FALSE ECONOMY?

WITHDRAWAL BY NATIONAL PROBATION SERVICE OF FUNDING FOR CIRCLES OF SUPPORT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

I have been an admirer and a supporter from the side lines of the success of Circles of Support and Accountability ("Circles"), having been introduced to the concept as the judicial member of the Advisory Panel of Rethinking Crime and Punishment more than a dozen years ago. Before explaining my personal dismay at a funding decision which threatens the lifeblood of this vital initiative, it is timely to explain the concept; and why it is so effective in monitoring those sex offenders who have been released into the community for continued supervision by the Probation Service.

In short, the name of the organisation accurately describes its function; and why it is so effective. Carefully selected and fully trained groups of 4 – 6 volunteers regularly meet with a released sex offender, prompting them with the active support they are likely to require, particularly after a lengthy period of imprisonment; but making it equally clear that the price of support is that the offender must be accountable to the Circle for their continued behaviour. Circles provide a range of support mechanisms to help these people form appropriate links to their community, access the services which they need, and thus help prevent further victims of sexual abuse.

The unique strength of Circles has been its ability to harness the enthusiasm and commitment of its highly trained community volunteers; and the skills which they develop enable them effectively to manage the risk of potential harm posed by those who have once been assessed as high risk sex offenders.

Not only was I a judge sitting in the Crown Court both part-time and full-time for 27 years, but I served my maximum 10 year term as a member of the Parole Board. In both capacities I had considerable experience not only of those whose sexual offending had caused significant harm, but of those who, following many years in custody, had been carefully assessed by professionals as presenting a sufficiently low risk to be properly managed in the community.

The more than 600 active volunteers who form such Circles are, and for the past 10 years have been, managing former sex offenders who have hitherto been assessed as posing a high risk of harm. While objectively their risk has been sufficiently lowered to justify their release on licence if they had been serving indeterminate sentences, many such offenders are automatically released at the halfway point of a determinate sentence; and such persons are recognised to be among the most stigmatised and marginalised groups of former offenders. Those who are assigned to a Circle are often isolated, shunned by family and associates, who struggle to find accommodation or employment, and hence successfully to integrate back into the community. Circles assist not only with all
these practical aspects, but in addition work with the offender permanently to change their former abusive behaviour.

Circles provision has been fully and independently evaluated; and the evaluations have demonstrated significant benefits both to the recipients of a Circle, as well as to the volunteers and the community in general. Offenders who have taken part have demonstrated a proven reduction in their risk scores; the Circle has helped them to secure suitable accommodation and employment, and to improve their emotional well-being; to form appropriate and meaningful relationships; and to pursue constructive hobbies and activities.

Local Circles Providers have been supported through a Service Level Agreement with the National Probation Service (NPS) totalling some £256,000 annually. This very modest provision, which enables oversight of the work of some 600 active volunteers, can be contrasted with the substantial value which NPS obtains from Circles. That body is of course statutorily responsible for the management of such persons on licence in the community.

It is objectively all too clear that, but for the volunteer support which is available through Circles, the hard-pressed Probation Service would struggle to begin to provide the degree of supervision and support which these former offenders continue to require in the community to which they have been released.

It is against this background that I learned with dismay bordering on incomprehension of the reported decision of NPS to discontinue the funding of Circles. I understand that the immediate consequences of this decision are stark. First, Circles provision in a number of Regions, such as Greater Manchester, where there has always been a waiting list for those seeking the support of a Circle, will have to cease. Most local Circles Providers operate as small charities; and without this regular support their long-term sustainability is under threat. Second, I understand that approximately 100 Circles which were due to start up may now have to be cancelled as a result of this withdrawal of funding. The emotional implications for a cohort of former sex offenders who are ready to start their Circles, and for which they may have prepared for months, and the consequential impact on their future risk, is immeasurable.

So let us put this financial “saving” into context. It is said that the funding of £256,000 will be injected into “the purchase of accommodation provision”. If that means literally what is stated, it is unlikely to provide more than 5 hostel places per year, since £50,000 is the approximate annual cost of a hostel place. Contrast that with the current and planned provision of at least 170 Circles per year, keeping safe an equal number of former sex offenders in the community. The task of keeping them safe inevitably includes the sourcing and maintaining of secure accommodation. Hence this budget decision makes no sense at all. The exercise of judgment is not the exclusive preserve of the judge (or even the
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