The idea that locking up paedophiles for longer will solve the problems of dangerous offenders is an illusion. The real solution lies in the community. David Wilson

Once released, prisoners can often find resettlement a bewildering and intimidating experience that makes it hard for them to sustain the plans and good intentions they had while in custody. This is particularly the case for high-risk sex offenders whose offence, combined with the label ‘ex-prisoner’, brings stigma and exclusion. To aid the process of reintegration, formal methods of providing community support are sometimes needed.

The theory behind circles of support and accountability is that building a network of social support for released prisoners can reduce re-offending. The idea is quite simple: a group of about four or five volunteers from the community, working together, meet regularly with a recently released high-risk offender, the ‘core member’ of the circle.

Ideally, their first contact is when the offender is still in custody. Upon release, the offender might meet a member of the circle everyday, and then the whole circle about once a week. Over time, meetings might reduce to once a fortnight.

The project is selective about offenders who become core members. They are typically high-risk offenders, who have high levels of need and minimal existing social networks. They must also show a commitment not to re-offend, and to adhere to their release plan. The volunteers are screened, trained and supported by the circles of support and accountability scheme.

The help the scheme provides goes beyond friendly meetings and can include advice about housing, employment, finances, and other concerns. The group operates by consensus, and on the basis of a formal agreement between the group and the core member. For example, an explicit part of the agreement is that the circle will maintain communication with probation and police and take responsibility for informing the authorities of concerns they might have about the core member’s behaviour.

A preliminary report on the project (from 2003) drew a link between low self-esteem, social pressures, and an increased risk of re-offending. In contrast, offenders who experience a chance to work with a circle often find that the support and accountability can help them to sustain their good intentions. As one offender wrote in the report:

Coming out of prison was an emotional period for me. If I had not had the Circle it could have led to re-offending when feeling emotionally down. They have helped me to focus in on the way I think so that I do not get into a situation of re-offending.

(Quaker Peace and Social Witness, 2003)

The pilot project run by Quaker Peace and Social Witness has been active in Britain for five years. In that time, 23 circles have been developed and supported in the Thames Valley, and a few in Hampshire. To date, not one of the core members has been convicted of a subsequent sexual offence, despite the fact that most were classified as ‘high-risk’ when they became involved in the project (Quaker News Summer, 2006). Similarly, in Canada, an evaluation found that re-offending by this high-risk group of released prisoners was reduced from the predicted rate by 60% (David Wilson, 2006).

The idea is inspiring similar developments in Scotland, as well as Bedfordshire, Exeter, Manchester, Somerset, Norwich, and Yorkshire. The Lucy Faithful Foundation is also running a pilot. A key to its success is its balance of support and accountability.

The volunteers are the community’s representatives, in that they hold key knowledge relating to the offender and act as the eyes and ears of those agencies responsible for the management of that offender, feeding vital information into the Multi Agency Public Protection Panel (Chris Wilson, cited in Quaker Peace and Social Witness, 2003)

By working closely with probation, and providing information where necessary, circles of support have added a new dimension of risk management for a sensitive group of offenders seeking to become part of the community again.

Circles of support and accountability won one of the Howard League for Penal Reform’s Community Awards for 2006. Professor David Wilson has written that the circles project provides encouraging signs of...
reducing re-offending by high-risk sex offenders.

At their heart, circles are about including, rather than excluding; they provide a real and meaningful community for a group that has previously been only stigmatised and marginalised.

(David Wilson, 2006)

Stigmatising certain groups of offenders is only likely to increase their social isolation and, by extension, create further obstacles to successful resettlement. Circles of support and accountability is an idea that works. Although the model is simple, it needs care, expertise and sufficient resources to work well. In particular, the work needs full and sustained funding from government. A key step would be for NOMS to explore how it can ensure national coverage, so that high-risk sex offenders being released to all areas of the country have access to the programme.


spirit of the radio

Chief executive of the Prison Radio Association Phil Maguire, explains why their innovative training scheme teaches more than just radio skills

I love radio, always have. It’s much better than TV; you can even watch it with your eyes closed. It is a very powerful medium; it regularly makes me laugh, sometimes makes me cry and almost constantly makes me think. Until recently my favourite thing about radio was the way that, when you listen, you paint pictures in your mind. During the last few months that has changed.

My favourite thing about radio is the power it has to change people, the way it can increase confidence, raise self-esteem, and equip people with skills that benefit them for the rest of their lives. I’m talking about radio as education. More specifically, I’m talking about Prison Radio.

Twelve years ago the first prison radio station was set up at HMP & YOI Feltham following an increased number of suicides amongst the young men. Since its inception, the role of prison radio has evolved and encouraged stations to be set up in other prisons including Wandsworth, Huntercombe, Cardiff, Rye Hill, Northallerton, Lancaster Farms and Warren Hill.

Since Radio Feltham first hit the airwaves, more than 40 prisons have expressed an interest in establishing their own station. It’s now my job to help them to do just that.

I was a residential social worker and a teacher before I decided that I should pursue my love of radio. I qualified as a broadcast journalist and landed a job as a producer on Radio 2’s Jeremy Vine Show. After three amazing years of working with some of the most talented people in broadcasting I felt drawn back to “the real world” and it doesn’t get much more real than prison.

The BBC gave me the opportunity to work in partnership with a new charity, The Prison Radio Association and to manage a prison radio pilot project in the West Midlands. Nine months later HMP Hewell Grange and HMP Birmingham both have fully equipped radio training facilities.

At the end of the pilot I was so convinced by the power of prison radio to effect positive change in those involved that when the Prison Radio Association asked me to become their first chief executive, I hardly had to think twice.

Reducing re-offending benefits us all. Equipping prisoners with the skills and confidence necessary to find work upon release is crucial in bringing down re-offending rates.