



## **Briefing Paper**

**European Criminology Conference September 2016**

**Munster Germany**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to provide an account of the content and outcomes of the Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) presentations and following session, at the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the European Society of Criminology. Organised jointly by Circles UK and Cardiff University, the initial objective related to showcasing current research being conducted by various European COSA projects, two years after the end of the European Commissioned Circles 4EU project. The session also displayed a number of posters from current PhD studies researching the work of COSA, with following poster sessions at a later date during the conference. Four Presentations were given,

- 1) Dr Belinda Winder (Head of Sexual Offences, Crime and Misconduct Research Unit (SOCAMRU) presented the research design and methodology on the national UK evaluation of the Big Lottery funded Community Circles of Support and Accountability
- 2) Dr Mechtild Höing (Avans University) presented a study that focused upon issues of impact for Dutch volunteers working in Circles of Support and Accountability.
- 3) Dr Nadia Wager (University of Bedfordshire) and Chris Wilson (Circles UK) presented the initial findings of a study exploring the restorative justice potential for survivors of sexual violence volunteering for Circles of Support and Accountability.
- 4) Andrew Bates (Thames Valley Probation) presented an analysis of the Dynamic Risk Review and Adverse Outcomes for Circles Core Members.

These presentations were followed by a closed session, invitation only, aimed to build upon the successful European Commissioned Circles 4EU project and identify whether a further European COSA platform could be created, primarily to communicate and share the research being undertaken and ensure that the research would be of a consistent quality. There was also a consensus that such a platform would facilitate the sharing of both innovative and or problematic practice.

Those European countries delivering COSA represented at the event were as follows,

- England and Wales
- Ireland
- Holland

All those countries who had been part of the Circles 4EU project had been invited to attend the conference. Hungary, France and Bulgaria were unable to attend and while Spain and Belgium had intended to attend and participate but unfortunately had to send their apologies. Latvia were represented at the conference and it is important to note that communication from Circles in Spain and Bulgaria demonstrate a desire to be involved in any future European Circle developments.

### **Background**

The initial 'Together in Safety' project funded by the European Commission, used the learning and development of Circles in the UK to establish COSA in the Netherlands and Belgium. The four key partners for this project were Circles UK, the Dutch Probation Service, Avans University and the Belgium Justice Safe House. The project also produced a manual which could guide other European countries in assessing their own criminal justice infrastructure, legal context and development of sex offender management, to help them decide whether COSA could be appropriately and safely implemented. Such was the success of the 'Together in Safety' project that the European Commission invited a further funding application to continue the work with a further six European countries.

- Latvia
- Bulgaria
- Spain
- France
- Ireland
- Hungary

The project known as Circles 4EU had a remit to establish COSA in the first of the three countries listed above, while the latter three were to prepare for implementation at a later stage. However, Ireland used the project to establish its own COSA project. Commissioned by the Irish Probation Service, a local charity launched their Project in 2015. The Confederation of European Probation (CEP) supported the Circles 4EU project by providing representatives to facilitate and guide both the projects governance and help with the implementation of practice. Materials used by Circles UK, developed and adapted by Holland during the first 'Together in Safety' project were used as a basis for ensuring a base line standard and consistency of practice across Europe. The original four partner organisations continued their involvement with Avans University providing the Project's administration. The addition of CEP and new academic partners were key to the success of the Project, most notably Nottingham, Barcelona Universities, with Avans and Nottingham Universities specifically, working collaboratively and producing a number of published studies\* identified as important during the life of the Project. The Circles 4EU Project culminated in November 2014 with a final International conference held in Barcelona, attended by some 240 representatives from over 20 countries and opened with a Key Note address by the founding father of COSA Harry Nigh, the Mennonite Pastor who set up the very first Circle.

The Conference ended with a closed session where all participating countries and organisations met to discuss the next steps. Objectives were set with regard to further work, specifically in helping those countries preparing for implementation and a commitment to ensuring that the identified research topics were completed. However, without funding and an organisational structure in which to hold and administrate further work there has now been a two - year absence of European cooperation and

\* **Public attitudes to sex offenders Journal of Criminology July 16**

communication with regards to COSA. However, evidence would suggest that the aims, hopes and achievements of the Circles 4EU Project have not been forgotten and that there exists a real desire among those involved in that project wish to now implement the next stage of COSA's European development.

### **The European Criminology Conference September 2016**

A truly International conference with over a 1000 international delegates in attendance. While presentations and seminars relating to sexual offending were in the minority for this conference, it is worth noting that the majority of what there was related to this subject was COSA related. Three of the four presentations focussed upon subject matter that had previously been identified by the Circles 4EU Project as important research streams to address. It was disappointing that others invited to present were unable to. However, it is the case that COSA in Spain, Latvia and Ireland are all working in collaboration with academics and researchers to evaluate their practice.

All four presentations were well received and prompted a number of pertinent questions from those delegates present and provided a solid foundation from which the following closed session could build upon. Circles UK are in receipt of both abstracts and power point slides for all four presentations and can be requested through Kerry Earnshaw.

The closed session was chaired by Chris Wilson - Circles UK and through discussion there was an initial identification of two specific themes upon which there was a consensus,

- Limitations on the use of volunteers as a resource for research and the need for an overall strategy to protect them from overuse
- A need for a shared European / International agreement relating to the measure of a 'success' including 'does the Circle prevent re-offending and if so how does this happen and how long should that success work for'?

There then followed a more general discussion relating to the creation of a European platform for COSA with three specific themes,

- The identification and defining of purpose
- How would such a platform be funded
- Who or what would be the context or structure to hold such a platform

A particular concern expressed was that without sustained funding and an organisational structure to host such an initiative, further European development will result in another time limited funded project that once again ends without the ability to continue to build upon the already significant infrastructure that has been previously created.

It was acknowledged the importance of the previous involvement by CEP and the benefits that had brought to the Circles 4EU project. It was also noted that Holland has just won a CEP prize related to their national COSA project. It was suggested that CEP, if not the structure to hold any future European initiative would remain an important partner and advocate. There is a meeting of CEP on the 25<sup>th</sup> October 2016 where Dutch colleague Audrey Alards will be in attendance and will agenda future COSA developments. Chris Wilson stated that he would communicate with Elizabeth Hayes who was one of the CEP representatives on the Circles 4EU Project prior to the meeting on the 25<sup>th</sup>.

The importance of Circles UK was also acknowledged and that it was they who had initially developed all the key materials, Code of Practice, Audit materials and the Dynamic Risk Review, that have provided a consistency of practice across Europe. The Quality Assurance element so essential for COSA across Europe originates from Circles UK and a number of our European colleagues believed that this could provide an important precedent for Circles UK to be the structure in which to hold a European platform (the irony of which post Brexit was not lost upon some). Partnership and cooperation is key to the success of such a future project and should replicate that which has previously proved successful. Cardiff University is also committed to working in partnership with others and is hosting the 17<sup>th</sup> Annual European Criminology Conference next year.

Bas Vogelvang formally of Avans University who was instrumental in the securing of funds for both the previous European COSA projects and is the architect of the European COSA movement, now works for a research institute known as Vanmontfoort and thought was given as to the importance and positive role such an institute could also play in any future development and funding applications. The significance of Bas Vogelvang's willingness and commitment should not be underestimated as indeed the willingness and commitment of Stephen Hanvey, former CEO of Circles UK. Both are committed to the process and have expressed a wish to be actively involved in the further development of a European COSA platform. Although not present at the conference, both Bas and Stephen had taken the time to contribute their initial thoughts to the discussion and continue to give a commitment to help in any way that would help.

### **Conclusion**

Following the closed session Mechtild Höing, Audrey Alards and Chris Wilson met to discuss what needed to be done next. It was agreed that the engagement of both Stephen Hanvey in his role as a 'Fellow' of Circles UK and of Bas Vogelvang (whose role in the past two European COSA Projects was crucial) would be wholly positive and that their skill set could be used to benefit any future European COSA development. An agenda was set for future discussion that included reference to where Circles 4EU ended (reference to the closed session in Barcelona November 2014) and that it is at this point that the future objectives identified should be developed. To identify the goals and activities of a future European COSA platform and to assess the feasibility of such a platform. To develop the ideas of what is feasible i.e. a quality assurance framework for research and the collaboration of research. The development of a European / International COSA practice journal and supporting the three Circle 4EU countries that were getting ready for implementation. Other Issues related to finance, governance and content all need careful consideration.

It was agreed that an initial working group should meet and that a Skype session should be held. It was agreed that in the first instant this group would involve Bas Vogelvang, Chris Wilson, Stephen Hanvey and Mechtild Höing. A working plan will be formulated and feedback in the first instance given to respective personnel i.e. Riana Taylor CEO of Circles UK.

**Chris Wilson**

**Formally - National Development Manager  
Circles UK**

**Currently – PhD Research Student  
Cardiff University**

10<sup>th</sup> October 2016.

