

# BEST PRACTICES IN COSA

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# 1 Best practices in COSA

## 1.1 Introduction

One of the objectives of Circles4EU was the collection of best practices in COSA implementation. This report on best practices is one of the deliverables in workstream 3 of the project Circles4EU.

In this project, COSA pilots were started in Latvia, Spain and Bulgaria, while project partners in the UK, The Netherlands and Belgium had already fully operational projects. As a new or an experienced COSA provider or facilitator, one has probably encountered situations that were different from standard COSA procedures or that needed a special solution. Maybe some of the solutions found are useful to address problems that occur also in other countries; or maybe they have raised questions, and one would like to get some opinions or advice from other project partners.

### Definition

Best practice can be defined as 'a policy or practice (method or technique) that has consistently shown to contribute to the mission of COSA in terms of organization / implementation, practice / circles operation, and program integrity / quality. This means the policy or practice leads to results that are either more consistent / reliable, more efficient or results superior to those achieved with other means'.

These best practices might provide a package of practical knowledge that can also be used by other countries working with COSA.

### Method

Initially it was intended to gain information through collecting best practices via a blog and to create an overview of the most relevant best practices related to COSA which could be discussed. As the project partners concluded later on, the blog did not attract enough attention and interest. Therefore all partners in participating countries, including all volunteers, were actively invited to share best practices by telling their stories to the researcher. Narratives were received from Catalonia, The Netherlands, Latvia and the UK. The researchers also used articles and research reports for this purpose.

For the collection of narratives via the blog and later via personal communications, a format was developed. The following guiding questions were asked:

1. What is the interesting issue you want to bring into discussion on the blog?
2. Why is that issue interesting?
3. What caused this issue?
4. Who is involved or plays a role concerning the issue you are bringing into discussion?
5. Where did it take place?
6. When did it happen?
7. How often does it take place?
8. What is the importance of the issue you are bringing into discussion?
9. What did you do about it?
10. What were specific challenging or supporting circumstances related to that issue?
11. How did that issue get concluded?
12. What was the effect of your solution?

Consequently, for more efficacy, these questions were reduced to the following four questions which will be used further while describing the stories:

- A. The issue** e.g.: What is the interesting issue you want to bring into discussion; Why is that issue interesting? What caused this issue?
- B. The context** e.g.: Who is involved or plays a role concerning the issue you are bringing into discussion? Where did it take place? When did it happen? How often does it take place?
- C. The solution** e.g.: What did you do about it? What were specific challenging or supporting circumstances related to that issue?
- D. The result** e.g.: How did that issue get concluded? What was the effect of your solution?

In the following chapters, best practices will be summarized by country, following this structure.

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## 2 Best practices in Catalonia

### 2.1 Case 1

- A. The issue: CM (core member) has sexual fantasies with one of the volunteers.
- B. The context: the psychologist in charge is informed by the CM about his fantasies. The psychologist decides to bring this information (gradually) into the circle to be discussed.
- C. The solution: Total openness within the circle, but gradually, transparency is built up. The CM decides himself about the moment of his disclosure.
- D. The result: The issue was discussed and consequently trust got stronger within the circle.

*There is an open communication among the circle members, which is essential to build a trusting relationship between the volunteers and the core member. This relationship already exists, the circle works as a team of 5 people. Although the circle deals with sensitive issues, volunteers try to make the core member feel comfortable enough to talk freely. Volunteers express their own point of view about any subject, without judging him. Thanks to the key role of the circle coordinator, the inner and the outer circle also communicate with each other. Thus one of the circles program key principles ('no secrets') is followed. The following situation is an example of this exchange of information:*

*The psychologist of the open prison in charge of the core member's treatment, informs the circle coordinator that the core member has some sexual fantasies with one of the volunteers from the circle. The two professionals wonder if it is appropriate to address this situation in the inner circle - this could entail a loss of the core member's confidence in his psychologist. Finally they decide to share it with the inner circle. They proceed in the following way:*

- *Meeting of the circle coordinator with the core member.*
- *Meeting of the circle coordinator with the concerned volunteer.*
- *Meeting of the circle coordinator with all volunteers (without the core member).*
- *Meeting of the inner circle.*

*The core member and the volunteers deal maturely with this situation. Volunteers help the core member to find strategies to channel his sexuality in an appropriate way. In contrast to what the circles organization expected, the circle emerges stronger from this and the core member expresses his need to keep involved in his psychological treatment. The core member also accepts the transparency principle and shows he is conscious of the possible effects of not following this principle.*

### 2.2 Case 2

- A. The issue: volunteer discloses the inmate condition of CM to a third person.
- B. The context: the disclosure of the inmate condition takes place on a day trip, when the volunteer in question meets an acquaintance to whom he talks (too much).

- C. The solution: 'no secrets'. The volunteer excuses himself to the CM and to the other volunteers.
- D. The result: CM accepts the apologies. Everyone is agreeing that CM should be the one that must make the step and take the decision to reveal information and the CM is the one to set his own pace in this process.

*The circle decides to take part in a social activity: to go on a full day excursion organized by a hiking association. Two volunteers and the core member go on this trip.*

*One of the volunteers comes across an acquaintance among the hiking group (a group of around 50 people). This person tells the volunteer that he is working in a non-profit organization committed in the social reintegration of people at risk of social exclusion. The conversation leads the volunteer to tell him that he is taking part in a support program of a person in the end of his prison sentence and that this inmate is going with them on the trip. They also talk about the possibility of getting in contact with that non-profit organization.*

*When the trip is finished, this volunteer talks with the other one. The latter tells him that in his opinion he should have not revealed the inmate condition of the core member to a third person if the core member was not aware of it.*

*Since another particular situation has taken place during the trip, the circle decides to meet without the core member to explain these two situations to the rest of the volunteers. The coordinator joins the meeting later.*

*They decide to address this situation by following the principles of 'no secrets' and transparency, so they call a meeting with the whole circle and the coordinator. In this second meeting, the volunteer explains the conversation that he kept with that acquaintance to the core member and apologizes to the volunteers and the core member for not respecting his privacy.*

*The core member approves the explanation. The coordinator uses this opportunity to remember the circle rules, especially those concerning the respect of privacy of the core member. The circle expresses that the core member must assume his condition as an ex-convict, since he might be identified as a person who spent some time in prison. However, he is the one that must make decisions and set his own pace in this process.*

### **2.3 Case 3**

- A. The issue: one volunteer does too little work.
- B. The context: one volunteer does too little work and after a few months leaves the circle completely. The rest of the volunteers have to frequently take over his work.
- C. The solution: the question which arises is: shall we look for another volunteer to replace the one or shall the circle be continued with four volunteers only?
- D. The result: after discussing the issue with all concerned, it was decided to continue the circle with four volunteers and thus not to include any other new volunteer in the already formed circle.

*One of the volunteers of the circle faces difficult personal and work situations. Due to this reason he must skip some circle meetings and the rest of the volunteers must assume a higher workload. Finally, this volunteer gets a new job which doesn't allow a proper involvement in the circle, so he decides to leave the project.*

*The coordinator evaluates the possibility of replacing him by another volunteer. However, he takes into account that the circle has already been running for four months and the inclusion of a new member at this stage could interfere with its good dynamics if he / she not adapts to it.*

*The coordinator sets out this question both to the CerclesCat organization team and to the circle volunteers and takes into account everyone's opinion. Volunteers also express their fears regarding the consequences of the inclusion of a new volunteer in the circle: they think this could interfere in a negative way in the relationship among them and with the core member. The final decision is to keep a circle with only four volunteers, assuming that it might imply a higher workload for them. This has entailed a greater sense of responsibility and a higher commitment in these four volunteers. Besides, this decision has been made in a participatory manner.*

## **2.4 Case 4**

- A. The issue: volunteers have different opinions in certain situations.
- B. The context: CM informs the circle coordinator about the fact that some volunteers have different opinions about the same issues. This makes it often problematic for the CM.
- C. The solution: a meeting of all concerned persons (without CM) was organized. With a mature attitude it was discussed how to avoid such situations in the future.
- D. The result: the circle became more aware of the situation and of its impact on the CM. Because the circle was in an advanced stage of development, it was possible to deal successfully with similar situations in the future.

*In an individual interview with the circle coordinator, the core member tells him that he feels that some volunteers are more demanding, while some others tend to defend him. When the coordinator meets each volunteer in the individual meetings, some of them also explain that in certain specific situations there is an opposition among the volunteers.*

*This situation is addressed in a meeting of the circle coordinator with all the volunteers without the core member. In this meeting, everyone shares his or her own feelings in each stage of the circle process and tells in what moment that disagreement started to be noticed. Each member of the circle explains the intentions that guided his or her acts. The whole group builds a shared point of view of the situation. With a mature attitude, each one assumes the own responsibility and the group discusses possible ways to prevent this from happening again.*

*Even if they were small conflicts, it was important to address this situation so that the core member did not feel that the group was divided and he could take benefit of it. This situation occurred because the circle was already in an advanced stage and the different traits and*

*methods of the several volunteers started to be noticed. When each member got conscious of his own weak points, everyone put attention to it in order to improve it.*

## **2.5 Case 5**

- A. The issue: CM owns inappropriate photos of 13-years-old child.
- B. The context: a volunteer sees the photos on the camera of the CM during a trip. She does not discuss it at that moment, but waits until she will be able to discuss it first with the other volunteers. Later on, the psychologist of CM is also informed over this, but the psychologist concludes that CM has no wrong associations related to the photos.
- C. The solution: CM saves a selection of the photos on his computer and deletes the rest from his camera.
- D. The result: through transparency and 'no secrets'-principle the situation was solved adequately for all involved.

*Two volunteers and the core member go on a full day excursion organized by a hiking association. The activity consists of a 20 km trek with other people who are not involved in the circle.*

*The core member carries his photo camera. In one of the stops made by the group during the trip, he shows the photos to a volunteer. Most of them are previous to his time in prison. The volunteer realizes that most of them are photos of the core member's 13-years-old niece posing. What attracts her attention most are two photos showing the niece holding a gun in a provocative pose. We must bear in mind that the crime committed by the core member was possession of child pornography through internet and that some of those images showed violent scenes with weapons aimed at naked minor girls.*

*At the moment when the volunteer sees those images, the core member is not attentive to the camera, so he does not realize that the volunteer has seen them. She decides not to talk with him about the photos at that moment.*

*When the trip is finished, the two volunteers exchange their own opinions about the activity. This volunteer tells what happened to the other one. Both of them think that the coordinator and the rest of the volunteers must know about it. When she writes the minute of the activity, she does not get into detail. However, since another important fact happened during the trip, they agree to call the coordinator the next day to talk about the two situations.*

*The next week the coordinator and the volunteers meet without the core member in order to talk about that situation, among other subjects. The coordinator asks for more details from the photos seen by the volunteer. They agree that this volunteer has to talk about the photos at the next meeting with the core member. They also agree that she must express the circle's concern about the fact that he has so many photos of his niece at his disposal and about the photos with the gun. All this should be done in order to know the context in which those photos were taken, among other objectives.*

*After this meeting, the circle coordinator prepares some guidelines for the next one. He sends them to the circle volunteers. Three days before the meeting with the core member, the coordinator calls that volunteer, to know more deeply how the moment was when the core member showed her those photos. He also asks her why the core member showed the photos*



*only to her. Finally, he asks her to tell him any other aspect that she might consider important in order to take it into account at the meeting with the core member.*

*In that meeting the circle follows the guidelines prepared by the coordinator. The volunteer in question expresses to the core member her concern for seeing so many photos of his niece, especially those with the gun. The volunteers ask him why he keeps them in the camera. The coordinator explains to him that this is a risk factor, which can boost the same desire or the same impulse of the crime he committed. The core member does not think it is important and he is reluctant to delete them or to move them away from the camera. All the volunteers express their own opinion and the whole group discusses it for a long time. After that, the volunteers ask the core member to tell them what he is going to do with the photos, whatever his final decision might be. The coordinator suggest to the core member to talk about this with his psychologist and his social worker, in order to address it more deeply.*

*In the next interview with his psychologist, the core member tells her what happened with the photos. He admits that he felt annoyed because the volunteer talked about the photos in the meeting while she had said nothing to him during the trip. The psychologist does not detect any deviant fantasies related neither to the photos nor to his niece. She encourages the core member to tell his feelings at the circle meeting.*

*In the next meeting with the volunteers, the core member talks about his previous interview with his psychologist. The volunteer explains that the trip was not the proper context to address the subject. The core member tells the volunteers that he made a selection of the photos, saved them in his PC and deleted all the photos from the camera.*

*During his treatment sexuality and fantasies were addressed, both when he was in an open prison as well as now that he is under parole. Nothing has so far attracted the attention of professionals. Within the circle meetings no deviant fantasies have been detected either.*

## **2.6 Case 6**

- A. The issue: CM goes within prison to another cellblock where are convicted of all types of crime (while before he was only within a group of sex offenders).
- B. The context: CM consequently wants to slow down the process within the circle, because of his new location which was associated with much stress for him.
- C. The solution: the inner and outer circle decide to accept the request of the CM to slow down the circle process.
- D. The result: CM gets more confident and develops more trusts in the circle.

*In Catalonia, circles start with core members who are in an open prison regime. At some point, the prison status of the core member changes. His penitentiary lifestyle must change according to his treatment. He is transferred from a cellblock where there are only inmates who committed sexual crimes, to one with inmates who committed different types of crime in an open prison.*

*The core member faces this new situation with fear and anxiety. This made him feel stressed about the demands of the circles program and he asked to slow down the rhythm in the*

*programming and the activities. The volunteers appreciate the fact that he expresses it and they listen to him. They invite the core member to freely express his feelings, even if they do not assume a totally passive role.*

*In the next meeting, the volunteers ask the core member again to express how he is feeling, trying to get back progressively to the circles normal rhythm.*

*In this case it was very important to adapt the circle rhythm to the needs of the core member. His state of anxiety caused by his new prison situation would have prevented to work properly at the circle objectives. Besides, this adaptation helped to increase the confidence of the core member in the circle.*

## **2.7 Case 7**

- A. The issue: recruiting volunteers for circles.
- B. The context: COSA is not largely known and the issue is sensible to the public.
- C. The solution: organizing a lunch for journalists where COSA was presented.
- D. The result: many people were interested in working as volunteer for COSA.

*Recruitment of volunteers was successful through media strategy: They organized a working lunch with 30 journalists, the project manager and some volunteers. This generated a lot of good media coverage. Supervision and coaching structure for pilot circles was developed through a secured e-mail account. While in the beginning the recruitment of volunteers was problematic, after the working lunch with the journalists the 'good news' spread around and this resulted in a lot of interest for this issue from the large public.*

## 3 Best Practices in The Netherlands

### 3.1 Case 1

- A. The issue: inappropriate behaviour of a volunteer.
- B. The context: a certain volunteer drew too much attention to himself, his own life story and that was distracting the work of everyone involved and undermined the group process.
- C. The solution: the volunteer was approached by the circle coordinator and had to leave the circle as soon as possible, before he would possibly harm the process of the circle even more.
- D. The result: the volunteer in question left the circle and soon the circle dynamics improved, towards the way COSA is meant to be.

*In one of the Dutch circles, a situation arrived where one of the volunteers had a strong and dominating influence on the circle and showed inappropriate behaviour.*

*In 2010 Alan registered for circles. He would like to lead a life without (sex) offending and learn how to develop social skills in society. The hobbies that he has been focused on were individual acts: watching television, doing some carpentry at home, gaming and cars. He hopes to make contact with people who have the same interest as he has.*

*The circle appears in the first period, especially 'guided' by volunteer John. John is a former prison guard and manages to convince the other circle members that he knows a lot of this kind of business, more than the circle coordinator does.*

*John demands a lot of attention by showing a whole series of his private photo collection during the circle meetings. He convinced other volunteers that he can convince the court of the innocence of Alan.*

*Because the circle coordinator received circle minutes weekly, an undefined feeling started to grow. Next week the circle coordinator decided to join the circle without any announcement. The circle members were told that 'as usual' the circle coordinator came to join and experience the atmosphere during the meeting.*

*That evening John also showed family pictures of a holiday in Greece. Life-size pictures were shown on the screen of the projector from the community center. At that meeting the circle coordinator discovered the unacceptable behaviour of John. No one was interested in his pictures, but John enforced every one to watch them. No one was capable to stop John's behaviour. Volunteers see themselves as equal. Where they learn to hold the core member accountable for his behaviour it is not that obvious that they hold each other accountable for unacceptable behaviour.*

*The week after the meeting, the circle coordinator spoke with each individual member of the circle (volunteers as well as the core member). During this individual face-to-face conversation all sort of information of the circle process and contribution of the individuals is mined. None of the volunteers seemed to be able to discuss with each other about personal boundaries. From these so-called hidden agendas, the circle coordinator took the different stories as a whole and discussed the outcomes during the next circle meeting. The goal of the*

*circle coordinator was to remove John out of this group. His contribution lacked respect when it comes to the Code of the circles project. The circle coordinator hesitated because it was her first time such an action had to take place.*

*The decisive factor was a call from the core member in which he explained the circle coordinator John showed no interest in him, but only enriched himself. This stagnated the process of Alan who was planning to discuss his life events for the first time ever. Because Alan lacked social skills he did not know how he could get the attention of the volunteers. He silently listened to John with the others, but he wished to talk about his offending and the shame he has to live with.*

*Under the impression that the circle members were listening to John out of interest, no one discussed the attention he had got. After the 'private conversation' with the circle coordinator it was proved that everyone listened to John out of politeness.*

*From then on, the group discovers that it's nice to discuss and identify problems and considerations with the circle coordinator.*

*Meanwhile John attempted to shut the information out of the scope from the circle coordinator. This behaviour and the earlier call from the core member made the self-confidence of the circle coordinator grow. There was no doubt: John had to leave the circle immediately before he could harm the whole circle process.*

*Because of the belief in the fact that people can change and learn from their own situation, the circle coordinator asked John what he learned out of it and what he wished in the future. The only thing he was clear about: he thanked and assured not to change anything and that he was a lucky man to have some real friends.*

*After John left the circle all circle members desired peace in the group process. In consultation with the whole group the circle coordinator decided to take a month timeout for the group. The core member took this time for a two weeks holiday with his sister and her children. The volunteers took time to consider what they learned from of this situation.*

*Meanwhile the circle coordinator was looking at the request of the other circle members: to recruit a new volunteer.*

*A month later Alan, back from vacation, revealed that he missed the circle meetings and he was relieved that the circle coordinator was capable to expel John from the circle. Meanwhile everybody was present for the meeting with the new volunteer Conrad. Conrad, a few years older than Alan, soon created a new positive dynamic in the group process. Alan tells about his experiences in the treatment and soon this will become a standard topic during weekly group meetings.*

## **3.2 Case 2**

- A. The issue: no venue available for circle meetings.
- B. The context: some conflicts with the owner of the place where the circle meetings were hold led to the situation that the meeting of the circle took place at the home of a volunteer.
- C. The solution: the circle coordinator agreed on that, but asked every volunteer to guard his or her own boundaries. No one should feel obliged to make the same gesture to the

CM, because of the fact that another volunteer did so. So the message was: "watch your own boundaries".

- D. The result: the circle continued in a proper way and the CM had - as maybe expected - a warmer contact to the certain volunteer whose house was used for the circle meetings.

*This circle met in a community center. As time progressed, a disagreement with the manager of the community center appeared. Several times, under the influence of alcohol, the manager appeared too late to open the door of the community center. In winter time circle members wanted to make a statement and discussed the problem directly with the manager. There was a discussion (shouting) on the street while the circle coordinator by chance arrived at the circle meeting. The circle coordinator asked the circle members to leave and go to a motel lobby nearby. Meanwhile the circle coordinator tried to reason with the manager. After a few minutes he calmed down a bit but he did not want to meet the circle members ever again in his life.*

*From then on there was no venue available for circle meetings. Until a few weeks later when the group decided to meet each other at the home of one of the volunteers. The circle coordinator did not know how to properly handle this wonderful initiative. Considerations were made: does the volunteer have younger children in the house? Is someone in the surrounding of the volunteer (indirectly) endangered by the presence of the core member at the volunteer's home? Do other volunteers agree with the venue? Is the likelihood of recidivism present? What is the opinion of the forensic therapist? Will the volunteer be safe as the core member knows where she resides? Does the volunteer guard her own boundaries? What does this 'gesture' mean for the core member?*

*At some moment all questions could be answered positively and there were no foreseeable problems to expect. The circle coordinator (with consent from colleagues, therapist, probation officer, volunteers and core member) agreed to hold meetings at the home of the particular volunteer. The other volunteers were told that they would not be hold accountable if they would not make the same gesture to the core member. The message for other circle members is: stick to your own needs, your own feelings and your own boundaries. Do not feel obliged to make the same gesture because of the fact that any one of your own circle does. Guard your boundaries.*

*In the following period the group (at the duration of one and a half year) came weekly to the home of the volunteer. Weekly experiences of the week were shared and Alan soon became a full member of the group. There was an equal and reciprocal relationship.*

### **3.3 Case 3**

- A. The issue: restoring the relationship with the victim seems not possible.
- B. The context: CM is an adult who has sexually abused his own son. Since his offence he has no contact with his family anymore. He lives in isolation and the volunteers would like to reduce his social isolation and reconcile him with his family.
- C. The solution: as time passes, a brother of the CM organizes a family party in order to re-establish some contact with everyone within the family.

- D. The result: the ex-wife of the CM wants no contact whatsoever with the father of her son.

*The core member is a 52-year-old divorced man who is convicted for possession of child pornography and sexual abuse of his son. The contacts he has, consist of contact with his son while he visits his parents. His brothers and sisters do not want any contact with him. Beside the contact with his parents and having colleagues at work, the core member lives isolated. To minimize this isolated life, the core member meets his circle of four volunteers on a weekly base.*

*The core member - and also his parents - wishes restoration of ties in his family life, and to meet his brothers and sisters again. He wishes that they can celebrate birthdays or other family celebrations like Christmas together again. The core member tells the circle coordinator which family members are able to listen and can mediate between members of the family. Initially he calls his parents and/or elder sister. The circle coordinator met the parents of the core member. They still feel, years after the conviction of their son, powerless in this whole situation. In a frank manner they are telling their story 'for the first time'. They tell about their experiences with their son and how the separation grew within their family. "The family will never be complete.", they told the circle coordinator their greatest wish. Understanding within the family would be enough in their opinion. The other family members appear to have young children and therefore it was impossible for them to interact with the core member. The desire of the core member, and his parents, did not seem to be fulfilled. The preparatory talks, however, have led to conversation with other family members because the parents brought their conversation with the circle coordinator to their attention. A relative insisted to celebrate a family anniversary in the presence of all family members, including the core member. During the party, some family members came to talk with the core member, while others avoided his presence. It was an opportunity to restore family contact. Result: the oldest sister considered to restore contact with her brother, but eventually did decide not to, because she has little children of her own. An older brother invited the core member to a dinner party at his home. The parents, who have frequent contact with the ex-wife of their son, requested the circle coordinator also to make contact with her. She let the circle coordinator know that she did not want to have to do anything anymore with the core member, nor with agencies which are concerned with his rehabilitation process.*

### **3.4 Case 4**

- A. The issue: CM lives in isolation from his family.
- B. The context: CM is still in prison when a niece of him takes the initiative to restore contact with him.
- C. The solution: after some time the whole family gradually reconsiders contact to the CM.
- D. The result: in the end even a vacation was planned with the whole family including the CM.

*The core member is a 42-year-old single man who was convicted of making and distributing child pornography. The contact with his family was neglected and he lived socially isolated. Waiting for his detention order to be effected, he met his circle of volunteers. During his detention, a niece appeared. She offered to take care of the core members business while he was in prison. This contact created a conversation between the family and the circle coordinator. Other family members were indirectly informed of recent (positive) developments. Meantime the family gets more involved in the positively changing life of the core member. This results in a joined meeting of family and circle volunteers. Meanwhile, the core member took initiative to have frequent contact with his family. They even planned a joint vacation. The family members expressed warm feelings for the circle volunteers. They indicated that the core member for example, never would have managed to bring a gift to the family if the circle volunteers had not guided the core member and supported him with such little things in life.*

### **3.5 Case 5**

- A. The issue: CM makes photos of children on the beach.
- B. The context: consequently, volunteers confront the CM with regard to accountability and responsibility. CM asks volunteers not to discuss it with the parole officers (outer circle).
- C. The solution: the CM discusses the case with his psychologist. The volunteers keep the agreement they made with the CM and do not discuss the case with the parole officer. Because - according to COSA – the CM decides himself the moment of his disclosure.
- D. The result: this trust which the CM received from the volunteers created a stronger circle and increased the chances of a final good result of the circle.

*A core member (in 2009 convicted for making child pornography and abusing several children and started in a circle early 2014) showed some pictures to the volunteers. A couple of days before, he took a walk on the beach and made some pictures of young children on the beach playing with sand. The volunteers said that in their opinion he had to stop making pictures of children. Even after he said that these pictures were not made for sexual arousal, but to pick up his hobby of photography.*

*One of the volunteers said that she would not allow a strange man taking pictures of her children on the beach. "What if someone recognized you?". Another volunteer did not believe the innocence of those pictures and commanded the core member to talk about this whole situation with his forensic expert. At that moment they held their core member accountable: he had to communicate this with one of the members in the outer circle.*

*The core member was shocked. He did not realize that his action could harm anyone. Being confronted with the opinion of his volunteers, he decided to take responsibility and discussed this action and confrontation with his forensic expert. The forensic expert decided to pay attention to his relapse prevention plan again.*

*The circle coordinator saw the pictures and held the core member also accountable by saying that he had to reveal this kind of information with his professionals (therapist and probation officer). In the opinion of the circle coordinator he is showing accountability when he reveals this kind of information himself.*

*In the opinion of the forensic expert the information had to be shared. Without any consultation, the forensic expert revealed the information to the probation officer. When he asked the circle coordinator if she knew, she let him know that at first it is the responsibility of the core member to reveal this kind of information so that he learned to take responsibility. She asked the probation officer what is important: the fact that you know or the moment you know. (Because the circle coordinator believed that in time the core member would have revealed the same information towards his probation officer.) A dilemma arose, because the core member trusted his volunteers and circle coordinator. The volunteers felt responsible when they heard of the fact that the core member did not reveal the information directly to his probation officer. The core member told them not to, because he chose to make the pictures and it was his own responsibility to reveal the information towards his professionals. He thanked the volunteers for being so open, honest and holding him accountable.*

### **3.6 Case 6**

- A. The issue: can a circle operate when the core member is in prison?
- B. The context: a person who was not yet finally convicted had to wait almost one year for the final decision of the high court. Several questions have risen about how to support and how to approach him during this time, until his final verdict has been given.
- C. The solution: during the time of waiting for his sentence, the person was selected as a core member and a circle was formed around him. Later on when he was convicted to prison for nine months, the circle continued as well, but with some specific difficulties.
- D. The result: the circle stayed in place during his imprisonment and had an important role in supporting him while in prison and during his reintegration phase. So, circles can be started, even if a core member is not yet convicted. But specific problems can arise from it and need to be dealt with effectively (group dynamics; volunteer anonymity).

*The issue has taken place in The Netherlands, in one of the first Dutch COSA circles. It took place in the year of 2011 and 2012. One of the core members had been convicted for sexual abuse of minors, but had fought this court decision and was allowed to wait for his next and final court session at his home, with supervision from probation and the obligation to start sex offender treatment. Apart from him not having been sentenced, he met all selection criteria, and the circle coordinator asked permission to start a circle with him, which was allowed as an experiment, to evaluate two questions:*

- *Does it make sense to start a circle, when the core member possibly will be imprisoned at some time?*
- *How can a circle operate during his imprisonment (if necessary) and how can the circle support his reintegration?*

*He got a circle, started as a core member and was very motivated. While being in his circle, he had to wait for his higher appeal for more than a year, and when his case eventually was presented, he was sentenced to nine months imprisonment. The circle stayed in place during his time in prison and supported him, especially when he was allowed to reintegrate. But there were several problems to deal with:*



- *How can the circle visit him in prison, without other inmates finding out about the nature of his offence (since COSA is always associated with sex offenders)? His life in prison would become much harder if other inmates knew about his offence.*
- *How can volunteers visit him in prison, without having to tell their family names to the officials, thus giving away their anonymity as COSA volunteers?*

*In this case, the core member did not meet all selection criteria, because he had not been definitely sentenced yet when his circle started. But since he was allowed to live in his own city, with his former victims living nearby and almost no social network to support or control him, COSA was seen as a unique chance to support him and reduce risk. In fact, this issue is caused by slow court processes in The Netherlands, which means that sex offenders with low to medium risk of reoffending are not imprisoned while waiting for their final sentence. It can take up to two years between being arrested and being sentenced, which causes a lot of stress because of the uncertainty about the future, and this can increase risk. For sex offenders with medium risk of reoffending, this happens quite often. If COSA can start when core members are waiting for trial, the community can be protected at an earlier stage. Also, the circle can become involved in the reintegration planning.*

*The issue involved the circle coordinator, the outer circle, consisting of the core members' probation officer, his therapist and the local police officer, the director of the prison and other prison staff. The circle coordinator dealt with this problem in three phases: before imprisonment, during imprisonment and in the reintegration phase. Before imprisonment, all volunteers were informed about the prison system; what it means to be imprisoned and what this means for your own privacy. Some volunteers had no idea or hesitated because of personal boundaries or experiences. They all were given ample chance to decide for themselves if they wanted to be involved or not. The circle supported the core member in his actions to make arrangements for work, housing etc., during his imprisonment.*

*The circle coordinator repeatedly talked to the prison director and prison officials about what COSA is and what volunteers can do to support the core member. The circle coordinator also stressed the importance of anonymity for volunteers, and that some volunteers did not want their full name become known to the core member. This means that only their given name is put on the visitors list, which is used by prison officials to manage visitors. The circle coordinator very frequently discussed these issues with his colleague and with the outer circle. Finally, all arrangements could be made to guarantee volunteer anonymity. When the core member was in prison, the circle visited him regularly. They felt that the circle could exercise the basic functions even in the prison, because the core member needed support to 'survive' in prison; and was stimulated to make plans and take action towards his reintegration phase (in an open prison regime) and life after imprisonment. After some of these prison visits, the circle coordinator checked with the volunteers if they felt ok with the procedure and wanted to continue.*

*During the reintegration phase, when the core member was allowed to go on weekend leave, the circle visited him at his home during the weekends, which was very much appreciated by the core member. They helped him to prepare his open prison regime, by supporting him when he needed to find a job, which was a condition to be placed in the open prison regime. These visits and plans were discussed within the outer circle and with the prison officials. For the prison administration, COSA was able to give extra information about the core members'*

*life outside prison, which supported their decisions regarding allowing leave and open prison regime.*

*In the beginning, the core member and his circle didn't get along very well. The core member felt overwhelmed by some more dominant volunteers, and volunteers felt the core member was not completely open and responsive to their advice. Also, since the core member was waiting for his court decision, the circle felt this was a barrier to develop targets to work on, which hindered the group process. Another issue was the fact that the core member was afraid of community reactions and reaction by other prisoners, and he tended to panic and isolate himself.*

*The circle coordinator offered more than usual group coaching and planned evaluation sessions with the circle. Finally, the circle was asked to concentrate on preparing life in prison. His tendency to isolate himself and to build up stress was targeted by supporting him in thinking about and planning necessary precautions, but also asking/stimulating him to solve problems actively. The circle stayed in place during his imprisonment and had an important role in supporting him while he was in prison and during his reintegration phase. The prison administration now is very much pro-COSA, realizing that they have common goals (safe reintegration, no recidivism) and that COSA can support reintegration planning. The difficult group dynamic could be changed into a positive, supportive group, by discussing issues openly. Also the fact that volunteers were willing to support him while in prison, improved the core members' responsiveness.*

*The conclusion is that circles can be started, even if a core member is not yet convicted. But specific problems can arise from it and need to be dealt with effectively (group dynamics; volunteer anonymity). A circle can play an important role in preparing the core member for a period of detention, helping him to 'survive' detention and supporting his process of change – even while in prison – and by supporting reintegration planning and offering additional monitoring in the core members own living circumstances.*

### **3.7 Case 7**

- A. The issue: media approach in a high profile case.
- B. The context: too much media attention on in a high profile case of a sex offender threatens to interfere with his reintegration process and negatively influences this process.
- C. The solution: the volunteers and professionals kept media politely on a distance by giving general answers and following one line in the media communication.
- D. The result: the circle develops relatively normal. This is still going on.

*A swimming trainer and owner of a swimming school for children was convicted in 2010 to 10 years of prison for the sexual abuse of 57 young girls. The officer of justice concluded at his sentence: "His aim was not to teach kids how to swim, but to abuse them. Having a school for swimming was the perfect camouflage for it". The sex offender was convicted on the basis of video pictures, made by himself . According to the officer of justice, he was a clear danger for society and had a high risk of recidivating. The case is especially interesting*

*because it attracted a lot of publicity; it was discussed in newspapers, on TV shows, it was becoming a media issue.*

*The enormous media impact was even more problematic when the sex offender was released on probation after 4 years of prison. When it was publicly known that he was going to live in the city of Leiden, there were demonstrations and the community of the city of Leiden was very alert at once. The mayor of Leiden had to publicly explain his decision of permitting this person to live in his town. This media hype was neither good for the worried parents in the town nor for the reintegration of the person in question. The mayor reacted publicly in repeated ways and said that he should not be send away as the protesting mob was demanding, but should be accepted and helped to rehabilitate. The person in question was not allowed to engage in discussions with children and also he had to register at the Probation Service if he wanted to drive his motorcycle outside the city of Leiden.*

*The Dutch Probation Service built a COSA circle around him (from the beginning of March 2014) immediately after his release. The media was since then given as little information as possible and the message to the public was: everything is under control. The municipality of Leiden also supported the decision of the mayor to let this person live in the city of Leiden and they publicly explained their decision by discussing their inclusive views on offender rehabilitation.*

*The result is that the media lost their interest. The case is now still going on, but at the moment one hears little about it in the media. There were rumours that this person had moved to Germany, but The Dutch Probation Service did not confirm nor denounce this news. So, not reacting to the 'provocation' of the mass media is maybe a solution to media hypes.*

### **3.8 Case 8**

- A. The issue: core member diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).
- B. The context: how do circles work in such a case?
- C. The solution: division of tasks within the circle.
- D. The result: the circle adapts and functions according to the specific needs of the core member.

*Charles was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The first thing the forensic expert asked when she heard the circle coordinator wanted to start a circle for Charles was: "How on earth are you going to manage the communication with Charles and a whole group of volunteers?"*

*The circle coordinator did not have an answer to that. Loving challenges and customization, a circle was started with an open mind and Charles was asked to teach the circle coordinator what does and what does not work for him.*

*After two highly structured circle meetings with Charles and his four volunteers, everybody recognized that it was too difficult for Charles to process new information and new impressions. Despite the fact that everyone spoke at his own turn, did not change the subject and silently waited for Charles' answers and comments, it did not work to their satisfaction. Charles wanted to know what the volunteers can do for him. He had a relapse prevention plan, but did not know how to use this during the week. His intelligence apparently is enough to arrange housing and health insurance. But during his actions to reach his goals, he got entangled in the rules of the Dutch government. He studied the details of the legislation and*

*gradually became frustrated. He wanted to know what the value of the volunteers could be. How should he trust volunteers when professionals show that they are not trustworthy? To make this as concrete as possible for him, the group divided Charles' list of wishes and actions into smaller tasks. Now, one volunteer has the time and experience to guide the arrangements around housing. Another volunteer guides Charles during conversation with agencies, and another volunteer has a weekly hiking activity with Charles. Each volunteer has his / her own role and responsibility in the circle. To keep in touch with each other, each volunteer makes notes and shares them with the other circle volunteers and circle coordinator. Additionally, the volunteers and Charles meet on a monthly basis to allocate new tasks and activities. Also, the group can evaluate and exchange their experiences over the last month. Charles can indicate what did and what did not work for him.*

## 4 Best Practices UK

### 4.1 Case 1

- A. The issue: how to deal with the press.
- B. The context: journalists of tabloid media might have the tendency to create sensations by focusing attention on spectacular, not necessarily positive, details or incidental events related to COSA.
- C. The solution: have a 'marketing brand statement' already prepared.
- D. The result: use the advantages of publicity, i.e. reaching a much wider, more diverse audience to spread your own information. The media plays an important role in volunteer recruitment and gives certain 'credibility' through media 'expert' status (if something has been said in the media, that gives much credibility in front of the public).

*The press might be sometimes perceived like a 'Trojan Horse', an effect which could be caused by false interpretation or false representation, statistical errors and distortions, much wasted time and the demand in fashion "we want it in 5 minutes". Press sometimes exercise pressure on volunteers and interrupt them from the day job.*

*Journalists of tabloid media have the tendency to create sensations by focusing attention on spectacular, not necessarily positive details or incidental events related to COSA.*

*COSA volunteers can have a 'marketing brand statement' already prepared. For example, in the UK this is an often used sentence: "Circles build safer communities through local volunteers working with sex offenders to minimize alienation, support reintegration and to prevent sexual reoffending".*

*Other operational tools which might be of help in dealing with media are:*

- *A Media Protocol – what / who / when / how / communications and adult trail / risks and mitigation;*
- *Media expertise at hand, within the project or partner agency;*
- *Press Statements ready for the unexpected – be prepared to acknowledge errors and point to actions being taken;*
- *Never comment or give information on individual circumstances;*
- *Develop good relationships with friendly and sympathetic journalists;*
- *Provide training for one or two confident and eloquent volunteers and circles staff on managing media interviews;*
- *Have a fact sheet available as to statistics of circles research and some core member (much anonymized) stories and quotations;*
- *Have a standard strapline which everyone must use in order to convey a key message to the media;*
- *Use publicity safe information, avoid possible wrong interpretations.*

*The result: one might use the advantages of publicity, i.e. reaching a much wider, more diverse audience to spread information about COSA. The media play surely an important role in volunteer recruitment and also gives certain 'credibility' through media 'expert' status (if*

*something has been said in the media, that gives credibility on that issue in front of the public).*

## **4.2 Case 2**

- A. The issue: a sex offender with learning disabilities.
- B. The context: an illustrative story on how the circles work in case of a high risk sex offender with 'learning disability'.
- C. The solution: through perseverance of the circle, through commitment of the volunteers especially, the life of the core member was continuously put on the right way, even after struggles and light recidivating.
- D. The result: the condition of the core member improved substantially over the years: his personal hygiene improved, a part time employment was secured, finding appropriate accommodation and developing new interests.

*Peter had a long history of sexually abusing children, including offences of child abduction and rape. He was due to be released from prison having served a custodial sentence for the breach of a Sex Offender Order. Such was the authorities concern over the risk he would pose upon his release that the Home Office had been directly involved in his release plan. Peter had, of his own volition, agreed to reside at a local Probation Hostel and be electronically tagged. Peter had never had any treatment, remained in partial denial about much of his offending and his desire to desist from further offending appeared questionable. The similarity was not lost on the Project's staff that Peter, like Charlie had the same offending profile, had a learning disability and upon release neither was subject to any statutory supervision. The risk that Peter posed was considered so serious that a previous psychologist's report had expressed the fear that future offending could lead to the death of a child. Once again an ominous sense of foreboding descended over the Project, but in truth the expectations of both the Home Office and local statutory agencies was justified. As with Charlie eight years previously, without a system of support and monitoring, Peter's release back into the community was not favourable, neither for Peter nor the community.*

*It is important to recognise that the British system, unlike Canada, was able to coordinate a multi-agency post release plan on an offender not subject to any statutory supervision. Peter continued to be bound by the terms of his Sex Offender Order and was required to register as a sex offender, but his agreement to be accommodated at a Probation Hostel and be electronically tagged was voluntary. Approved Probation Hostel premises specialise in the housing and management of offenders who present a high risk of harm to the public. The circles project was fortunate to have the support of the hostel's management and staff in ensuring the success of this circle. It also helped to develop a 'through the gate' model of practice. This allowed circle volunteers to develop a relationship with the offender while the offender was still subject to the boundaries and control of institutional premises. Such a model facilitates a seamless transfer from incarceration to a community of care which can provide intense support and monitoring.*

*Given the very high risk status of Peter it was important that this circle was as robust as possible and the circle worked tirelessly in helping to facilitate access to employment while supporting his move from the Probation Hostel into independent accommodation. After a year of working with Peter, the circle of volunteers was observing significant changes in his self-*

*esteem, confidence and personal hygiene. He had begun to talk to the volunteers about his past offending, acknowledging issues that he had previously denied. However, with the growth of Peter's confidence came complacency. The circle began to detect renewed manipulation and deviant behaviour, replicating some of the issues evident in his past offending behaviour. Further problems came to light when circle volunteers discovered that Peter had begun to groom young girls living nearby. He was recalled immediately to the Probation Hostel while the police carried out further investigations. He was once again in breach of his Sex Offender Order and faced a further charge of grooming under the newly implemented Sexual Offences Act 2003. Upon sentence the court concluded that the circle had prevented a serious further offence taking place and sentenced Peter to a three year Community Sentence Order with a condition of residence back at the Probation Hostel. Nevertheless, COSA has provided a valuable resource in working with some of the hostel's highest risk offenders. The circles had supported and enhanced the risk management process of resident sex offenders by developing a supportive relationship. Even the staff at the hostel had been so impressed by the work of circles that two of them had undertaken circle's training and had themselves become volunteers.*

*(Taken from – 'A Community Based Approach to the Reduction of Sexual Reoffending', Hanvey et al published by Jessica Kingsley, 2011- pages 25–27).*

*Peter had previous convictions for sexual assault on both pre-pubescent male and female children as well as an offence for abduction of a child. Peter was border line 'learning disabled' and initially struggled with the basics of independent living. He had been and continued to be, subject to a Sex Offender Prevention Order and his last prison sentence had been for breach of that order. Although initially suspicious of his circle he grew to trust the volunteers and became grateful for their support and guidance. However throughout the first year of the circle, the volunteers were aware that what Peter would say and what he would do, were very different and that he constantly was looking for opportunities to groom situations, people and children. The task and objective of this circle became heavily weighted in relation to public and child protection. Intervention by Peter's circle prevented a number of offences, one of which led to a further prosecution of grooming and resulted in a 3 year community sentence, the judge stated he gave such a sentence because of the excellent work that was being done by the volunteers in protecting the community. Eight years later Peter remained in a circle and over that time a number of his volunteers had changed. Some had left and then returned, while others moved on to other circles. The task of volunteering and working directly with Peter in his circle was a difficult and onerous one although over the years. Thanks to his volunteers much had improved in Peter's life. His personal hygiene improved, the circle supported him in securing part time employment, finding appropriate accommodation and developing new interests, all of which contributed to mitigating his risk. (Taken from the Circles UK National Coordinators Training Induction Pack 2013, 'Understanding How Circles Work', page 11).*

### **4.3**

#### **Case 3**

- A. The issue: long term monitoring of the core member by the volunteers.
- B. The context: a story of how long term monitoring of the core member is at its best if done by volunteers.

- C. The solution: by permanently keeping in touch with the former core member even after the circle was officially closed, the volunteers concretely prevented the core member from recidivating.
- D. The result: the relationship between volunteers and core member is having the most chance of a positive effect on the behaviour of the core member, just because this relationship is based on idealism and humanity and not because it has to be in a professional way.

*After a period of time when license conditions etc. have expired and all statutory contact has ceased, there are examples where it is the circle volunteers who are the only people who know the antecedent history and the previous modus operandi of the offender. It is the volunteers, who will recognize when, perhaps years later, through their continued and often informal contact, are able to see that the dynamic and contextual risk of the core member has changed or is changing. An example of this is demonstrated in the case of a core member known as John. John was released from prison having served ten years in prison for the rape and indecent assault of two children. He was released into a Probation Hostel where he was introduced to his circle. His circle lasted for a number of years. The circle had been successful in its objective of facilitating a positive and productive role for John within his community. Having helped him secure permanent accommodation, he engaged in both adult education courses and voluntary work with the latter eventually leading to employment. He made his own network of friends and the circle was formally closed. As time passed there was no further statutory involvement, with the need for registration and supervision having elapsed. The only people seeing him and aware of any issues related to risk were the volunteers from his circle. Three years after the circle had formally closed the Circles Project received a call from one of John's volunteers informing them that John had begun a relationship with a woman who had young grandchildren. The police were also informed and the circle was formally reinstated with active professional supervision from the circle coordinator. This allowed both the police and the circle to work with John initially on the specific issue of disclosure and then subsequent joint protective work was undertaken with both John and his new partner. Such work and intervention by circle volunteers gives real meaning to the statement, monitoring becomes a positive and community based activity.*

*While circle volunteers are not therapists and the circle is not a therapy group, some elements of the 'therapeutic alliance' do certainly exist within a circle. According to the reports, it seems, that for John the most significant thing he has gained from the relationship has been the fact that this 'therapeutic alliance' is based upon honesty. John doesn't have to hide what he has done or lie about it. The friendship between core member and volunteer is based upon this openness. The use of volunteers within circles seems crucial. As volunteers are not paid and not involved because they have to be, but because they choose to be. This changes the context of the relationships that are developed, enabling them to become real friendships rather than just professional relationships. These examples of volunteers working within a truly collaborative relationship are important in giving real meaning to the assertion that circles can support those strategies developed by the core member during treatment, to avoid re-offending. It is concluded that the core member is most likely to accept the relationship of being held accountable by the circle if that happens in a relationship that defines itself within a context of human warmth and care.*

*(Adapted from the Circles UK National Coordinators Training Induction Pack 2013, 'Understanding How Circles Work', page 9-11).*



## 5 Best Practices Latvia

### 5.1 Case 1

- A. The issue: sex offender returned back to the house where he earlier victimized his younger sister after being imprisoned.
- B. The context: the situation was possible because municipality specialists involved were not aware of risks for the victim and were also lacking resources to provide alternative housing.
- C. The solution: the circle decided to operate and as soon as an opportunity appeared another housing situation was given to the Core Member.
- D. The result: a relatively good operating Circle is going on doing its work. The results on a long term will be seen in the future.

*One of the Latvian circles is operating in the north of Riga. The core member is young (21) and had been incarcerated when he was 16. He is a shy, introvert young man, has had a life in poverty and stands at the bottom of the social ladder. The victim is a younger sister. On release from prison, he was relocated in the shelter where he used to live before and now sleeps in one room with the sister he victimized, which is a major challenge for the circle. In the outer circle there are many professionals: the director of social services, a social worker from the shelter, a psychologist (who was initially trained as volunteer), a member of the Orphans court, a senior inspector of Child protection, a local police officer. A major challenge is the location of the circle. After the core member was selected in prison, his area of relocation became known on very short notice; therefore it was difficult to find local volunteers. Now volunteers have to drive long distances (30 km). The poor living conditions are difficult, and also the mother of the core member has a negative influence, minimizing and excusing the behaviour of the core member. The core member is hardly motivated to change. Also all official parties have a strong influence on the circle. It is a busy schedule for volunteers and circle coordinator and volunteers need much support. Key achievement is that the circle is still going on under these circumstances, there have been no new offences, and the core member gradually is becoming more open.*

## **6 Short conclusion**

The different stories above are literally just enlisted, grouped by countries, but they show how in very different contexts the COSA practices have been adapted to a concrete situation, while keeping in mind the basic quality standards. Whether the issue is about dealing with the Media or about recruiting volunteers or about taking care of the group process and dynamics within the group, it always comes down to the creativity and common sense of the dedicated people involved in COSA at all places and levels.

Understanding the real aim of COSA helps circle coordinators as well as volunteers to adapt to specific situations (e.g. circles during or even before prison incarceration, meeting of the Circle at volunteer's home or trying to restore the relationship with the victim).

One should not forget that COSA basically means that the core member after release is regularly visited by three to six volunteers, preferably from the local community. The inner circle assists the core member with resettling in the community by stimulating pro-social behaviour and by providing support, practical help, and helping him recognize risky behaviour.

The above enlisted Best Practices are just some examples which might give an idea of how COSA remains implementable even in very different situations which – at first sight – are not easily fitting to COSA requirements.