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Scotland is missing an opportunity to reduce reoffending by sex offenders.

An innovative way of managing sex offenders within the community is not being introduced in Scotland despite overwhelming evidence pointing to its success. In an article published in SCOLAG, the Scottish Legal Action Group's journal, Steve Kirkwood and Tim Richley of Sacro have put forward the case for Circles of Support and Accountability (Circles) and the benefits this innovative approach brings to the effective management of high risk sex offenders in the community. The Scottish Government has so far resisted funding even a pilot project, opting instead to defer decisions to partners in local areas.

Circles was developed in Canada in 1994 and has been used to great effect in England and Wales since 2002. The system works by providing a "circle" of professionals and highly trained volunteers from the community to monitor and support the offender or "core member", after their release. The fundamental aim of the Circle is to reduce the risk of offending by combating the social isolation of the core member and providing ongoing contact, support and of course, monitoring. Circles is not intended as a substitute for existing protection measures, but as a complementary intervention for those presenting a high risk of reoffending.

The evidence to support Circles as an effective intervention is compelling. Two major studies have taken place to date, one in Canada and one in Thames Valley, England.

The Canadian research found reoffending rates for sexual crimes were 70% lower for a Circles group of 60 offenders in comparison to a closely matched control group. Of any reoffending that did take place, there was a significant drop in the violent nature of the offence. Even better results were seen in England where there was not one conviction for a new sexual offence among a Circles group of 20 offenders. Even more encouraging was the fact that eight of the group were identified by the Circles members as being about to reoffend and the situation was dealt with prior to an offence taking place.

Although the introduction of Multi-agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) in Scotland has ensured that sex offenders are now monitored more closely than ever before, there is still a significant proportion of those released who are judged to pose a high risk of re-offending and are not being managed as effectively as they could be.

A great many interested parties and stakeholders are convinced that Circles would provide a highly effective method of managing this risk.

Background

Sacro

Sacro is a national community justice voluntary organisation working across Scotland to make communities safer by reducing conflict and offending. Sacro operates in the community in partnership with others who share its values. It works with communities, those in conflict, victims and offenders. It does this in four key ways:

- > by being a leading provider of direct, innovative services in community mediation (CM), including schools work, restorative justice (RJ) and criminal justice (CJ)
- > through consultancy and training services, which equip Sacro and other organisations to deliver best practice, to extend the impact of Sacro's specialist expertise across Scotland
- > through research which monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of Sacro's services and keeps it abreast of research in the field, and
- > by seeking to influence policy and legislation, on the basis of research evidence, so that: the use of restorative justice and of constructive conflict resolution are extended; and the use of imprisonment is restricted to those who have committed serious crimes or are a danger to the public.

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