

# scottish justice matters

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## POVERTY, INEQUALITY AND JUSTICE



# A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A ...

## “CIRCLES” VOLUNTEER



Image: Sacro

**Steph is a volunteer with Sacro's Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) service. The service assists in the monitoring and community re-integration of certain high risk individuals who commit sexual offences.**

**WHEN I TELL PEOPLE** that I work as a volunteer with sex offenders they think I'm mad. They usually say something like, "They should all be lined up and shot! How you can sit in the same room with them?" Yes, they have committed terrible offences but they want and need help to not reoffend. Helping them achieve this means I am helping make my community safer and that is something we should all take responsibility for.

When a circle begins we meet weekly, and depending on the needs of the core member (offender), a weekly phone call may also be arranged. Our circle meets every Monday evening. The circle members (volunteers) meet at the venue 15-30 minutes before the core member arrives to discuss any points from the previous week's meeting or anything that may have occurred during the week. We set a rough agenda highlighting areas of concern or actions to be completed. We get the room ready by creating a circle with the seating so that we face each other informally with no physical barriers. Each week we sit in a different seat so that no-one gets into the habit of sitting in the same place or next to the same person. This gives us the opportunity to observe how the core member interacts with each circle member, taking note of whom the core member chooses to sit by looking for any signs of manipulation or exclusion.

Once the core member arrives we grab a cuppa and asking how everyone's week has been and if anything noteworthy has taken place. Small talk dominates particularly in the early stages of a circle as trust is an issue and, we are all still getting to know one another without giving away too much personal information. It's not just that, we are also trying to bring an air of normality to the often chaotic and challenging life of the core member and so we can't be deep and meaningful all of the time.

Often, the core member can't believe that people are willing to spend their time with them. It's nice for them just talking to people who aren't acting in a professional

capacity. Somewhere in-between all of the small talk the core member may make a comment about something in relation to their offending behaviour. We will ask them to expand and question them about their thoughts, attitudes and behaviour patterns linked to an increased risk of them reoffending. Sometimes he is happy to share and a lengthy conversation will ensue. Other times they are reluctant to say anything further and we have to decide whether to leave the issue for another time or to press them a little harder.

Our role as CoSA volunteers involves supporting the core member with practicalities but also holding them accountable for their actions. For example, we may have to cancel a meeting and alert the circle co-ordinator that the core member has made a disclosure and arrived at a meeting under the influence of either drugs or alcohol. We help them to evaluate their choices in a safe and supportive environment. We explore their perceptions to help with less desirable beliefs and behaviour that are preventing them from achieving their goals.

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Regardless of what is discussed, the core member is aware that minutes are recorded and provided to MAPPA. Whoever is writing the minutes takes notes and at the end of each meeting (once the core member has left) we debrief for 20-30 minutes to make sure that all important points have been captured. It is important that our record is accurate as it can be used by other agencies as part of their monitoring. The minutes are typed and distributed via email to all circle members (except for the core member) and to the circle co-ordinator for approval no later than Friday of the same week.

As the core member's confidence grows they start to believe they have something to offer the community and they develop other pro-social relationships. We build a relationship of trust with the core member who in turn, allows us to hold them accountable; supporting them to maintain their treatment objectives and hopefully culminating in an offence-free life, long after the circle has ended with the crucial aim of no more victims.





# **CRIME, JUSTICE AND SOCIETY IN SCOTLAND**

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