

Circles of Support and Personalisation

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“When we seek for connection, we restore the world to wholeness. Our seemingly separate lives become meaningful as we discover how truly necessary we are to each other”

Margaret J. Wheatley

‘Circles of Support’ already improve the lives of a small minority of people in thousands of diverse ways. How can we share the effectiveness of circles so that they touch the lives of many more people, and become a tool for building connection and resilience in our communities?

The beginning of this decade has been characterised by rapid change around the world. New technologies and new attitudes means that people have been creating new forms of networks, networks that have given them the strength and courage to attempt what a few years ago might have seemed impossible.

In the UK, the way social care is organised and financed is undergoing radical change. Despite the challenges caused by cuts, a shift toward personalisation is creating new opportunities for people who use social care to live in ways that overcome exclusion and disempowerment. We believe however there is potential for this change to go much wider and much deeper; if we can learn how to give real attention and sustenance to the structures that support people, going beyond traditional rigid formal structures toward more natural, flexible structures where the person is in far more control of their situation.

In this context, the potential for a reinvigoration of the idea of ‘circles of support’ seems immense. Using the control over resources that personal budgets in health and social care offers to people, coupled with the practice of building a supportive network of allies around a person becomes a powerful mechanism for implementing change in that person’s life, change in the way services interact with that person, and a fundamental change in the way communities receive and regard people who require

long-term support. Circles are actually a deeply practical way of building social and community capital and of harnessing ‘social productivity’. Circles bring together people to think and plan in a way that organically builds the capacity of communities to welcome people with disabilities. Circles of support, coupled with personal budgets have the potential to become powerful methods of delivering support for far many more people, though this will require an investment of resources, commitment and energy at many levels from the leadership of health and social care.



Figure 1: Circles can use person centred thinking to link a person’s paid and natural supports together, and help to build relationships and connections with the community

1 What are Circles?

The idea of a circle is both simple and ancient. It's the way that the first human beings decided everything about how they would live. A circle is simply a group of people who come together regularly with a common purpose, who think and talk together, then agree and take actions that will further that purpose. It's based on humanity and human relationships, and on the way that a group of people working together can harness their mental and physical resources toward a common end.

When a circle is built around a person who would otherwise tend to find themselves underestimated and excluded from society, the circle's focus can be turned onto challenging it's members to explore ways of enabling the person at it's centre to reach their highest potential, to develop positive roles and relationships and to live the kind of life that makes most sense to them, it links the person up with others, but also links everyone involved with each other.

Most people build their own circles quite naturally and informally through their everyday lives. However one issue that is common to many people who have long term illness or disability is that they become socially isolated. Often people find that the only people consistently in their lives are close family or paid carers. Here it becomes necessary to consciously build circles and connections with the person, because for some people connection does not occur easily or automatically. Sometimes a circle can even begin with just the focus person and one other person making a commitment to work to build a circle of support around the person, however difficult that is, and however long it takes. This more 'intentional' work of building connections in order to overcome a person's social isolation is what is meant by a 'circle of support'.

The work of building circles can be based on the loftiest dreams and ambitions, yet at the same time is highly practical and mundane, as simple as following quietly in the person's daily itinerary and making note of all the people that person actually knows and interacts with, searching for those people who might be invited into the circle.

Jennie's Circle

Jennie's circle was set up to help her in transition. Jennie already had a person-centred plan (an Essential Lifestyle Plan) and when she was in Year 10 she had a person centred review. Suzie, Jennie's Mum takes up the story:

“Jennie's person-centred review made me realise that the best way for us to move Jennie's future forward was to have a Circle of Support. One of the long-term issues for me is that I'm not always going to be here to support Jennie. I wanted to make sure that there were enough people in her life with the same interests and concerns for her future as me, and who knew her well enough, who could make the right choices about what she wants when she is older. This was the reason behind setting up the Circle of Support.

Helen facilitated Jennie's person-centred review and offered to facilitate the circle for us as well. At the first meeting Helen introduced us to the principles of Positive and Productive meetings, and this means that we have a clear purpose for our meetings, agreed rules, we use 'rounds' and share roles. It is very important to share roles so that everything does not end up on one person.

When the circle first started meeting, these were our roles: Dave and I are there to support Jennie; Matt was the timekeeper; Julie and Debbie provided food and drinks; Helen was the facilitator; and we take turns to record meetings. There were a few rules, such as: have fun and food, the meetings are confidential; speak up and ask questions if things are not clear; be honest and open about differing opinions and meetings would be held at our house. This is our 'Circle Meeting Map' which we had up at every meeting in the first year.

I was relieved we were sharing responsibilities because it felt like so much was already resting on my shoulders with organising reviews and keeping the Essential Lifestyle Plan up to date.

Once the Circle of Support was established it started to take that weight off my shoulders. Thinking about the future and how to make it happen is monumentally stressful for families of disabled children. The transition from children's services to adult life is a worry and the circle helped ease that burden.

I think most of the time I get Jennie's best interests right but sometimes a decision might be right for the parent but not necessarily right for the child. The circle allows other people to challenge me in a safe way by asking 'is that right for Jennie?' and that has been really good for me.

I wanted to see Jennie happy and settled and now the Circle of Support means I don't have to worry about her because if I am not around I know they will continue supporting Jennie and everything we want collectively for her will carry on. The circle will provide a forum to support Jennie the way I would like."

Circles are a natural and human way of organising, that are of benefit to the person, to the people who participate in the circle, and to the wider community, but this does not mean that building circles is automatic, easy or cheap. Our experience is that both pulling together circles, and sustaining circles so that they become enduring requires persistent work, and that the people who do this work also require support and resources.

Circles have been given a variety of names and follow different models such as: 'Self-Directed Support Corporations', 'Microboards', 'Circles of Support and Accountability', and are similar to methods of organising like 'Family Group Conferencing'. While there are some important differences between these ways

of organising, they're all based on a radical form of subsidiarity - taking decision making power directly to the point closest to the people who will be affected by that decision. These methods have been shown to encourage independence, increase resilience and self-reliance, encourage creativity in planning, delivering support in a way that makes sense for the person, and also an increasing use of 'natural' supports.

It's important not to be doctrinaire and enforce too many rules onto the form or organisation of circles. Every person's circle will come together for slightly different reasons, and find their own ways of working together. There is a lot however that we can learn from the experience of building circles that has been going on, particularly in the last two or three decades.

Joe's Circle

Caroline Tomlinson has recently published a powerful account of how she helped build a circle of support around her son Joe.

She was inspired by Judith Snow who gave her the hard message that "sometimes you have to invite people into your sons or daughter's life".

She was helped to set up her son's first circle when he was 8. "As much as the circle was fantastic I had to organise everything and I started to feel really tired. As Joe reached the age of 12 the next few years became a blur and I felt I was yet again having to fight the system. I mustered up the energy and got Ruth Gorman from Helen Sanderson Associates to facilitate the circle... Ruth reinvigorated the vision, and the circle really started to come together.

Joe was one of the first people in the country to self-direct his own support. He now has a great team of people supporting him, his own home, his own business, his own car and a great life, but in reality could it be sustained?

Caroline set up a family led organisation called 'Embrace' in Wigan & Leigh. This organisation promotes circles, and where an individual or family would like a circle, matches them up with a facilitator for a small fee. The fee covers training, mentoring and paying the facilitator. As more circles are set up, they are encouraged to come together to give each other mutual support.

"Joe's security, and my own depend upon his being at the centre of a network of people who care about what happens to him and will continue to care about him even after I have gone"

Quotes from Caroline Tomlinson (2012) "Love is simply not enough" Tizard Learning Disability Review, Vol 17 issue 1 pp26-31

What are the principles underpinning circles of support?

Circles are very diverse. They must by their nature reflect much of the culture and values of the participants, who own the circle together. We do feel however that there are certain clear principles that are common among circles of support:

- 1 **Purpose:** Circles are drawn together by a common purpose and by motivations that are unique to each individual involved. Overall the purpose of cultivating circles at scale is to build the capacity of our communities to include and welcome everyone. In the case of individual circles of support, this deeply held purpose is to enable the person at its centre to move toward a life that enables them to achieve their full potentials as a human being and to participate in their community as a contributing citizen and a valued friend.
- 2 **People:** People come to the circle to help build the life of the person and the strength of the community around them. Those closest to the person come because of their love or friendship for the person. Others come because they wish to create and expand community capacity. Some are invited because they can provide a useful service to the person or the circle, some are paid service providers.
- 3 **Vision:** Circles create a shared vision of the future based on what's learned about what is important to the person and who the person is. They find ways to move toward this vision.
- 4 **Capacity:** Circles speak the language of capacity. They seek out their own capacities, the person's strengths and gifts, and the resources of the community and find ways to appreciate, value and use these gifts to the full.
- 5 **Inclusion:** Circles call to the values that lie deepest in our hearts and ask us to have the courage to express them. The circle is a space of respect and honesty. We keep working to earn the trust that enables this. Circles are a practical inclusion tool that expands the capacity of society to welcome and support all its members.
- 6 **Listening:** Everyone in the circle must have time to think, time to speak. The circle practices listening mindfully and with respect to create a soothing space where diverse opinions and knowledge can be shared.
- 7 **Thinking:** Circles create a thinking environment to think together about possibilities. Spending time together to think is far too rare in social care. When supporting a person's whole life, it's useful to spend a couple of hours thinking about it's direction and quality.
- 8 **Learning:** The circle has a radical openness to learning; a preparedness to change anything and everything based on what is discovered during their interaction with the person and the world.
- 9 **Power:** The circle is founded with the aim of establishing 'power with' rather than 'power over'. An understanding of power and a sharing of roles and responsibilities helps us generate 'power to' and 'power within', both in the circle and in the person at it's focus.

10 Action: The work of the circle leads to actions. Circle members honour the commitments they make to the person and each other during their time in the circle.

The role of the ‘circles facilitator’ is to embody these principles deeply in their own core, and to gently help the circle incorporate these principles into the space they create together.

Changing the rules without changing the principles

We would like to see circles of support moving from still being a relatively rare and unusual way of managing a person’s support, to being an option that is accessible to everyone who uses social care.

A commitment to delivering circles of support at scale, and in a way that is sustainable will require us to seriously consider the resources that such a change will need, and whether some of the rules and restrictions that circles practitioners have sometimes imposed on themselves are still practical or necessary in the era of personalisation of social care.

One such restriction was a ‘rule’ that everyone in a circle should be unpaid. This rule made some sense during the first wave of circles, when they were a mechanism for operating outside and defending the person from a service-centred system that was deeply impersonal and inflexible in its approach that relied heavily on the expertise of professionals and put little or no trust in people, their families or frontline carers. Suggestions that people who do the work of building and facilitating circles might be paid for their time were met with objections that this would create a ‘new layer of professionals’, thus taking power away from the person and their allies.

We feel that the advent of personal budgets and the first stages of the spread of person centred thinking into some organisations now means this objection no longer has as much power as it once did. For example, it could now be possible for the person and their circle to use a portion of the personal budget to ‘hire and fire’ the facilitator, facilitation could be offered by a range of community based organisations, including user-led organisations, centres for independent living and self-advocacy groups, and the revenue generated by providing such facilitation could provide these groups with an income stream that gives them more independence from local authorities. Circle facilitation could also be offered as part of time-banks or ‘slithers of time’.

Other common arguments that facilitators should be unpaid relate to an idea that people who are unpaid are likely to have fewer conflicts of interest, and that their motivation is likely to be “purer”. We do not accept this, conflicts of interest can extend to many areas beyond money, and a moralistic approach to motivation simply restricts the number of people who will ever get circles. We believe that in many, and possibly most, cases, it will be necessary to support a circle by paying the facilitator so that they are fairly rewarded for the skills they apply and the time they

commit to the work of building a person's supportive network. The likely alternative to sustaining a circle with a paid facilitator is often 'firework' circles that start with a burst of ideas and optimism, but fizzle out quickly as people realize the weight of the work involved in sustaining a circle over time against all the obstacles and challenges, and as that old enemy of change; inertia creeps back in.

Derek's Circle

Derek is supported by 'Living Ambitions': a supported living service.

Living Ambitions helped Derek set up a small circle of support. They wanted to make sure that Derek had 'Just enough support' and felt that a circle would be a good way of moving from a situation where he was supported 100% by Living Ambitions to getting all the things he could share when being supported by a really powerful circle.

Derek used a PATH to decide on his ambitions for the future. These included raising money for charity, improving his woodworking skills, setting up his own woodworking business, having his own business cards and including his partner in all this.

Derek is now a registered fundraiser for the epilepsy society, has designed his own business cards, has his own wood workshop, is growing his business, and has been featured in the local newspaper and the council website. He has made more friends and is doing more things on his own, without support.

Jodie who facilitates Derek's circle said that some people had criticised the fact that some of its members (including her) are being paid, arguing that everyone in a circle should be unpaid. Jodie said "I just asked those people to look at what Derek and his circle have achieved. We would like to see it being made a contractual requirement of supported living services that they help the people they support to increase local community capital by building circles with them"

Derek said "I have other dreams and ambitions and my Circle are still meeting to help me think about them and ways I can achieve them – I'm looking forward to the future!"

What works and does not work about paid and unpaid circles facilitators?

	Works	Doesn't work
Where the facilitator is unpaid	<p>Cheaper – no cost.</p> <p>Closeness of facilitator to person.</p> <p>Avoids some conflicts of interest.</p> <p>Unselfinterested motivation of facilitator.</p>	<p>Family and person feel beholden to facilitator.</p> <p>Feeling of obligation to repay the facilitator in other ways.</p> <p>What happens when facilitator gets another job, moves away?</p> <p>Other conflicts of interest</p> <p>If facilitator is also a main carer, ends up with two jobs - both providing support and organising circle.</p> <p>How is the facilitator held accountable?</p> <p>Unlikely to work at scale, as people who can consistently work for nothing are thin on the ground!</p>
Where the facilitator is paid by the person or the circle	<p>Facilitator can be required to work to a particular standard, be trained to a particular level – if the circle wishes.</p> <p>Person/circle can fire the facilitator and hire another!</p> <p>Accountability to the circle: easier to ask a person you pay to change the way they work</p> <p>Facilitator is rewarded for their work, including some of the administration of the circle</p> <p>Stability/longevity of circle: becomes ‘enduring’. Could continue during absence of main carer.</p> <p>Skilled facilitators help develop many new circles.</p> <p>Can be repeated at scale, if a source of funding can be found</p> <p>‘Invest to save’, a circle plans how to use its various resources to meet the person’s needs and aspirations most effectively, immediately and over the long term.</p>	<p>Finding ways to pay the facilitator.</p> <p>Does the facilitator become ‘just another professional’?</p> <p>Questions about motivation of the facilitator.</p> <p>Where will the money come from?</p> <p>Are people confident enough in the power and effectiveness of circles to invest money in a circles facilitator?</p>

Ways of establishing and sustaining circles

- Person and allies build a circle and sustain it without any outside intervention.
- Person and allies are given information and support to set up and sustain their own circle.
- Person and allies are helped by someone who facilitates their first circle meeting, offers facilitation training to someone within the circle, then leaves them to get on with it.
- Person and allies are helped by someone who facilitates several circles meetings, offers facilitation training to someone within the circle then leaves them to get on with it, sometimes offering advice and support from outside when requested.
- Person and allies are helped to build a circle, then helped to sustain it over the long term by a 'permanent' facilitator (an 'enduring circle').

Key: building enough flexibility into the model so that people can move up and down the levels of facilitator engagement in a way that suits their approach to planning.

It's likely that the more isolated, disempowered, underestimated and excluded the person has been, the more work it will take to build a circle of committed allies around that person, but also the more valuable to the person and to the community every new connection will be.

Overcoming social isolation is the one change in health and social care that has the longest list of positive outcomes; with the immense positive impact it has on the person in terms of physical and mental health, and their ability to find ways to contribute their own gifts to the community.

People often begin to see the need for circles in times of crisis. Circles come into their own when they become a regular thinking mechanism for everyday life.

2 What is the contribution of Circles of Support to delivering personalisation and creating social capital

Impact on the Person

People organising and thinking in circles have a wide variety of impacts on the person, as diverse as the people they focus on. By thinking outside the more limited options presented by traditional service delivery, people can think in a more practical problem solving way. At their best they enable people to sustain responsibilities as well as rights, and to contribute to their families and the wider community.

Circles organised across North West England provide us with learning around this:

In Lancashire a report written on the initial impact of circles at ‘West Lancashire Positive Living’ recounts stories that include how a person was enabled to reduce the number of personal assistants he uses from 2:1 down to 1:1, and is now thinking of launching his own small business, another person was helped by the circle to move into a supported living environment, with the circle acting as a control over how his support is delivered. His parents report that this has massively increased his self-confidence.

Impact on others

Another person already had a person centred plan, but nothing seemed to be happening with it. Getting a circle started meant that the person and his allies were able to thrash out important family issues, and they could now start movement on wills and trusts.

Other people are reporting that meeting in circles has helped them do the thinking they need to obtain an individual budget and organise genuinely self-directed support.

3 Ideas for Circles of Support at scale

Building many more circles than exist today will require the engagement of far more people into this activity. In particular it will require people with values, skills and motivation to carry out the work of convening and facilitating the circle.

Standing up in front of a group, and asking questions in a way that helps that group think with the person mindfully, respectfully, creatively is a particular skill that requires effort to learn and constant refreshment and renewal, and is supported by being among a community of others following the same path to avoid bad habits and complacency, to share learning and to reaffirm commitment.

Encouraging the development of a layer of circles facilitators will in itself require creativity, effort and resources, though it is not necessarily about creating something completely new. There are already a layer of people in the UK who have skills in person centred thinking and planning, who are committed to ideas of personalisation and inclusion, and people with experience of facilitating circles who could share these skills and experiences more widely if they are supported to do so. The Circles of Support model fits very naturally with the idea of ‘Local Area Coordination’ which aims to build and maintain formal and informal community networks.

Who could provide facilitation and support for circles?

- **Existing circles:** Where existing circles have been working successfully, the people who have been part of this success can share their learning with others who face similar situations.

- **Family members** who participate in courses like ‘Partners in Policymaking’ could apply what they learn in to supporting their own relative, but also to someone else outside their family, spreading and sharing the learning.
- **Local social enterprises/voluntary groups/community organisations:** These groups seem at the same time to be invested by our social care system with increasingly high hopes and increasingly sparse resources. They have immense advantages from the point of view of building circles, in that they are often more willing and more free to experiment and innovate. Their footprint in the community means they are capable of deep local knowledge which could be a huge asset to the circles they support.

We all know however that despite a pervasive rhetoric of ‘stronger citizen control’, such organisations typically live a perilous ‘hand to mouth’ existence, from funding application to funding application, surviving often on grim determination and the strength of people’s hearts. Providing paid facilitation services to people could become an important revenue stream for these groups. The crucial social capital that these groups embody would thus be sustained.

- **Existing providers** could release certain staff for a few hours every month to help facilitate circles. The experience and skills they gain through this activity will be beneficial to the organisation, and be a method of them exercising corporate social responsibility. Organisations would need to undertake this with the expectation that this will have a big impact on the people they release. Such people are likely to benefit from deep learning from the circles they engage in, and bring that learning back to their organisations, challenging them to grow and adapt to the new person-centred paradigm. Some organisations have positively embraced the change this brings. Others might find it more difficult. Provider organisations could be involved in circles of support in other ways, for example by providing paid services to Circles of Support, for example, book-keeping or training is another possibility.

IAS (a provider in Greater Manchester) actively supports staff and managers to be involved in circles of support. They worked with a family-led organisation to train circle facilitators, and make these available to local families who wanted to set up a circle around their son or daughter. As well as this, they brought together local established circles in the area to ask what would help more circles develop. One of the issues that came from that was how hard it can be for Circles to manage the ‘business’ side of employing and supporting staff. IAS responded to this by developing a costed ‘offer’ to Circles and people who have personal budgets listing the support that they can offer. This includes management support for Circles, where a manager supports the staff on behalf of the Circle, or mentors an existing manager.

- **Trainee social work students, trainee nurses, AHPs**, as a key part of their training (and possibly beyond this time).

There exists a whole layer of young enthusiastic people wishing to gain a professional qualification, and hoping to use it to make a big difference in people's lives. We also know that many family carers already appreciate the opportunity to support students on placements with them as this is an opportunity to share the reality of life from the point of view of people and their carers. A radical shift in how future professionals are trained could give them even more potential to meet and engage with people and their families in a meaningful way. Introducing a requirement to participate in a circle as part of a student's training would shift some of focus of training from the Office, Classroom and hospital directly into the community; it would provide the student with a person-focused point of view of how services are delivered. As both social and health care aspire to become increasingly focused in the community and at the community level, it makes sense to change the way students are trained in order to reflect this shift. It will be important here however that the circle itself is able to choose who should facilitate their circle, and to change this if it is not working for the person.

Conclusion

The 'circle of support' is a model that has enormous potential to enhance the lives of many more people, and to increase the capacity of the community to welcome people with disabilities and other social and health needs. In order for this to happen two main things need to change. Firstly person centred practitioners need to become much more willing to be flexible in how we apply the model, so that the benefits of circles can be shared at scale.

Secondly we need to recognise that circles will not build themselves or necessarily be easy to build. Most circles will need a conscious intervention and resources to explain their benefits, train facilitators, create them and sustain them over time so that their full effectiveness can be felt. Every way of delivering these resources so that individuals can build a circle as a key component of their package of support needs to be explored.

Circles harness human warmth and human creativity and apply it to a purpose. In enabling improved support and improved lives so that more people can contribute to our communities they also enhance community connections and capacity; they help us build the interconnected, interdependent, resilient communities that must sustain mutual human support through these challenging times.

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Appendix 1: Circles in Practice, Caroline Tomlinson on her experience of building a cluster of circles

“The circles concept can play a huge part in getting a good life for individuals who need support and their families, but what about those people who are not as well connected or who don’t have any friends or family? This was a question I thought long and hard about in my quest to get ordinary people a good life. Taking the PLAN institute model in Canada we adapted the process to work in England and developed the ‘Our Futures’ model initially in Wigan which is now rolling out across the country.

The model is simple, for each circle of support we have a facilitator who is paid for by the family or the individual themselves. Why paid? well it is simple if you pay someone to do a job you expect a certain quality and if you don’t like what you get you can replace them. Each facilitator works with 1 circle, this is to ensure each facilitator can concentrate on developing a circle unique and meaningful to the individual and their family.

To recruit families and facilitators we needed a local host organisation who was trusted by families, the obvious choice was Embrace Wigan and Leigh who had working in the locality for many years. Their role was to find local people who wanted a circle of support, to train the facilitators, co-ordinate the process and provide ongoing mentoring and support.

Encouraging some early adopters took a lot of energy and encouragement, but once one or two families got going with circles word got out. In fact we had recruited several families and didn’t have enough facilitators, so effort needed to be put into recruiting local people to be facilitators. This process was helped by working with local providers of services who had a good person centred reputation and some skilled staff who wanted to be facilitators. We developed a ‘trade off’ where staff could be released to be trained as facilitators for local people who didn’t receive support from their organisation and in return other local facilitators would facilitate a circle for people who they supported.

The facilitator training was given which emphasised people living a good life through positive friendships and relationships. We based the training on a model of hospitality and concentrated on developing a circle, person centred tools, effective mediation skills and keeping a circle alive and productive. As each circle meeting was held the facilitators were brought together to be supported and mentored, this provided excellent peer support and enabled the coordinator to keep track of what was working and was not working.

The outcome has been that 30 circles are now up and running in Wigan and some of them have been going for several years. Individuals and families have described the process as initially scary, but have been able to address the issue of who will be there for my family member when something happens to me? They also describe how the present has changed, how they are exploring many ways to give their relative a good life that they would have never have done.

Here are some of the stories so far:

Pauls Pondering Posse

Paul has a circle that has been set up in the last few months, so that his mum and dad and their non-disabled daughter could have peace of mind if anything should happen to mum and dad. They had wanted a circle for years but didn't think it would be possible to do. The big issue for them was who would you ask and would people be interested. The facilitator Kevin really made this work and reassured them throughout the process. What they never anticipated was that when they set up the circle there would be so many on-going issues that they were struggling to deal with; the circle has really helped on a practical and emotional level and is making the whole family feel much more confident about the future.

Jenny's Jolly Jaunts

A circle has been set up for Jenny, a young lady with very complex needs. She's in her final year of college within a special school setting. Both mum and dad were very anxious about their daughter's future and hadn't got confidence in a social worker giving the family the best options for their daughter. Where she lives, transition social workers still only get involved with the individual six months before they leave college at 19.

After just two circle meetings and lots of tasks completed by the circle members this young lady has more options available now than she can fit into a week. Ironically, most of the activities are part of universal services which is fantastic considering this young lady's complex disability. We held a circle meeting last night and mum and dad said they are quite overwhelmed by what the circle has achieved in such a short space of time, and they couldn't measure just how much pressure the circle has taken off the family.

How long do we wait for the Invite?

A single parent heard a presentation from Our Futures and took the information away with her. She then got in contact with us four months later. She wanted a circle for both her son and daughter because mum has started to have concerns regarding the future and if anything should happen to her. Both her son and daughter currently live at home and have no plans for moving out in the future. Both her son and daughter have a learning disability, but if anything should happen to mum they would be able to live together without support except for someone popping in now and again.

What mum's main concern is, that if anything should happen to her son and daughter they wouldn't financially be able to continue living in their current

home. She feels that if they need to move they would be left vulnerable and could be open to financial abuse.

At first she was struggling to think of anyone who would want to sit on a circle. However, after spending a bit of time with the coordinator she came up with 5 names. We have held one circle meeting to date. One circle member said we have been waiting to be invited in because we didn't know how to approach you. Mum said that she didn't ask in case people thought she couldn't cope. Again, at the circle meeting, day to day issues came up and mum had tried to sort some of the issues out but was struggling. Although it was the first circle meeting 3 members have taken on tasks to help the family move forward. These issues have all now been addressed.

What about people whose family are not interested?

Carly has just turned 22 years old and has had a life of shared care between the state and her family. Carly has a moderate learning disability and went to a special school, but her support needs were heightened by her chaotic family life.

Carly spent much of her childhood between council respite units and living at home. When Carly turned 18 years old her family were persecuted by a firebomb at their home and this separated the family. The only option was for Carly to live in a hostel with 36 other people who all were significantly older than her.

Carly was extremely unhappy, she didn't know many people and her family no longer wanted contact with her. Having known Carly for several years to get out of the crisis situation, we felt the best thing would be set to up the circle, even though this would be our first it was worth a try. The circle was made up of several people who had known Carly in school and different places she went to. In the first instance the circle managed to secure some direct payments and manage the payments so she could have at least have some quality time with personal assistants outside of the hostel. Eventually the circle managed to support her move into her own home and have been critical in terms of ensuring she can access and contribute to her community.

The circle is as strong as ever 4 years down the line and has supported Carly with the of struggles where she lives and who she lives with. The circle are helping Carly look for an alternative place to live in the future, but are supporting her to get it right. They assist her with her making choices on how to spend her money, getting her staff team to understand her and have recently enabled her to meet back up with her Mum again. By no means is Carly's life sorted but the circle has her vision at the heart of everything they do.

What happens when I'm gone?

Brendan is in his 40s and found himself in residential care. His Mum had died years before and his Dad had just died suddenly. Brendan wanted a circle but the people paid to be in his life resisted like anything. To cut a long story short the circle has finally got going after negotiating long and hard with the paid staff, and is working on a plan for Brendan to live with someone out of the residential care unit that he gets on with really well. They are looking for property near where he used to live and hope to be in their own home for Christmas.

What happens when I'm long gone?

Bernard is 62 and his family have either died or live abroad. He has lived on his own for years and has been supported by a provider who recognised he didn't have many people in his life, just paid support. A circle started to evolve as the facilitator recognised some of Bernard's interests. Bernard was an avid world war fan and so the facilitator has got a local group of veterans involved, some folk from the local supermarket distribution centre and other local people. The circle are in the early stages of building a relationship with Bernard, but already he is chatting more, is certainly more sparky and a glint seems to have some into his eye.

So to conclude

The circles have in some instances moved mountains, given people a feeling of security or have simply cheered people up. It is early days, but what we are seeing is a very real concept that whatever shape or form the circle takes, it is providing something which has never existed before.

The people at the heart of the circles and their family and friends are feeling much safer and secure. They say they can't believe how such a simple concept seems to be so effective. The effectiveness we believe is that it is owned, loved and cared for by families. We don't profess it is the right solution for everyone nor do we think it should become a standardised practice. Our Futures is a concept and idea for people to think about and certainly is not the only way people can develop a circle of support, however it provides the infrastructure for offering people peace of mind should they wish to take it.

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