

Title: Supporting desistance through ambiguous practice: what can be learnt from the first prison-based model of CoSA in England and Wales?

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Keywords: CoSA, Sex Offenders, Reintegration, Social Support, Prison

Abstract

Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) are an initiative designed to support those previously convicted of sexual offences as they reintegrate back in to society, whilst still holding them accountable for their thoughts and behaviour (Cesaroni, 2002). The aim of the research was to explore the Core Member and volunteer experience of being involved in a CoSA that transitions from prison to community, with the objective being to focus upon what can be learnt from these initial experiences. The study included qualitative interviews with two separate groups of participants; Core Members (n=7) and volunteers (n=10) involved in the

prison-model CoSA. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the data was undertaken to consider the individual's subjective experience of being involved in this initiative.

A superordinate theme of ambiguous practice was identified, whereby volunteers appeared to overlook the importance of expressive support, described a lack of commitment from other fellow volunteers and demonstrated a confusion surrounding the accountability aspect of their role. Despite the confusion highlighted, however, the accountability aspect of the volunteers' role was identified through their indirect support of Core members' desistance. The second superordinate theme outlined the volunteers' encouragement of the Core Members new pro-social lifestyle, thus helping to reinforce their crime -free identity. This led to a concern, however, of what would happen once the CoSA journey had come to an end.

The learning derived from these findings can now be used to continue to develop and improve the use of prison-model CoSA across England and Wales.

## Introduction

The release from prison to community, of those convicted of sexual offences, is an emotive subject (Clarke, Brown & Völlm, 2015). Due to the stigmatisation surrounding these individuals, many will be released in to communities that are unwilling to accept them, thus, resulting in a lack of social support available (Lowe, Willis & Gibson, 2017). A review by the Ministry of Justice was commissioned in England and Wales to explore the importance of relational ties in the prevention of reoffending (Farmer, 2017). It was reported that those who have been convicted and imprisoned for sexual offences had difficult family ties, which had often broken down due to the nature of the offence. Whilst the focus of the review was family ties, Farmer (2017) acknowledged that individuals other than family members are able to provide the safe, supportive and nurturing relationships believed to be key if rehabilitation is to be achieved. Providing pro-social, stable relationships in this way may also enable a sense of belonging and encourage law-abiding behaviour (Tewksbury & Connor, 2012). In addition,

Maruna (2006) argues that successful reintegration requires a moral inclusion, whereby ex-offenders are forgiven for their past behaviour and accepted back into society. One initiative that aims to provide such support and inclusion, to individuals convicted of sexual offences, is Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA).

CoSA was first developed in Canada as a community initiative designed to reintegrate those previously convicted of sexual offences back into society. Although the community model of CoSA still dominates, prison-models have since been established both in the US and across England and Wales, as will be discussed shortly. All CoSA models involve a group of screened, selected and trained volunteers who meet once a week with a medium to very high-risk individual (Core Member) previously convicted of a sexual offence, who has little or no pro-social support (Wilson, Bates, & Völlm, 2010). These volunteers can offer emotional and practical support alongside monitoring the attitudes and behaviours of the Core Members, thus, also holding them accountable for their commitment to live an offence-free life (Bates, Macrae, Williams & Webb, 2012). Unlike Canada, where CoSA functions mainly outside the criminal justice framework, CoSA volunteers across England and Wales are supervised by a qualified coordinator who reviews and assesses the progress and risk of the Core Member. The coordinator also liaises with other agencies responsible for the Core Member's risk management (police, probation, psychologists etc.) through the Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) process (Wilson, McWhinnie & Wilson, 2008). MAPPA is a national arrangement, which is responsible for assessing and managing all offenders convicted of sexual offences at a local level. CoSA can therefore be considered as a form of positive risk management across England and Wales, through which MAPPA can aim to provide public protection and community safety. In essence, CoSA can be portrayed as two concentric rings of individuals, who liaise and work with one another to ensure effective support and monitoring of the Core Member (McCartan, Kemshall, Westwood, Solle,

MacKenzie, & Pollard, 2014). It is worth reiterating here, that a Core Member's involvement within CoSA is voluntary. Participation in CoSA 'cannot be specified as part of any statutory requirement, nor can failure to engage by itself result in a breach' (Circles UK, 2013, p.8).

There is now a substantial amount of research exploring the potential benefits of CoSA as a reintegration model. For example, CoSA has been deemed effective in reducing the isolation and emotional loneliness often experienced by those previously convicted of sexual offences as they attempt to reintegrate back in to society (Fox, 2015; Wilson, Picheca, & Prinzo, 2007; Wilson, Cortoni & McWhinnie, 2009). The ability to reduce factors significant in sexual recidivism, such as isolation and loneliness (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005; Marshall, 2010), has led to research reporting CoSA as an effective rehabilitative initiative suitable for reducing reoffending behaviour (Wilson, Bates and Völlm). Indeed, Bates, William, Wilson & Wilson (2014) reported from their comparison study that Core Members reoffended sexually or violently at a lower rate than those who were suitable but did not receive a CoSA. Their research, however, attracts several criticisms (Elliot and Zajac, 2015) and highlights how an individual's motivation to desist from offending, along with the opportunities available to them to access a balanced, self-determined and crime-free lifestyle, also needs to be considered (Kitson-Boyce, 2018a).

Indeed, CoSA has been reported as improving Core Members' emotional well-being through inclusion, defined by a sense of belonging, acceptance and equality (Bates et al., 2012; Höing et al., 2013). These qualities support any internal motivation to change within the Core Member and provide a safe place for their new pro-social identity to be developed. Weaver and McNeill's (2015) argued, from their research involving repeat offenders and the exploration of social relationships, that it is the sense of belonging and social bonds that can encourage change within an individual and a shift towards desistance.

The majority of the previous research involving CoSA, however, focuses on the community model of CoSA, whereby volunteers meet the Core Member once the latter has been released from prison. The exception to this are the studies evaluating the Minnesota CoSA model (MnCoSA) in the US (Duwe, 2012, 2018). Offered through the Minnesota Department of Corrections, MnCoSA focuses upon the successful transition from prison to community for individuals convicted for sexual offences (MnCoSA, 2017). The volunteers meet with the Core Member approximately three times whilst in prison before the sessions move in to the community as the Core Member re-enters society (MnCoSA, 2017).

Duwe (2012) highlights the importance of a continuum of social support from prison to community and believes this is a main factor in why MnCoSA has demonstrated some success in reintegrating those who commit sexual offences back in to the community. For example, a randomised controlled trial (RCT), demonstrated a significant reduction in both sexual and general recidivism for those who took part in MnCoSA, when compared to those that did not, with the risk of re-arrest for a sexual offence reduced by 88% (Duwe, 2018). Building on a previous RCT on the same project (Duwe, 2012) this study involved a 6 year follow up and highlighted the potential benefit of providing ‘through the gate’, pro-social support to individuals previously convicted of a sexual offence.

Although good quality evaluations of recidivism are important and useful in determining effectiveness, they arguably do not capture the psychosocial outcomes, and therefore, full experience of participating in a CoSA (Clarke et al., 2015). For example, Höing, Vogelvang and Bogaerts (2015b) conducted both qualitative and quantitative research with Core Members in CoSA in the Netherlands. From the qualitative interviews improvements in existing relationships or the extension of social networks were reported, which interestingly were not detected as improvements through the quantitative data. In addition, Fox (2015),

explored, through the first qualitative study of CoSA in US, the relationships between Core members and volunteers. The interviews enabled the Core Members to explain how the feelings of inclusion created by the volunteers in the CoSA were helping to combat the feelings of exclusion the Core members were experiencing from the general community. Again, quantitative data alone is unable to detect the depth of experience Fox (2015) provides. The majority of qualitative CoSA research, however, has focused upon the community model, thus, highlighting the need for qualitative research when considering the new prison-model of CoSA outlined below. This model involves CoSA that are being established in forensic settings whilst the Core Members are still in prison.

#### The first prison-based model CoSA in England and Wales

The Safer Living Foundation charity is a joint venture between a treatment prison for individuals convicted of sexual offences and a University in the East Midlands, England. It is also supported by police and probation representatives as trustees. The charity has two clear objectives; to promote the protection of people from, and the prevention of, sexual crime and to promote the rehabilitation of persons who have committed or who are likely to commit sexual offences against others (Safer Living Foundation, 2017). The prison-based model of CoSA was established by the charity in 2014 to support the transition of vulnerable individuals from prison to the community. For the first time across England and Wales Core Members could begin their CoSA around 3 months prior to their release from prison, before continuing in the community for up to 18 months.

To be considered for a Core Member place on a prison-model CoSA individual must have had previously committed a sexual offense and currently be residing in the prison where the CoSA were due to start (which only houses those convicted, or previously convicted of a sexual offense). Secondly, they must have been assessed as medium to very-high risk using the

Risk Matrix 2000 assessment tool (Thornton et al., 2003). Thirdly, the individuals must be facing release from prison with little to no pro-social support in the community. This is operationalised through self-report from the individual, along with supporting evidence from their offender manager and offender supervisor. The final criterion is that the individuals must either be elderly (55+) or be defined as having intellectual disabilities. This final measure was introduced due to a concern felt by the trustees of the SLF that some individuals falling in to this category were leaving prison without any family or community support (Saunders, Kitson-Boyce, & Elliott, 2014).

The identification of an intellectual disability involved an assessment of both intellectual (IQ<80) and adaptive functioning (Craig & Hutchinson, 2005; Keeling, Rose, & Beech, 2008). Whilst there is no universal definition of what it means to be ‘elderly’, ‘older’ is defined within the criminal justice literature as starting anywhere between 45 and 65 years old (Bows & Westmarland, 2016). Until recently, retirement age in the UK was 65 years old (Gov.uk, 2017). However, as a report for the House of Commons Justice Committee (2013) acknowledged, accelerated aging of prisoners, due to chronic health problems within prison, can lead to individuals residing in a prison setting having a biological age several years older than individuals in the community. Bows and Westmarland (2016) have agreed, stating that the mental and physical health problems offenders in prison experience results in a more rapid onset of age related issues, compared to their counterparts outside prison. This provides an argument for a lower threshold for an ‘elderly’ category and indeed Age UK, the largest charity in the UK to work with older individuals including prisoners, have 55 as the starting age of their ‘elderly’ category.

Members of the local community are interviewed by the trustees of the Safer Living Foundation and, if suitable, offered a volunteer position. Prior to starting a CoSA the volunteers undergo a 3-day training event, whereby information is given regarding CoSA and working

with those convicted of sexual offences. For those volunteers joining a prison-model CoSA, experience of working in a prison setting is also shared along with effective techniques for working with individuals who are elderly or who have intellectual difficulties. The ‘through the gate’ support offered by the prison-based model of CoSA involves the volunteers visiting the prison weekly for the CoSA meetings whilst the Core Member is still residing there, thus, requiring them to also undergo criminal security checks before beginning their role. The CoSA meetings continue then through the transitional period from prison to community, with the meetings continuing in the first week of the Core Member’s release. Building social relations in this way, prior to release from prison may create the sense of ‘we-ness’ argued by Weaver and McNeill (2015) to be the most influential in supporting desistance from further sexual offences. Indeed, research has begun to explore the benefits of providing additional prison sessions within a CoSA and how this may impact on the desistance process (Kitson-Boyce, Blagden, Winder, & Dillon, 2018b, Kitson-Boyce, Blagden, Winder & Dillon, 2018c). However, Elliott (2014) warns researchers involved in CoSA studies against the potential to over-emphasise the successes of CoSA, whilst minimising the challenges. The aim of the study, therefore, was to explore the Core Member and volunteer experience of being involved in a CoSA that transitions from prison to community, with the objective being to focus upon what can be learnt from these initial experiences.

## Method

### *Participants*

This study includes two separate groups of participants; Core Members and volunteers involved in the prison-model CoSA already described. Including volunteers as participants, alongside Core Members, enabled further depth and breadth to be achieved whilst exploring the experience of being involved in a prison-model CoSA. The Core Members involved in the



study (n= 7) had all been released from prison and were, therefore, holding their CoSA sessions in the community. They had already taken part in the prison sessions of the prison-model CoSA and had undergone the transition from prison to community with the support of the volunteers (see Table 1). Out of the 10 possible participants who were on a prison-model CoSA, 3 were unable to take part. Two Core Members' CoSA were no longer active at the point of data collection in the community and a third was serving an IPP sentence in prison and had therefore not yet made the transition from prison to community. Findings from data collected whilst the Core Members were still in the prison part of the CoSA have been published previously (Kitson-Boyce, 2018a; Kitson-Boyce et al., 2018b, Kitson-Boyce et al., 2018c) and are therefore not focused on during this paper.

A total of 31 volunteers were approached to take part in the research, with 10 consenting. This provided a 32% response rate, slightly less than other CoSA research involving volunteers (i.e. Höing et al., 2015a reported a 37% response rate). The volunteers were all working on a prison-model CoSA (see table 2). All of the participants' names have been changed and pseudonyms used to protect their anonymity.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

### *Procedure*

Ethical approval was obtained, prior to data collection commencing, from the National Offender Management System (HMPPS) ethics board, as well as Nottingham Trent University College Research Ethics Committee. In addition, the research adhered to the British Psychological Society's guidelines regarding the ethical considerations of collecting data for research purposes (BPS, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each

consenting participant. Described by Smith, Flowers and Larkins (2009, p.57) as a 'conversation with a purpose', qualitative one to one interviews were carried out with participants to facilitate in-depth discussion and explore their personal experience. The interviews were carried out at the charity's offices in the community.

The interviews with the Core Members lasted for a mean of 1.5 hours and focused on the experience of being involved in a CoSA as they moved from prison to community. For example, 'What were the good or bad things about being in a Circle when you moved from prison to the community?' The rest of the questions focused on their current thoughts and feelings and their future aspirations i.e. 'Who do you have to support you now you are in the community?' and 'What are you looking forward to, or not looking forward to, in the future now?' Due to some of the participants having intellectual disabilities (ID), the interview schedule was written in suitable language with a Flesch readability score (Farr, Jenkins & Paterson, 1951) of 2.9. This meant the questions posed could be understood by an individual with the reading ability of a 7-year old and therefore suitable to be used with those who had borderline to mild ID.

The interviews with the volunteers were slightly shorter than those carried out with the Core Members, lasting for a mean of one hour. Open-ended, neutral questions were constructed for each of the separate issues to be discussed. For example, 'What are the positives or negatives for you of being involved in a prison-based Circle? To what extent do you believe Circles hold Core Members accountable for their thoughts and behaviours?' This enabled the researcher to be an engaged, flexible and an attentive listener, using prompts where necessary to explore areas of interest (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Upon completion of the interview, the participants were given a debrief sheet and the opportunity to ask any questions they may have had about the research.

### *Analysis process*

The interviews in this study were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which is concerned with a detailed examination of an individual's subjective experience (Brocki & Wearden, 2006); in this case their experience of being involved in a prison-model CoSA. Smith and Osborn (2003) offer a flexible set of guidelines for IPA, which were adopted for this research.

The aim of IPA is to try and understand the content and complexity of the meanings of the participants, rather than measure their frequency. The first step considered by Smith and Osborn (2003) when conducting IPA is to become familiar with the data by considering the transcripts several times, focusing on the sense of the person themselves, their use of language and any similarities or contradictions identified. The researcher therefore engaged in an interpretative relationship with the transcript to capture and do justice to the meanings of the participant's mental and social world (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

This preliminary analysis was then transformed in to emerging themes, which aimed to capture the essential quality of what was identified in the text. IPA can be viewed as a descriptive and simple method of analysis; however, the second level of analysis proves this not to be the case (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). Instead the participants' concerns and experiences were not only described but developed further to a more interpretative and conceptual level and invoked more psychological terminology. This approach was repeated for each transcript, which enabled the researcher to make sense of the connections emerging between themes. In addition, themes, which did not fit well with the emerging structure or had a weak evidential base were removed (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The transcripts were reconsidered as the cluster of themes emerged. This ensured the connections derived during the analysis related back to the words of the participant. A double hermeneutic process was

also implemented whereby the researcher checked their own sense making against the interpretation of what the participant had said.

Finally, a summary was produced whereby sub-themes were clustered to represent the superordinate themes (see table 3). These themes were then translated into a narrative account, both telling the story of the participant and incorporating the researcher's interpretative commentary. This narrative is outlined below, along with a discussion relating the themes identified back to existing literature, as is typical in most IPA research (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

## **Findings and discussion**

The main themes derived from the data collected (see table 3) will now be unpacked and discussed.

[INSERT TABLE 3 HERE]

### **Superordinate theme: Ambiguous practice**

CoSA research in general has been criticised for only focusing on the positive aspects of the initiative (Elliott, 2014). It is important, however, to discuss *all* findings from the data collected from volunteers and Core Members involved, particularly when considering a new project such as the prison-model of CoSA. A superordinate theme to emerge from the data was ambiguous practice, whereby volunteers appeared to overlook the importance of expressive support, described a lack of commitment from other fellow volunteers and demonstrated a confusion surrounding the accountability aspect of their role.

#### ***The 'real job' starts on release***

The prison-model CoSA begins whilst the Core Member is still in prison before moving in to the community with them. The aim is to provide support and accountability during both the

prison and community sections of this CoSA model. A theme derived from the volunteer data however, involved a belief that their 'real job' as a volunteer would begin once the Core Member had been released from prison.

### **Extract 1**

'So erm yeah, so I guess, yeah, I guess the point I was trying to make is that with some things sometimes it felt like ok we reached point where we can't discuss some things any further to help him' (*Dillan - Volunteer*).

### **Extract 2**

'it's very easy to talk to him when he's in prison, that's the easy bit, it's when he gets out, back out in the community and he's scared and alone that our job really starts you know' (*Joanne - Volunteer*).

Both Dillan and Joanne highlight how the volunteers felt they could only provide emotional support during the prison sessions and were limited as to how much practical support they could offer. They deemed the practical support to be more productive, therefore resulting in the belief that their 'job' would begin properly on release. Northcutt Bohmert, Duwe and Hipple (2016) reported however, that although both types of support are important it is the expressive support, characterised by emotional support, friendship and respectful listening, that was critical to CoSA success. In addition, there appears to be a presumption that the Core Members do not require as much support during their time in the prison sessions of the CoSA. Previous findings have proved this not to be the case, however, with the volunteers providing support invaluable support to the Core Members during a period of heightened anxiety (Kitson-Boyce et al., 2018b).

### **Extract 3**

‘I think you feel a bit helpless in the prison because you’re not really doing stuff as such, like talking to them so they feel better in that sense erm yeah I think actually it’s that apprehension, ok we’ve got all this stuff we need to do but you can’t just get in and get it sorted so I think that’s how it will, it will feel like we’re actually beginning when we’re outside of the prison cause we can help sort out the accommodation and do this that and the other and go with him to these places so I think yeah it will feel more natural when we’re outside’  
*(Gemma - Volunteer).*

The last extract from Gemma again, illuminates a feeling within the volunteers of being limited in the extent they can support the Core Member whilst they are in prison. The expressive support they are providing appears over looked and almost dismissed as unimportant. Feelings of apprehension, however, appear to be underlying within this extract also. The volunteers seem eager to reach the community part of the CoSA. It is therefore, important for CoSA coordinators to recognise these feelings within volunteers and reinforce the benefits of the prison sessions that have been outlined previously (Kitson-Boyce et al., 2018b, Kitson-Boyce et al., 2018c).

It could be presumed from the findings outlined in this theme that once the CoSA reaches the community, a sense of purpose may grow within the volunteers. Whilst some volunteers had established a sense of commitment, it was reported that not all volunteers demonstrated this, even during the community sessions.

### ***Volunteer commitment***

A key challenge faced by CoSA projects is the recruitment of volunteers who are available, motivated and committed to their role (Wilson, McWhinnie, Picheca, Prinzo, & Cortoni, 2007). During the recruitment process to be a volunteer on a prison-based CoSA, a commitment to

attend every CoSA session (holidays and illness aside) was requested. Despite this, some volunteers explained how their CoSA was not running with the full number of volunteers, due to some individuals regularly not turning up to sessions.

#### **Extract 4**

‘the circle itself is quite disjointed erm there’s one member who attends every single one... I’m there almost all the time as well, it’s just me and them, we know everything, we know how the circle works, we know \*\*\*\* (the Core Member) very well and the other two are kind of there, not there, a lot of times, it’s just me and the other or three of us, there’s only been one time when there’s been all four of us’ (*Joanne - Volunteer*).

#### **Extract 5**

‘There is an issue at the moment with one of them erm just not turning up, due to like work commitments erm and at first it was ok but I think now that it’s an on-going thing not only for the circle but obviously for the Core Member, the consistency isn’t there’ (*Sapphire - Volunteer*).

Both Joanne and Sapphire highlight how from some volunteers there appears to be a lack of commitment. The reasons for this, however, remain unclear, for example, do volunteers believe they will be capable of working with such individuals but find the reality different upon starting their role? Alternatively, is a lack of enforcement on attendance impacting on the level of ‘buying in’ and engagement the volunteers have of their role? Whilst there may be occasions whereby a missed session is unavoidable, the need for commitment from the volunteers needs to be reinforced. This variation and disparity in who attends the session may undermine the value and importance of the CoSA sessions to the Core Members who also raised it as an issue during their interviews.

## **Extract 6**

‘I think we all seem to get on, I think the worst part is they don’t always come together, like this week it was just \*\*\*\* (volunteer) and \*\*\*\* (coordinator) the week before \*\*\*\* was missing, I’ve not seen \*\*\*\* for about 4 sessions now, \*\*\*\* was away last week, last session so there’s only been, there’s not been that many occasions when all 4 of them have been there to be honest, it’s either two or three usually’ (*Harry – Core Member*).

As Harry highlights, the Core Members also recognise how the volunteers rarely all attended every meeting. This may indicate a weaker, or lead to a breakdown in, relationships between the Core Members and the absent volunteers. As Weaver (2012) argued when considering the positive impact pro-social relations can have on desistance, the quality of the relationships and connections are important to focus on. It is therefore not enough for the volunteers to be merely present on an intermittent basis; they need to invest time to form a social and supportive bond with the Core Member. Understandably, personal commitments sometimes require sessions to be missed, however it is important to also consider the impact the level of volunteers’ commitment can have on the Core Members’ expectations.

A similar finding has previously been reported, whereby the number of volunteers willing to take part in CoSA became problematic, with some CoSA dropping to two volunteers due to holidays or sick leave (Armstrong & Wills, 2014). This may create a negative impression on the Core Members regarding the volunteers’ commitment to the CoSA. In addition, an unequal level of volunteer commitment can also create additional work and pressure on the volunteers who do attend the CoSA sessions. Indeed, Lowe and Willis (2018) acknowledge how working with a stigmatised population can be demanding for any CoSA volunteer. If these demands are increased through a reduction in commitment in other volunteers then burnout



and exhaustion, associated with excessive volunteering, (Höing et al., 2015b) may occur. Whilst these results were derived from a review of the literature on volunteering with ex-offenders convicted of all crimes, the findings are also important to consider for CoSA projects, which depend heavily upon the use of volunteers. It has previously been suggested that levels of connectedness can be increased within the volunteers through the organisation of volunteer support groups and social events (Höing, Bogaerts, & Vogelvang, 2015a). These are concepts, therefore, currently being developed and introduced by the prison-model CoSA.

In addition to the concerns considered so far, confusion regarding the accountability aspect of their role was also reported by the volunteers, as discussed below.

### ***Doing risk management***

CoSA has a dual aspect involving both support and accountability (Cesaroni, 2002). The volunteers appeared confident in their role supporting the Core Members, however, even once they had started the community section of the CoSA they reported feelings of confusion and a lack of clarity of their accountability role.

#### **Extract 7**

Erm knowing more of the risk factors that we're looking for erm I know it's been, it was discussed in the training but I probably would have liked a refresher on that before we went back in to the community you know 'what are we looking for, what are we supposed to be keeping an eye out for in case this happens?' (*Joanne - Volunteer*).

This extract highlights the lack of confidence the volunteers feel with regard to holding the Core Member accountable. Underpinning this extract is a sense of responsibility experienced by the volunteers, which when combined with confusion may lead to anxiety. Indeed, many of the volunteers reported a lack of clarity regarding the cognitive distortions and comments

they should be challenging and to what extent. In addition, the length of time between the volunteer training and the point the prison-model CoSA moved in to the community was often several months, thus, leading to further anxiety. It is important to note here however, that since the data was collected a colour coded risk and contact escalation protocol has been introduced for each prison-model CoSA. In line with the monitor principle underpinning all CoSA (Saunders & Wilson, 2003), these are tailored specifically to each Core Member indicating the relevant risk factors and the required action should the situation present itself. Lowe and Willis (2018) have acknowledged how key challenges faced by the volunteers are recognising negative patterns of behaviour and maladaptive coping strategies in the Core Member. This document may, therefore, reduce some of the anxieties the volunteers disclosed regarding the accountability aspect of their role. Further research, however, is required to confirm this.

#### **Extract 8**

‘I don’t know if you know he hasn’t done any formal group work or treatment so he is saying things like for an example, a couple of weeks ago he said ‘the thing I don’t understand is why she waited 16 years or whatever before she reported it’ now when I was in my other job that would have been an invitation in to a conversation about why does he think that might be and trying to get him to understand a bit about things and their perspective with a view move towards accountability and understanding’ (*Jim - Volunteer*).

Here the extract highlights Jim’s confusion in how much they can challenge the Core Member as a volunteer whose role it is to also support them. This volunteer has previous work experience and is therefore aware that some of the comments made may be risky. He is unclear, however, as to the extent he can challenge these as a volunteer. These tentative feelings are demonstrated through the language he uses; he wants to support the Core Member in becoming

accountable but appears unclear as to the extent he can hold these discussions. This resonates with the CoSA literature whereby the requirement to be supportive but also to acknowledge and work in relation to the Core Members' risk factors to ensure accountability, is recognised as a difficult balance to strike (Armstrong, Chistyakova, Mackenzie, & Malloch, 2008; Lowe & Willis, 2018; McCartan, 2016). However, although not specific to CoSA, Farmer, McAlinden and Maruna (2015) reported how ex-offenders who had proceeded to successfully desist from crime reported the most appreciation for probation officers who expressed concern but were also firm and realistic. This suggests that the Core Members may not only respect but also appreciate the dual role of the volunteers, a finding that is unpacked in the following superordinate theme.

#### **Extract 9**

'I don't know I think part of me feels a bit nervous about that aspect because it's like you know when you're trying to turn over a new leaf, I think I'm just conscious of you know perhaps he doesn't want to talk about or he doesn't want to go over it so 'ok we won't go there, we won't discuss it' but actually certain things like that do need to be discussed and I think it's all part of a learning curve for me as a person and a volunteer to be more assertive on those matters but it is on the forefront of my mind and I know it needs to be done so I'm not going to overlook it entirely but I just need to get more confident about, I dunno what I can and can't speak about with him (*Gemma - Volunteer*).

This extract highlights further the uncertainty the volunteers experience regarding effectively balancing the support for the new 'offence free' Core Member, whilst holding them accountable for their thoughts and feelings based on their past 'offending self'. Underlying this appears a confusion surrounding the importance of discussing topic risk factors with Core

Members, particularly those who do not volunteer the information themselves. This highlights the consideration the volunteers have for the Core Members and the relationships that have been established; they do not wish to cause them distress through forcing them to discuss topics they would rather leave behind. Whilst it is important for volunteers to hold Core Members accountable for their current behaviour, the use of encouraging individuals desisting from sexual offending to take responsibility for past behaviour has indeed been questioned (Maruna & Mann, 2006). Instead Farmer, McAlinden and Maruna (2016) argue that the focus should be on maintaining and working towards a positive future self. Based on these arguments it is possible that the new risk and contact escalation protocol that has been introduced for each prison-model CoSA, since collecting the current data, may be sufficient in providing knowledge of the risk factors relevant to each Core Member. Even when Core Members choose not to discuss past behaviour or factors related to their risk of reoffending, volunteers may still feel confident in recognising any potential risky situations in their current behaviour.

Interestingly, the Core Members did recognise the accountability role of the volunteers despite the volunteers feeling unsure about it, which will now be considered.

### **Superordinate theme: Supporting desistance**

The second superordinate theme involves the Core Members' understanding of their risk factors and the harm they have caused through their offences. Once they have been released into the community the volunteers encourage them to focus on their new pro-social lifestyle, thus helping to reinforce their crime-free identity and desist against their old, crime associated identity. Although the volunteers did not necessarily recognise or report an active accountability role, it appeared to be achieved indirectly by being there for the Core Members when 'wobbles' or problems occurred and by regularly asking them where they had been and with whom. This led to a concern, however, of what would happen once the CoSA journey had come to an end.

### *Staying on track*

Nearly all the Core Members interviewed stated that having the volunteers to talk to helped them work through problems and respond to them in a risk-free way.

#### **Extract 10**

‘So I’ve stayed off the drink and I’m positive now I’m going to stay off it, although there has been times when I felt like, like when I got letters from City homes saying ‘no you can’t have a place, we’re not going to house you’ and I’ve got phone numbers and yeah I can phone them up anytime and have a chat’ (*Frank – Core Member*).

This extract highlights how the Core Members are aware of the support they have from the volunteers should potential risky situations arise, whereby they are tempted to slip back in to old, risky habits. Frank appears to express honesty regarding the barriers he has faced to reintegration and how they have impacted on his motivation to desist; there have been times when he felt like turning to his old, coping mechanism of drinking. It is the expressive support offered by the volunteers, demonstrated through being there for him to talk to, which appears to encourage hope and motivation to change, keeping it alive when their belief in themselves may waver. This again provides evidence for the importance of the expressive support provided through CoSA, due to it signifying a sense of belonging, acceptance and being cared for (Reis & Collins, 2000).

#### **Extract 11**

‘We were talking about it in general the other day and we were saying we’d put the chaplain in the situation about me past and now, then I’d probably pick a time when we go, it wouldn’t be say a morning service cause there’s more likely to be more family related to an evening service. You probably still get the odd family

go to the evening service but evening services are more adults but I wouldn't say families with children or whatever' (*John – Core Member*).

### **Extract 12**

'There's not a lot you can't get through even if it's something you can't singularly (get through), you can get together with someone (from the circle)' (*William – Core Member*).

What is notable from the two extracts above is the use of the language the Core Members use when explaining how they can turn to the volunteers to discuss potential problems. It is inclusive and highlights a sense of 'we-ness' experienced between the Core Member and the volunteers. Indeed, this sense of solidarity has been reported within previous research as effective in enabling ex-offenders to realise their pro-social aspirations (Weaver & McNeill, 2015). In addition, through modelling and talking through challenges, as demonstrated in the extracts, can increase the Core Members' sense of control in making decisions over their own life (Fox, 2015). This increased sense of agency is, in turn, argued to be a starting point from which desistance can follow (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009).

Interestingly, despite the volunteers' concern surrounding their accountability role as highlighted in the first superordinate theme, the Core Members demonstrated an awareness of this dual function of their prison-model CoSA.

### ***'What have you been up to?'***

In addition to encouraging the Core Members to stay on track through the open discussion of any problems or concerns, the Core Members highlighted how simply being asked questions about their week at each CoSA meeting reinforced their accountability further.

### **Extract 13**

‘Well there’s usually questions, what have you done today or what are your plans for the week and this that and the other, have you seen \*\*\*\*’ (*James – Core Member*).

As the extract from James highlights, the volunteers appeared to use a low-key method , to hold the Core Members accountable for their behaviour. This method appeared to work effectively with the Core Members, encouraging them to stop and think about their behaviour beforehand.

#### **Extract 14**

‘Well knowing that there’s somebody out there that just takes the time out to ask these questions, cause if you’re say I’d come out of prison before all this was available, there’d be nobody, I’d be stuck on me own I’d be ‘let’s go and have a fricking pint’ and then you know with me one’s too many and 20’s not enough and I’d just carry on drinking and I’d end up dead or I’d end up committing further offences and stuff like that, so it’s not a road I want to go down (*Frank – Core Member*).

Indeed, some have suggested that more work is required to effectively achieve the accountability aspect of CoSA (McCartan, 2016). The extract from Frank, however, suggests that alongside the expressive support offered by the volunteers they are, despite their concerns, encouraging the participants from slipping back in to old habits. Indeed, Cooley, Moore and Sample (2017, p.146), reported from their research that frequent communication between ex-offenders and their probation officers encouraged desistance from crime as it reminded them that they ‘had a problem they need to control’. It is possible therefore, that the experience of the volunteers asking questions about their weekly activities reminded Core Members of the

risk of certain behaviours linked with previous offending, such as drinking alcohol in Franks case.

### **Extract 15**

‘Yeah I think especially a couple of them would say well ‘I don’t think you should be pursuing that line (if he stated he had done something they didn’t approve of)’ (*Keith - Core Member*).

Here the knowledge is more overt with Keith recognising that the volunteers would disapprove of certain behaviours. This indicated that in-depth discussions of the Core Members’ offences may not be necessary to ensure accountability. This has been stated previously by Weaver and McNeil (2015) who believe that when ex-offenders develop a sense of inclusion through the formation of pro-social relationships, pro-social behaviour is aspired to out of a desire to maintain these new relationships. Within the questioning of their day to day activities therefore it is possible that there is a more implicit message. The Core Members know that at best they would be challenged on their behaviour if it was potentially risky and at worst they may lose the support of the volunteers. This, however leads to the question of what happens after the volunteers are no longer there, particularly if a pro-social network has not been established outside of the CoSA.

### ***A journey’s end***

Although the participants were receiving both support and accountability from the volunteers, no one involved in the study had been able to establish any pro-social relationships outside of the CoSA by the time data was collected during the community sessions. Whilst it is positive that the Core Members had the volunteers as pro-social, non-professionals to talk to, they had been unable to establish any firm friendships outside of this despite stating their aspirations to do so.



### **Extract 16**

I: How have you been in terms of socialising outside of the circle?

P: Erm well I don't really because erm if I'm making, forming a friendship it's on me licence conditions that I have to inform them of my offences (*Frank – Core Member participant*).

This extract highlights how for some participants the fact they would have to disclose their previous offence to someone prevents them from forming any friendships outside of the volunteers. This reflects the participants' worry of the general public's perception of and reaction towards those who have been convicted for sexual offences. Indeed, research into the perceptions of those who commit sexual offences have concluded that the public's attitude is generally negative and punitive towards this group of offenders, with many believing they are still at risk of reoffending even after psychological treatment (Levenson et al., 2007). This reluctance to socialise outside of the CoSA, in which they are viewed as a valued member of the community, could therefore be viewed as a self-preservation mechanism that the participants have developed. Based on Goffman's (1959) presentation of the self, maintaining social distance between themselves and others enables them to preserve the impression that they are pro-social members of the community with nothing to hide. This prevents them having to face the judgment and negativity they are fearful of should they have to disclose their previous offending behaviour. This may not, however, be a useful or beneficial mechanism for the Core Members to have.

### **Extract 17**

'I mean I'm quite lucky cause I've got circles, I've got me CPA, I'm got my key worker at the hostel erm \*\*\*\* and you know I've also got erm the mental health team 24 hour team as well so I've got plenty of support but I still don't

feel ready to be, I'm still frightened to be on my own.' (*David – Core Member participant*)

### **Extract 18**

'My worst fear, not my worst fear but something I'm not looking forward to is the end...when the 18 months is up, it's not a fear that I can't cope with anything, it's I don't like saying goodbye (visibly upset) you get close to people and then, you know. I just don't like goodbyes that's it, that's what I'm not looking forward to.' (*James – Core Member participant*)

These extracts illuminate the fear and sadness the Core Members are experiencing regarding their CoSA coming to an end. This emphasises the inclusive nature of the CoSA and the positive work the volunteers are carrying out; the participants feel truly accepted by these individuals. With regard to the prison-model CoSA specifically, the volunteers have been on a significant journey with the Core Members, starting in the prison and continuing with them into the community. The meetings gradually reduce in frequency as the CoSA comes to a close, so the Core Members do not experience the same abrupt change in circumstances as they do when they are released from prison. Despite this, the emotionality in the extracts indicates that the participants view the end of the CoSA as a form of loss. As McCartan and Kemshall (2017) acknowledge, if the Core Members have not been able to bridge to other social groups by this point, problems could arise due to the links between social isolation, loneliness and the risk of reoffending (Mingus & Burchfield, 2012; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006; Wilson et al., 2009).

This highlights the importance of any CoSA in encouraging the Core Member to socialise within the local community, thus strengthening their social ties with pro-social individuals outside of the CoSA. For example, the Core Member may express a desire to begin a new hobby, which the volunteers could start with them, at least for the first few sessions until

they had developed enough confidence to attend alone. Indeed, Paternoster and Bushway (2009) acknowledge the importance of a network realignment with pro-social others in order for successful desistance to occur. However, it is also important to highlight that the volunteers are not responsible for the Core Members or the choices they make. If the Core Members choose not to socialise outside of the CoSA, despite encouragement and suggestions from the volunteers, that is their prerogative not to do so. Future research is now required to explore the experience of the Core Members after the prison-model CoSA, or indeed any CoSA, has come to an end. Evaluating the process of change in prison-model Core Members, over longer periods, will help to determine whether desistance is in fact reached once the volunteers are no longer there to offer both support and accountability.

It is important to note here that the research analysed in this study was carried out during the early implementation stage of the prison-model CoSA project when best practices were still being developed. This may have influenced the quality of the CoSA and therefore some of the findings derived from the data. The prison- model of CoSA however, has now been established for four years. It may be possible therefore, that during this time volunteer recruitment has become streamlined, thus, ensuring committed volunteers are recruited. In addition, tools such as the risk escalation protocol outlined earlier has been introduced and may be working to effect. Further research, however, would be required to explore this further.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper was to explore the experiences of both Core member and volunteers involved in the first prison-based model of CoSA across England and Wales. From this data, learning points have been derived that can be used to help guide the implementation of future prison-based models.

The first theme within the context of ambiguous practice involved a belief that the ‘real job’ of a volunteer involved more instrumental and practical support, which could not be started until the Core Member was released from prison. The importance of expressive and emotional support needs to therefore be reinforced to volunteers, along with the benefits of the prison sessions, which has been discussed in previous studies (Kitson-Boyce et al., 2018b, Kitson-Boyce et al., 2018c). Volunteer commitment was also raised as a potential issue by both the Core Members and the volunteers themselves. It is encouraged therefore that the importance of volunteer attendance is reinforced regularly by the CoSA coordinators. In addition, it will be interesting to explore whether the volunteer social events organised by the SLF have an impact on volunteer commitment and levels of ‘buying in’ to the initiative. In relation to the volunteers’ anxieties regarding their accountability role, further research is now required to consider whether the risk and contact escalation documents introduced by the SLF are enough to improve their confidence in carrying out the required actions i.e. challenging the Core Member, feeding relevant information back to the coordinator. It is important to note, however that the Core Members, although not using the term ‘accountability’ appeared aware of this aspect of their CoSA and the benefits of it i.e. it helped them ‘stay on track’.

In addition, the findings highlighted how in-depth discussion of Core Members’ offences and offence related thoughts may not be required to hold them accountable for their behaviour. Instead the volunteers simply asking probing questions about their week was enough for the Core Members to think before they acted. The fact that the Core Members can be held accountable using this method should be reinforced to future volunteers, which may help to build their confidence in this aspect of their role. Finally Core Members’ expressed their concern regarding the CoSA coming to a close. This highlights the importance of the Core Members forming relationships outside of the CoSA through hobbies and activities. It would be useful for coordinators to reinforce to the volunteers the importance of the Core Members

bridging to other social groups due to the role in can play in preventing future recidivism (Mingus & Burchfield, 2012; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006; Wilson et al., 2009).

This paper has outlined and discussed the learning points derived from both Core Member and volunteer data. These can now be used, along with discussions of the benefits of the prison-based model CoSA, to continue to develop and improve this national first.

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