Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA)

**Background**

Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) is a community based initiative that aims to prevent further offending and sexual abuse by sexual offenders, ("core members").

COSA originated in Canada through the Mennonite church in an attempt to help sexual offenders “move from fearful rejection to active, compassionate involvement by experienced professionals and volunteers in creating sanctuaries where despised offenders could be treated with respect but also with accountability”.

COSA now operates in several European countries and was introduced to the UK in 2002 where the initiative is managed by Circles UK. It tries to complement public safety (the “don’ts” ) with promoting social capital (the “do’s”).

It emphasises the goal of “no more victims”.

**How it works**

A circle provides a medium to high risk **core member** with a group of 3-6 trained volunteers from the community who meet with the core member on a weekly basis. The core member must not be in total denial of the offence and must have a high need for social support as well as being prepared to share information about his offence and personal risk factors with the volunteers.

The core member and the volunteers comprise the **Inner Circle**. Volunteers support the core member by modelling pro-social behaviour, offering moral support and assisting with practical needs. They hold the core member accountable by challenging pro-offending attitudes, beliefs and behaviours.

The volunteers are selected, screened, recruited and trained by a **Co-ordinator** who is a professional with specific expertise in coaching, supervision and the management of sex offenders. In several jurisdictions the co-ordinator is a Probation Officer or experienced Social Worker. As well as assessing the core member’s appropriateness for a Circle, the Co-ordinator attends the first 3 preparatory meetings without the Core Member and the first Circle meeting with the Core Member. Volunteers are provided with regular supervision by the Co-ordinator who receives minutes of all meetings and helps the volunteers to monitor the Core Member’s progress.

An **Outer Circle** is formed by the professionals who are involved in the core member’s life such as probation, police, social workers and mental health workers. It is good practice to introduce volunteers and professionals to each other at the beginning of a Circle in order to discuss views, expectations and boundaries. The outer Circle monitors the Circle process through monthly
updates from the Circle Co-ordinator though professionals will remain in touch with the Core Member throughout the lifetime of a Circle which is usually about 18 months.

**What is the evidence of effectiveness?**

It is early days yet in terms of longitudinal reconviction studies but some very promising indicators have emerged.

Two Canadian outcome evaluations have compared recidivism among sexual offenders who participated in Canadian COSA to matched comparison groups of sexual offenders. The study reported lower levels of sexual recidivism among COSA participants (2.3% reoffending rate after 36 months) compared to 13.7% for the comparison group. There were also statistically significant reductions of violent offending and other generalised reoffending among the COSA participants. (Wilson et al 2009).

In the UK (Bates et al 2103) 4.2% of 71 COSA participants were reconvicted of a sexual offence over a 55 month follow up period. This compares to a 16.9% rate of a matched comparison group.

There has been some interesting research in terms of value for money. The University of Birmingham has concluded that each circle costs approximately £11,000 compared to £147,000 for every offender who goes on to abuse another victim.

**Implications for Jersey**

We do not have a formal Circles of Support and Accountability framework in the island. Based on emerging findings and the extra dimension of community engagement together with an emphasis on both public protection and safeguarding it is a scheme that deserves consideration.

Discussions with Circles UK have indicated that the formation of up to 4 circles would entail the recruitment of approximately 24 volunteers. A Co-ordinator would be required for 2 days a week minimum. This would suit the skills set of a Probation Officer but the introduction of COSA would represent a new area of work. It is anticipated that staff costs and the hiring of a room for Circles to meet (a neutral venue is recommended) would cost in the region of £35k a year.

If COSA is pursued it would be sensible in my opinion to align Jersey to Circles UK. This would provide us with training, support and access to important material such as codes of practice and recruitment protocols that will be very helpful when establishing COSA. Importantly, it will also provide programme integrity and quality assurance in what can be a contentious area of work. Although it has not been possible to quantify training costs it is estimated that £5k a year should be ample for this purpose.
There is clear advice from the Circles Europe organisation that funding for any pilot project should be sustained for a minimum of 3 years. It is estimated that it takes approximately 9 months from project inception to delivery. During this period stakeholder engagement is vital, including close liaison with groups representing victims of abuse.

In summary the cost of a 3 year pilot project would be in the region of £40k per year or £120k in total.

**Considerations for the Strategic Management Board**

The key issue to decide is whether the COSA model should be pursued with a view to implementation.

If the decision is affirmative then the questions of governance and funding arise. The Probation Service would be willing to manage a COSA project as it fits its skill set. Although the Service is prepared to give detailed consideration as to how it might incorporate this work into existing resources, there can be no guarantees at this point that this is realistic or sustainable—particularly given the need to make savings.

Other potential avenues to explore could include a bid by SMB and the Safeguarding Partnership board to the States for funding. Alternatively, members of the SMB might wish to share the cost of the 3 year pilot project perhaps with contributions from interested parties in the voluntary sector such as Barnados and NSPCC. This last option, however, runs the risk of appearing somewhat unwieldy.

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April 2015