



Ministry
of Justice

Evaluating Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) in England and Wales

**Justice Data Lab impact evaluation of proven reoffending
July 2026**

This document outlines a description of the intervention in the provider's own words and a response to the July 2026 evaluation of their intervention.

This wording is from the provider and does not reflect the views of the Justice Data Lab.

Circles UK in their own words

“Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) is a community-based intervention, overseen by Circles UK and delivered by its network of regional providers, working with people convicted of sexual offences after their release into the community.

Each Circle comprises a group of four to six trained volunteers, the 'inner circle', who, under the supervision of a Circle Coordinator, meet regularly with a single 'core member'. The Circle Coordinator additionally liaises with an 'outer circle' consisting of statutory agency members such as public protection officers and probation practitioners who have responsibility for managing/supervising the core member.

The model rests on two mutually reinforcing functions. The first is support: addressing the social isolation, emotional dysregulation and lack of prosocial networks that are well-established dynamic risk factors for sexual reoffending. The second is accountability: volunteers maintain regular, close contact that enables early recognition of risky behaviour, warning signs and non-compliance, and swift notification of the relevant authorities where necessary.

Referrals are typically made through statutory agencies, and many core members are among the more isolated and marginalised people leaving prison. The intervention is deliberately targeted at individuals who often struggle to sustain engagement with mainstream services. Circles typically run for twelve to eighteen months, and the changes the model seeks to bring about include: reductions in social isolation, the building of stable prosocial relationships and capacity for self-regulation. These changes are cumulative, developing over the duration of the Circle rather than at the point of enrolment.”

Response from Circles UK

“We want to express our appreciation to the Justice Data Lab team for undertaking this evaluation, which represents a substantial investment in understanding the impact of CoSA, and we acknowledge the team's engagement with the detailed questions submitted by Circles UK following publication.

It is important to state clearly what the evaluation found: for the main outcome measures over a five-year follow-up period, there was no statistically significant difference in either general or sexual reoffending between those who received CoSA support and the matched comparison group. We accept that these results do not demonstrate that CoSA reduces reoffending. We would equally note, as the report itself acknowledges, that a non-significant result does not demonstrate that it does not.

The report also contains secondary findings from the analysis of those who completed their Circle. Circle completers received significantly fewer custodial sentences overall, fewer custodial sentences for sexual reoffending, and were less likely to receive custody following a first sexual reoffence. Given the statistically significant differences in custodial sentencing outcomes, it is possible that the groups experienced different periods of time in the community and therefore different opportunities to reoffend. Without accounting for differential time at risk, the extent to which these differences may have influenced the reoffending comparisons remains unclear. Further analysis accounting for periods spent in custody would therefore be valuable in establishing a more accurate understanding of the findings.

These statistically significant secondary findings warrant further consideration, particularly in relation to offence severity, sentencing outcomes and their potential implications for public protection. Although they cannot, in isolation, establish that CoSA reduces the seriousness of subsequent offending, they raise important questions that warrant further investigation. Further examination of the nature and circumstances of these outcomes would help establish their significance for understanding CoSA's potential contribution.

We would ask readers of the report to hold several matters in mind:

- First, recidivism is measured from the start of the Circle. This captures the period during which the Circle's accountability function, close monitoring and early identification of risky behaviour, is most active. Where non-compliance is detected promptly by the inner circle and reported to the outer circle, this is CoSA operating as intended. Yet behaviour that is detected in a Circle may go undetected in its absence. Notably, when breaches of court orders are excluded from the measure, the sexual reoffending rate is 15.6% for the CoSA group and 13.5% for the comparison group. A difference that readers should consider alongside the headline figures.
- Second, the evaluation measured reoffending using the Sexual Risk Predictivity (SRP) list of offence codes, which is broader than the Home Office 'Sexual offences' category used in the Ministry of Justice's national statistics. Had the Home Office category been applied, the sexual reoffending rate would have been 7% for both groups. Readers comparing these findings with published national reoffending rates should be aware of this definitional difference.
- Third, the evaluation compares 533 CoSA participants with a very large comparison group of over 47,000 individuals, which, we believe, raises questions about the stated comparability between groups of such different sizes. We note in this regard that the report acknowledges that the effects of CoSA cannot be isolated from other interventions,

supervision or monitoring experienced by the comparison group, which we feel is in line with our other points.

- Fourth, we note that the average time to a first proven reoffence was 546 days for CoSA participants against 582 days for the comparison group. Although this difference was not statistically significant, its interpretation warrants consideration of CoSA's accountability function. Earlier identification, disclosure and reporting of concerning behaviour are integral to the intervention and may influence when offending comes to the attention of criminal justice agencies. While the evaluation cannot determine whether this mechanism contributed to the observed difference, it represents an important contextual consideration when interpreting time-to-reoffending outcomes.

Finally, it is also important to recognise that proven reoffending represents only one dimension of CoSA's intended outcomes. The intervention seeks to promote safe community reintegration through social support, accountability, meaningful relationships and opportunities for positive social participation. These factors are relevant to wider processes of rehabilitation and desistance but were not directly evaluated in this study. Consequently, the findings should not be interpreted as a comprehensive assessment of CoSA's effectiveness or its wider contribution to public protection and community reintegration for which there is ample national and international research evidence ([Evidence of Effectiveness – Circles UK.](#))

We welcome the contribution this evaluation makes to understanding CoSA and recognise the methodological challenges involved in evaluating complex interventions of this nature. We nevertheless believe that further analysis of the statistically significant sentencing outcomes, consideration of differential time at risk and monitoring effects, and evaluation of wider rehabilitation and reintegration outcomes would provide a more complete understanding of CoSA's contribution to public protection. We hope these findings will inform continued and future research evaluating the impact of CoSA.”

Further information

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