

Winston Churchill Fellowship Research Report:
Can the CoSA model be culturally adapted and established to work
successfully in Aotearoa New Zealand?

Fellowship recipient: Dr Amanda M. Young-Hauser

Travel undertaken between August 9 to September 7, 2023

Report submitted: November 2023

Table of Contents

<i>Executive summary</i>	3
<i>Introduction</i>	4
<i>Background</i>	5
<i>Key learnings</i>	7
Meeting with Riana Taylor, CEO of Circles UK (https://circles-uk.org.uk/).....	7
1 Core members.....	8
2 Volunteers	8
3 CoSA programme	8
4 CoSA and relationships with other agencies	9
5 CoSA and funding.....	9
6 Risk.....	9
<i>Meeting other key players</i>	10
<i>Dissemination</i>	10
<i>Conclusions</i>	11
Figure 1 The Circle of Support and Accountability (courtesy of Circles UK)	6

Executive summary

Child sexual abuse remains a serious and widespread crime. Growing evidence suggests that its reduction is more likely to occur with a community-based approach. Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) is a model that works with perpetrators of sexual abuse to prevent further victims by upholding both principles of accountability and support. CoSAs are cost effective, evidence-based and well established in the UK, with member projects in ten other European countries and Australia also exploring the possibility of its introduction. This information gathering journey to the UK provided a deeper understanding of the different functions of and distinction between Circles UK and CoSA providers. The meetings allowed me to expand my network of international experts in the reintegration field. The next step is to gauge the feasibility of establishing an adapted and culturally appropriate CoSA model in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Introduction

Child sexual offending (CSO) continues to be a prevalent societal issue. Most perpetrators who are convicted and serve a prison term will eventually re-enter the community. This is a crucial and complex moment for the prisoner, the community, and agencies (Parole Board, Department of Corrections, Police, for example) with many aspects needing to be considered to keeping the community and the released prisoner safe and accountable.

In Aotearoa New Zealand a range of smaller NGOs assist men who have been imprisoned for CSO to re-enter communities, however, there is a lack of an evidence-based, national model to reintegrate men who sexually abused children. Circle of Support and Accountability (CoSA) is such an evidence-based model that originated from Canada, operates in the UK and has been and is being adopted and adapted in other European countries and potentially also in Australia. With the core question “Can the CoSA model be culturally adapted and established to work successfully in Aotearoa NZ?” in mind, I travelled to Reading (UK) to meet Riana Taylor, the CEO of Circles (UK), to learn more about the CoSA model. At the IATSO (International Association for the Treatment of Sex Offenders) conference that took place in Trondheim (Norway) I had the opportunity to meet with other key players, academics and stakeholders from the UK and other countries who are instrumental to CoSA and are either directly involved with a Circle, are advisors to Circles UK or evaluators of the program. The conference also allowed me to attend presentations relevant to integration and community-based management of men who sexually abused children.

I begin this report by elaborating on CoSA, its mechanisms and outcomes. I then discuss what I have learned from these meetings and reflect that my original question should have been formulated somewhat differently as the question of cultural adaption needs to be discussed

and developed from this end (Aotearoa-New Zealand) in consultation with tangata whenua. I will examine the possibility of introducing CoSA to A-NZ by way of discussing how I plan to disseminate my findings before I offer some concluding remarks.

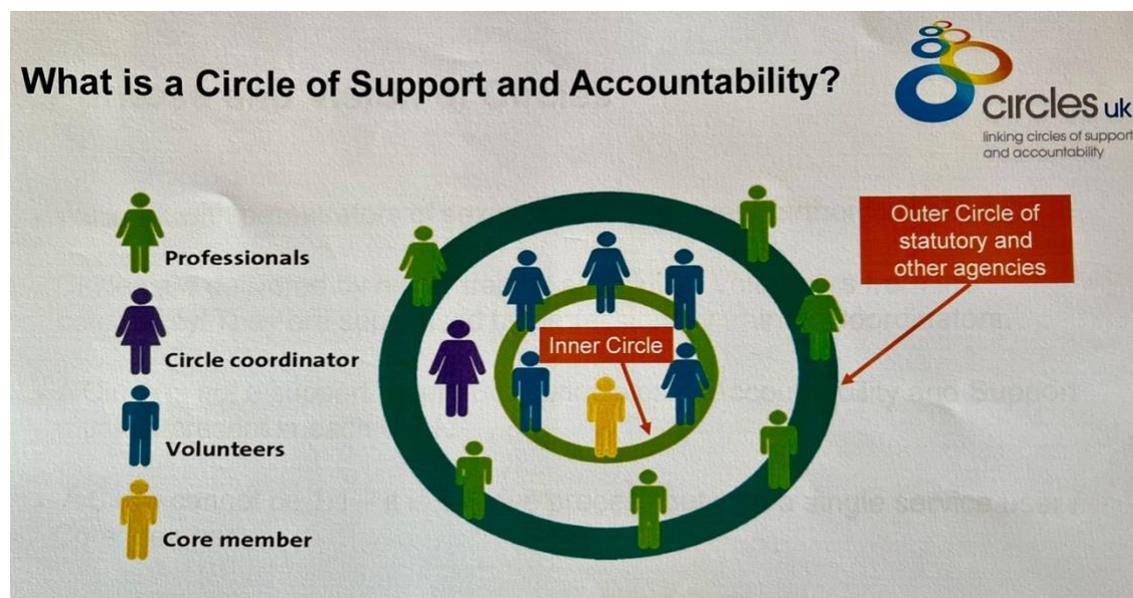
Background

Prison reintegration is fraught with challenges in particular for men who sexually abused children. At the time of release these men have often little support in the community and no or only a small social network because child sexual abuse frequently occurs within the family or extended family and thus relationships are either severed, restricted or not permitted. Suitable accommodation and employment are difficult to find. Such was the situation for a repeat offender in Canada until Harry Nigh, a Mennonite pastor, together with other parishioners formed a support group. This was the inception of CoSA to support men in the community by drawing on volunteers to form circles around the core member (released prisoner) to keep communities and former offenders safe. There is strong empirical evidence that suggests that CoSA is a successful model to a challenging problem.

Circles consist of the core member and five to seven volunteers who form the inner circle with the outer circle comprising statutory and other agencies (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

The Circle of Support and Accountability (courtesy of Circles UK)



The purpose of CoSA is to work with perpetrators of sexual abuse to prevent further victims. Volunteers are trained and skilled community members who are supervised by a professionally trained coordinator. Circle meetings (volunteers and the core member) occur on a weekly basis and through conversations volunteers identify any changes in a core member's attitudes, beliefs, wellbeing, behaviour or activity. The core member is held accountable for their past and current behaviours, however, the focus is on positive aims to move forward with the help and guidance from volunteers in order to prevent bad life choices, isolation and unhelpful associations. The volunteers are in close contact with the circle coordinator who advises and manages any potential concerns.

The function of the Circles UK is to oversee the provision of CoSAs in England and Wales and organisations which provide Circles are required to become members of Circles UK and

operate within the requirements of a Code of Practice (Circles UK, Annual Review Summary). Since the establishment of Circles UK in 2008 1,200 Circles have been successfully completed (Circles UK, Annual Review Summary), and evaluation studies consistently demonstrate that Circles play an important role in assisting core members and help them engage in meaningful activities, overall making a significant contribution in helping to reduce sexual abuse (Circles UK, Annual Review Summary).

Key learnings

Meeting with Riana Taylor, CEO of Circles UK (<https://circles-uk.org.uk/>)

In preparation for my meeting with Riana I collated a list of questions with the input from my colleagues from the Bond Trust and two men who have spent time in prison for sexually abusing children and whom I have known and supported for many years. Also present at the meeting with Riana were Jude Thomas (National Development Manager); Liz Hickey (National Quality Manager); Lynn Taylor (Information Officer); and Heather Curnow (Office/Business Manager). The roles of these core staff members tie in with a crucial new understanding of the function of Circles UK and its relationship with regional Circles and their agencies. In short, Circles UK oversees the Circle providers, is responsible for quality assurance and best practice, and offer training and consultancy. Circles UK organise a two-day event every year to engage with and upskill its volunteers and evaluates Circle providers every second year.

Although not relevant to this report but worthwhile mentioning, Circles ReBoot (recognise strengths; encourage self-efficacy; building resilience; overcome obstacles; optimise wellbeing; twelve sessions) is a new approach and programme to address online harm and has just been evaluated by Prof Derek Perkins and Dr Hannah Merdian.

I now elaborate on the core areas of learnings corresponding to my list of questions, which were divided into six areas.

1 Core members

CoSAs are part of a multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/multi-agency-public-protection-arrangements-mappa-guidance>) that are involved with the reintegrating of men who sexually abused children. Circle providers accept high risk offenders who are mostly referred by probation services. Statutory and other agencies provide reintegration services for all other offenders. The demand to accept a core member is high and there are not enough Circles.

2 Volunteers

Although evaluation shows high volunteer satisfaction, there are not enough volunteers. Word of mouth, via Circles UK's website, or invited talks (for example at Universities' Psychology or Forensic Psychology Departments) yield some volunteers who are carefully screened for their suitability and undergo 16 hours of training before being assessed further for their suitability. New volunteers are paired with experienced volunteers. In general, former service users are not considered suitable as volunteer, however, this is assessed on a case-by-case basis. Being a CoSA volunteer requires commitment to engage with the core member and other circle volunteers on a weekly basis for about one year and then fortnightly for up to 18 months in total, at which stage the core member has gained confidence, independence and built up a healthy social network and the circle is dissolved. The Circle meetings always take place in the community and, in general, no other agency representative (for example from community probation or police) is invited to these meetings.

3 CoSA programme

As mentioned above volunteers receive training and ongoing support from Circles UK and meet the core member on a weekly basis. Volunteers are considered to be the 'eyes and ears'

of the core member and scrutinise their attitudes, beliefs, wellbeing, behaviour and general progress. Any concern is raised with the circle coordinator who is the link between the inner and outer circles (see Figure 1).

4 CoSA and relationships with other agencies

Here, the main point concerns suitable accommodation and employment, both of which seem equally challenging to find in the UK and reflect the situation in A-NZ. There is, however, one main difference: probation (UK) runs hostels where a core member lives up to six months following their release. A philanthropically oriented family business (Timpson <https://www.timpson-group.co.uk/>) offers released prisoners employment opportunities but excludes men who sexually abused children from working in their business.

5 CoSA and funding

Funding Circles UK (for example, to pay their staff and the circle coordinators) is an ongoing struggle and it has been Riana's responsibility to fundraise. Volunteers are reimbursed for their transport costs only. Thanks to longstanding relationships and an evidence-based approach to reintegrating, the Ministry of Justice now contributes financially to circle providers. However, money is always scarce, and fundraising is ongoing.

6 Risk

CoSA's objective is 'no more victims' which is achieved through the circle supporting a core member and the mechanism of the inner and outer circle with an experienced circle coordinator liaising between the two circles (see Figure 1). Ongoing training and evaluation of the circle providers and volunteers to ensure best practice reduce risk of recidivism of a core member. Over the years, Circles UK and in particular Riana established good relationships, trust and respect with other agencies, which is reflected, for example, in the fact that CoSA is part of MAPP. Risk of recall, for example for a breach of a core member's condition, is real and the possibility that such an eventuality is noted by media requires careful

attention, consideration and management to prevent damage to reputation and established relationships and has the potential to evoke kneejerk reactions and hasty decisions because child sexual offending is a contentious and emotive topic.

Meeting other key players

I participated at the IATSO conference in Trondheim / Norway where I presented a paper entitled 'The omnipresence of the correctional system: A case study'. During the conference I had formal meetings with Kieran McCartan, Professor of Criminology at the University of the West of England and Chair of Circles South West (<https://circles-southwest.org.uk/staffandtrust/>), Derek Perkins, Professor in Forensic Psychology (Royal Holloway University of London), and Dr Hannah Merdian, Psychologist and co-director of onlinePROTECT®, a research and consultation programme on online child protection at the University of Lincoln/UK. Kieran, Derek and Hannah each is involved in different capacities with Circles UK and CoSA and their input and views have provided me with different insights and considerations with regards to the structure and circle provision.

The IATSO conference has also provided an opportunity for informal networking, and I have made some invaluable connections, in particular with Dr Jayson Ware, a clinical psychologist at the University of Canterbury, whose research interest relate to the effective treatment of sexual and violent offenders.

Dissemination

The purpose of my trip to the UK was to collect information on an established, cost-effective, and evidence-based for their effectiveness in contributing to reducing sexual reoffending

programme CoSA. I not only gained insights and knowledge about Circles UK and CoSA, Riana Taylor also very generously offered her support by way of participating and presenting in potential future Zoom meetings with representatives from the Department of Corrections, the Police, the Ministry of Justice, and other interested parties with the view of establishing CoSAs in A-NZ. Furthermore, and subject to available funding, Prof Derek Perkins and Dr Hannah Merdian showed willingness to travel to A-NZ and hold workshops on the CoSA model.

Due to my newly gained network, I have been able to connect a NZ parole lawyer (she is interested in topic of 'tricky paroles' who claim innocence) with Derek Perkins.

Currently I am compiling a list of names of potentially interested parties (academics, existing service providers, Korowai Tumanako, police, staff from the Department of Corrections) with the aim to extend my network and organising a meeting early next year to gauge interest in introducing, adopting and adapting the CoSA model in A-NZ. A date for a meeting to present my learnings has been set for March 5, 2024.

Conclusions

I return to the question I posed originally: "Can the CoSA model be culturally adapted and established to work successfully in Aotearoa NZ?". I concede that it is imperative to consult and involve Māori at an early stage to consider whether the CoSA model can be culturally modified to a suitable model for Māori. Such consultation processes have always been considered but I should have made this fundamental component more explicit and re-considered the formulation of the initial question.

Considering whether a CoSA model and program could be introduced in A-NZ requires a group of dedicated people to build rapport and trust and consult and collaborate with multiple stakeholders. It will take time to establish an interest group. Proposing and establishing a reintegrative service based on the CoSA model requires also political maturity and willingness to acknowledge and address this issue, be solution focused and support it. I see this as a beginning of a long but worthwhile journey that I could not have commenced without the generous financial support from the Winston Churchill Fellowship, and I thank the Board members for their trust.