


The Circle Concept – it starts with a hello

CHANGE! Good practice factsheet

Title of good practice/initiative	Image/photo of good practice/initiative
<p>The Circle Concept – it starts with a hello</p> <p>The Circle model – developed by Participle in the UK - aims to demonstrate what a 21st century ageing service - rooted in prevention and the fostering of capabilities - might look like and, through this demonstration, to have a wider impact on the public policy landscape.</p>	<p>Sylvia Basford</p> <p>"You've helped me stay independent"</p> <p>After I lost my husband, I felt so lonely and had nothing to get out of bed for. My health was suffering and I got in a state about my overgrown garden which was always our pride and joy. Getting practical help to get my garden sorted, and being introduced to local members who I could see regularly has kept my spirits up and helped me stay in my own home.</p> 

Description of the good practice /initiative: history, activities, number of involved people, territorial scope, current scale, future plans, impact and benefits (Max. 400 words)

Circle is a membership organisation that supports members aged 50+ to build and sustain strong social bonds and take care of their practical needs. The Circle Concept was developed first by Participle with 250 older people and their families in Southwark, South London, in 2007. The Circle model is locally rooted but designed from the outset with national scale in mind. London Circle was the first attempt to create an infrastructure to support a scaling strategy appropriate for the 33 London Boroughs.

Circle has been successful in proving that an alternative community based approach can support a rich third age. Circle has produced strong (and independently reviewed) social and health outcomes, reducing social isolation and the unnecessary use of statutory services. Circle has saved public money, helping to keep people living as independently as possible for as long as possible, reducing the need for long-term personal care and support.

There are two regional Circles in Nottingham and Rochdale (see websites below) which continue to grow and flourish. London Circle however was not able to develop a sustainable business model or secure ongoing funding in the current climate. The Circle Concept was co-designed with elderly and is around three core things elderly people want:

- Stay sorted and independent: someone to take care of the little things – going up a ladder to change a light bulb;
- Be socially connected: with a rich social life based on shared interests, not age and;
- Live life with a purpose: an opportunity to share skills and knowledge as well as contribute to their community - the support to continue to grow and change at whatever stage of life they found themselves.

Each Circle is run as a local, independent social enterprise, incorporated as a Community Interest Company, employing some staff, led by a full time director. Members are asked to pay an annual subscription of ca. £30 (intentionally set low given the aim to provide a universal service) which gives access to a local free phone number for support: a monthly local Circle social calendar and practical help and support. The core services offered by each Circle remain those of the initial design: a rich, ever changing social calendar and on demand practical support, provided both by members themselves and paid helpers who are all checked and approved.

Circle is a mission driven organisation: its purpose is to support older people to live flourishing independent lives. Circle achieves this through building a broad community and its ability to attract the younger old (members in their 50s and 60s) proved critical to its success since it ensured a community with the strength to support older and frailer members.

Key to the success of the Circle model is the relationships members have with each other. New and diverse friendship groups sustained over time offer practical and emotional support in a light touch, everyday way and are there for when the inevitable difficult times emerge. Circle's key strength is its ability to offer a bespoke, on demand service to members: a rich, ever changing social calendar including overnight breaks and holidays plus customised practical support.

Circle social events are hosted by members or staff creating both a welcoming and supportive environment. A supported social Circle that doesn't look or feel like a service for old people gives confidence to those who might not otherwise make the effort to reconnect. Once members are active, most combine some use of the social calendar with other activities they do with new friends met locally at Circle. Circle has been particularly successful as a trampoline, catching those who are becoming increasingly isolated, supporting them and giving them a boost, helping to bounce them back to the place they want to be.

Circle was designed as an exemplar of what a national ageing service might look like, with an intention to move away from centralised institutions to more distributed social networks.

Circle's approach to partnerships is to forge relationships at a grassroots local level, at wider level and at national level with third sector organisations, health and social care partners as well as local and national businesses (particularly important for the social calendar). Fostering and sustaining this wide range of relationships often contributed to the stretch of the task facing a small, delivery focussed team.

Brief description of how the specific **local public service** has been **challenged** (with figures, if possible)

Like in the majority of EU, UK's social services face a huge challenge derived from ageing population. There is a growing gap between the elderly, the very old and the services available. Not enough family members are able to care for their elder relatives: they live at too great a distance or they cannot work flexibly. Well-known scientific data highlight that loneliness and social isolation are harmful to health. According to Click Nottingham website, research shows that lacking social connections is as damaging to our health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and 59% of adults aged over 52 who report poor health say they feel lonely some of the time or often, compared to 21% who say they are in excellent health.

It is also important that the way things are provided is as important as what is provided, and it is the core principle of Circle. In other words the culture of a Circle would be as important as the formal offer. People did not want to see themselves as needy and they did not want Circle to look or feel like a traditional service.

Role of the municipality within the process (e.g. how the municipality facilitates or coordinates the process to systematise/upscale a civic initiative)

Circles are founded by local authorities, but a circle has most impact and can be the most cost effective when it is part of a structured relationship with a local municipality. Where Local Authorities have a clear strategic vision and a role for Circle within this vision, Circles have thrived. The best example of this comes from outside London where Nottingham's ambitions and vision around early intervention has encompassed Circle.

It is key that the municipality provides only a framework through awareness raising and embedding the circle into local systems like social workers, housing bodies, council newsletters and community programmes, and enables Circle to concentrate on activation and deepening membership experience - since ultimately this is where Circle provided the biggest social and financial gain for its partners.

Budget (in total and municipality's own contribution)

No information has been published with regards to the budget, but the study clearly states that Circle has saved money for involved cities. It is important to add that the development of a Circle within the social finance sector by no means presented a challenge.

Key attributes (success factors) enabling (municipal) staff to implement the project successfully

Circle, as a new service delivery method, is an excellent case study to analyse the different steps of the Collaborative Framework. Among other it needs a proper insight what elderly people really need and what the official services cannot provide. It requires a true co-design or co-creation process from the municipality, where community engagement is also key. As mentioned above, leadership behind the project is also essential, Circle should fit to a wider elderly policy, and city leaders shall find the right colleagues for contribution and awareness-raising, having the right skills, networks and mind-set to influence the public, the private and social worlds. The municipality also should have a brokerage attitude to manage conflicts of interests and to cross the silos? Last, but not least a new system is required to collect evidence and measure experiment.

Links to website for further information on the good practice/initiative

Nottingham Circle: <http://clicknottingham.com/>
Rochdale Circle: <http://hmrcircle.org.uk/>

The above description was prepared mainly based and Participle's study and partly on the website texts.