

PRESS RELEASE

To: Editors
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Scottish Government refer sex offender initiative to local decision makers.

The Scottish Government has announced its decision not to support at this time Sacro's proposal for a national pilot of Circles of Support & Accountability to reduce the risk of re-offending by high-risk sex-offenders in Scotland. Announcing this decision in a letter delivered this week to Sacro, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, Kenny MacAskill MSP, stated that his primary area of concern is with the safety, training and supervision of Circles volunteers dealing with an often highly manipulative offender group. Referring to a report on Circles commissioned by the government from the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research, Mr McAskill stated:

"The report highlights concerns around the ability of agencies to recruit adequate numbers of suitable volunteers to run such programmes, the considerable commitment required to train volunteers and the concerns of respondents around the 'exit strategy' for volunteers from the Circle and consequent contact with the offender. The safety of the volunteer as well as the wider public all require to be taken into account and in my judgement there is not a well enough developed evidence base from which to take reassurance on the volunteer aspect of Circles."

Commenting on the decision, Sacro's Head of Research & Development, Keith Simpson, expressed disappointment that the government had not recognised that questions raised by the Cabinet Secretary actually demonstrate the need for a pilot project in Scotland. Mr Simpson stated:

"The most important question is whether Circles offer a means of improving public protection against predatory sex offenders. Circles in Canada and other parts of the UK have produced impressive evidence that they do. This has been recognised in the government sponsored research and the government's response does not challenge this. The issues relating to volunteers are primarily concerned with questions of scale – 'can sufficient volunteers be recruited?', 'can we provide sufficient resources to ensure adequate training and support?', etc. There is already positive experience elsewhere in relation to these questions, and the only way to obtain conclusive answers in relation to whether there would be enough suitable volunteers coming forward in Scotland is actually to run a pilot project here. There is a real opportunity to make Scotland safer through this initiative and the Scottish Government should rise to the challenge to allow Scotland to benefit as England has done in this respect."

Nevertheless, Mr Simpson was encouraged by the statement from Mr MacAskill that:

"The report is a very informative addition to the available evidence base on the concept and I am certain it will be helpful to any local agency considering the feasibility of Circles in their own area. Local agencies are in an increasingly strong position to make informed choices on whether to prioritise Circles and can draw on various sources of information when determining their feasibility. This must be on the basis of local circumstances and priorities and it is right that we leave those decisions to local partners."

In response to this, Mr Simpson stated:

“We know that there is considerable interest in many areas in developing Circles in Scotland and we will now engage in further discussions about how best to develop this work in the light of the government response. The danger of sex offenders re-offending is of great concern to the public in Scotland. Circles offer a new, evidence-based way of making Scotland safer from these dangerous offenders.”

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Copies of the full response from the Scottish Government can be provided on request.