associates” (ONS, 2020)

coordinators considered available and understanding, holding regular reviews and checking in proactively, while also being reachable through phone, text and email. Some knew support was available but reported not needing to use it, others described receiving practical and emotional advice and support through their coordinators” (Research in Practice)

99% Volunteers thought the training adequately prepared them for their Circles

“By far the most insightful and useful training I have experience[d] throughout my professional career” (Volunteer)

“The training Circles provides for its volunteers is outstanding, provided by passionate coordinators who have a lot of experience in this field and who are very knowledgeable about the topic” (Volunteer)

99% volunteering expectations were met

“I’ve come to the conclusion that the model does work, enhanced by individual differences on both sides ... there’s also an element of chemistry (magic?!) where the whole is greater than the sum of all the parts” (Volunteer)

“I do not personally feel that I have definitely made a significant difference to our Core Member. However, Circles SW as an organisation has exceeded my expectations” (Volunteer)

92% Volunteers found their experiences volunteering with Circles rewarding

“Volunteers were extremely positive about their experiences. Building relationships and positive changes in Core Members’ attitudes and behaviours were referenced as being especially rewarding. Comments also cited improved situations in school, voluntary work or accommodation. Other comments referenced seeing a Core Member begin to open up and trust the Circle, gain a fresh perspective and make progress toward their goals. Understandably, volunteering experiences appeared directly linked with Circles’ outcomes, with those reaching a “good” conclusion often described as rewarding” (Research in Practice)

“Volunteers overwhelmingly reported feeling safe in Circle” (Ibid)

“It is rewarding to see that he is no longer so dependent on the Circle and is building a life again, making new friends and maintaining employment” (Volunteer)

“It has been a very rewarding year. CM has definitely grown in confidence and all of our friendships have grown too. CM has started college, started dating, made friends, learned to use public transport, had a job and more! It has been really special to be able to achieve all of these goals he had” (Volunteer)

88% volunteers believed their Circle had a positive relationship with the core member

“[I]t was very gratifying to see the CM begin to trust us and open up, enjoy our company and recognise that he could form positive relationships with adults” (Volunteer)

“[H]e appreciated that we were there for him without judging him, and gave him the opportunity to have a continuing dialogue where he was seen as a human being rather than a sex offender” (Volunteer)

61% volunteers thought their core member was accountable to the Circle

“I believe we have helped the core member in other aspects of his life, for example, helping him engage in conversation rather than merely talking at people” (Volunteer)

“I believe the circle has offered CM the right amount of support and accountability, which he lacked prior to his offence” (Volunteer)

“[A] friendship had begun and the CM did not want to let [group] down” (Volunteer)

Volunteer recommendations

“Many comments suggested no improvements were necessary with positive experiences reported”
(Research in Practice)

Volunteer recommendations are being considered and include:

- More ‘tools’ to use in Circles
- Ideas for activities appropriate in different locations
- More opportunities to go out for meals more often
- More opportunities for role play
- Ensuring a good balance of age and gender in the Circles
- Additional information at the outset e.g. that core member may make slow progress
- Provisional timeline – roadmap
- Additional focus on preparing for endings
- More opportunities for volunteers to meet with each other – socially and knowledge sharing
- More training and events to be held outside Taunton
- Some Volunteer-led training
- More volunteer training opportunities

Full evaluation reports at this link [Making a difference - Circles South West \(circles-southwest.org.uk\)](https://circles-southwest.org.uk)