

EMBEDDING  
COMMUNITY  
CIRCLES IN  
SUPPORT  
FOR OLDER  
PEOPLE  
LIVING IN  
RESIDENTIAL  
CARE  
HOMES OR  
EXTRA CARE



Community  
Circles

**A Practical Resource**

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### **Acknowledgements**

Many thanks to:

- Wigan Council staff led by Jo Willmott and Jenny Yates and including all the Community Knowledge Officers and Quality Performance Officers we are working with
- Care home, extra care and housing provider managers, activity coordinators and staff
- Caroline Tomlinson and the *My Life* staff helping us find and support volunteers
- All the volunteers supporting Circles and community partners spreading the “ripples”
- The people using Circles and their families who have helped us learn and shared their stories
- Skills for Care – a Workforce Development Fund Innovation Grant supported development of this resource



## INTRODUCTION & PURPOSE

This e-resource, sponsored by Skills for Care, is a practical guide for anyone wanting to include Community Circles as part of the offer of support for older people in residential care or extra care. It is based upon the first two years of experience developing Circles in Wigan, in partnership with the local council. It will also be of wider use to those looking to embed a range of person and community centred approaches in these types of support.

The resource is made up of this paper and a series of links to more detailed guides, tools and other materials, including top tips and ideas from a range of people. It can be used directly by people offering support to older people or can be used alongside support from the [Community Circles charity](#).

We have developed the resource based on our own experience and perspectives and that of key others involved in the project. We have used a range of sources of information including:

- Our continuing record of the implementation journey – including our regular reviews
- Information from our regular reviews with Wigan Council staff and interviews undertaken for this project
- Outputs from the hub meetings held with a range of staff from residential and extra care services
- Interviews with residential and extra care staff for this project
- The views of people and families using Circles in Wigan
- Evidence from other Community Circles projects

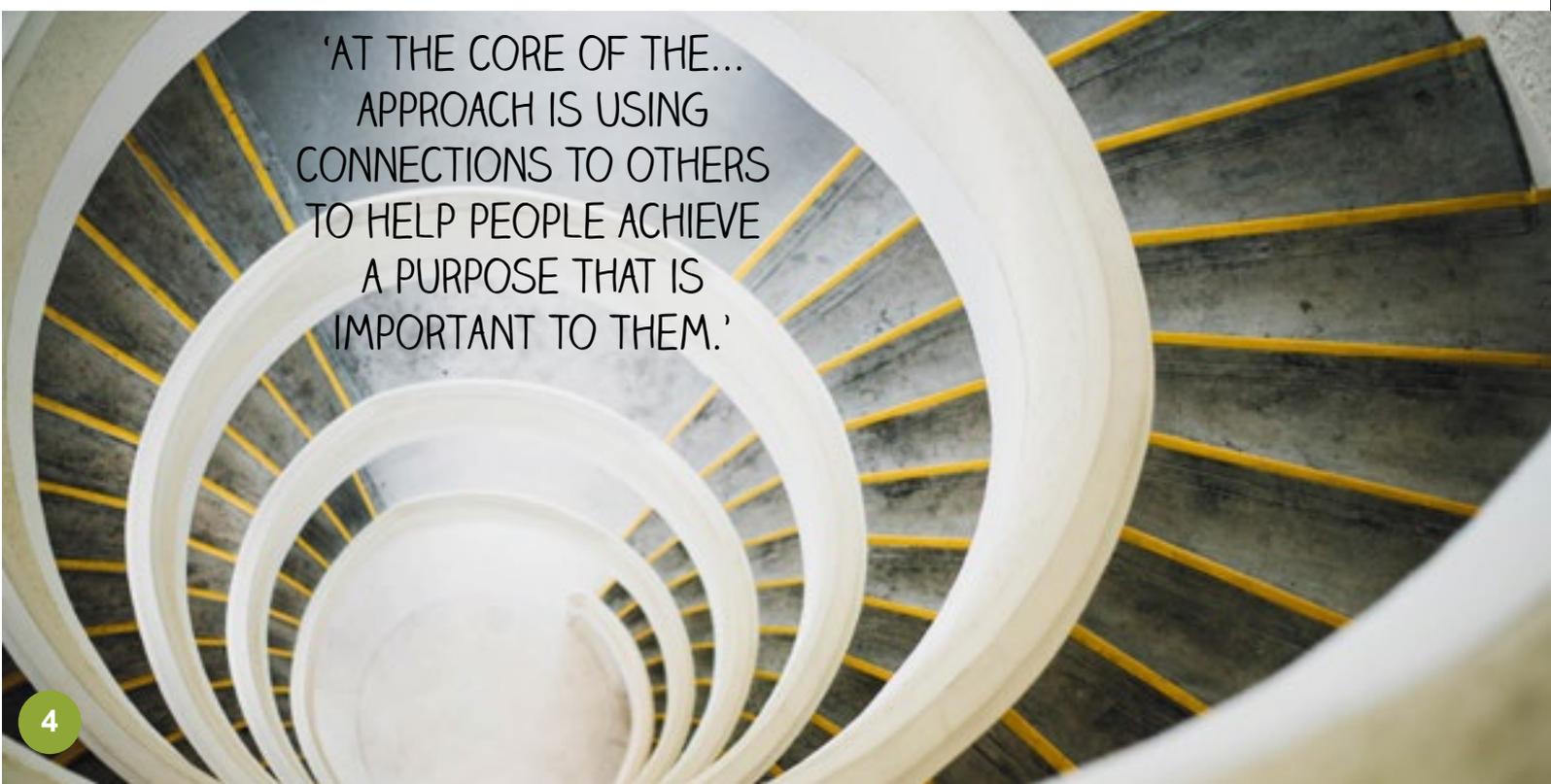
As with other person and community centred approaches, we are still learning about how to most effectively use and introduce Circles into accommodation with support for older people. As we, and others, learn more we will share that learning. For now, this is our best knowledge and we hope others will find it useful. As someone once said, perhaps this is the end of the beginning.

# WHAT ARE COMMUNITY CIRCLES?

Circles are facilitated by volunteers and bring together family, friends, staff and community members around a person. They use person centred methods and tools to identify things that are important to people and then plan and act to achieve these things – helping people to be happier, healthier and more connected. The person is at the centre of their Circle, with those who love and care about them, supported by a volunteer. A Circle is based on what matters to the person – the purpose. To help develop and then flowing from this purpose Circles use tools and ways of recording information to support the conversation. These tools help to think about what's working and not working in a person's life and about what we can do to change things. Circle members agree to do something, to take on an action and use ways of recording and planning what next and how to keep making progress. All Circles are different because they are made up of unique

individuals with different histories and experiences and some people already have connections whilst others need to be developed.

At the core of the Community Circles approach is using connections to others to help people achieve a purpose that is important to them. For more detail about the “essence” of a Circle [click here](#). To view an introductory webinar on Community Circles, [click here](#). Over the past couple of years our experience has taught us to be flexible building from these core elements of purpose and connections. People's circumstances vary greatly. Some have very few people in their lives, making a “traditional” Circle difficult, at least at first. We are not precious about this and are careful to start from where a person is – often very informally. We also try very hard not to turn anyone away who is offering their time – including people who would find it challenging to facilitate a Circle.



'AT THE CORE OF THE...  
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# WHY COMMUNITY CIRCLES IN SUPPORT FOR OLDER PEOPLE?

**M**ost care homes must personalise and improve how they support residents and families to maximise their well-being and retain interests and relationships, especially beyond the home. CQC State of Care reports consistently identify these elements as essential for outstanding services. Families, community groups and volunteers need better ways of staying connected and offering support.

The [Commission on Residential Care \(2014\)](#) took evidence from a wide range of stakeholders and undertook public and user surveys. Important findings were:

- *(the) Public broadly see residential care homes as places of illness and frailty pervaded by boredom and loneliness*
- *Housing with care providers need to ensure that they and the people that live in their schemes become a more visible part of the surrounding neighbourhood, bringing local groups and volunteers in as much as reaching out to people who are supported in their family homes*

The Commission recommended that homes go beyond physical re-design to provide personalised, relationship centred support, allowing people to take more control, have a sense of ownership of their environment, be an active and visible part of their community and have a sense of purpose. As well as matching CQC expectations, these findings align with the well-being requirements of the Care Act (2014) and the Dementia Alliance Principles. Though some organisations and homes have taken initiatives to address these issues, progress remains slow and is hampered by a lack of cost effective approaches that can be delivered in current challenging contexts. Community Circles provide these, along with approaches to expand the volunteer base and activate better relationships with local organisations and businesses beyond

traditional corporate social responsibility.

Community Circles first explored Circles with older people in residential care in the Each Step Dementia Care Home in Blackburn. Circles helped the home win the National Dementia Care Awards for the [Best Dementia Care Home](#). After inspection, CQC noted,

*“Creative ways were found to engage people to live full lives which impacted positively on their health and wellbeing. The use of Community Circles, supported by volunteers, identified opportunities for people to participate in meaningful activities based on their interests or skills. People were also supported to re-engage with social and family networks which were important to them and helped to maintain their sense of identity.”*



In Doncaster we have a partnership with Age UK Doncaster who are using Circles to support connections for older people living at home.

*“An independent evaluation of Age UK Doncaster’s Circles Project has shown that the pro-ject is having a positive impact on reducing social isolation and loneliness in older people (aged 50+) by increasing social engagement, independence and resilience. The most significant change we are seeing is in improved mental wellbeing. The people supported by Circles are also increasing their social connections through the project.”*

**‘AGE UK DONCASTER’S CIRCLES PROJECT HAS SHOWN THAT THE PROJECT IS HAVING A POSITIVE IMPACT ON REDUCING SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS IN OLDER PEOPLE...’**

But what does all this mean for real people – what can a Circle mean to a person and their family?

Arthur’s family said they are “...so glad you came into our lives...you certainly made a difference to our lives. Since

*(the) Circle started I have noticed a change in Arthur – he loves doing anything that involves the DIY and likes helping people. It makes him feel useful and keeps him occupied – he is happy and content and he likes to keep busy...had a wonderful afternoon. We are lucky to have gained such good friends.. it’s good there have been some positives come out of such a cruel illness”*

See [this blog](#) for more detail.

The full report can be found [here](#).

# WHY COMMUNITY CIRCLES IN WIGAN?

## CONTEXT

Though historically Circles of Support originated with disabled people and families with a member with learning disabilities Community Circles as a charity wanted to use the learning about how Circles can benefit older people living in a care home to support people on a bigger scale in a local area. We wanted to develop and explore an approach that could embed Circles across accommodation with support, in collaboration with homes, the local council and other partners.

Wigan offered a perfect opportunity to develop and test such an approach. This was because the council had decided to make a strategic effort to improve the lives of people living in local care homes. As part of the Age Well element of the Wigan Deal, the council has developed a care home reform programme, overseen by a senior board. In outline, the programme aims to achieve significant shifts in quality, sufficiency and sustainability, including a shift in models of provision and better outcomes (lives) for people. In addition to specific support to help improve people's health and wellbeing, Wigan implemented a set of interventions aimed at increasing the person and community centredness of accommodation with support. Knowledge Officers are an important part of this. The work on the Deal identified a gap in local home staff knowledge about "what was out there" and they work to fill this gap.



' A KEY FACET OF THE APPROACH IN WIGAN HAS BEEN A STRONG PARTNERSHIP WITH THE COUNCIL'

As part of this approach they provided a transformation fund, with grants for innovation. Circles was awarded a three year grant to work in partnership with the council, its officers and partners. This strong partnership with the council has been a key facet of the approach in Wigan. Community Circles take the approach that we will not enter a traditional commission or compete for tenders. We believe this approach leads to a more productive partnership approach including a collective sense of responsibility and commitment to success.

# WHAT HAVE WE BEEN DOING?

## SET UP AND CONTEXT

Community Circles started with a series of meetings with relevant council officers in order to develop a project that had a good chance of achieving our desired objectives and being sustainable at the end of the grant period. Given the level of resources

initially available (1.5 WTE Community Connectors plus a small support budget), we developed a “depth and breadth” strategy. This involved intensive work in three care homes in year one then a gradual spread approach starting in year two.

## PHASE ONE

The goal of the first phase was to build on learning from earlier work to develop our approach to embedding Circles in residential care. We undertook half-day introductory sessions (attended by about two thirds of the 52 local care homes). For these sessions we developed a specific local version of a resource called *Progress for Providers* – this version was focussed on care homes supporting people with dementia. As part of the introductory sessions we asked care home leaders to self-rate the person and community centredness of their homes in order to help decide if they wanted to apply to be in phase one. The resource is available [here](#). Selection of the first three homes was made by Community Circles with advice from the council.

In this early stage we also worked with Wigan council and North West Association of Directors of Adult Social Services to organise a full day conference on person and community centred approaches for care home leaders and staff. The key note speaker at this event was Andrea Sutcliffe then Chief Inspector of Adult Social Services at CQC. Andrea set out what helps Care Homes to be outstanding. (For a blog about this [click here](#).)

Working with the first phase homes we developed an initial working approach to test in the first year. Building on this phase and learning since we have now developed a practical handbook for care homes. The handbook is available [here](#).



## Community Connectors

The Connectors were allocated to the three homes to support the home to develop their local approach to embedding Circles. This included developing a plan with identified roles and goals and providing mentoring support to key staff. The Connector helped the home to align the steps in developing and supporting Circles, with home processes and procedures. Connectors in this stage identified volunteer facilitators, matched them with people who wanted a Circle and mentored them and home staff in the initial period until they were confident. For more detail on the main activities of the Connector [click here](#).

## Home Leaders

Home managers were expected to help develop the plan and play a general encouraging and overseeing role, facilitating the successful embedding of Circles. Homes were asked to allocate a local coordinator, who could allocate at least four hours a week to supporting Circles via liaison with staff to support identification of people wanting Circles, assist matching and early Circle sessions. Activity coordinators usually, though not exclusively took on these roles. For more on the role of the care home lead/co-ordinator [click here](#).

## Extending to Extra Care

About nine months after the start of phase one in residential care, an opportunity arose to extend Circles into extra care. Wigan council, in transferring three extra care schemes from their own management to the independent sector, wanted to add Circles into how extra care operates. They provided two year funding for an additional full time Circles Connector to lead this. We began working with three settings across the Wigan Borough in January 2018. The providers are Imagine Act Succeed and Community Integrated Care and the housing providers are Adacus and Anchor Hanover. One Community Circles Connector works across all three settings. An extra care guide was produced to demonstrate the roles of connector and setting lead. Key to this first phase was building relationships with care and support managers to start the process of embedding Circles within their respective settings with the support and guidance of the Connector.

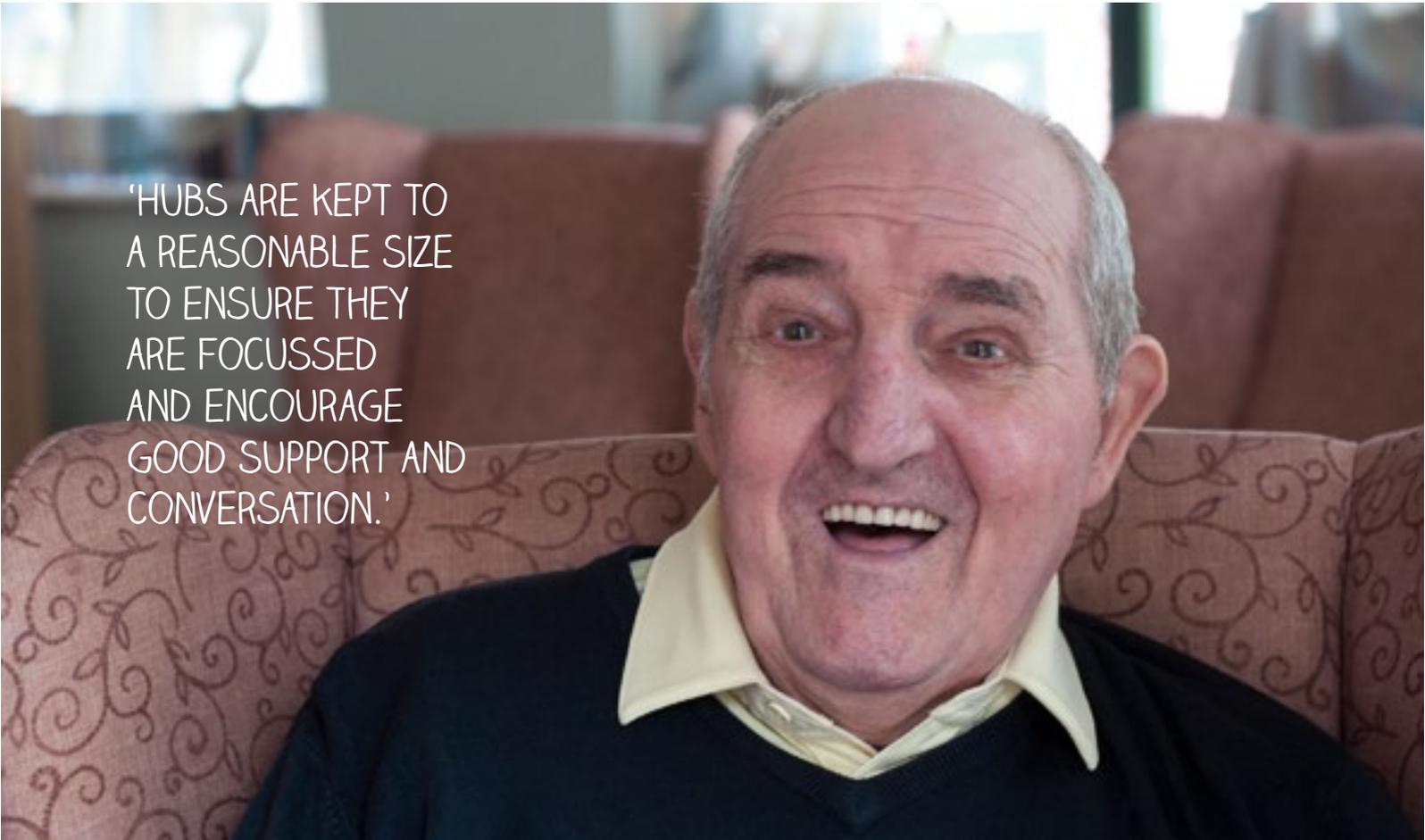
There followed a process of recruitment and introduction of volunteers by the Connector to each setting to start to get the first Circles up and running. In addition, the Connector began a Community Mapping exercise to understand what local community resources could be useful for linking with early and then subsequent Circles. For more detail [click here](#).

### Local hubs to support the spread of Community Circles

In planning phase two of the project, we agreed a hub approach to spreading Circles to an expanding number of care homes (and later extra care services) across Wigan. Year two of the three year project is focussing on developing, supporting and expanding these hubs. Our extra care project is at an earlier stage and is only working with three schemes. However a hub model is developing here as well.

Hubs are locality based and usually bring together up to five care homes in that locality for an [initial period of more intensive support](#). The purpose of the hub is to support care homes in developing Community Circles using an approach that enables them to take ownership of the developments and to generate their own community connections. The aim is to develop the hubs to become largely self-supporting, with light touch assistance after the initial period, allowing the Connector to move on to develop the next hub and achieve gradual spread during the project period.

Care homes in the locality who have expressed their interest in developing Community Circles are invited to join the hub. The named lead from the care home attends and links back with the care home manager and other involved in developing circles in their home. Hubs are kept to a reasonable size to ensure

A photograph of an older man with a friendly expression, sitting in a patterned armchair. He is wearing a dark sweater over a light-colored collared shirt. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be a care home setting.

'HUBS ARE KEPT TO A REASONABLE SIZE TO ENSURE THEY ARE FOCUSSED AND ENCOURAGE GOOD SUPPORT AND CONVERSATION.'

they are focussed and encourage good support and conversation. Quality Performance Officers join each hub to support the flow of information and also to support any other development areas that the care homes may identify and are-as of support needed from Wigan Council. Knowledge Officers also link in to support making local connections.

In their first phase, the hubs usually meet on a fortnightly basis (six-nine months). Each meeting takes the format of an informal learning set. Connectors share information and guidance around the development of Community Circles. The group then have time to explore how this works for them and to set themselves actions to complete before the next meeting. The subsequent meeting re-visits the actions of each care home and shares their success and learning and there is an opportunity to support each other with any challenges. The hub then looks at the next steps with Connectors sharing the next stage of information, and again offering time to discuss this and agree on actions.

The expectation of the care homes is that they attend the hub meetings, participate in conversations and sharing ideas and that they deliver the actions that they identify within each meeting to enable circles to progress including agreed targets for volunteer recruitment and numbers of Circles.

After six-nine months, the goal is the hub members continue to meet together

to support each other and share their learning on Community Circles and beyond. Hub homes will continue to be supported via light touch Circles membership. The Connector will move on to support the next 3 hubs to support new care homes.

Extra care hubs are at present in their infancy. We have had two hub meetings so far which brought together all three extra care settings care and support managers and building managers. The Connector had originally organised some meetings between the two settings which are based close to each other in Central Wigan to encourage cross working. This theme of cross working has continued to be discussed in the tri – hub model. We are exploring transport options to see how we can bring people from different settings together with more regularity. Feedback from residents has been that this used to take place and they would enjoy visiting the other settings and indeed would like residents from other settings to visit them.

As well as cross working we are exploring Circles which incorporate more than one person who share the same purpose. So far this has been implemented with a Friendship Circle, a Veterans Circle and shortly a Knitting Circle. We are also just starting to explore what measures need to be in place to make Community Circles sustainable in the three settings as all managers have confirmed the positive effect they are having.

'WE ARE...STARTING TO EXPLORE WHAT MEASURES NEED TO BE IN PLACE TO MAKE COMMUNITY CIRCLES SUSTAINABLE IN THE THREE SETTINGS AS ALL MANAGERS HAVE CONFIRMED THE POSITIVE EFFECT THEY ARE HAVING.'

# HOW IS IT GOING?

## CIRCLES

**W**ith the support of our partners we have started to demonstrate that it is possible to establish Circles in care homes and extra care settings. To date 53 volunteers have been recruited to support Circles in care homes with a substantial number in the pipeline. At the time of publishing 19 care homes are involved in four hubs (at different stages of development, with two hubs well established and two coming on stream). In the three extra care settings, where a slightly different approach has developed 47 people are engaged in various forms of Circle.

## BEYOND INDIVIDUAL CIRCLES



**W**e have been very pleased that, though our main goal was to set up successful Circles for the benefit of individuals, we have seen wider impacts on culture, motivation, connections and relationships. In particular stronger links have been forged between the homes and groups, people and resources in their local areas. These are producing benefits well beyond individual Circles. In addition our training and mentoring has led, in some places, to the embedding of a range of person centred tools and practices into regular business. We are seeing some shifts towards greater use of non-service solutions and supports for people, increasing staff creativity, bringing local assets and resources more into play. The main vehicle for these “ripples” is the hubs. Some examples can be found [here](#).



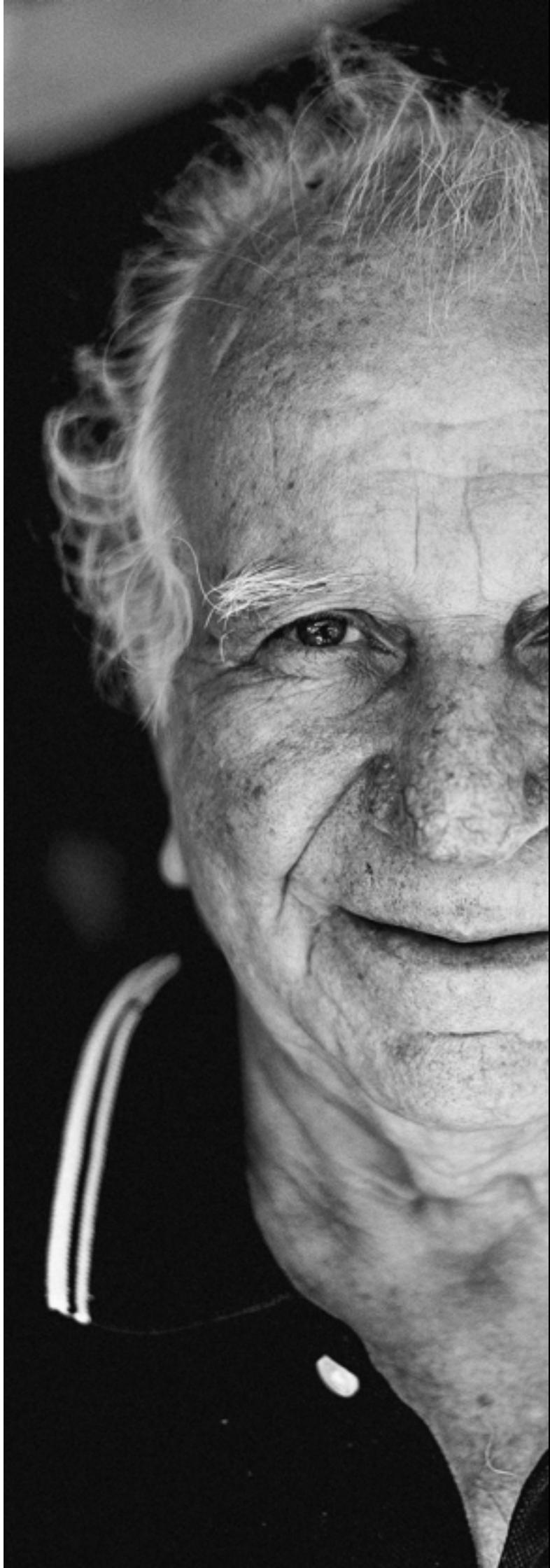
We are still in the first phase of the introduction of hubs. To date there has been progress in the following areas:

- Appropriate membership of local hubs has been identified – based on geographies and scale
- Hub members have received coaching in person centred thinking tools relevant to Circles and home coordinators mentored on the introduction of Circles process into homes
- The *Progress for Providers* self-assessment and planning resource has been introduced – allowing homes to start to measure their progress
- Volunteers have been identified, trained and started to be matched with hub care homes and Circles have been introduced to people living in the homes
- Hubs have supported the development and production of materials and collateral for the recruitment of volunteers
- Local community mapping has taken place which has promoted the building of links and relationships with groups and organisations in the environs of the homes with an increasing number of positive outcomes. These include both bringing capacity into the homes, such as local school children, college students, and a range of resources, plus the homes making offers to local community residents such as the recent provision of Christmas lunches to isolated local people.
- Connections across the homes have facilitated collaboration and sharing of knowledge and resources. Council officers appreciate the opportunity to use the hubs to keep homes connected to information and opportunities linked to the council and its partners *“They have genuinely worked together as a group of care homes”*

Our learning from the hubs to date includes:

- The hubs provide many new opportunities for ideas generating and collaboration – many members find this is a major motivation for attendance beyond the development of Circles. *“We have become one”*. The hubs have developed practical approaches to capture and share their resources and information about local assets. They are using simple tech approaches like Slack and Whatsapp groups to keep in regular communication. *“One activity coordinator was struggling a bit in the early days of her role – she was supported by her peers – moral and practical support.”*
- There are “ripples” well beyond the establishment of Circles – including community connections built from use of tools like the community mapping approach - which bring in groups and connect to assets.
- Sustaining hubs benefits from the support of the council at different levels. This includes practical involvement from officers providing support through to incentives and messages from senior staff that support manager prioritisation.

*‘WE HAVE BEEN VERY PLEASED THAT, THOUGH OUR MAIN GOAL WAS TO SET UP SUCCESSFUL CIRCLES FOR THE BENEFIT OF INDIVIDUALS, WE HAVE SEEN WIDER IMPACTS ON CULTURE, MOTIVATION, CONNECTIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS.’*



## Outcomes for people

When Circles are started, the volunteer who has been recruited and supported by a Connector, works with the person and Circle members to establish a purpose. They use tools such as the *Purpose Poster*, *Working and Not Working*, *Relationship Map*, *Perfect Week* (see more [here](#)).

At this stage of project development we have focussed on learning about how to embed Circles and make them work for people. At an individual level we review progress towards achieving a person's purpose – often using the *What Matters Wheel*. To show how this works, [here](#) are some examples of people who use Circles and [here](#) is a case study from one home.

At this stage we have not systematically analysed data from individual Circles but plan to do this with a sample in phase three of the project. We previously did this with people in the Blackburn care home and were able to demonstrate significant positive developments. Later this year, in another project, to support learning we will conduct evaluation and modelling in three care homes. This will include a decision modelling simulation approach to model likely cost effectiveness linked to improved health and other outcomes.

For this project we have gathered the views of staff at the Hub meetings and conducted a sample of interviews with home staff and managers as well as Wigan council staff. In considering the kinds of benefits they have seen in their homes, for older people, families and the wider staff and home, some of the main

themes were:

- Direct benefits for individuals and families from their Circle – interests, relationships, connections, contributions
- Connecting people with similar interests for relationships and contribution
- Growth of staff skills and confidence to support culture change
- Development of wider connections beyond care homes which bring in additional support and resources of benefit to people
- Cross care-home support and resource sharing leading to “ripple effects” of benefit to people in the homes



## Partnership with the council

In Wigan we have engaged strongly with council officers at strategic, management and operational levels. At the strategic level we co-designed the approach with senior managers and we review progress and plan developments at regular sessions with them. At the operational level the Circles initiative is viewed as an important part of the local strategy to support care home improvement. Wigan has invested strongly in this with considerable success. At the level of

the homes two key council roles are the Local Knowledge Officer and the Quality Performance Officer. These officers support homes in a range of ways and the Circles Connectors have very regular contact with them in support of individual homes and via the hubs. For this project we interviewed a selection of these staff. When we asked their views about the benefits of the Circles. Some of the key themes that emerged were:

- There are many encouraging examples of Circles making a difference in people's lives
- A general view that significant progress is underway - we are demonstrating that despite challenges, Circles can have a considerable direct impact and one that supports wider cultural change
- The local links of staff in homes and extra care are an underused resource that Circles and hubs can help release
- Hubs are critical in supporting both Circles spread and wider improvement – via the learning, sharing and confidence building effects they can create. In addition they can facilitate the effective impact of council staff supporting care home development – offering efficient access to groups. The implications of this for sustainability of Circles are significant
- We are learning about what facilitates or inhibits successful embedding in care homes and extra care, helping develop a support, spread and sustainability strategy with clarity about key roles, interventions, early focus and phasing
- Sustaining a supply of volunteers, geographically spread is crucial to project success and sustainability



'SUSTAINING A SUPPLY OF VOLUNTEERS, GEOGRAPHICALLY SPREAD IS CRUCIAL TO PROJECT SUCCESS AND SUSTAINABILITY'

# KEY ELEMENTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

In this section we outline our learning and that of others in respect of the embedding of Circles in the two types of support. We provide detail or links around key roles and activities, with links to useful resources and additional information.

## CARE HOME/EXTRA CARE CONTEXT



Prior to starting this project, in discussions with people from the sector and in looking at previous projects and attempts to introduce person and community centred approaches into similar settings - there were concerns about feasibility. Some concerns were quite fundamental – serious doubts about what were seen to be structural and cultural barriers to a person centred approach linked to institutional features such as size, practices, rights and control issues for residents. Other practical concerns were about staff turnover and consistency, training and skills issues, levers driving a focus on “the basics”. As one council officer said. *“It doesn’t matter how*

*passionate you are, you’ve still got 30 other people to care for.”*

There were questions about the ability of all managers to create the conditions within the home or extra care setting, to make it possible for Circles to be introduced and sustained. Even if it was seen to be a desirable thing to introduce Circles, another question was about “phasing”. Was it necessary to do significant preparatory work in introducing person and community centred approaches including a staff training programme prior to introducing a specific approach like Circles. If we didn’t do this would the attempt fail due to lack of underpinning?

We took these issues and concerns seriously and we have inevitably been challenged by many of them. We have taken the view that we are working in the real world and if we wanted people in care homes to benefit, we would have to find the best approaches possible to see what could be achieved with available resources, based on our and others' experiences. We were also working in the positive context of a council making a serious, strategic effort to support the improvement of the local sector. At our introductory events and at a conference bringing all local care homes together to share ideas and practice, we also noted many managers and staff will have skills and positive attitudes to serve people well, even in challenging circumstances.

As with the introduction of any approach, local relationships are crucial and it is very important to invest in these from the start and take action to sustain them. Key relationships are with the managers and key staff such as activities co-ordinators but good relationships with all staff are important. Managers and staff are very busy and are making choices about what they prioritise and invest in. Connectors have worked hard to both demonstrate how Circles are of benefit to people and the service and to motivate staff in support of them.



## ROLES OF CONNECTORS

In the early stages of the development of Community Circles we developed clear roles for the Connector around recruiting supporting and mentoring volunteers, identifying people looking for a Circle, matching and supporting the early stage of Circles. For this project, attempting to embed and grow Circles across a local “sector” we have needed to adapt the Connector role to the context. Critically this is about a combination of transferring some elements of the “classic” model to others, in order to support sustainability - and adopting additional roles in order to transfer knowledge and establish collective support arrangements.

## ROLES OF RESIDENTIAL/EXTRA CARE STAFF

**A**s we detail in the handbooks ([Care Home Guide](#) & [Extra Care Guide](#)) Circles can only be successfully embedded when staff are able and willing to play key roles and this is facilitated and encouraged by leaders. This is rarely either easy or straightforward. Residential care and extra care face pressures and challenges in supporting people. There are capacity issues and often staff turnover, including in key roles. Communication can become stretched and inevitably there can be a focus on prioritising “the basics”. In this context, even with very good leadership, prioritising person and community centred approaches and paying strong attention to hearing what is important to individuals and acting on this can be difficult. In looking to introduce Circles therefore, we have had to consider what is practical and possible and what might be the best approaches to use.

Because it is vital to find people who might want a Circle, match them to a volunteer and support Circle development, we focussed on how these things might be done and who might do them. In addition, to have a chance of success we felt that the Circles process needed to align with how things get done in the homes. We therefore mapped key Circles processes against home procedures and roles – see the handbooks linked above for more.

When looking for the first homes to start Circles to get early local win wins, we do recommend you look for homes with leadership able and willing to support these roles and with reasonable levels of stability – especially in key roles like the activities co-ordinator.



## PARTNERSHIP WITH THE COUNCIL

In attempting to introduce Circles into a local sector with very helpful but inevitably limited and temporary grant funded capacity, the relationship with the local council and its staff is crucial - given their commissioning function and the roles of specific staff in supporting and influencing residential and extra care managers and staff. From the start we worked with the council to establish a partnership approach – not one of commissioner and commissioned. We believe this has been very important – it is a different kind of relationship where both have roles to play in achieving success as opposed to a “we have given you the money to achieve x, our job is to check you have done it”. That kind of relationship couldn’t work when trying to embed something that would need to be sustained after our project ends. We have seen many projects simply end when a funding period concludes. Our relationship with the council has operated at the levels of design, strategic overview, operational relationship.

At the initial design level we spent significant time with senior council staff understanding the context, considering

the role Circles could play in supporting the care home reform process, accessing local intelligence, considering the roles to be played by various players. We tested our prototype ideas, undertook initial implementation and then redesigned for later phases with council input. We have regular review sessions with strategic managers typically using a “four plus one” process which asks, from different perspectives “what have we tried, learnt, what are we pleased and concerned about – what shall we do next based on this. These reviews have allowed us to consider how the role of various council officers can align with Circles Connectors activity. In particular the council Quality Performance Officers and Local Knowledge Officers play relevant roles – they have supported embedding Circles by aligning our work with care homes and extra care settings. They help care home leaders view Circles as an important part of local transformation efforts and hence to prioritise involvement in the project and the local hubs. They liaise between home staff and Connectors, they help identify approaches and supports that would complement Circles. Close



relationships will also help as we move to the phase of planning sustainability as officers have become familiar with

Circles methodology and been trained in use of key tools.

## VOLUNTEERS



The recruitment, support and retention of volunteers is of course crucial as they facilitate the Circles. We are learning a lot on this project about how to do this more effectively. There is an issue here relating to the nature of the role which is not a traditional volunteer role like a befriender for example. When operating the “classic” Circles model we are asking people to facilitate meetings and co-ordinate activity, using tools and creativity. Not everyone feels immediately like this is a role for them or that they would be able to do it. This presents challenges for our information and communication and wider recruitment approaches. At the same time the role is in some ways less

challenging than some volunteering roles – it only requires 2-3 hours an month and the volunteer doesn’t have responsibility for everything that happens – Circle members share this. Our experience has been that though it can be challenging to recruit, once involved people really enjoy the role and most stay. In addition, our learning on this project has led us to be flexible in our approach. Some volunteers don’t want to play a facilitator role but have other contributions to make to Circles. We welcome a wide range of such contributions. In this latter model there is additional call on the Circles Connector to play the facilitator role – this of course has implications for sustainability.

We have tried a number of approaches to recruitment including making it a core part of the Connector role, contracting with a local organisation, (*My Life*) to recruit for us, starting to shift responsibility to the homes, for sustainability. To date the council staff volunteer schemes and recruitment via *My Life* have produced most volunteers. *My Life* developed a strategy that incorporated: key hooks for recruitment;

use of a range of media and methods; careful timing and effective face to face recruitment post initial application. They used creative methods like invitations on beer mats in pubs local to the care homes, messages offering local people a practical opportunity to address loneliness in their own communities and with places (the homes) near where they lived. They used locally targeted social media such as community facebook



pages, using ordinary and appealing language. They timed recruitment for opportunities like pre-Christmas and took stalls at carefully targeted places. After bringing in large numbers of initial expressions of interest they brought people together for a hot pot supper, social opportunity and chance to find out more. This type of engaging approach has driven large

**'THE RECRUITMENT, SUPPORT AND RETENTION OF VOLUNTEERS IS OF COURSE CRUCIAL AS THEY FACILITATE THE CIRCLES.'**

numbers of volunteers to the Circles Connectors. They have then needed to act quickly to match and introduce people. The homes with the largest and longest sustained volunteers are those which can quickly and supportively make these introductions.



**A**s a key element of Community Circles is helping people achieve their purpose via widening and deepening their connections, this has been a key focus of the project. We know from research and CQC reports that there is often a need to build stronger connections between local care homes and community “assets” – the other people, groups, organisations and services present in their locality. We know also that many people, entering care homes or extra care, find their previous connections stretched or even broken and that for some, connections have been eroded over time, leaving people lonely and unsupported.

In the Wigan project we have invested in growing and invigorating community connections with a range of tools and methods and at different levels. The levels are individual circles, homes, hubs and local strategy. Within individual Circles we use tools such as relationship maps to establish people’s connections and start to explore how the Circle can grow or deepen these, linked to [the person’s purpose](#). At the home level we have supported key staff to map local assets and resources and to reach out and make effective links to them. This has enabled some homes to access activities, expertise, volunteers, support and capacity [they were not previously using](#). Hubs have proved to be an important source of support for and growth of community connections as homes have shown a high level of collaboration in both sharing their capacity and resources with each other and sharing information about external resources. At a strategic level, Wigan council have Local Knowledge Officers and have put effort into supporting the growth of connections, linking to local assets.

## KEY TOOLS

**C**ommunity Circles are not rocket science. They are about finding out what is important to an individual person, thinking together about how to turn that purpose into meaningful action, making connections to make it happen, checking what is working and moving forward. Though simple in conception they benefit greatly from person centred tools that help people think and plan together and make sure the Circle is doing what the person needs. Some of these key tools are listed below.



**One page profiles** for volunteers and people wanting Circles – to help make a great match

**Relationship map** - to help us think about who to invite to the Circle meetings, we complete a relationship map. This helps us to think about the people who are in someone's life.

**Purpose posters** - We use a purpose poster to record the purpose, roles and ground rules within a Circle meeting

**The Circle meeting map** – to help the meetings flow well and achieve their goals

**Working and not working tool** – to help think about what can be built on or needs to change

**Four plus one questions** – these are “what have we tried, learned, pleased about, concerned about, what next” Great questions to take stock and plan forward

**Learning logs** – these help us to respond to what we are learning about what works well and also about the things we need to do differently

**Person centred reviews** - uses person-centred thinking tools to explore what is happening from the person's perspective and from other people's perspectives. This results in outcomes and actions for person-centred change

**What Matters Wheel** – this is a simple but effective way of taking what is important to a person (the Circle purpose) and checking in over time to see the progress being made. It can also be aggregated across lots of Circles.

It can't be stressed too much, however, that these are helpful tools, not to be used rigidly or formally. Often we use ideas or elements of them very informally, within a conversation rather than over-structured format.

**N**ot surprisingly we have found communication to be critical to success and have learnt a lot on the project to date about how to achieve greater success in a number of respects through changing how we communicate.

### **The language we use**

When developing and testing a model, and in teaching it to others, clear descriptive and sometimes conceptual language is important. Our model, with the roles of Connector, Facilitator, Circle Member is important in this respect so that we can ensure that appropriate roles are played and activity undertaken. However, when communicating about Circles, this conceptual language can be unhelpful. We have become increasingly clear that in sharing with wider audiences, recruiting volunteers, getting the essence of Circles across to staff – and most importantly introducing Circles to people and families – we need to use language that is accessible and motivating.

### **The use of practical methods and technology**

When working to embed Circles at scale locally, we have explored and experimented with a range of approaches to communication – both approaches and technology. This is relevant to volunteer recruitment, training and mentoring of significant numbers of people, sharing outcomes and learning, connecting to external groups and resources, supporting effective hubs. The range of social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp and Slack have all played a part.

### **Communication across homes and extra care**

We have discussed the hubs above. In extra care, when Circles were first being established the Connector embedded regular catch up meetings with key leads at all three settings. This was well maintained by two of the settings whom engaged regularly with the Connector and whom maintained good levels of contact and regular communication. However, one of the settings was inconsistent with communication and rarely engaged with the contact from the Connector. The outcome of this was that Circles were less embedded at the setting which did not engage well with the Connector. These regular meetings encourage coherence and provide support from Connector to lead and vice versa. This support is essential for both parties, there grows an understanding of each other's role, how Circles are progressing and how the setting can support the bringing together of those who may benefit from a Circle.

### **Extending to extra care**

We have found that Circles can work really well in extra care settings. Our Connector working with the three settings has adapted approaches to the slightly different context and much has been learned about how to go about this. For more on this learning and “top tips” [click here](#).

## WHAT'S NEXT?



**E**mbedding Community Circles into accommodation with support for older people is a work in progress. We are still at a relatively early stage, but now have useful learning about key aspects of the task of embedding Circles in these types of support. As you would expect we have faced significant challenges and explored and where possible implemented solutions.

Next we move on to phase three. Here, as well as focusing on the next stage of the spread strategy with the extension of hubs we will complete and implement the sustainability strategy with Wigan council. Our current thinking about the issues and options to support sustainability can be found [here](#).

We will continue to learn as we go and hope to update this guide as we do. We are also exploring how to disseminate our learning to others around the country who want to try something similar. We plan a series of workshops and will develop training and support materials based on our continuing learning. One main vehicle for this will be our membership and community of practice. If you want to know more about this please do get in touch.



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