

An evaluation of Circles of Support and Accountability delivered by Circles South West between 2017 and 2022

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Cover image: Risk radars for all individual circles 2017-2022

Anonymity: No individual data or names are used in this report. All comments have been checked and any identifying information removed.

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Key terms

Circles (also known as Circles of Support and Accountability – CoSA) are community-based, restorative interventions which aim to reduce the likelihood of reoffending for people who have committed sexual offences. The intervention typically involves a group of local volunteers, overseen by a professional ‘coordinator’, meeting regularly with a person at risk of offending (the ‘core member’) over a series of meetings. The typical period over which circles are provided is 12-18 months.

Circles South West (CSW), an independent charity affiliated with the national body, Circles UK, provides circles across the South West of England. The ultimate goal of CSW is for there to be ‘no more victims’ of sexual abuse. CSW is funded through a combination of charitable grants and also through the commissioning of circles by statutory organisations, including local Police and Crime Commissioners.

Research in Practice are a national charity with a dedicated Research and Evaluation team which aims to support organisations in understanding the impact of their work to support children, adults and families, and those who work alongside them.

Core members are the people who receive support from circles. Adult core members have been convicted of a sexual offence in the past and are under the supervision of probation and / or police. There are different referral criteria for younger core members with harmful sexual behaviour, some of whom may have been convicted of a sexual offence. CSW has adapted the circles model to suit young core members, accepting referrals from 10 years of age.

Coordinators are the professionals from CSW who arrange circles, carry out risk assessments, and ensure the smooth and safe running of circles.

Volunteers are members of the local community who give their time for free to work with core members and meet as part of the circle on a weekly basis. They receive training from CSW prior to undertaking this role.

Dynamic risk is risk which can change over time. In this report, it is risk of a core member going on to commit sexual abuse in the future. Dynamic risk factors are things which could change over time in order to reduce the chance of abuse, such as the way someone manages their behaviour, their living situation, or their employment.

Summaries

Executive summary

Circles South West (CSW) deliver circles of support and accountability ('circles') across the South West region of the United Kingdom. A circle involves a group of volunteer members of the local community meeting with a person (the 'core member' of the circle) who presents a risk of perpetrating sexual abuse, including crimes against children, and supporting them to reduce this risk. Circles typically last for around a year, with weekly meetings of the circle. The circles delivered by CSW include standard community circles, which are delivered in accordance with national standards, as well as adapted circles for specific populations: young people, people with intellectual disabilities, and circles starting whilst a person is in prison and continuing through their release and reintegration into society.

Since 2017, Research in Practice have worked with CSW as an independent evaluator of their circles. In the early stages of the evaluation, based on a series of workshops with CSW stakeholders, a selection of questionnaires were developed (some pre-existing and some bespoke) and a monitoring and evaluation framework 'No more victims' was co-produced between Research in Practice and Circles South West. These questionnaires were developed in order to better understand the dynamic risk of people who had committed or were at risk of committing sexual abuse, how this risk changes over time, and how circles affect this. The monitoring and evaluation framework underpins the evaluation approach taken in this report.

These questionnaires were completed at the start, middle, and end of circles run by CSW from 2017 to 2022, resulting in a dataset of 131 circles, of which we have complete data for 65 circles. This data includes answers from 1750 individual questionnaires, completed by circle core members, volunteers, coordinators, and parent and carers (for young person circles). The CSW approach to evaluation and approach to understanding risk is progressive in its approach, balancing feedback from multiple stakeholders and including the views of core members.

As discussed in this report, Covid-19 interrupted circles for a period of time, after which circles began to reconvene; first remotely, and then face-to-face. The evaluation approach remained consistent through this time and, as such, the disruption of Covid may not be as visible in the 2020-2022 data as it was in reality. Nonetheless, we do draw out findings related to the pandemic via comments made by circle members and coordinators, and highlight the particular challenges faced by CSW during this time, such as the disruption to positive routines that core members were developing and their building of relationships with friends and family.

This evaluation has built upon previous evaluations of the CSW dataset in 2019 and 2020. These reports documented the overall statistically significant decrease in average risk scores over the course of most circles, as identified by a balanced average dynamic risk score (including ratings from all stakeholders). As new data have been added to the evaluation from more recent circles, this effect has persisted and the current report shows a statistically significant decrease in dynamic risk scores for completed circles, across multiple risk categories, as assessed by coordinators, volunteers, and core members.

Furthermore, an analysis of the questionnaires has added further validation to the evaluation tools used by CSW and Research in Practice, showing that the balanced stakeholder approach to evaluation (mixing scores from coordinators, volunteers and core members) is appropriate. This was shown via correlations between different stakeholders' risk scores for circles at each time point.

The evaluation has also looked beyond changes in perceived risk, at the attribution of changes to the circles themselves. This involved analysis of questionnaires and associated comments provided by respondents. Across all circle types, volunteers, coordinators and core members routinely reported positive changes in core members lives thanks to their circles. Core members spoke of the value of having independent and non-judgemental people to listen to them; volunteers spoke of the relationships they were able to develop with core members to enable discussions about managing their thoughts and behaviours; and coordinators spoke about how circles had addressed areas of risk through their positive relationships with the core member. Core members often mentioned the confidence that circles had given them to reengage with society, education, employment, and positive relationships with friends and family.

Finally, the evaluation discusses the wider impact that circles have on communities, particularly through the contribution that CSW volunteers make through the time they give to circles. Each circle is responsible for hundreds of donated hours of work to prevent offending in local communities, and the efforts of CSW volunteers are worth tens of thousands of pounds a year to communities, probation, and local services. Furthermore, volunteers are taking away skills to build their own careers and personal lives, contributing to a society that takes a strengths-based and restorative approach to stopping sexual abuse.

Standard community circles for adults

Standard (or 'community') circles follow the same format as those delivered across the UK and worldwide, standardised in the UK by the central body, Circles UK. Core members meet weekly with their circle, typically for the period of a year. The background of offending differs from one core member to the next, and not all are on probation or have served time in prison. Each circle adapts to the specific circumstances of the core member, but with a focus on all areas of dynamic risk which might affect the likelihood of future offending.

The evaluation included data for 57 standard community circles from 2016 – 2022, 28 of which have completed data (data for start, middle and end of circle reviews).

The majority of circles were in Devon (n = 23), Dorset (n = 13) and Wiltshire (n = 13), with the remainder in Gloucestershire (n = 4) and Cornwall (n = 3). Most core members were referred to the service by probation (86%). Almost all circles began within a year of the referral date, most within 6 months. The average age of core members was 45, and the majority were male (95%).

The average dynamic risk scores for core members reduced during the course of the circle, with decreased risk in almost all areas, including mental wellbeing, loneliness, relationships, managing thoughts and behaviours, safe community integration, accommodation, and hobbies and activities. The reduction in risk between start and end of circles was shown to be statistically significant.

Between the start and end of circles, 85% had improved wellbeing scores; 70% had improved on managing thoughts and behaviours; 75% had improved isolation and loneliness; and 80% had improved in their careful decision making.

There were fewer circles improving in longer term dynamic factors such as employment (30%) and family relationships (47%). Overall, circle coordinators rated the dynamic risk of core members as decreasing on average across all circles from start to end of circles.

Core members described many ways in which their circle helped them with their thoughts and behaviours.

[My circle has] made me realise how much I have to lose and how far I have come since coming out of prison. (Core member)

We have discussed at length my offending and what were the triggers which helps me feel I am in control of my actions. (Core member)

Core members who provided comments spoke positively about their experience of having a circle:

I've enjoyed it. It has restored my faith in people. Has given me confidence again when talking to people. (Core member)

I thoroughly enjoyed the circles' company, no words to describe how they have helped. (Core member)

Thank you. It's been fun and the Circle has helped me with problems. (Core member)

In terms of volunteering, a total of 3,693 direct volunteering hours and 3,758 indirect hours were logged across all 57 circles. All volunteers reported feeling very supported and safe during their time volunteering, and felt they could turn to someone for support if needed. Almost all reported finding the experience highly rewarding.

I have thoroughly enjoyed my experience as a volunteer. I have enjoyed working closely with the CM at managing their emotions, triggers and promoting their self-esteem. (Volunteer)

I had a very positive experience volunteering with CSW. A particular strength is the continuous training offered by the organisation. Part of our role is to help manage the thoughts feelings and actions of the CM to protect wider society as well as to address any other issues such as financial issues, mental health and employability. As a circle I believe we have achieved this. (Volunteer)

Prison (Through the Gate) circles for adults

Prison circles (also referred to as 'Through the Gate' circles) begin when the core member is still serving a sentence in prison. Circle volunteers undertake additional training which enables them to visit the core member and begin the circle in a prison setting. This additional work in setting up the circle enables volunteers to build relationships with the core member before their release and subsequently help them through this challenging time when their life is uprooted and a variety of factors such as their beliefs and behaviours, changes to their accommodation and employment, and their wellbeing and loneliness might increase their risk of reoffending (Brunton-Smith and Hopkins, 2013).

The evaluation included data for 24 prison circles from 2017 – 2022, 10 of which have completed data (data for start, middle and end of circle reviews). These circles were delivered across the South West, in Bristol (n = 8); Devon (n = 6); Somerset (n = 6); Cornwall (n = 2); and Gloucestershire (n = 2). Most core members were referred to the service by probation (83%) with only three referrals coming from prisons. All circles began within a year of the referral date, with the majority beginning within 4 months. The average age of core members was 50, and all core members were male.

The average dynamic risk scores for core members reduced during the course of the circle, with decreased average dynamic risk in almost all areas, including mental wellbeing, isolation and loneliness, managing thoughts and behaviours, safe community integration, and hobbies and activities. Some areas had fewer improvements, such as accommodation and family relationships.

Between the start and end of circles, 92% had improved wellbeing scores; 92% had improved on managing thoughts and behaviours; 69% had improved isolation and loneliness; and 77% had improved in their careful decision making.

Accommodation was a more challenging area for prison circles, with only 15% reporting an improvement in this area during the course of the circle, and the remainder either staying the same or getting worse. The majority were in hostels or temporary shelter which may explain the challenges in this area. Understandably, the housing of people on release from prison is outside of the control of the circle, however the support in terms of wellbeing and loneliness during this time was positive.

Three quarters of core members reported that their circle helped with their transition from prison to the community.

There in the background for support. I see you every week and it feels like a safety net. I feel that the circle cares. (Core member)

Given me something to look forward to each week. Good to talk in a non-judgemental environment. (Core member)

Made me feel more positive. Helped me to socialise with people. (Core member)

For prison circles, a total of 1,467 direct volunteering hours and 2,004 indirect hours were logged across all 24 circles. All volunteers reported feeling supported and safe during their time volunteering, and felt they could turn to someone for support if needed.

Volunteers spoke very highly of the training they received in preparation for their circle; and many volunteers also spoke of the skills they had learned whilst volunteering, including those who have previously worked in probation:

Circles training is excellent, even under Covid. I look forward to more! (Volunteer)

*Although starting a circle felt daunting I did feel well prepared from my training.
(Volunteer)*

The training was great and very interesting. Most of the skills used in circle meetings are social skills that most people are already equipped with so it was nice getting to use and improve the knowledge and skills. (Volunteer)

Learned how to work as part of a team and in direct contact with the core member as my previous role in probation was largely administrative. (Volunteer)

The transition from prison to the community is an extremely challenging time for former offenders, whose support networks and housing situations can change suddenly and without much warning. The support of their circles during this time was well received by core members, who showed decreased loneliness and improved social support and wellbeing at a crucial point in their rehabilitative journey.

Intellectual disability circles for adults

One of the adapted circles developed by CSW in 2017 were circles for people with intellectual disabilities. The adaptations included increased relationship building at the start of circles and more flexibility in the ways circles addressed sexual offending. There were also adaptations made to evaluation tools used to assess dynamic risk in this group, as well as support in completing questionnaires.

The evaluation included data for 17 ID circles from 2016 – 2022, 10 of which have completed data (data for start, middle and end of circle reviews). These circles were delivered across the South West, in Bristol (n = 11); South Gloucestershire (n = 4); Bath and North East Somerset (n = 1); and Cornwall (n = 1). Most core members were referred to the service by local service providers for people with intellectual disabilities (n = 9) and probation (n = 6). All circles began within 6 months of the referral date, with the majority beginning within 2 months. The average age of core members was 33, and all core members were male.

The average dynamic risk scores for core members reduced during the course of the circle, with decreased average dynamic risk in almost all areas, including wellbeing, isolation and loneliness, managing thoughts and behaviours, relationships, and hobbies and activities.

Between the start and end of circles, 93% had improved in their management of thoughts and behaviour and 85% had improved in making careful decisions. There were also improvements for most core members in wellbeing (79%) and community integration (83%).

Core members talked about how their circles had been non-judgemental, listening to their issues, and helping them to develop strategies and behaviours:

[My circle has] given me another outlet to discuss problems. (Core member)

They've helped me from day one with all the support I need, for example, spending nights on my own. (Core member)

Having a different perspective on situations. Encouraging positive strategies and talking through negatives. (Core member)

Many core members expressed sadness that their circle was coming to an end, and spoke fondly of the relationships they had made with the circle.

It would be nice for it to carry on for a bit longer. The circle has been really helpful, given me a lot of good feedback and positive vibes to motivate me to carry on. (Core member)

I think the volunteers are great but I'd like more time with them each week and more years of the circle. (Core member)

For ID circles, volunteers gave a total of 1,631 direct volunteering hours and 3,316 indirect hours across all 17 circles. All volunteers reported feeling supported and safe during their time volunteering and felt well supported by CSW throughout. Many volunteers described the benefits they had gained through their time as a circle member:

It improved my own confidence in social settings and felt like a meaningful thing to be a part of. (Volunteer)

It enhanced my skills as a counsellor. (Volunteer)

Seeing how the other volunteers interact in a supportive but non-professional/therapeutic manner has been really interesting as it allows one to reflect on one's own approach both personally and professionally. (Volunteer)

Volunteers also reflected positively on the difference they felt the circle had made to the core members' risk of reoffending and accountability:

I believe the CM has learnt more about what it means to be responsive and also what leading a healthy and appropriate lifestyle with positive relationships means. (Volunteer)

[The core member has] much stronger social skills and confidence - less likely to rely on internet for companionship. Better thoughts about the future. (Volunteer)

I think [the core member] was already honest and remorseful of offence but the circle helped to look deeper into links between this and other areas of life. (Volunteer)

Young person circles

Circles South West has been developing their model of circles for young people since 2016, supported by funding since 2017 for delivery across the South West. These models are adapted for a younger core member and informed by research into young people with harmful sexual behaviour, including asset based approaches and trauma informed practice.

Young person circles are primarily funded by The National Lottery Community Fund and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and include partnerships with other organisations (including Glebe House in South East England, and the Be Safe multiagency partnership in the Bristol area). Typically, circles involve additional relationship building in the early stages, as well as a more activity-focused format to support conversations with young people; opposed to the more static format of adult circles. There is also likely to be less discussion of past behaviour, and more asset-based work to support positive future behaviour. As with other adapted circles delivered by CSW, questionnaires for evaluation purposes have been adapted to suit young people, including appropriate language and questions.

The evaluation included data for 33 YP circles from 2017 – 2022, 17 of which have completed data (data for start, middle and end of circle reviews). These circles were delivered across the South West, primarily in Bristol (n = 20) and Bath (n = 3). All core members were referred to the service by services for young people (such as Bristol Be Safe and Glebe House). All circles began within 12 months of the referral date, with the majority beginning within 4 months. The average age of core members was 16, with the youngest at 10 years old and oldest at 20 years old. Most core members were male (n = 30).

For young person circles the average risk scores over time were relatively stable throughout the course of circles; however there is some argument that dynamic risk factors that apply to adults are not as relevant to young core members, and that the difference between the youngest (i.e. 10 years old) and oldest (20 years old) is much more significant than the same age gap in adult core members. As such, the scores for risk in young people may not reflect dynamic risk in the same way as older core members.

Assessments of young person risk based on specific stakeholder questionnaires suggested that the average dynamic risk of further harmful behaviour from core members reduced for the majority of core members, with 94% of coordinator questionnaire and 93% of parent and carer questionnaires suggesting reduced risk from the start to the end of circles. Three quarters (75%) of core members also reported improved social support at the end of their circle. Young people were less positive in some self-reported measures, with only 42% reporting improvements in loneliness, and 50% reporting improved mental wellbeing.

Across all questionnaires, average scores relating to core members being able to manage their thoughts and behaviours showed improvements for approximately three quarters of circles (76%) and 68% showed improvements in careful decision making.

Circles supported young people in their education, such as by carrying out 'hangman' revision sessions, with the majority of young people responding that the circle had helped them with their education, including supporting those young people who were approaching employment, college and further education decisions.

Good – [volunteer] helped with maths. Helped show alternative options to college/apprenticeships. (Core member)

Did a pros and cons list for colleges, gave ideas for apprenticeships. (Core member)

The volunteers also helped young people with their family relationships, with many describing how the circle helped with their communication with family members:

Feel I can talk to my parents more now, know how to approach conversations better. (Core member)

Advice on things to be done better. Gave advice on how to manage relationship with mum. (Core member)

They helped me to think how much my attitude effects mum and dad. (Core member)

In addition to the routine questionnaires, young person circles had an additional questionnaire sent to parents and carers of core members to assess the impact of circles. All but 2 parents / carers responding thought that the circle had helped with the young person's behaviour (94%). Across all questions, the prevalent themes in comments were 'confidence' and 'communication skills'. Parents and carers noted how the young people had developed abilities in communicating with peers and adults, and had developed confidence to engage with education, activities, and improved relationships.

The Circle has helped with his self-confidence. Prior to the Circle he had been stuck in his bedroom every day / night for almost 2 years with only family and close friends to talk to. (Parent / Carer)

He is now getting on with me far better (e.g. helping me with his brother and with cooking). He is more socially confident. His time keeping is better. Now always keeps to his curfew. No negative changes due to the circle but there's still general progress he needs to make in his life. (Parent / Carer)

Having a positive male role model has really helped – also having a group of trusted adults that believe in him and giving him the time to repeat and practice skills he has learned. (Parent / Carer)

The Circle has helped with her self-esteem issues. [She] is now focused on art and uses it to relieve stress / to manage her violent and aggressive outbursts. (Parent / Carer)

Young person circle volunteers gave a total of 2,068 direct volunteering hours and 2,406 indirect hours across all 33 circles. All volunteers reported feeling supported and safe during their time volunteering and felt well supported by CSW throughout.

Volunteers felt supported and prepared for their circle thanks to the training provided by CSW:

Everything I encountered while volunteering was what I expected from the preparation and information provided to me from Circles. (Volunteer)

I felt extremely supported by my coordinator and the training given was by far the most insightful and useful training I have experience throughout my professional career. (Volunteer)

The training has always been very thorough, with plenty of opportunity to top that up. And ongoing guidance from my coordinator which has been amazing. (Volunteer)

Volunteers described the satisfaction and impact they felt the circle had achieved for the young people they had worked with, including a reduced likelihood of reoffending:

The impact the circle had on our core member was tangible and clear by the end of the Circle. It was great to see their confidence grow as much as it did and how they developed better relationships with adults in their lives. (Volunteer)

They had more support from adults in their life by the end of the circle which left me confident they would sooner reach out than act out if something came up. (Volunteer)

While [risk] could never be eliminated, I believe that CM's improved relationships with his family, and open discussions with us, have helped him to consider others. (Volunteer)

Introduction

Since 2017, Research in Practice has acted as the independent evaluator of CSW. During this time, CSW has built upon a foundation of objective self-assessment, developing a wrap-around approach to evaluating the impact of circles on core members and the community. This has included the development of a toolkit of measures, expanding on pre-existing approaches to understanding dynamic risk and offending, and creating an approach to systematically evaluate circles where all stakeholders are considered and included in the process. During this time, CSW has become more data-informed and statistically-minded, whilst retaining their personal and holistic approach to restorative work – a challenging feat which deserves particular recognition.

This evaluation report follows on from previous reports (2019 and 2021), building upon the data collection and analysis processes (see Preston and Allen, 2019). As before, the main intention of this report is to assist CSW in their delivery of circles across the South West region, and to better understand the impact of circles on the people they support and surrounding community.

CSW deliver standard circles in community settings, as well as a number of adapted circles which were developed thanks to funding from The National Lottery community Fund awarded in 2016. These adapted circles are:

- Young person circles – whereby young people who have sexually harmed others receive a circle, specially adapted for their age, often including activities and play to support the young person in their communication with volunteers.
- Intellectual disability circles which have been adapted specifically for people with learning disabilities in order to help them to engage with the circles approach.
- Prison circles – where the circle is formed whilst the core member is in the final stage of their time in prison and continues to support the core member through their release and probation.

Adapting to Covid-19

Circles South West responded to the coronavirus pandemic in a level-headed manner; deferring the majority of grant and other revenue and accessing government support via the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme in order to survive financially (Circles South West Annual Report and Accounts, 2021) and pick back up as people were able to return to in-person meetings. Furthermore, alongside these adaptations, Circles South West continued to provide support for their core members during a time where loneliness and societal unease may have had potentially negative effects on risk of offending, offering a valuable resource to the community. This support came in the form of remote support for core members, the involvement of CSW in a telephone befriending service and, subsequently, socially distant adaptations of Circles to ensure core members had continuity in their support and relationships. In particular, young person circles, which are often activity-based, required extra ingenuity in their adaptation, with volunteers and coordinators coming up with socially distant activities to ensure continued engagement.

During the coronavirus pandemic and associated lockdowns, many theorised that the increased isolation (and associated time spent in front of a computer screen) would result in increased rates of

child sexual exploitation and non-contact offences (e.g. accessing harmful online images, online grooming). Although data on this takes time to be collected and analysed, the early evidence suggests that this was indeed the case, and that rates of online CSE rose across Europe (Europol, 2020).

CSW have been working with former offenders who have accessed indecent images of children for many years (though it should be noted that some circles providers will only work with core members who have committed contact offences). In addition to this, in partnership with the Lucy Faithful Foundation, CSW has also been delivering Inform Plus – a group intervention for people who have accessed CSE material online. These additional interventions are outside of the scope of this evaluation and as such the impact of these will not be visible in the report.

At the time of writing, no coronavirus measures are in place in the UK and existing and new circles are now able to meet again in person and without restrictions.

Circles background

The first circle was carried out in Canada in 1994 (although the concept of community-supported rehabilitation and restorative practice date back much further and across many cultures). Since the first circle, this process has been expanded and refined. In the UK, after a successful pilot in the South East of England, circles providers developed across the country and circles are now standardised in their delivery via the national body, Circles UK.

Circles are influenced by the principles of the Good Lives Model of Offender Rehabilitation (GLM), developed by Tony Ward and colleagues (see Ward, Mann and Gannon, 2007). The GLM focuses on (1) the enhancement of offender wellbeing, and (2) the reduction of reoffending risk; noting that these two concepts go hand-in-hand. For instance, the development of positive relationships and support in the case of child sex offenders as a means of both improving wellbeing and preventing the behaviour of seeking this intimacy from children (Wilson and Yates, 2009).

Circles embody the principles of the GLM, aiming to help former offenders in building pro-social relationships, networks of support, manage their thoughts and behaviour, engage in positive activities, education and work, and develop a series of other protective factors to prevent reoffending. This approach acknowledges that restorative work can be beneficial to core members and the community, and that rehabilitation is not an ‘either / or’ situation.

CSW have further developed circles in the South West of England, thanks in part to Big Lottery funding, for additional populations: young people who’ve sexually harmed others, people with intellectual disabilities, and circles which begin whilst the offender is still in prison to help with their transition on release. These circles, the specific adaptations, and the evaluation of this pilot, are fully detailed in our 2019 evaluation (Preston and Allen, 2019). These circles are now offered as part of CSWs service and their data are included in the evaluation dataset; however, due to the distinct differences in provision to these unique populations, data are kept separate from ‘standard’ circles in many cases.

Evidence for Circles of Support and Accountability

There is a building evidence base for the efficacy of circles and validity of the approach. This includes a range of academic studies and service evaluations. In their systematic review of outcomes for

circles, Clarke and colleagues (2017) conclude that circles have made a positive impact on outcomes for core members and their community; however the authors note an absence of data which empirically demonstrates an impact on reoffending in the absence of any controlled studies (such as randomised controlled trials - RCTs).

At this stage, circles have been shown as a valid approach, but further studies using statistically robust methods are required before it can be unequivocally stated that circles prevent reoffending. Only one RCT of circles was included in Clarke and colleagues' review; however the means by which quasi-experimental studies can be conducted already exist in the UK via HMPPS data collection. But, in order to get to this point, there needs to be a unified approach between the circles providers, prison and probation services, and evaluators – which is a challenging and potentially time-intensive task. In previous evaluations (see Preston and Allen, 2019) we set out how the approach taken by CSW has greatly advanced this, incorporating a range of new and existing tools and bringing the ability for future study of reoffending.

Qualitative and evaluation evidence in support of circles is more abundant than experimental and quasi-experimental studies. Bates and colleagues (2012) conclude that circles provided in the South East of England were successful in both reducing risk and also at identifying risk (through additional contact and conversation with core members) – a finding replicated in our own evaluation of CSW (see Preston and Allen, 2019). However, Bates and colleagues (2012) also conclude that the identification of a counterfactual was not possible in their circumstances. This counterfactual would involve selection of a control group of offenders who have been matched on a range of characteristics (such as motivation to have a circle, offending history, static and dynamic risk factors), who then didn't receive a circle. This method was also suggested in our own research, however access to data for (1) matching and (2) criminological outcomes requires access to the Police National Computer, therefore a large amount of additional resource and access would be required to carry out this form of study. Furthermore, the situations where potential core members are deemed eligible for a circle but then decline may arguably exclude them from a control group anyway (e.g. their motivations or situation changes).

Methodological challenges aside, a number of researchers and evaluators across the UK and more widely have also shown the positive impact of circles on the dynamic risk factors associated with reoffending; primarily utilising a mixture of qualitative (i.e. interviews) and quantitative measures (such as the dynamic risk review; DRR); many concluding that circles were associated with a decline in risk (e.g. Bates et al., 2012; Banks et al., 2015; Clarke et al., 2016; McCartan, 2016; Thomas et al., 2014; Winder et al., 2020). Furthermore, many of these mixed method studies of circles have looked in further depth at circles, taking a case study approach. This has proven to be particularly valuable in identifying the factors related to delivering successful (and unsuccessful) circles, such as trust between volunteers and core members (see Winder et al., 2020).

Despite the ever-mounting evidence base, it would be a mistake to think that a large body of evidence precludes the need to continue the important process of monitoring and evaluation of circles. Indeed, the absence of data on changes in dynamic risk over time was noted in a systematic review of evidence for circles (Clarke et al., 2017). Evaluation should be an on-going and embedded feature of the service, considered by all commissioners and funders. A detailed understanding of changes in dynamic risk is an important part of the process for all of those involved in circles, and evaluators must continue to work towards methods which are timely and useful to those delivering circles, rather than simply in service of the end report. This has been a challenge we have constantly grappled with as evaluators, and led to the development of tools such as the 'risk radar' (Preston and Allen, 2019) and automated reporting which was designed to give a top-level view of individual

circles and core member dynamic risk. There is still further work to be done in this area, and a simplified yet secure means of collating, analysing, and presenting dynamic risk metrics which can be managed and used by circle providers would be an extremely valuable tool to develop.

Risk assessment

Circles South West operates within what Bonta and Andrews (2007) define as the ‘fourth generation of risk assessment’:

- **First generation:** Risk was defined by professional judgement with minimal use of structured tools. These assessments were typically carried out by correctional staff and clinicians, based upon their own experiences and judgements.
- **Second generation:** Evidence-based tools were introduced which provided better predictive ability for offending, but were limited to static (fixed) factors (such as criminal history), thus not allowing for former offenders to change their behaviour. In this model, risk of offending can only ever increase (e.g. as items are added to their case file) and never go down.
- **Third generation:** Dynamic (i.e. changeable) factors were introduced, such as job status, and supportive / risky relationships; although static factors still took the lead. The introduction of dynamic factors had the benefit of helping interventions to direct their work towards certain behaviours and situations.
- **Fourth generation:** The expansion of dynamic risk factors as well as systematic assessment and monitoring. This current generation of risk assessment provides a more rounded and responsive view of risk, as well as the change in risk over time (for instance over the course of an intervention). This generation of risk assessment is better suited to a restorative justice system and acknowledges that risk of offending can be reduced by the appropriate support.

Within the ‘risk-need-responsivity model’ set out by Bonta and Andrews (2007), and central to this fourth generation of risk assessment, is the inclusion of non-criminogenic factors such as self-esteem, anxiety, and health-related activities. Arguably, these ‘minor factors’ have formerly received little attention in terms of risk assessment tools. Importantly, Circles South West have adopted an approach to risk which fully embodies this progressive attitude towards risk (and guided by the Good Lives Model), where a range of different factors are considered, balanced by collecting evidence from a variety of stakeholders, and considering that risk is a complex and moveable concept.

As eloquently stated by Bonta and Andrews (2007, p.7):

“Good offender assessment is more than making decisions on level of risk. If one only cared about differentiating low risk from high risk offenders so that the high risk offender can be controlled through incapacitation or strict monitoring then second generation risk scales can suffice. However, in our view, this is short-sighted as it largely ignores the fundamental human condition of change. At the same time it has the potential of violating our sense of fairness. Offenders, like all human beings, are always changing their behaviours as a consequence to environmental demands and through their own deliberate, autonomous, self-directed change.”

One of the inherent challenges in using metrics to assess the risk of sexual reoffending is the complex relationship between behaviours, external triggers, and the environment that former offenders are in: *“Although an increased number of observed risk factors theoretically is associated with a greater risk of offending, in some cases even one or two items may be critical”* (Righthand et al., 2005).

Furthermore, there is often a complex relationship between dynamic factors which makes assessment of individuals via metrics difficult (Ward and Beech, 2014). For instance, in our previous evaluation of Circles South West (Preston and Allen, 2019), it was shown that loneliness (as self-reported by core members) was strongly correlated with risk as measured in a number of different tools and as reported by a variety of stakeholders. This is not to say that loneliness itself is a causal factor in reoffending, rather that the relationships between factors can be strong and that deeper understanding of core members is essential in assessing risk.

Accordingly, even where risk assessments are conducted by experienced and competent people, or by a range of different experienced stakeholders (as is the case in the way Circles South West carries out their evaluations), caution when using metrics to assess reoffending risk should always be held. Furthermore, risk factors should not be mistaken as causal factors – risk factors are those which correlate with offending (perhaps through some other underlying root cause) and might therefore indicate that reoffending may occur; however, direct treatment of a risk factor in ignorance of the underlying cause will not necessarily reduce risk (Monahan, 2014). Some so-called dynamic risk factors could also be viewed as indicators of underlying, embedded characteristics, or as more complex constructs. These have been described as ‘stable dynamic factors’ (Russell and Darjee, 2013); and it has been highlighted that focus should be on comprehensive clusters of behaviours and risk factors rather than individual factors in isolation (Ward and Beech, 2014).

There is still research to be carried out in terms of the refinement of tools used to assess dynamic risk; as well as the relationship between dynamic risk factors and reoffending. Indeed, the treatment of offenders and former offenders by authorities has varied over time in regards to how dynamic factors are addressed. However, regardless of the stance on dynamic factors taken by authorities, it is widely acknowledged that *“in order to successfully treat individuals who have committed serious offences against other people, it is necessary to modify, or at the very least manage, offence-related dispositions and traits”* (Ward and Beech, 2014). Importantly, dynamic factors form a crucial part of understanding the aetiology of offending behaviour (Thornton, 2013), and can direct restorative intervention to prevent reoffending.

Changes to national data collection: The SDR

Circles UK (CUK) has recently replaced the ‘dynamic risk review’ (DRR) with a new tool, the ‘strengths development review’ (SDR). The SDR will be collected at the start, mid-point, and end of a circle. It introduces core member feedback into the national reporting as each stage is completed in two parts: one by the core member and the second by the volunteers.

The DRR posed a series of individual questions on various aspects of dynamic risk, whereas the SDR asks volunteers to give red-amber-green ratings on a smaller set of compound domains. Each domain covers several underlying aspects. The overall rating, and underlying form of questioning, may be useful in indicating to a coordinator that further conversation with volunteers and core

members about risk factors are required. With fewer overall measures, the SDR may simplify the completion of the questionnaires and process of reporting the data for national analyses.

For example, 'General Functioning' includes the following factors:

- Is the CM in stable and suitable accommodation?
- Are they in education or employment that is suitable and meets their needs?
- Is their lifestyle generally stable? Do they think before acting?
- Do they solve problems effectively?

The compound measure records the highest level of risk across the different factors; a higher risk (red or amber) rating does not require there to be concerns for all underlying aspects. A volunteer recording a red rating for 'General Functioning' could be worried about homelessness, an argument with an employer, something the core member said in a meeting, or another lifestyle matter. There is complexity in creating compound measures, as a single factor or trigger may result in offending behaviour (Righthand et al., 2005). The use of the red rating on the SDR fits with this; volunteers are asked to rate the core member's risk as red if they have 'a substantial concern in one or more areas'. An amber rating is used if they have 'limited concern in most areas' with 'little evidence of protective factors'.

The introduction of the SDR changes the questions posed to volunteers, and the scales on which answers are collected. This will limit longitudinal comparisons back to the datasets and evaluations for circles which collected the DRR (approximately 2016 to 2022). However, the SDR draws from the standardised psychometric measure of the Short Warwick and Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) (Stewart-Brown et al., 2011). Circles SW have collected a psychometric measure from SWEMWBS since 2017 and this may enable a longitudinal comparison to be made to this measure in the SDR.

As the SDR does not require detail about the factors underlying the red-amber-green rating to be reported for each domain, and it may be desirable to collect additional data at regional level to supplement this. Although not required nationally, collecting detail on the underlying risks may to help guide service provision. Additional specificity about the underlying factors could also support regional analyses of where progress is made within compound area, even when this did not result in an overall change in risk rating; helping identify where extra support or provision would be helpful. If, for example, circles are making progress supporting core members with housing, but substantial concerns in other aspects indicate an overall 'General Functioning' rating of red.

Other existing measures collected by Circles SW may provide useful longitudinal insights, if continued as a supplement to the SDR. For instance, the UCLA Loneliness Scale (short version) (Hughes, Waite, Hawkey, & Cacioppo, 2004), has been demonstrated to correlated strongly across many other measures of dynamic risk (Preston and Allen, 2019).

Findings from previous evaluation

The initial Research in Practice evaluation of CSW was published in 2019 (Preston and Allen, 2019) and incorporated data from 2016-2019. Since this time, CSW have continued to routinely use the evaluation tools for ongoing monitoring of circles and a more condensed reporting format has continued alongside. These condensed reports have included the 'risk radar' assessments of dynamic risk, changes in risk over time, and key data related to delivery of circles.

At the most recent interim report (April 2022) there were 124 circles in the CSW dataset (53 standard, 32 young person, 24 prison, and 15 intellectual disability). In the 2019 evaluation it was shown that dynamic risk fell for the majority of core members during the course of their circles. In further quantitative analyses it was shown that many volunteers, core members, and coordinators attributed this reduction in risk to work the circles had carried out.

The evaluation also explored reliability of measures and the interaction between different risk areas. There were strong correlations shown between measurements of dynamic risk made by volunteers and coordinators, validating the training and ability of non-professional volunteers to rate dynamic risk. There was also agreement in many areas between core members and the circle, except in certain areas such as managing thoughts and behaviours. These findings were particularly important given the inevitable questions about the reliability of self-reporting by former offenders. The evaluation validated the approach of collecting data from all members of the circle, including the core member themselves which has previously not been a feature in all evaluations of circles.

One key finding from previous evaluation was the correlation between self-reported loneliness in core members and various other ratings of dynamic risk, both self-reported and as reported by volunteers and coordinators. Loneliness was also a prevalent theme in qualitative analyses and many core members spoke about the impact the circle had made here. Although increased loneliness was not shown to cause reoffending, the evaluation has indicated that it is a core component of various other dynamic risk factors and that loneliness in offenders should be monitored and used to guide further support and intervention.

Evaluation methods

The evaluation approach taken by CSW, *underpinned by the ‘No More Victims’ Monitoring and Evaluation Framework*, has been outlined comprehensively in previous evaluation reports (see Preston and Allen, 2019). In brief, data collection is carried out by circle volunteers and coordinators, then compiled for all circles. These data are primarily responses to questionnaires which are collected throughout the course of the circle – at the start, mid-point, and end of the circle.

Table: Questionnaires and data collected

Tool	Description	Who completes	When
Routine Data Collection	Routine core member information gathered at start and end of circles, including demographics, offending history, prior intervention history, any reasons for the circle ending prematurely, changes in static factors during the course of the circle. This is collected for every core member at the start (0 months) and end (approximately 12 months) of their circle.	Coordinator	Start and end of circle
Dynamic Risk Review (and adaptations)	A MoJ approved tool, endorsed by Circles UK, based on the dynamic risk factors identified in the Structured Assessment of Risk and Need (SARN, HM Prison Service, 2005). Administered at the beginning, mid-point (approximately 6 months) and end (approximately 12 months) of the circles. Variations of the standard DRR have been developed by CSW for use with intellectual disability and young person circles.	Volunteers (with support from coordinator)	Start, middle and end
UCLA Loneliness Scale (short) (Hughes, Waite, Hawkey, and Cacioppo, 2004)	A short version of the validated UCLA loneliness scale, developed in 2004, which asks three questions to give a numerical measure of self-reported loneliness.	Core member	Start, middle and end
Short Warwick and Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) (Stewart-Brown et al., 2011)	A validated, self-reported measure of mental wellbeing; collected in parallel with the DRR.	Core member	Start, middle and end
MOS Social Support Questionnaire (emotional and informational support subset) (Sherbourne and Stewart, 1991)	A subset of the questions on the MOS Social Support Survey Instrument, developed in partnership with RAND in the 1990s. Eight questions provide a numerical measure of emotional and informational (i.e. ability to gain information from others) support.	Core member	Start, middle and end

CM Questionnaire	A series of questions developed by Research in Practice to gather evidence directly from core members against the CSW Monitoring and Evaluation Framework. Questions have been specifically designed to capture evidence against the framework's indicators.	Core member	Start, middle and end
Coordinator questionnaire	A bespoke questionnaire which mirrors the DRR and core member questionnaire; triangulating measures against the coordinators professional interpretation of the circle's progress	Coordinator	Start, middle and end
Parent / Carer questionnaire	For the young person circles, additional evidence will be gathered from parents/carers.	Parent / carer (young person circles only)	Start, middle and end
Volunteer Questionnaire	Collects outcomes and process data related to the training and support volunteers have received, their relationship with the core member, perceived changes in the core member's risk, reasons for the circle ending, and future intentions for volunteering.	Volunteers	End of circle

In practice, the data collection carried out by circles falls mainly into three meetings, where volunteers, core members, and coordinators all complete forms. These are at the start of the circle, at a mid-circle review, and at the end of the circle. This has kept data collection moderate, with the aim of not overburdening all those involved in circles, who already have a large amount of monitoring to carry out as part of their work with people who are often on licence.

Since the start of Research in Practice's involvement with CSW in 2017, a process of systematically analysing these data has also been developed. This now allows for the relatively straightforward processing and analysis of data via automated scripts (written in the statistical programming language, 'R') and a series of outputs which CSW are able to use for ongoing monitoring, evaluation and reporting. The development of these analyses are further described in Preston and Allen's (2019) evaluation of CSW.

The rigorous data collection and organisation carried out by Circles South West, as well as the ongoing evaluations of the service, has resulted in an extremely rich and detailed longitudinal dataset. These data provide a highly valuable view of dynamic risk which we have only begun to tap into as researchers. The continued dedication to responsibly collect information from core members, coordinators, volunteers and stakeholders has created one of the most comprehensive datasets on Circles of Support and Accountability that we are aware of, and we hope that this will continue to provide further opportunity for research in the future.

Scoring responses

To analyse data in the aggregate for circles provided by CSW, responses on each questionnaire were scored. A scoring template for each questionnaire was created, and this was used to process all responses from questionnaires. This template indicated whether a question score needed to be reversed, which risk category the question related to, and what the minimum and maximum scores were.

A score was generated for each questionnaire, which was normalised so that it represents a measure of dynamic risk on a scale of 0-100, where 100 = the highest level of risk. Therefore, each questionnaire score represents the average (mean) risk score for all questions on a particular tool, as scored by a particular person at a given point in time.

To maintain the detail in analyses, these questionnaire scores have been kept separate for most of the evaluation. This is particularly important in exploring whether different respondents have differing views of risk at the same point in time.

Analyses

There are two distinct ways to look at the data:

1. The entire dataset – which includes circles without data at all three reviews. Analysing at this level provides a ‘snapshot’ view of risk for all core members at given time points; however there is an assumption that circles are similar, and that all circles change at the same rate.
2. Complete circles only – which enables us to look at changes over time, i.e. whether, on average, risk decreases between the start and end of the circle.

The way in which a circle is defined as ‘complete’ could vary. Since not all circles have been able to collect every single questionnaire, a more flexible approach to defining a circle as ‘complete’ has been taken. **For the purpose of this report, circles where at least 2 questionnaires have been returned at each time point (start, middle, and end) are deemed ‘complete’. This is excluding volunteer and parent / carer questionnaires, which are only collected at the end of the circle.**

We look at both complete circles and the full dataset in this report; however caution should be taken with the whole dataset view. For instance, a reduction in risk at Review 3 could equally indicate that the more limited set of circles we have data for at Review 3 are simply lower risk circles overall.

Methodological limitations

Individuality

Each circle is bespoke to each core member – one of the strengths of the intervention. Each group of volunteers and each core member are individual and although the training and safety elements of the circle are structured, the conversations and work with the core member are adapted to their own specific situation. From a research perspective, this means that it is difficult to extrapolate findings from any one circle onto others. What works for one group may not necessarily work for another. The same can be said for many other interventions and those using research to inform practice should always consider the suitability of an intervention in their specific context.

In the particular case of CSW, the pilot programs for young people, prisons, and people with intellectual disability were adapted and developed over the course of the previous evaluation (2017-2019). As such the method of delivery and recording has changed over time, reflecting the learning and increased organisational wisdom of CSW in the delivery of these adapted approaches.

Bias in recording

An inherent challenge in the evaluation of offender programs is honesty in self-reporting. Given that the implications of honesty may be punitive and, coupled with a complex case history, core member honesty of responses cannot be assumed as one might in other questionnaires.

To overcome this methodological challenge, the former evaluation of CSW circles took an approach which gathered data on core concepts from multiple sources: primarily core members, volunteers, and coordinators. In the evaluation of these data, it was shown that many measures correlated with each other, suggesting that core members, coordinators, and volunteers were in agreement across multiple domains (Preston and Allen, 2019). For instance there was a positive correlation between coordinator and self-reported risk scores. There was also a positive correlation between coordinator and DRR scores (recorded by volunteers). This analysis is repeated in this evaluation.

Therefore, although the challenge of bias in recording is complex, there is some evidence to show that the measures employed in this evaluation have circumvented this via a holistic approach which considers evidence from a number of sources.

Voluntary programmes

Core members must choose to engage with circles. Involvement is not mandated by prison or probation services. Therefore, the group of people who receive a circle may already be seen as distinct from the wider population of former offenders, in that they have chosen to engage with rehabilitative interventions. As such, a comparison of criminological outcomes of circles core members against the wider population of people who have committed sexual offences may not be appropriate.

Limitations of available data

In order to address the challenges of understanding a topic as complex as the dynamic risk of offending, this evaluation utilises multiple questionnaires, at multiple time points, collected from multiple stakeholders. However, due to the various challenges involved in the delivery of circles, as well as other contextual factors (such as the coronavirus pandemic, described in more detail above), not all circles have been able to collect data from all sources at all time points.

The available data has been noted in the results section, and those 'complete' circles where data from the start, middle, and end of the circle have been identified.

Recidivism and reoffending data

As stated in previous evaluation reports (see Preston and Allen, 2019), this is not an evaluation of whether circles reduce reoffending. This would require different methodological approach, including the use of a matched control population (i.e. eligible participants who receive an alternative intervention).

However, the methods used here do allow for a deeper understanding of dynamic risk, how these known risk factors can be affected over time, how this can be attributed to circles, and the impact of this intervention on core members and volunteers.

Results

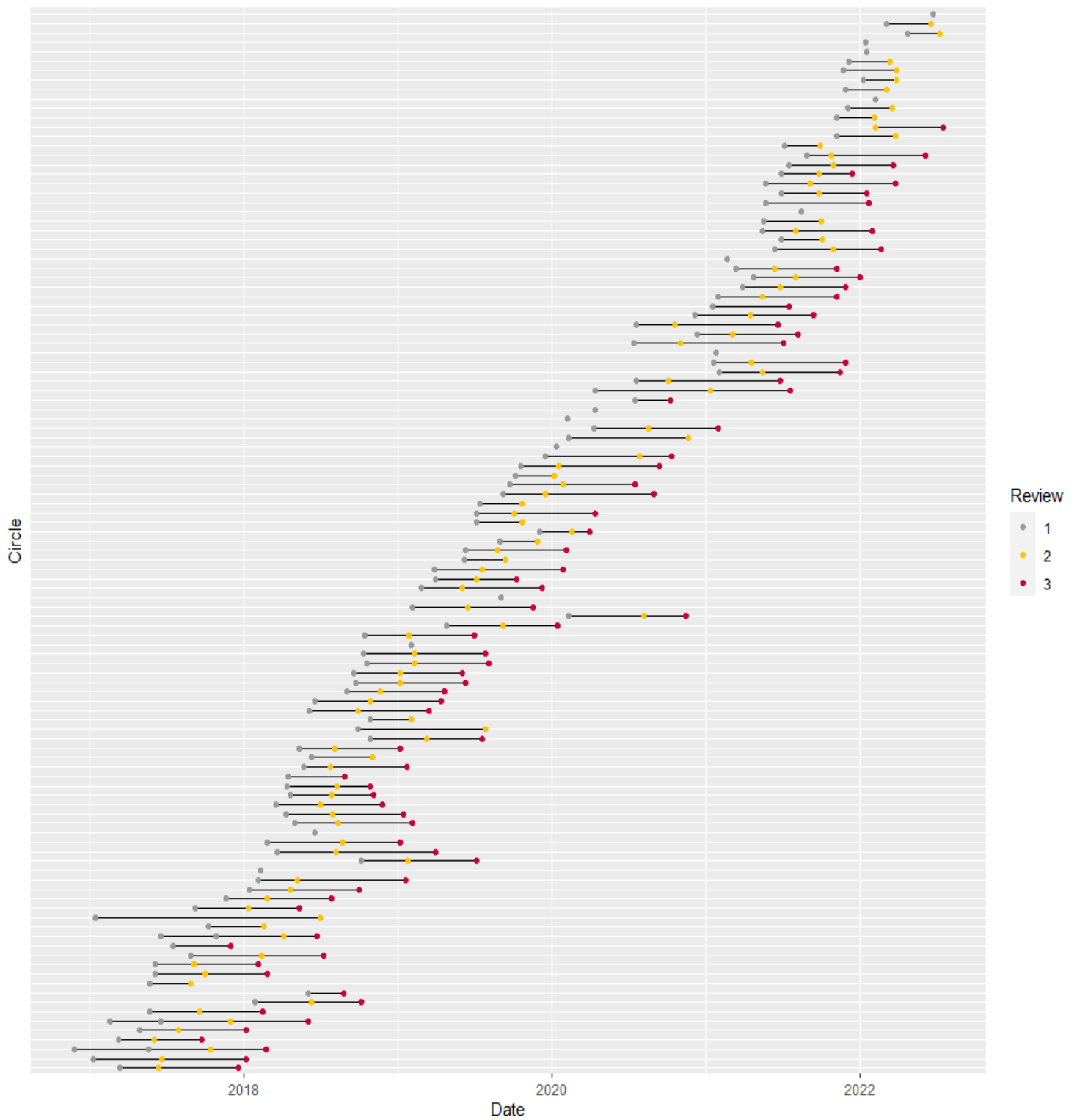
Data in this evaluation

The data analysed in this report includes circles from 2016 to 2022. Some of these circles are still running, however data from active circles are included in some analyses and it is stated whether data are from 'complete' or 'all' circles (including incomplete) in the following sections. These data include a total of 131 circles, split as follows by type:

Table: Number of circles in the dataset – total and complete

Circle type	All circles	Complete
Standard	57	28
Young person	33	17
Prison	24	10
Intellectual disability	17	10
Total	131	65

Graph: Circle length and review dates



The volume of data collected by CSW since 2016 includes multiple questionnaires from multiple time points across these circles. This represents a huge volume of complex information about circles and the dynamic risk of core members. A summary of the number of questionnaires collected is given in the tables below. In total, 1750 individual questionnaires have been processed as part of this evaluation.

Table: Number of questionnaires returned by circle type and time point (all circles)

Type	0 (pre-release)	Start	Mid-point	End
Standard	-	309	216	201
Young person	-	169	142	144
Prison	56	115	77	78
Intellectual disability	-	80	81	82
Total	56	673	516	505

Table: Total number of questionnaires returned by tool (all circles)

Tool	Total	0 (pre-release)	Start	Mid-point	End
Self-reported	248	-	103	76	69
Coordinator	276	-	117	93	66
DRR	280	-	112	93	75
Loneliness	269	18	106	79	66
Parents / Carers	58	-	24	17	17
Social Support	268	19	105	80	64
Volunteer	83	-	-	-	83
Mental wellbeing	268	19	106	78	65

Demographics

Not all circles had complete data provided so some totals in this section will not add up to the total number of circles in the dataset (n = 131).

Circles have been delivered across the South West of England, with the highest number across Bristol and Devon. Core members were primarily male, heterosexual and of White British origin, with 36% defining themselves as having a disability. For standard circles, core members were on average 45 years old; for prison circles, 50 years old; for ID circles, 33 years old; and for young person circles 16 years old.

The majority of referrals to CSW came from local probation services for standard community circles. Young person and ID circles were mainly referred from other services such as Be Safe in Bristol.

Table: Location of circles

Location	Number of circles
Bristol	39
Devon	30
Dorset	14
Wiltshire	14
Somerset	8
Cornwall	7
Gloucestershire	7
South Gloucestershire	6
Bath and NE Somerset	4

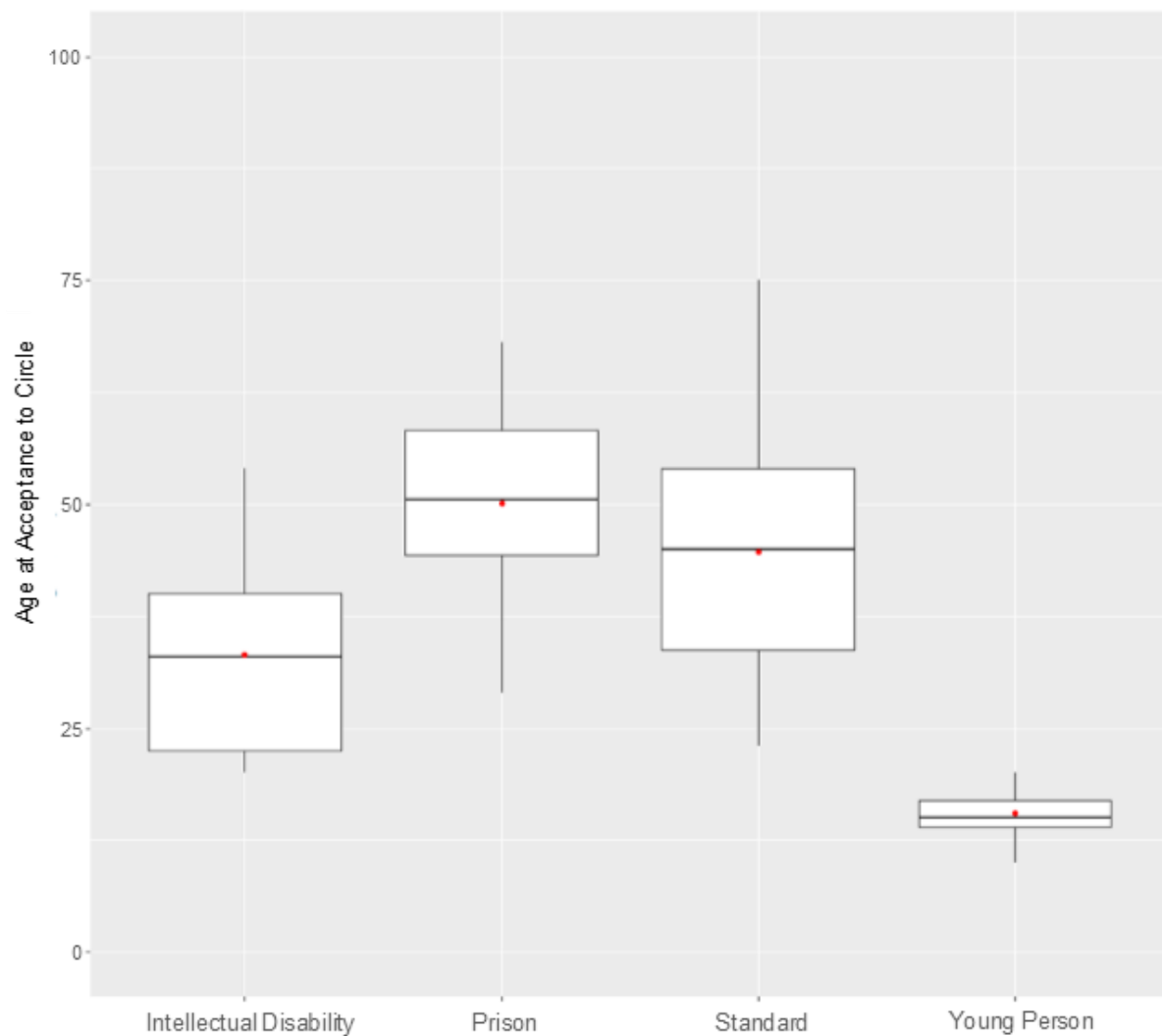
Table: Gender of core members

Type	Female	Male	Other	Missing data
Standard	2	54	-	1
Young person	3	30	-	-
Prison	-	24	-	-
Intellectual disability	-	15	1	1
Total	5	123	1	2

Table: Age of core members

Type	Mean age	Min age	Max age
Standard	44.7	23	75
Young person	15.5	10	20
Prison	50.2	29	68
Intellectual disability	33.2	20	54

Graph: Average and range of age of core members by circle type



Ethnicity

The majority (n = 120) of core members were White British.

Disability

36% (n = 46) of core members defined themselves as having a disability.

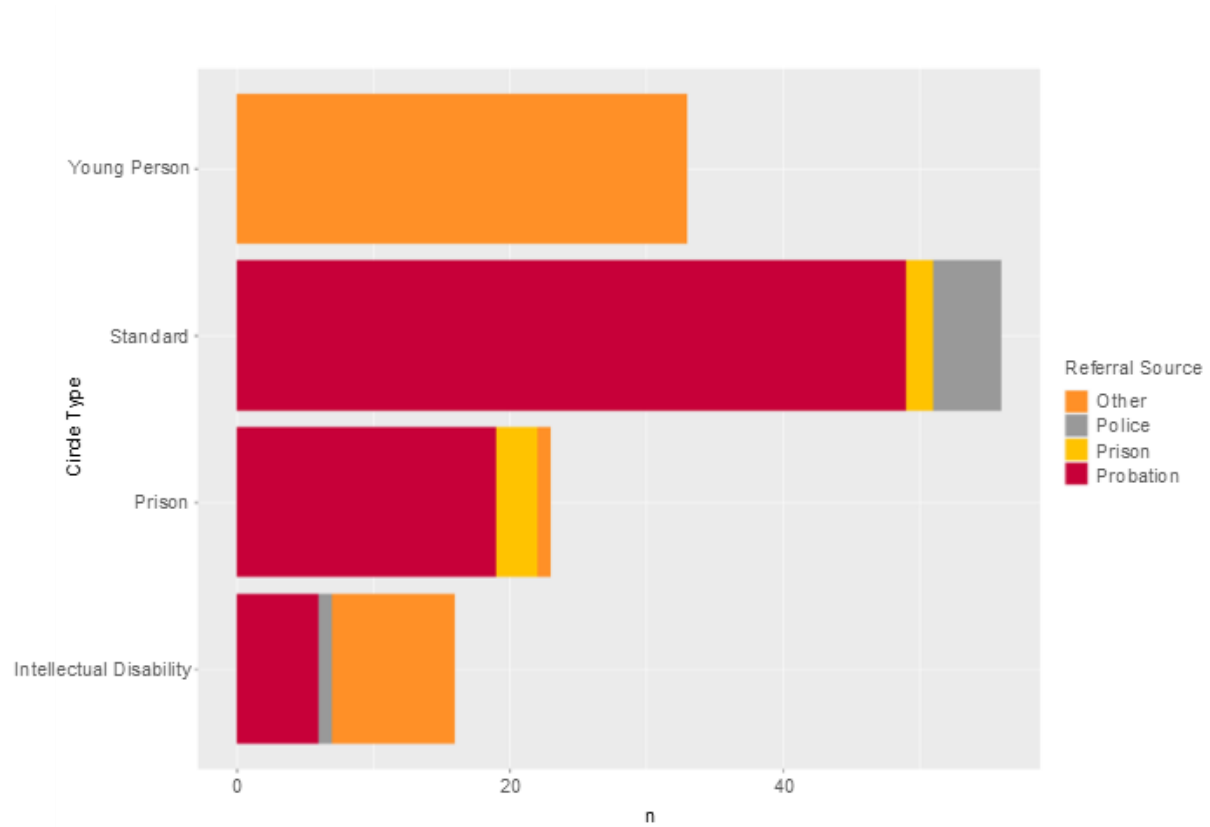
Table: Sexuality of core members

Sexuality	Number
Heterosexual	103
Bi-sexual	14
Gay / Lesbian	6
Other	2
Prefer not to say	4

Table: Referral source for circles

Referral source	Number of referrals
Probation	74
Other (including Glebe House for YP circles)	43
Police	6
Prison	5

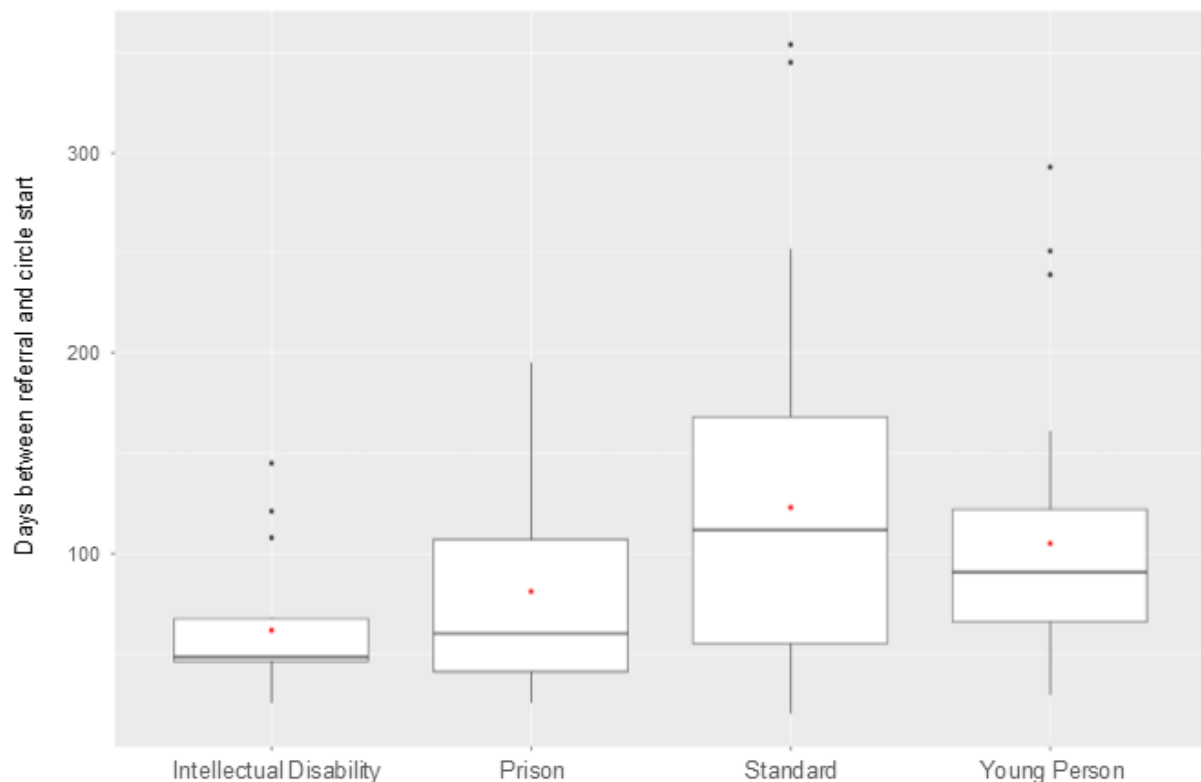
Graph: Referral source for circles by circle type



Time between referral and circle start

The time for a circle to begin after a successful referral could be anything between a few weeks and a year. This was typically shorter on average for ID and prison circles (approx. 50 days), and longest on average for standard community circles (slightly over 100 days on average).

Graph: Average and range of difference (in days) between referral and circle start date



Averaged risk scores

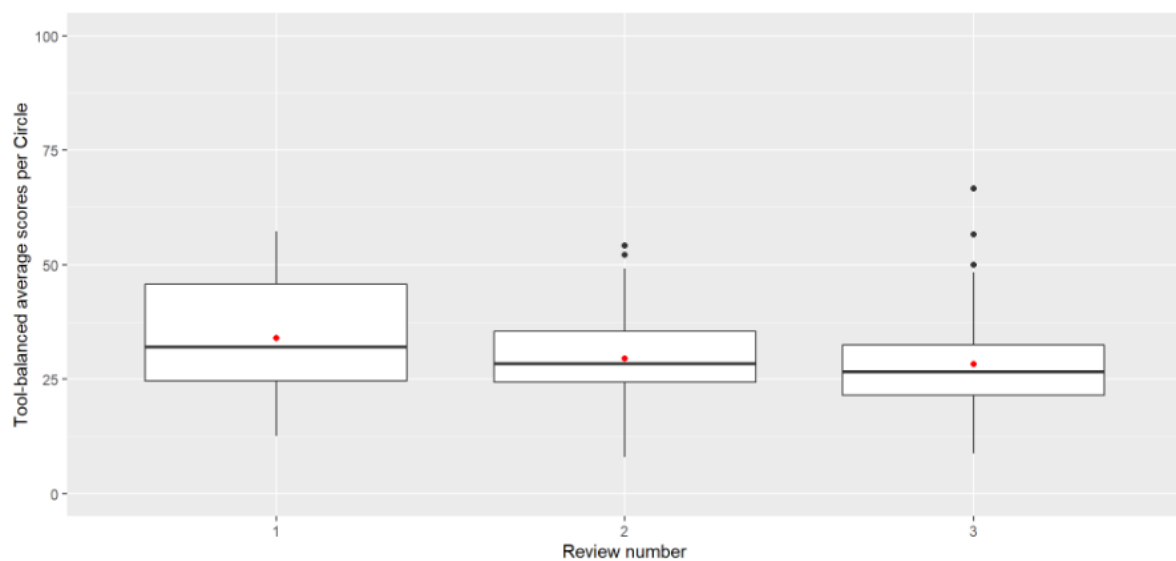
Average scores represent the mean score across all questionnaires at each time point. The normalised (0-100 where 100 is highest dynamic risk) scores across all questions in a questionnaire are averaged (mean), and then an average of all questionnaires for each core member at each time point is taken. This represents a balanced view of dynamic risk at the start, middle and end of the circle, as defined by core members, coordinators, and volunteers.

Because average scores rely on collated data from multiple time points, it is only appropriate to use complete circles for this data. Including incomplete circles could result in skewing data towards circles which are in their early stages (and hypothetically have higher risk) or those circles which might not complete at all for some reason (e.g. core members who are recalled or breach terms of their probation).

Furthermore, because some stakeholder groups complete more questionnaires than others (i.e. core members complete 3 different psychometric measures and a self-report questionnaire) questionnaires are further balanced so that each stakeholder group only contributes one average score to each time point average. **Therefore, the balanced average score is 33% self-reported, 33% DRR score (volunteer completed risk assessment), and 33% coordinator questionnaire.**

As shown in the boxplot chart below, the average balanced score decreases progressively from the start to the end of the circle.

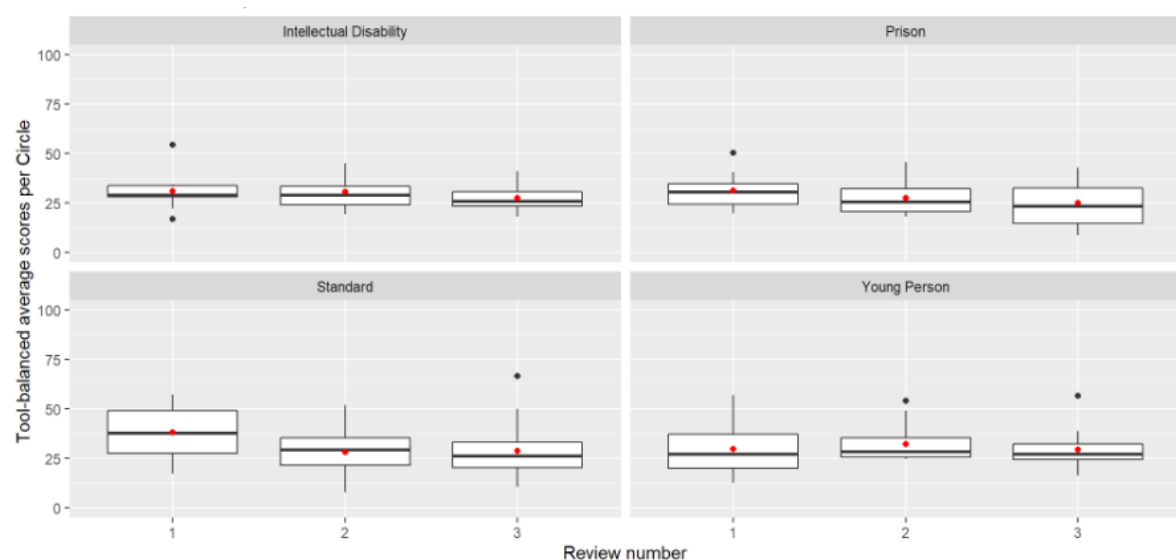
Graph: Mean normalised balanced scores for all complete circles



An analysis of variance (ANOVA) shows that this difference in average scores is significant ($F_{2, 177} = 4.38$, $p < 0.014$) and post-test comparisons showed significant group differences between start of circle and end of circle ($p = 0.0154$). **Therefore, we can say that, for completed circles, balanced dynamic risk assessments are significantly lower on average at the end of the circle than it is at the start of the circle.**

When splitting the data by circle type, we can see that this trend for reducing dynamic risk from the start to the end of circles is not consistent. For standard circles where we have the most data, the downward trend for risk is still statistically significant ($F_{2, 78} = 5.95$, $p < 0.0039$).

Graph: Mean normalised balanced scores for all complete circles by type



Risk radars

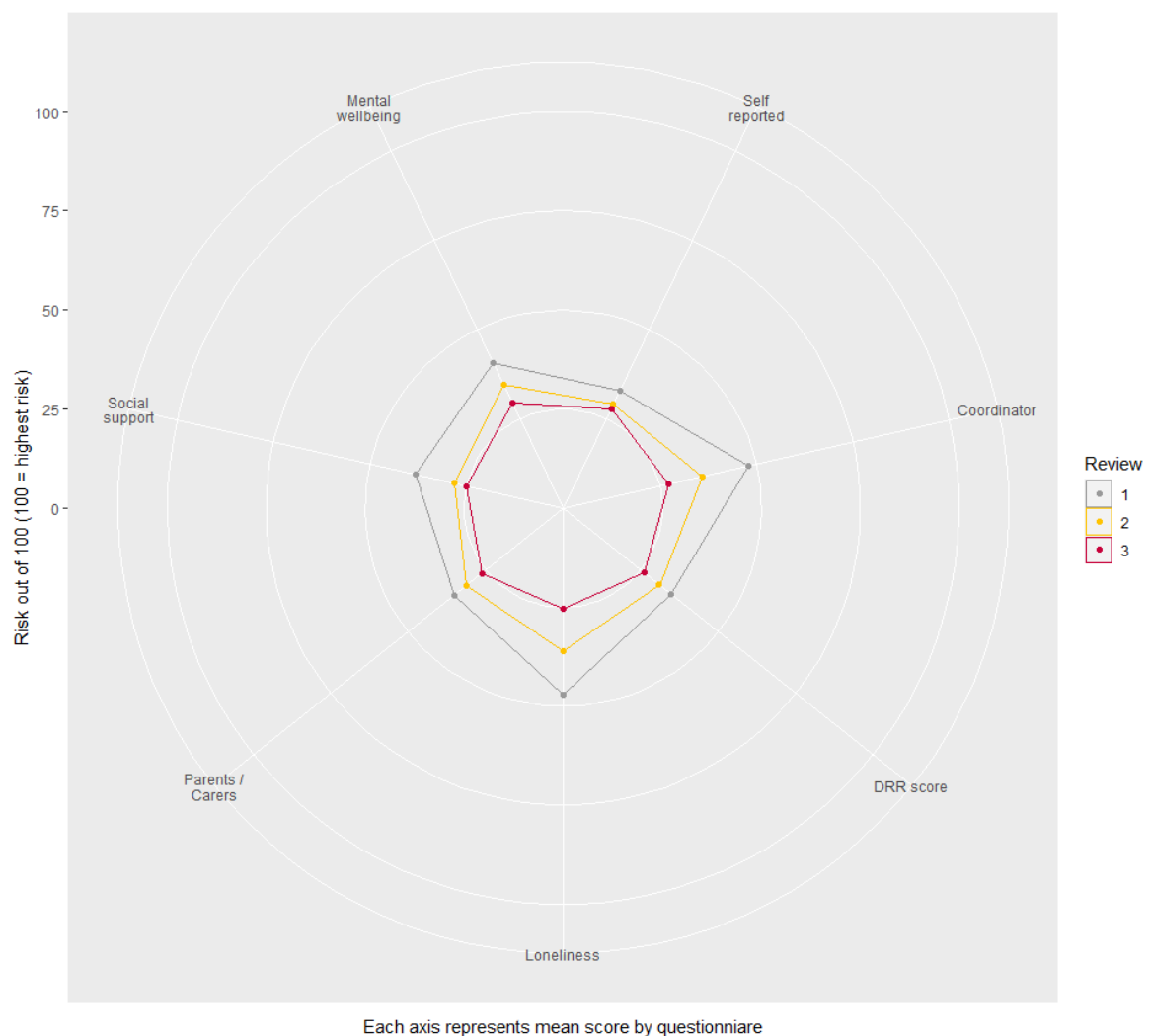
Since the development of the CSW evaluation approach, CSW and Research in Practice have utilised 'risk radars' to present changes in dynamic risk over time. This tool has become a standard part of reporting for CSW circles and is used in both top-level and individual circle reports.

All the points from each time (start, middle, and end of circle) are joined up. Since a lower score indicates lower dynamic risk, a smaller joined up shape indicates a lower level of overall risk. Therefore, we would hope to see a reduction in the size of the radar shape from start to end of the circle. Risk radars also highlight where shapes overlap – i.e. where risk may not have decreased between reviews.

Risk radars are presented in two different formats:

1. By 'tool' – the average normalised risk score for each questionnaire is shown as a point on the graph.
2. By 'category' – questions from all questionnaires are grouped into their individual categories and then plotted to show risk across different domains.

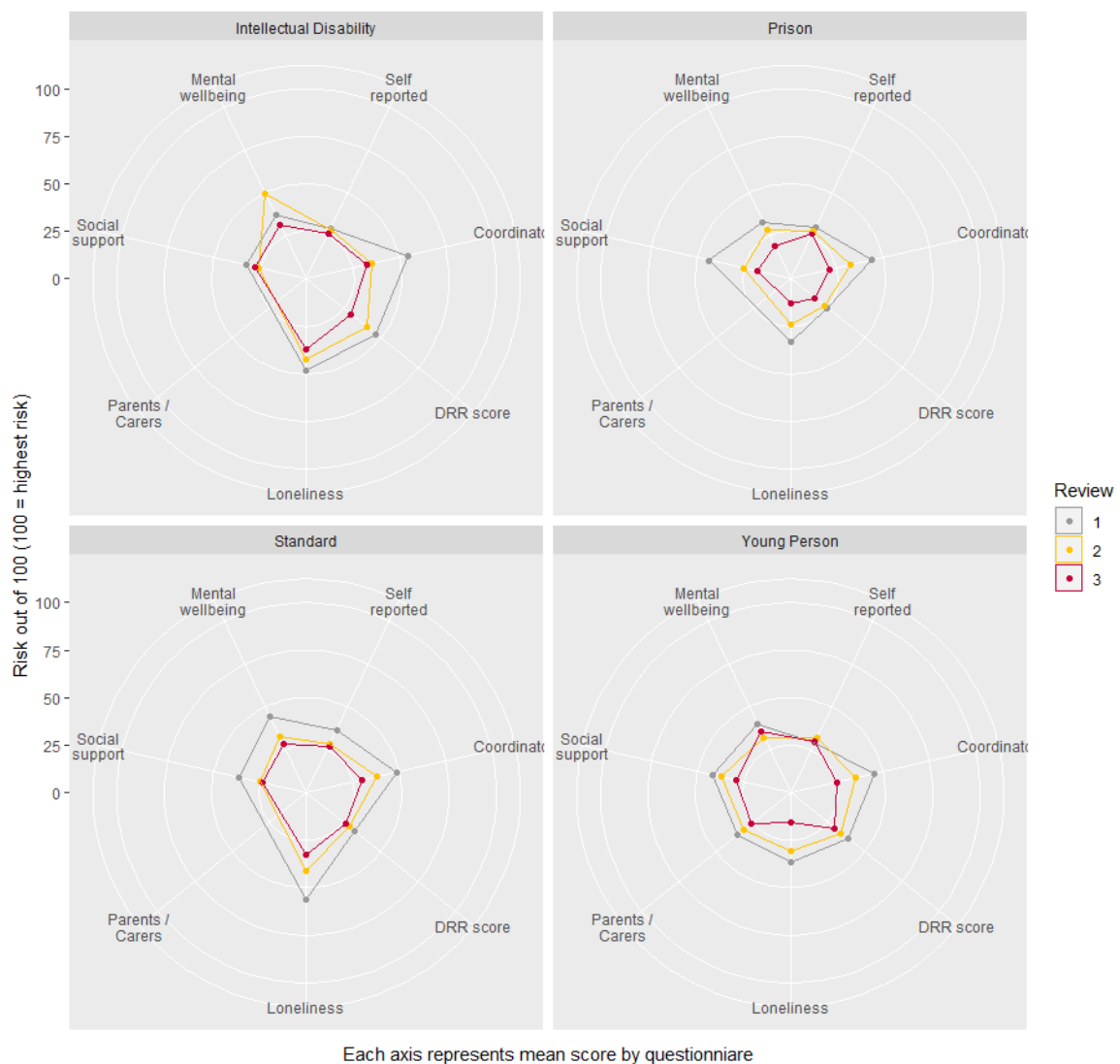
Graph: Risk radar by tool – all complete circles



The risk radar for all complete circles clearly shows a reduced risk profile between the start, middle and end of circles, indicating that dynamic risk scores reduce consistently throughout the life of circles across all tools.

Individual risk radars by tool (below) show that this trend is similar for all circle types, but with some small differences, such as the increase in mental wellbeing risk in ID circles at review 2 (mid-circle). In previous evaluation (Preston and Allen, 2019) it was suggested that these mid-circle spikes in risk may be due to increased openness and communication, developing in the early weeks of a circle.

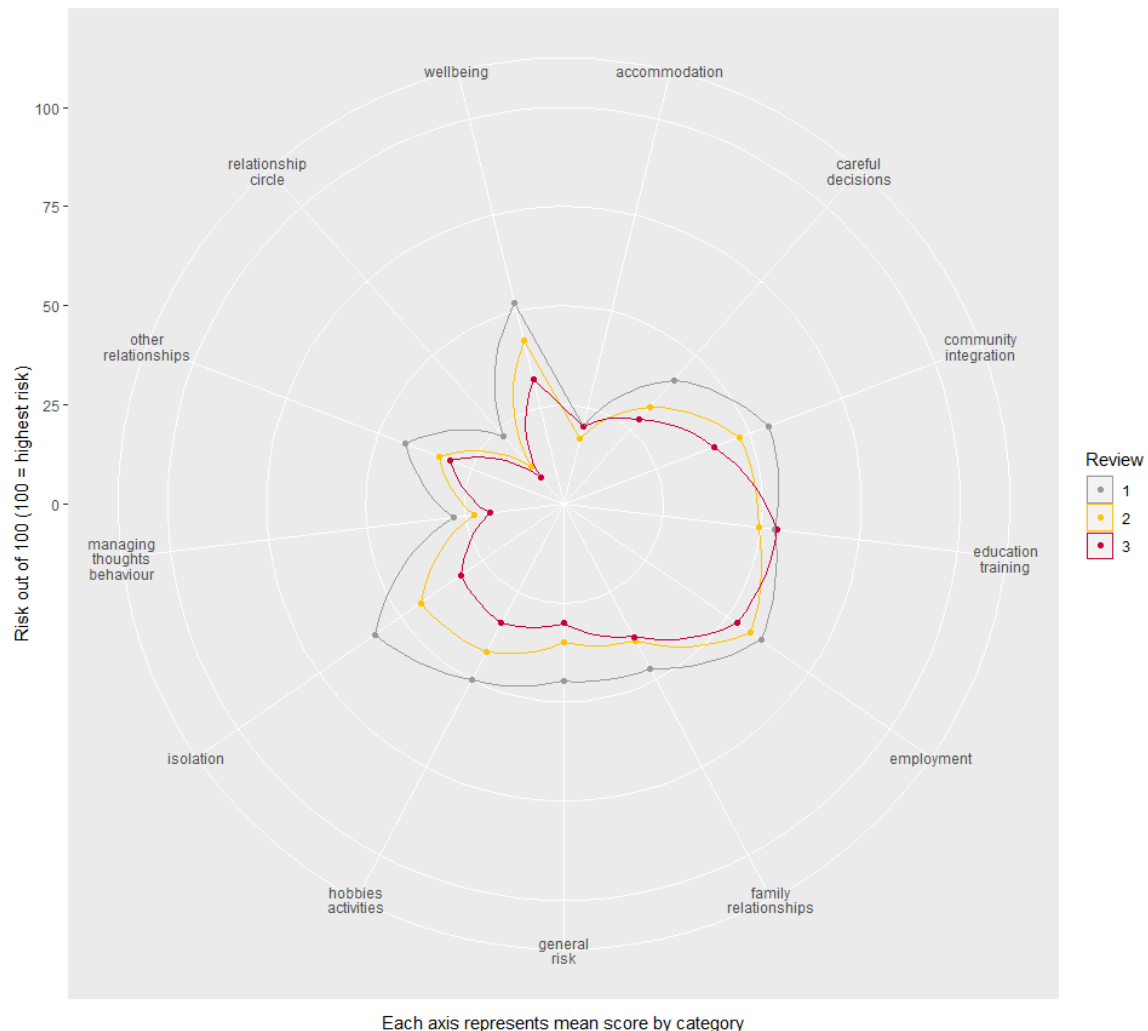
Graph: Risk radar by tool – all complete circles by circle type



The risk radars below show average risk scores by question category. These categories originate from theory of change work carried out in 2017 (see Preston and Allen, 2019). All questions across all questionnaires were coded to thirteen categories representing areas of dynamic risk.

In order to present data in this format, a balanced average score is used (as described above) where an average score is taken for each stakeholder, for each category, at each review point. Therefore, the score is balanced to evenly represent coordinators, core members, and volunteers.

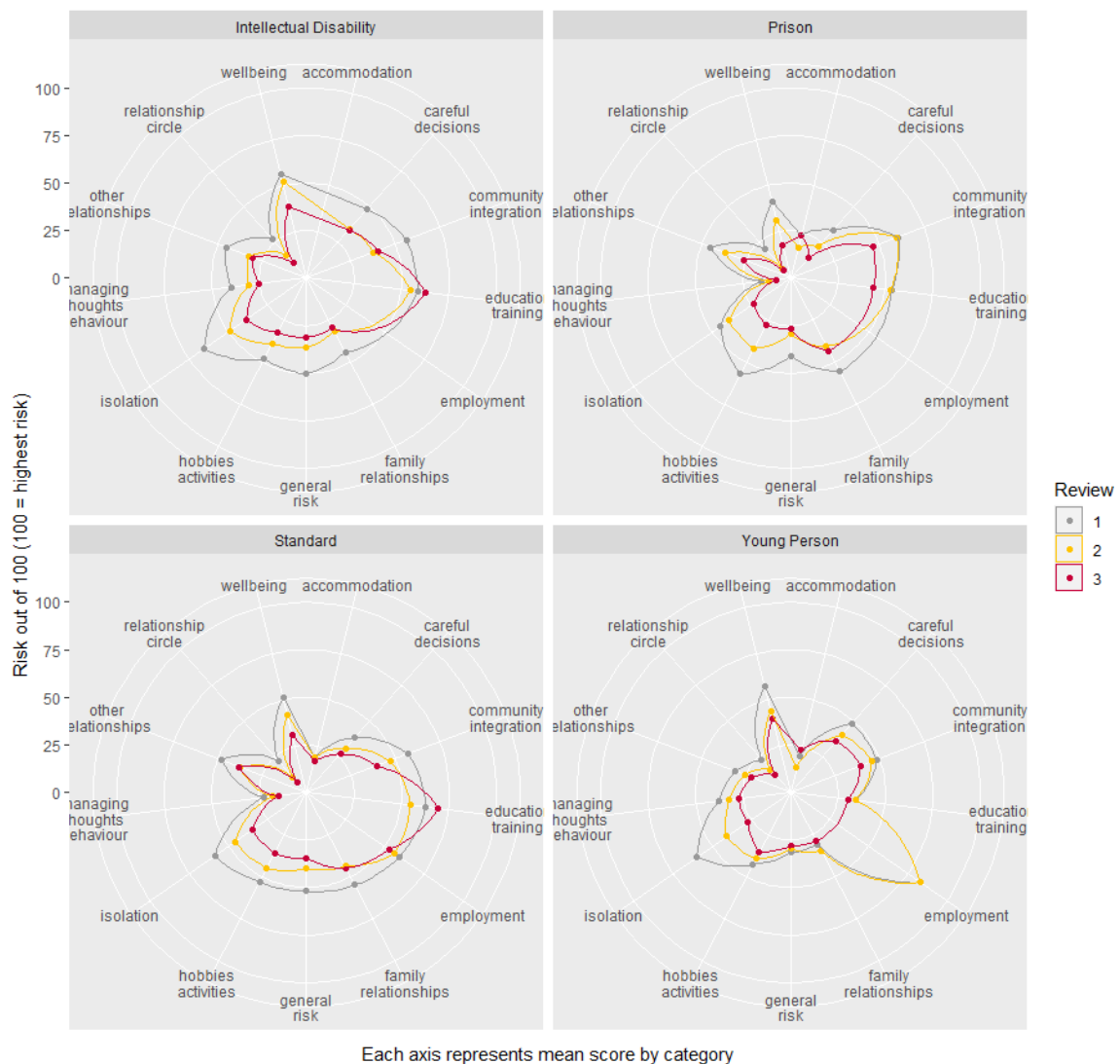
Graph: Risk radar by category – all complete circles



The category risk radar for all complete circles also highlights decreasing dynamic risk across almost all domains on average between the start and end of circles. Isolation and wellbeing in particular appear to improve across all circle types. The two exceptions to this are in education and training and accommodation, however these differences are close enough to suggest that there are no significant differences in these domains between reviews.

These findings are widely similar when splitting radars by circle type (see below). The noticeable spike in employment in young person circles is due to an absence of data here, mostly due to this domain being less applicable since many of the core members are too young to be in employment, rather than due to any sort of significant risk in this domain.

Graph: Risk radar by category – all complete circles by type



Attributing changes to the circle

As noted above, this evaluation has not used experimental methods to ascertain whether circles are more or less effective than other interventions. However, the mixed method approach has collected qualitative data in the form of comments and attribution questions (i.e. asking whether the circle has been responsible for changes).

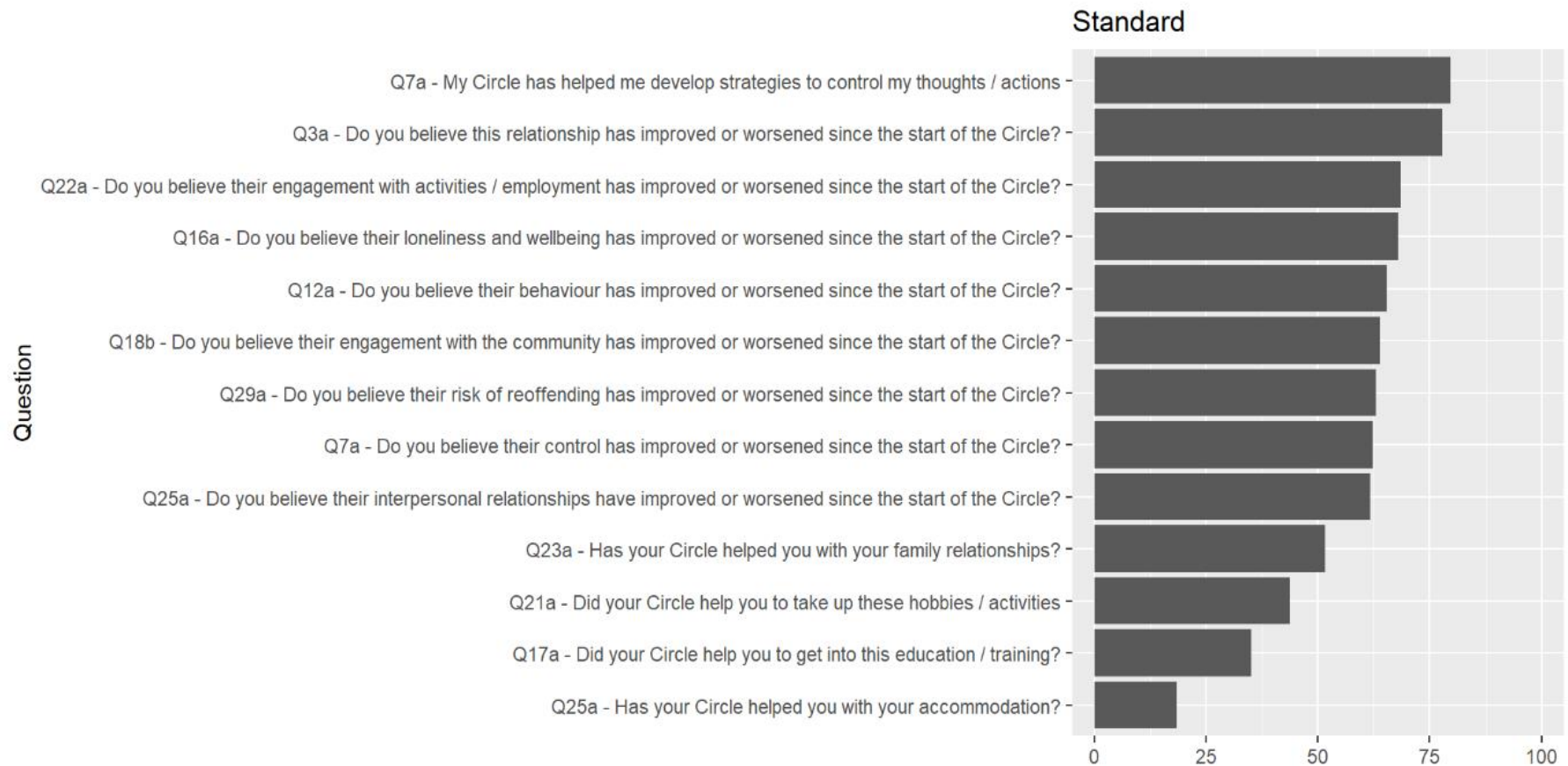
Across all circle types the majority of core members felt that their circle helped them to develop strategies to control their thoughts and behaviour. In young person circles, the majority of parents and carers felt the circle had helped with the young person's behaviour.

More than half of standard, young person, and ID circle core members said that the circle helped with their family relationships; with all young person core members reporting that their circle had helped with family relationships.

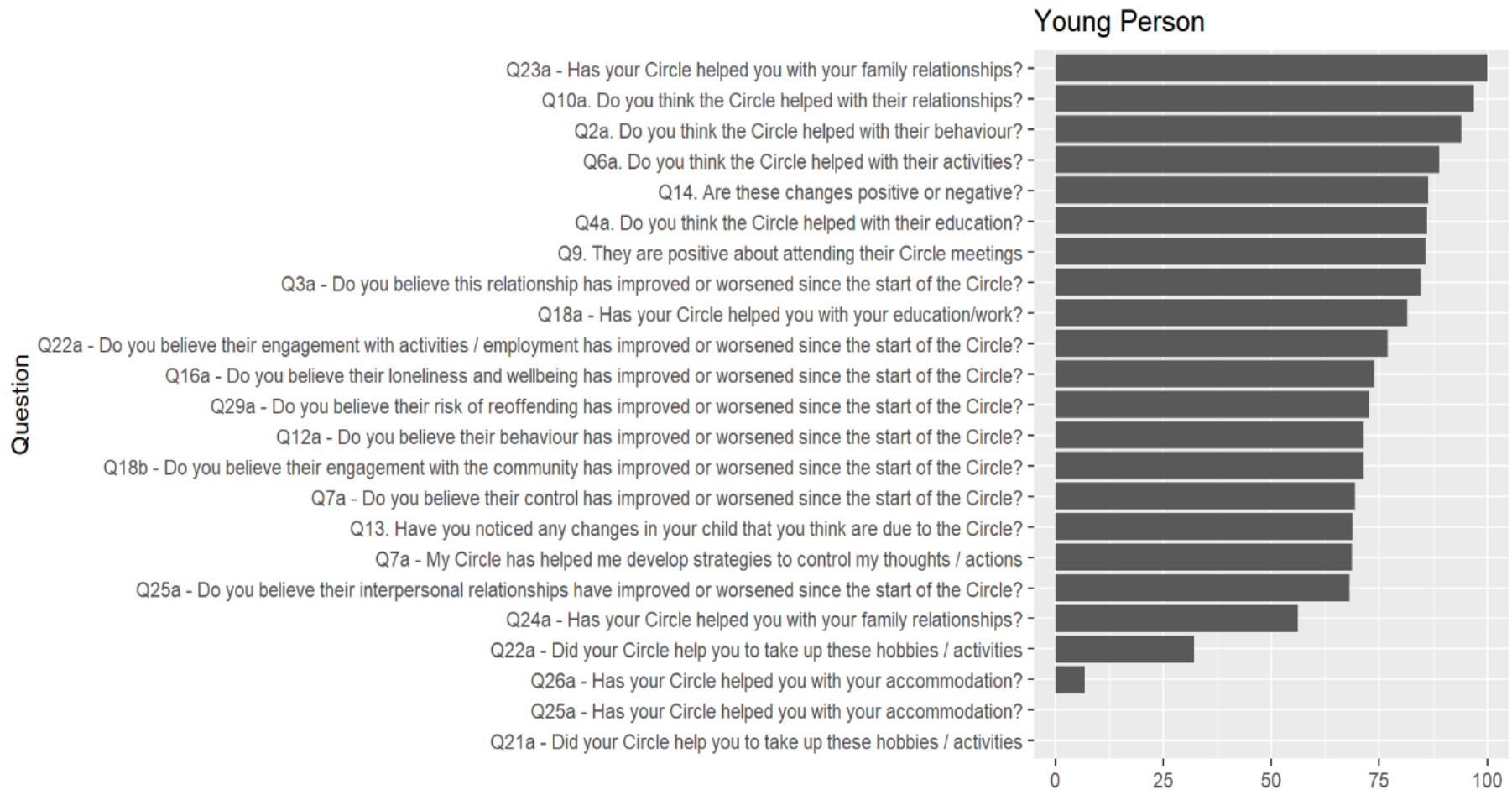
Three quarters of prison circle core members said that the circle helped with their transition from prison to the community; and three quarters said that the circle helped them with their activities and employment during this time as well.

More than three quarters of young person circle core members said that their circle helped them with their employment and education; this was also confirmed by feedback from parents and carers.

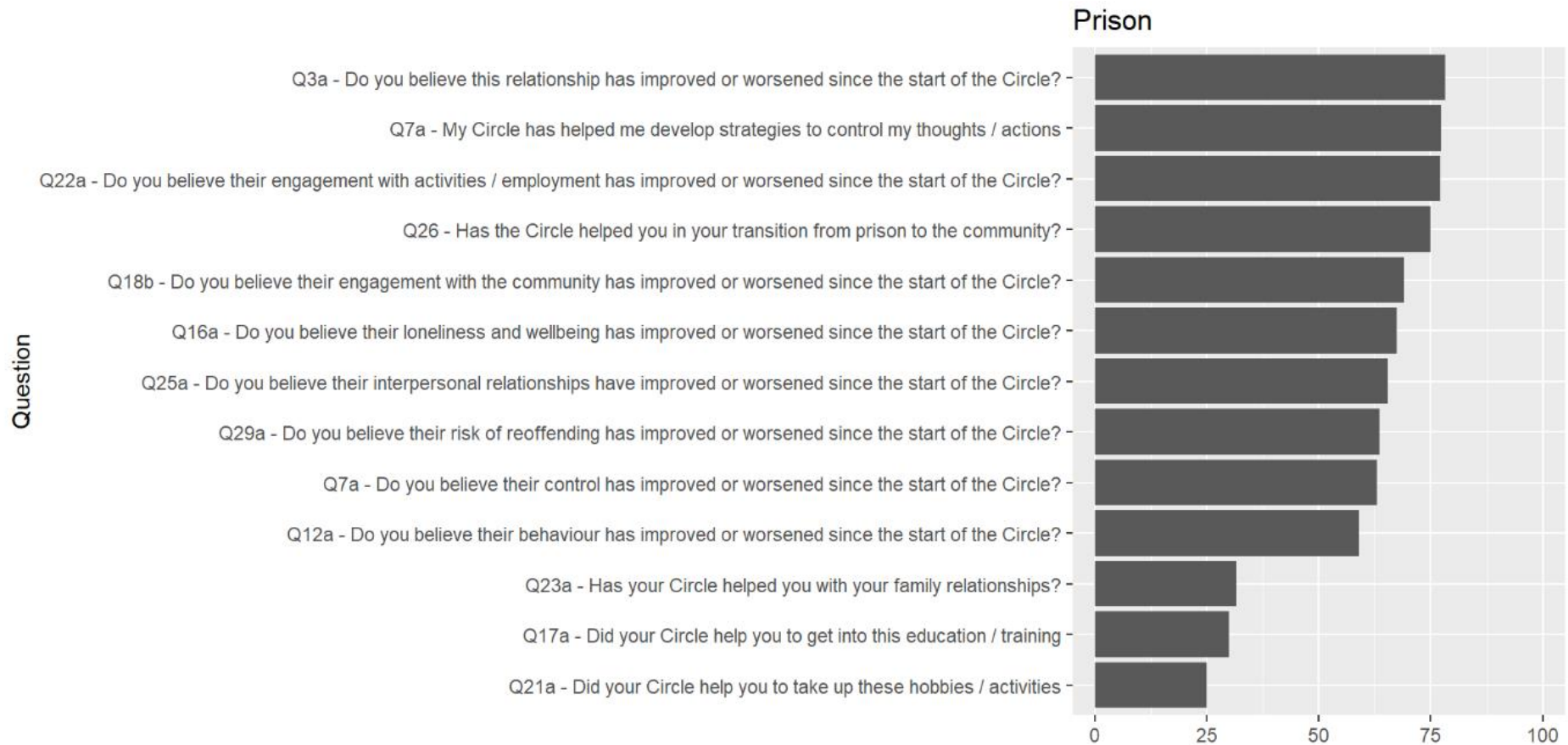
Graph: Responses to questions attributing changes to circles: Standard



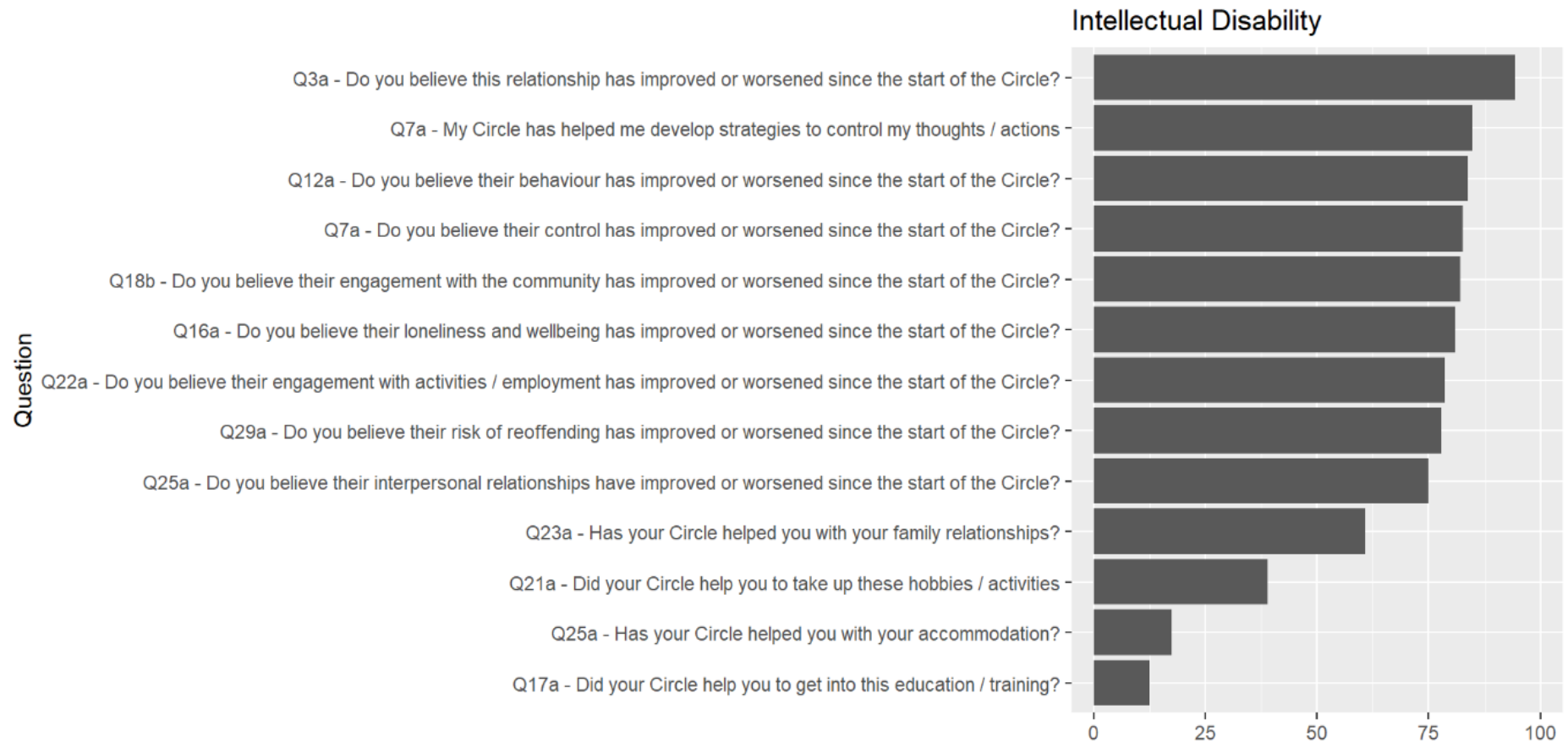
Graph: Responses to questions attributing changes to circles: Young Person



Graph: Responses to questions attributing changes to circles: Prison



Graph: Responses to questions attributing changes to circles: Intellectual Disability



Key performance indicators

These tables present the number of circles where dynamic risk has changed between reviews. This is a top-level view only and doesn't provide circle-level detail of why risk scores may have reduced.

Table: Changes in scores between reviews, grouped by questionnaire

Questionnaire	Average category score (0 = low risk, 100 = high)			Average change review 1 -> 3	Circles where risk reduced between reviews			Circles where risk increased or the same between reviews			% where risk reduced		
	Start	Mid-circle	End		1 -> 2	2 -> 3	1 -> 3	1 -> 2	2 -> 3	1 -> 3	1 -> 2	2 -> 3	1 -> 3
Self-reported	32.23	35.61	32.94	-0.71	26	38	27	38	21	28	41%	64%	49%
Coordinator	47.63	34.57	26.19	21.44	70	49	49	13	11	5	84%	82%	91%
DRR score	34.99	31.93	25.20	9.79	55	52	52	37	17	22	60%	75%	70%
Loneliness	43.70	36.64	25.30	18.40	31	29	27	36	30	25	46%	49%	52%
Parents / Carers	39.20	23.45	24.76	14.44	12	8	13	3	7	1	80%	53%	93%
Social support	35.83	28.93	26.20	9.62	44	29	35	24	28	16	65%	51%	69%
Mental wellbeing	38.52	35.27	28.93	9.59	46	36	35	20	21	15	70%	63%	70%

* Not all Circles in this dataset have completed, therefore data aren't available for all three Review points. Improved outcomes are therefore counted when data are available for two consecutive reviews, and where average scores across all questions in this tool / questionnaire reduce. This gives a top line figure of where improvements have been made overall, as judged by the stakeholders answering questions.

Table: Changes in scores between reviews, grouped by question category

Question category	Average category score (0 = low risk, 100 = high)			Average change review 1 -> 3	Circles where risk reduced between reviews			Circles where risk increased or the same between reviews			% where risk reduced		
	Start	Mid-circle	End		1 -> 2	2 -> 3	1 -> 3	1 -> 2	2 -> 3	1 -> 3	1 -> 2	2 -> 3	1 -> 3
Accommodation	23.44	19.87	20.30	3.14	5	0	4	72	55	58	6%	0%	6%
Careful Decisions	41.85	33.84	30.76	11.09	73	49	71	27	39	21	73%	56%	77%
Community Integration	53.80	47.30	41.04	12.76	52	47	55	34	32	19	60%	59%	74%
Education Training	53.28	45.69	52.47	0.81	45	35	37	47	47	40	49%	43%	48%
Employment	63.58	55.69	44.12	19.46	5	8	10	36	22	24	12%	27%	29%
Family Relationships	47.47	40.18	37.82	9.65	43	36	38	42	43	35	51%	46%	52%
General Risk	45.62	35.39	34.58	11.04	55	50	59	36	30	24	60%	63%	71%
Hobbies Activities	48.82	43.83	35.15	13.66	56	52	63	44	36	29	56%	59%	68%
Isolation	51.93	44.33	33.12	18.81	64	56	63	28	28	23	70%	67%	73%
Managing Thoughts Behaviour	28.39	23.77	19.65	8.75	69	58	72	31	30	20	69%	66%	78%
Other Relationships	40.87	36.14	34.30	6.58	67	47	60	34	39	30	66%	55%	67%
Relationship Circle	26.14	15.07	13.32	12.82	62	44	62	24	41	24	72%	52%	72%
Wellbeing	49.29	41.82	34.07	15.22	69	58	70	25	25	17	73%	70%	80%

* Not all Circles in this dataset have completed, therefore data aren't available for all three Review points. Improved outcomes are therefore counted when data are available for two consecutive reviews, and where average balanced scores across all questions in this set reduce. This gives a top line figure of where improvements have been made overall, as judged by the multiple stakeholders answering questions.

** Each category score is produced by taking the average score for all questions per category for each stakeholder (e.g. all 'wellbeing' questions for all self-reported measures) and then taking a grand average across all tools for each Circle at each review. This balances scores so that each stakeholder's assessment is weighted the same as others.

Outcomes

Routine data collection for circles captures if there are any criminological outcomes during the time of the circle. However, this is not collected longitudinally after a circle is completed. **Thus, this section does not constitute an analysis of the likelihood of reoffending after the circle is complete.**

Table: Criminological outcomes for core members

Outcome	Yes	No	Missing data
Arrest	14	95	34
Breach	12	84	47
Recall	9	93	41
Reconviction	4	100	39

These outcomes data provide the ability to assess the validity of dynamic risk assessments for predicting negative criminological outcomes. As noted above, this is not a study of the likelihood of reoffending once a circle is complete; however it does allow for measuring whether the risk measured during circles relates to the outcomes shown in the table above.

A binomial regression was carried out to assess the relationship between review 3 risk score (normalised, averaged, and balanced across stakeholders) on the likelihood of any negative criminological outcome (arrest, breach of licence, recall, and/or reconviction). Although there was some visible difference in average scores for those with and without negative outcomes, a binomial regressions did not show any significant differences in scores.

There may be a degree of bias within this method, since circle members and coordinators may be aware of any criminological outcomes by the end of the circle (they may even be the reason for the circle ending) and therefore this could affect the risk scores given.

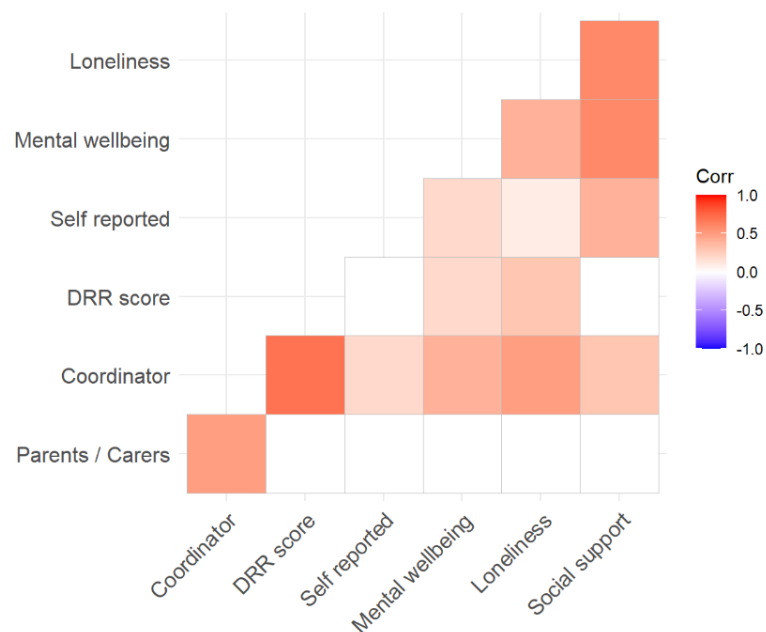
Therefore, at this time, we have not shown any correlation between dynamic risk and criminological outcomes, however the data available only shows outcomes within the life of the circle and not afterwards and care should be taken when interpreting this result.

Assessment of tools

As in our previous evaluation, we have assessed the relationship between the scores on questionnaires – i.e. is a high risk score on one questionnaire likely to mean a high risk score on another questionnaire for same core member at the same time point?

The correlation matrix below shows positive correlations (red) across most measures. For instance, coordinators' scores are positively correlated with all other scores. There is a particularly strong correlation between the coordinator and DRR risk scores, suggesting strong agreement between volunteers and coordinators. As in the 2019 evaluation, it is also encouraging to see that the risk scores attained by self-assessment are positively correlated with DRR and coordinator scores.

Graph: Correlations between different questionnaire average scores



This assessment further highlights the validity of the CSW evaluation tools and that self-reporting is a valuable means of understanding dynamic risk, as part of a balanced approach which considers all participants of the circle.

Parents and carers

Parents and carers responded to questionnaires at the start, middle and end of circles. The questionnaires and comments in this section reference responses across this dataset, unless specified otherwise (e.g. only end of circle responses).

Table: Number of parent questionnaires returned by review

Review	Parent / carer questionnaires received
1	24
2	17
3	17

The majority of parents and carers said that the young person was positive about attending circle meetings. Across all questions, the prevalent themes in comments were 'confidence' and 'communication skills'. Parents and carers noted that the young people had developed abilities in communicating with peers and adults, and had developed confidence to engage with education, activities, and improved relationships.

His willingness to be more involved, to push himself and being more confident.

The Circle has helped with his self-confidence. Prior to the Circle he had been stuck in his bedroom every day / night for almost 2 years with only family and close friends to talk to.

He is now getting on with me far better (e.g. helping me with his brother and with cooking). He is more socially confident. His time keeping is better. Now always keeps to his curfew. No negative changes due to the circle but there's still general progress he needs to make in his life.

By the end of the circle all parents and carers responding to the survey (n = 17 responses at end of circle review) felt that the circle had helped the young person with their behaviour.

Having a positive male role model has really helped – also having a group of trusted adults that believe in him and giving him the time to repeat and practice skills he has learned

The circle has given more avenues and perspectives - different ideas and strategies for coping

The Circle has helped with her self-esteem issues. [She] is now focused on art and uses it to relieve stress / to manage her violent and aggressive outbursts.

The majority of parents and carers felt that the circle had helped with the young person's education.

The Circle has helped him with developing his social skills which has helped him engage better with education.

The circle has given her other ideas and strategies for how to deal with incidents in school

[He] has learned different coping strategies for managing peer relationships at school and has also done some revision with the Circle.

The majority of parents and carers felt that the circle had helped with the young person's relationships.

Helping build his confidence. He is also more tolerant of other people and able to strike up conversations with new people since the start of his Circle.

The Circle have talked with [him] about his relationship with his brother. [He] is now engaging better with his brother, he has started having conversations with him rather than just bickering with him or hitting him.

The majority of parents and carers felt that the circle had helped with the young person's hobbies and social activities.

[He] has managed to attend after school club as a result of his improved confidence.

Talking to [circle volunteer] about his artwork and being inspired by him / his art.

He is less anxious about approaching new people and has more confidence. This was achieved through [him] buying his own drinks at the café and through learning to use buses by himself – the volunteers always waited at the same bus stop for him and saw him onto the bus at the end of the circle meeting.

Covid-19

The coronavirus pandemic had a large impact on everyone in the UK. For CSW it meant that there was initially a large disruption to service delivery, and although some circles were able to carry on quite quickly, the format changes affected core members through the removal of an important social interaction. Given the importance of loneliness as a factor in reoffending, and the increased time on the internet that came with the pandemic, there were clear challenges for CSW to overcome during this time (as described above).

Although no specific questionnaires were used to capture the impact of Covid-19 on circles, a number of comments highlighted the impact on circles. In this section, a selection of comments and themes are discussed, but in the absence of any standardised measures, **these comments should not be seen as representative of all circles and only illustrate the circumstances of individual cases for the purpose of learning and understanding the adaptations that circles made during this time period.**

Some stakeholders described the challenges to core members presented by Covid-19 and the associated isolation. In particular, this has been a challenge for young person circles, where the majority of circles engaged in activities and play with core members to encourage positive and strengths-based discussions:

At the 12 month point all was going well. The ending of the circle was delayed due to Covid-19. The lockdown had a profound negative impact on the CM's life leading to a recall to prison for breaching licence conditions. It remains unclear whether he had sexually reoffended against any new victims but no evidence for his currently. (Coordinator)

Particularly as a result of Covid lockdowns he has limited activities with friends, currently staying at home playing PC games and watching TV. This is definitely worse than it would be without Covid restrictions. (Coordinator)

Unfortunately, COVID restrictions may have led to our CM feeling slightly disengaged or abandoned. He would often express frustration at our inability to continue face to face meetings and stopped being so committed to our regular time slot. (Volunteer)

Covid-19 meant that his face to face contact with birth family stopped – only telephone contact. He seemed ok with this but obviously felt that it was not ideal. (Dynamic Risk Review)

However, some circles managed to continue to build strong relationships despite restrictions:

When I spoke with CM he said he had enjoyed his circle despite being under Covid restrictions for the entirety of the Circle. (Coordinator)

Even through Covid limitations- the team worked well. (Volunteer)

Given that his circle ran throughout the Covid pandemic and therefore was not able to do much in the way of activities, CM has done incredibly well to maintain his motivation to engage. (Coordinator)

Despite the difficulties created by Covid 19 that has limited the face to face contact until early September, it would appear that a good level of trust has been established between the CM and volunteers and that they have a positive relationship. This has certainly been made easier following the move to face to face meetings. (Coordinator)

Overall, Covid-19 represented a large disruption to circles, whether in the psychological effects to core members, increased loneliness and isolation, the restrictions to social activities and developing positive routines, preventing the relationship building of circles, and in some cases inhibiting key work such as the repair of family relationships.

Covid-19 restrictions are a complex topic, and this evaluation does not have suitable data available to make any recommendations regarding restorative work carried out during this time. However, it is clear that the disruption to circles was negative in the majority of cases, and that restrictions which had the intention of protecting the public may have had detrimental effects in non-health areas such as probation and restorative work aimed at preventing offending.

Volunteering

CSW's capacity to provide circles hinges upon their network of dedicated volunteers, who undertake in-depth training and preparation for circles and dedicate their time week after week, usually for at least a year or longer to reduce the risk of child sexual offences in their communities. The training and skills attained by volunteers are a legacy of the work of circles, and will continue to strengthen communities after circles end.

Feedback from volunteers is captured via the end of circle volunteering survey, which asks about the volunteers' experiences. This is in addition to the end of circle DRR and other questionnaires.

Therefore, data from this survey is focused on how the volunteer themselves experienced the circle, rather than dynamic risk presented by the core member.

In addition, CSW captures information about the number of volunteers for each circle and the number of hours they contribute over its lifespan, including direct (meetings with the core member) and indirect (such as preparing for circles and training).

Typically, a circle has three or more volunteers (varying depending on the location and type of circle). Where this data was captured 39% of circles had the same volunteers at the start and end of the circle; whilst 31% had different volunteers at the end (and a further 29% were missing data).

Where volunteers left in the course of the circle, it was not typical for them to be replaced. In the dataset, there were 67 volunteers who left, and only 14 who joined to replace them (21% replacement rate).

Total direct and indirect volunteered hours for circles in the dataset are given below. These figures are conservative as we do not have data for all circles, only those where volunteers have provided this information.

Table: Volunteering hours by circle type

Circle type	Direct hours (n = 94 circles)	Indirect hours (n = 94 circles)
Standard	3,693	3,768
Young person	2,068	2,406
Prison	1,467	2,004
Intellectual disability	1,631	3,347
All circles	8,860	11,526
Average hours per circle	94.26	122.60

Economic benefits of volunteering

The cost calculations here are made based on the expected hourly cost of a volunteer's time if they were employed to support a core member rather than volunteering their time for free. This is a conservative estimate which does not include on-costs / associated staffing costs, and any additional benefits of training to volunteers and their local communities once circles have ended.

Since volunteers do not provide any information on their own salaries for other jobs, and because some may be retired or not in work, estimated hourly rates are based on the Office for National Statistics' most recent figures for hourly wages¹:

- A more conservative value is the median hourly pay for all employees located in the South West of England (ONS 2021 provisional data): **£13.33 per hour**.
- Perhaps more realistic given the work undertaken by volunteers is the median hourly pay for 'Business and public service associate professionals', which more closely matches those working in probation services (ONS 2021 provisional data): **£17.17 per hour**.

Table: Economic value of volunteering hours

Hours calculation	Wage calculation	Wage	Hours	Value	Per year (2017-2022)
Total direct and indirect hours for all volunteers	South West median hourly wage 2021	£13.33	20,386	£271,745	£45,291
	Business and public service associate professional hourly wage 2021	£17.17	20,386	£350,028	£58,338
Average direct and indirect hours per circle multiplied by dataset of 131 circles	South West median hourly wage 2021	£13.33	28,409	£378,692	£63,115
	Business and public service associate professional hourly wage 2021	£17.17	28,409	£487,783	£81,297

Therefore, we can estimate from this dataset that the volunteering secured by CSW is worth anywhere from £45,000 to £81,000 a year to the local economy; and in particular to local offender management services and commissioners. And over the course of the last six years, CSW volunteers have contributed anywhere between £270,000 and £488,000 in volunteering hours to their local communities.

It should be noted that these estimates do not include the economic value of reductions in reoffending resulting from circles, which are outside of the scope of this evaluation. It could also be argued that the experiences of volunteers from participating in circles have additional economic value not captured here; such as those volunteers who go on to work in criminology, policing and probation and increase their employability through their volunteering. As such, these numbers might be considered conservative, and the full value of CSW volunteers is greater still.

1

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/datasets/placeofresidencebylocalauthorityshetable8>

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/datasets/occupation2digitsofemploymenttable2>

Experience of volunteering

Responses from the volunteering survey are presented below. Scores have been recoded so that all scores are on a scale of 0 (negative) to 100 (positive). For instance, in question 4 (“To what extent did volunteering meet your expectations”) a score of 100 would indicate that volunteering entirely met the volunteer’s expectations.

Where comments are used in this section, these are to exemplify points taken from quantitative analyses and table data, but should not be taken as representative of all volunteers views.

Volunteers got into volunteering with CSW for a variety of reasons. Comments from this question (n = 203) were coded into categories. Some comments were coded into multiple categories.

Table: Coded answers for question “Why did you volunteer with CSW?”

Reason	Count
Benefit the community / core members / helping core members	57
Learn about rehabilitation / work with offenders / career reason / gain experience	44
Prevent offending	40
Belief in circles values	28
Previous experience / relevant former employment / former volunteer	27
Other	29

The most common reason given was wanting to help people who were marginalised, and the local community by doing something positive:

I believe everyone deserves a chance in life and I want to help those who want to make their lives better.

I wanted to help a category of people which most of the society will alienate and judge AND because I believe that the support offered by circle can reduce reoffending.

I wanted to give back to the community, and believe in rehabilitation and a supportive environment for all

Another prominent reason was for those who were developing their own skills and experience, such as those hoping to work in probation and forensic psychology in the future:

To make a difference to CM's life path, to gain experience in conjunction with my university degree, and to help the community

There were also a number of volunteers who had previous experience which made volunteering with CSW the right decision for them, such as retired magistrates and those who had formerly worked in the criminal justice system. There were also some volunteers who had survived abuse themselves and chose to volunteer to prevent future abuse.

I was approached by the Circle coordinator, having worked with people who received mental health services, had learning difficulties and drug and alcohol problems previously, and also as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse I felt I had something to offer the organisation

A summary of the key quantitative questions in the volunteer questionnaire is given in the table below.

Table: Summary of quantitative answers in the volunteering survey

Question	mean	min	max	sd	n
Q4 - To what extent did volunteering meet your expectations?	83.57	0	100	24.05	207
Q6 - The Circle I was part of had a positive relationship with the Core Member	86.30	0	100	19.62	208
Q8 - The members of our Circle were well-matched to the needs of Core Member	83.53	25	75	18.12	208
Q10 - In my opinion the Core Member felt accountable to the Circle for their actions	65.87	0	100	24.22	208
Q12 - The Circle has significantly reduced the Core Members risk of sexual reoffending / harmful sexual behaviour	63.17	0	100	22.35	205
Q14 - I found my experience volunteering with Circles rewarding	88.35	0	100	17.57	206
Q16 - I felt safe throughout my time volunteering with Circles	97.21	50	50	8.63	206
Q18 - I felt that the training and guidance I received from Circles SW adequately prepared me for my role as a volunteer	91.71	25	75	13.50	205
Q20 - I learnt valuable new skills through volunteering with Circles	78.05	0	100	21.29	205
Q22 - I have been able to (or intend to) apply these new skills in my life outside of Circles	73.35	0	100	23.16	197
Q24 - I felt able to cope with the emotional pressure of volunteering for Circles	92.77	75	25	11.36	204
Q25 - I had a person/people I could turn to for emotional support if I needed to	93.90	25	75	12.35	205
Q26 - I felt well supported by Circles South West throughout my time volunteering	95.57	25	75	10.79	203
Q28 - I intend to volunteer in another Circle in the future	86.03	0	100	21.22	204
Q29 - I would recommend volunteering with Circles to others	92.61	50	50	13.19	203

The majority of volunteers felt that their experience matched their expectations:

Working with a good group of people and it is rewarding, doing some good for the community

The support from Circles and the coordinator has been very good, especially as our current CM has been such a challenge. I have found I [sic] very rewarding working with CM and seeing him flourish over the last 12 months

Volunteers also felt that they had a good relationship with the core member, and that volunteers had been well matched. A common theme of comments was that the relationship with the core member took some time to develop. Volunteers also spoke positively of the mix of backgrounds and experiences in their circles and how this was helpful for the core member:

It took us a while but we have built up a very good relationship with our CM. We know that he finds it very difficult to trust but he has come to trust us and in turn, has opened up about his past, which in turn has allowed us to work through some of his issues.

We worked hard to build a relationship with our CM because he had issues with confidence. He came out of his shell pretty quickly and continued to engage throughout.

We had a good mix of people within our circle, which allowed us to assist our core member in a number of ways

I feel a range of backgrounds and supporting ideas helped the CM.

Average scores were slightly less positive in terms of the changes the circle has made to the risk of reoffending and the core members' accountability. Several volunteers reported that this was not something that often came up in conversations or that the topic was difficult to address; however many also reported helping the CM in other ways.

CM told us he believed we were there to assist him with work and living arrangements and didn't see the circle as a service that he had to be accountable to.

The circle was more focused on safeguarding so it didn't feel as though there was a huge need for accountability. The CM did however seem to build their communication with the circle as their confidence grew which suggests they felt they could trust the circle and wanted to keep us updated on things.

Some volunteers made clear the challenges of working with core members and managing risk with some sexual offenders:

The CM did breach the conditions of their SHPO on a number of occasions throughout the life of the Circle. It is difficult to say whether the CM's offending behaviour would have been more prevalent or serious without the Circle's intervention. Whilst I don't believe the Circle 'significantly' reduced the CM's risk of sexual offending, it did hold the CM accountable and challenged them when they displayed concerning behaviour.

Almost all volunteers reported feeling very safe throughout their whole volunteering experience. The majority also felt supported throughout, able to cope with the emotional pressure of being in a circle, and that they received appropriate training and guidance for the role.

At no time did I feel unsafe, and if I had there was lots of support through circles that would of helped.

Our CM was a very pleasant friendly young man, who acted very respectfully towards all of us throughout the entire Circle. Other volunteers were also respectful and mindful of the Circles rules and boundaries. We all observed the rules of privacy and confidentiality throughout, so there was no sense of being unsafe.

Everyone is really supportive and I know who to go to if there's any problems

The majority of volunteers felt like they had learned new skills and that they would be able to use these in other areas of their life, including working with specific groups of people, such as young people and people with intellectual disabilities.

I now feel more informed and equipped to navigate moments/experiences that may be difficult for a person with an autism diagnosis

The CM presented a number of complex challenges, most notably their autism. This was my first experience of working with someone with autism and have found this to be an enlightening experience.

Knowledge on how to work with people who are convicted of sexual offences or have displayed harmful sexual behaviour. Confidence to work with this type of offending.

Reflecting on my circles experience has changed my approach to interacting patients (medical student). Moving from a more judging/valuing position to a coaching/supportive position has allowed me to build deeper rapport with my patients by being alongside them in their journey. It's also allowed me to realise a lot more that I can't change everything about a person's life, I can only help them feel more able to cope with its challenges.

And finally, most volunteers said that they would recommend volunteering with CSW to someone else, with many intending to continue volunteering with CSW in the future.

I would recommend volunteering for CSW as it gave me a great sense of achievement each week knowing that I was contributing to helping my community

I think it's hugely valuable and rewarding volunteer role. It's different to other roles out there both in terms of the type of activity/ work and the opportunity to learn and develop new skills.

It's a really rewarding experience and it clearly works. Our CM was really open and engaged which I'm sure makes a world of difference, but even meeting other volunteers, knowing you have the same goal at the end of the circle is a really rewarding experience in itself.

Conclusions

As far as we are aware, this evaluation has considered one of the largest datasets on circles of support and accountability to date, with over 1,700 individual questionnaires completed, processed, and analysed since 2017. The data from 131 circles, spanning 5 years, collected at multiple time points and from a range of stakeholders, represents a truly balanced view of the impact of circles on the lives of core members and those volunteers who support them in the pursuit of 'no more victims'.

In this evaluation, we have demonstrated how core members' dynamic risk of reoffending, as measured using a carefully selected set of questionnaires, has significantly reduced during the course of circles; and using a mixed methods approach we have shown that core members, volunteers, and professional coordinators attribute many of these changes to the work of the circles. In short, the evidence from this evaluation supports the use of circles as part of a restorative approach to reducing the risk of sexual offending.

Like almost all services in 2020 and onwards, the Covid-19 pandemic impeded CSW in their work. Where circle members spoke of Covid-19, their experience was generally of the disruption to relationship building, core members' positive social activities and new routines, isolation, and prevention of planned progress in their lives (such as rebuilding family relationships). However, many circles were able to progress despite disruptions, and build relationships with core members through online or phone contact.

CSW has shown that the adapted circle formats with young people, people with intellectual disabilities, and those transitioning from prison to the community have been successful in reducing risk across many risk categories for the majority of core members. Although an assessment of scores has not shown statistically significant differences in balanced risk, the mixed measures approach of this evaluation has highlighted how the majority of circles have seen improvements in one or more areas. Prison circles were shown to support core members during difficult and transient periods of their lives. Young person circles developed new ways of delivering circles through activities and play, helping with young people's relationships, education, and behaviour. Intellectual disability circle adaptations showed positive improvements across dynamic risk for the majority of core members, including improvements in how core members were able to manage their thoughts and behaviour.

Parents and carers were also positive about young person circles, commenting on the confidence and social skills that circles helped young people attain, as well as the improvements to their engagement with education and activities. Core members echoed these views, with many talking about how their circle had helped them with school; either academically through revision sessions, or socially with their relationships.

Circles volunteers were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences with CSW. Many got into volunteering as a result of wanting to prevent offending in their communities, and to help marginalised core members to lead more positive lives. Many also saw a benefit in volunteering as a way of strengthening their own skills and developing experience in working with offenders, such as those hoping to work in forensic psychology and probation. The training they received from CSW was highly commended and the majority felt well prepared for their circle. Although relationships with core members took time to develop in some cases, volunteers mainly spoke of positive and respectful relationships with core members, which enabled meaningful work in the circle. Almost all volunteers said that they would volunteer again in the future, and recommend volunteering with CSW to a friend.

As well as the impact that CSW volunteers have had on core members' lives and risk to reoffending, they have also contributed to the local economy through the many hours of direct and indirect volunteering time through circle meetings, planning, and training. As well as the financial value (estimated at a value of between £45,000 and £81,000 per year to the local economy), volunteers have supported their own professional and personal development, such as those attaining skills relevant for their work in probation and psychology. This group of volunteers represents a community asset in terms of their experience and skills in restorative work with offenders and their strengths-based approach to prevent further offending.

The tools used in this evaluation have been developed with the help of stakeholders and professionals, and informed by evidence on sexual offending and wider research. Furthermore, this evaluation and the previous evaluation (Preston and Allen, 2019) have further validated their usage, showing correlations between averaged ratings of dynamic risk by core members, volunteers, and professional circle coordinators. Furthermore, this evaluation has shown a correlation between negative criminological outcomes and a balanced dynamic risk score, which confirms the value in the use of dynamic risk measurement in the assessment of former sexual offenders. As such, these tools and the methods used in this evaluation may serve as an example of comprehensive evaluation of circles of support and accountability for future evaluators.

With impending national changes to the way dynamic risk is captured for circles in the UK, we hope that this evaluation demonstrates the value of taking a longitudinal view of evaluation, the impact that can be demonstrated through a balanced and holistic data collection approach, as well as the value of involving a range of stakeholders in the development of evaluation tools.

Overall, the circles delivered by CSW since late 2016 have been shown in this evaluation to have had an overwhelmingly positive impact on core members and the circle of volunteers who have dedicated their time to supporting them. Although we cannot say definitively whether circles prevented reoffending, we can say that circles played a key role in reducing the risk that core members presented, as judged by a holistic and research-informed measure of dynamic risk factors. Furthermore, circles impacted more than just core members, and the benefits that volunteers gained from their involvement have more widely impacted their own lives, the economy, and their local communities.

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