



# A Guide to Circles of Support



This is a guide to accompany 'The National Framework for Person-Centred Planning in Services for Persons with a Disability.'

## Contents

1. What is a Circle of Support? .....	2
2. Who is in a Circle of Support?.....	4
3. The Key Principles of a Circle of Support .....	6
4. The Benefits of a Circle of Support.....	8
5. How does a Circle of Support fit with the National Framework for Person-Centred Planning in Disability Services? .....	9
6. Examples of Circles of Support in action .....	14
7. Bibliography .....	23

## **I. What is a Circle of Support?**

Most of us naturally develop a network of people during our lives. These are people that we can count on; they take an interest in us and support us through good times and bad. We share memories, dreams, hobbies, and pastimes with these family members, friends, colleagues, and team-mates. This gives us a sense of identity and connects us together.

Persons with disabilities may have less opportunity to meet other people, join social groups, or build and sustain relationships. A Circle of Support is a way of connecting a person with a disability to their community. A group of people, who are known to the person with a disability, is established to support the person to identify things they would like to achieve or alter in their life. This Circle of Support explores ways to put the necessary supports in place to make things happen and can play a key role in the Person-Centred Planning process.

The concept of Circles of Support started in Canada in the 1980s. It has developed since and Circles of Support are now in operation in many countries around the world. They have been used with children, young people, and adults; primarily where individuals are thought to be vulnerable or isolated from their communities, for example, persons with disabilities, older persons, persons with dementia, and prisoners and young offenders.

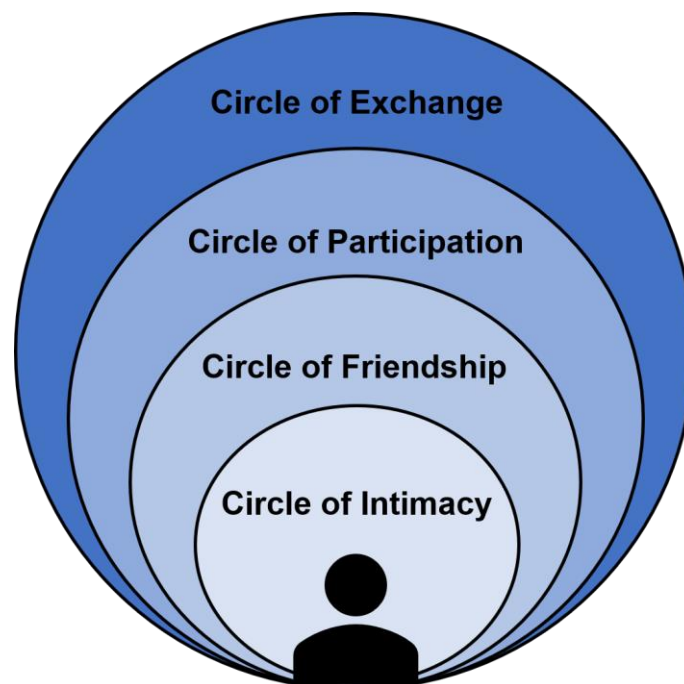
Circles of Support are also sometimes called a circle of friends, community circle, or support network. Different terms may be used but the principles remain the same. Circles of Support may develop into a 'Microboard'- a non-profit society that helps an individual plan their life and advocates for what they need.



Snow (1998) identified four layers to a Circle of Support:

1. **The circle of intimacy** – the people you spend a lot of time with, trust, and share emotions, intimate relationships, and private information with. These people are very precious to us and we would miss them greatly if they were not around. You might live with these people.
2. **The circle of friendship** - friends or relatives that we like to spend time with socially. We might see these people occasionally rather than very regularly. You might share interests and news with this group.
3. **The circle of participation** - the people or organisations you participate in and interact with on a frequent basis. This could be clubs, church groups, neighbourhood groups, sports teams, work colleagues, or college friends.
4. **The circle of exchange** - the people that are paid to be in our lives, for example, staff, doctor, dentist, tutor, social worker, therapist, hairdresser.

Snow observed that persons without disabilities may have a spread of people across all four layers of the Circle of Support. However, a person with a disability may have people in circle 1 and circle 4 but have significant gaps in the other two layers.



## 2. Who is in a Circle of Support?

A Circle of Support is made up primarily of people, that a person with a disability knows from different parts of his/her life, who want to volunteer their time to support them. The group is brought together intentionally with the person with a disability at the centre. The group recognises that this person is unique, with talents, skills, dreams, and a contribution to make to society.

The person with a disability should decide who will be part of their Circle of Support. Some individuals may need assistance to identify suitable people.

A Circle of Support may start with a small number of people and grow over time. Circles of Support often consist of between four and eight people; it should depend on the preference of the person with a disability. Some people are uncomfortable in large groups or it may be hard to reach consensus and agree actions in a large group.



A Circle of Support can be made up of:

- Immediate family members – mother, father, sister, brother
- Extended family members – cousins, nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles
- Work colleagues
- Peers and Friends

- Neighbours
- Community members or volunteers.

A Circle of Support works well when there is representation from all four layers of a circle. In addition, it can help to include persons from different genders, generations, or backgrounds. Each person will bring a different skill set to the table.

Often, the person with a disability will want immediate family members in their Circle of Support. However, some persons with a disability might prefer not to have family involved in their life and there is no requirement for family members to be part of a Circle of Support – this is down to individual choice.

It is strongly recommended that Circles of Support are not made up of paid staff and immediate family members **only**. At the outset, paid staff or immediate family members may act as facilitators to get a Circle of Support started. If they stay involved, the role of facilitator should be shared with other members of the Circle of Support. Some persons with disabilities, such as those with a personalised budget, may opt to hire an independent facilitator to assist with the organisation of their Circle of Support.

The literature debates the advantages and disadvantages of paid staff from disability services being part of a Circle of Support. If a paid staff member is involved, their opinion should not carry more weight than other members. It is also important that ‘conflicts of interest’ are avoided wherever possible. All members of the Circle of Support should be clear on their specific role. Paid staff and/or facilitators should pass on skills and empower the person with a disability and other members of the Circle of Support to develop and sustain it themselves wherever possible. Then, they should remove themselves from the Circle of Support.

Those involved in establishing a Circle of Support should be familiar with and should follow their organisation’s policies and processes in relation to safeguarding, vetting, and volunteering. Where these policies and processes are a barrier to the establishment of a Circle of Support, this issue should be raised with the relevant

management teams at Stage I in the Person-Centred Planning Process. A strategy should be developed to review and address the barriers.

### **3. The Key Principles of a Circle of Support**

1. The person with a disability is the focus of the Circle of Support. The Circle of Support should reflect this person's identity, culture, and values.
2. The Circle of Support is grounded in the beliefs of choice, respect, trust, self-determination, capacity, inclusion, independence, and active citizenship.
3. Every Circle of Support is unique; Circles of Support grow and develop at different paces and in different ways. There is no need to be overly prescriptive or for lots of rules!
4. The Circle of Support builds on natural support networks; members care about the person with a disability and have a genuine interest in their wellbeing.
5. The Circle of Support does not replace the role of the family or of services in a person's life.
6. The Circle of Support is not usually responsible for developing Personalised Care and Support Plans for the individual. These types of plans focus on what is important **for** the person - the support they need to stay healthy, safe, and well. The Circle of Support focuses on what is important **to** the person – their dreams and wishes.
7. The members of the Circle of Support work collaboratively and creatively. They are open, honest, and willing to learn.
8. Every member of the Circle of Support works towards a common vision: enabling the person with a disability to achieve their personal goals and live their best life.
9. Each member of the Circle of Support has an equal opportunity to contribute. They bring their own talents and attributes; they may join the Circle of

Support because they have a specific set of skills required by the person with a disability.

10. The Circle of Support assists the person with a disability with the Person-Centred Planning process; decision-making, planning life goals for the present and future, identifying and addressing risks and barriers. Their work leads to clear actions and outcomes.

11. The Circle of Support celebrates achievements.

12. All Circles of Support will face challenges. They are not a quick fix solution and need time, commitment, and resources to establish and sustain them. Members should have realistic expectations.





#### 4. The Benefits of a Circle of Support

A Circle of Support is working well if it leads to positive outcomes and an improved quality of life for the person with a disability. A Circle of Support:

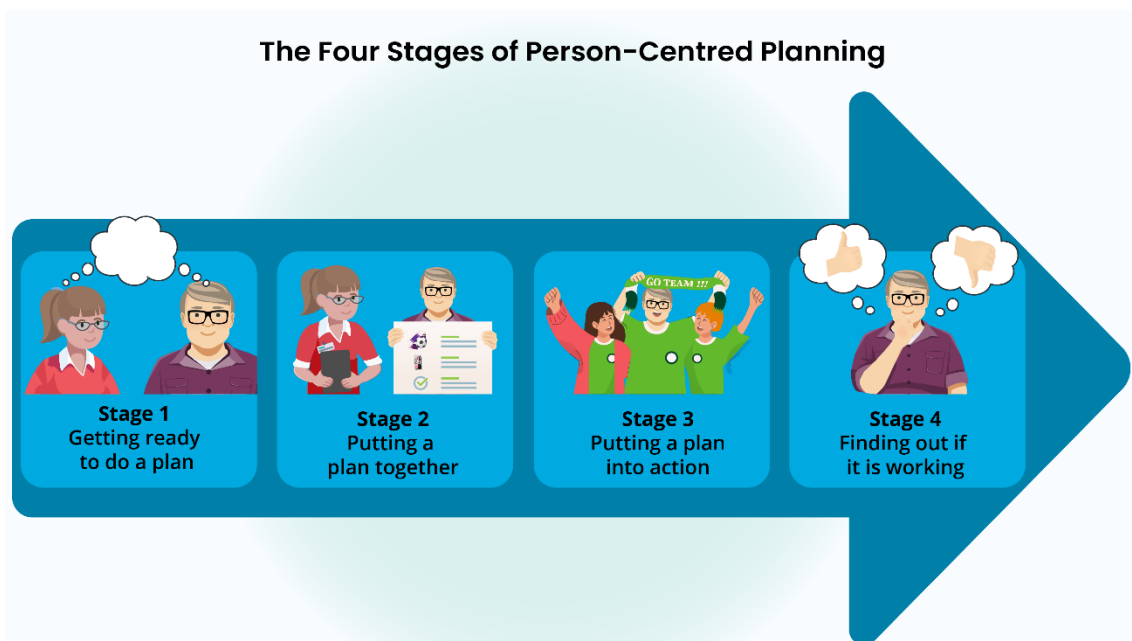
- fosters new and maintains existing relationships
- reduces isolation and improves wellbeing
- allows for a dynamic and creative approach to Person-Centred Planning – ‘thinking outside the box’
- encourages the sharing of ideas and a problem-solving attitude
- backs up natural support networks and reduces the strain on some families
- provides some relief for families in relation to future planning
- increases safeguarding – more people to listen to and watch out for the focus person
- promotes autonomy, independence, and self-reliance
- supports positive risk-taking
- supports active citizenship
- encourages open and honest evaluation
- provides opportunities for shared celebration.



## 5. How does a Circle of Support fit with the National Framework for Person-Centred Planning in Disability Services?

Person-Centred Planning supports and enables a person to make informed choices about how they want to live their life, now and in the future. The National Framework for Person-Centred Planning in Disability Services signposts information and evidence from research, and supports the reader to transfer this into effective, everyday practice. Circles of Support are a key recommendation of the Framework. The principles of Circles of Support fit well with the core beliefs and foundations outlined in the Framework, for example, individuality, empowerment, active citizenship, and outcomes.

### The four stages of Person-Centred Planning



The person who owns the Person-Centred Plan is at the centre of all organisation, planning, and discussion in both the Person-Centred Planning process and the Circle of Support.

The planning team and Circle of Support must work together at all stages of the Person-Centred Planning process. Roles at each stage of the process are summarised briefly below.

## Stage I – Getting ready to do a Person-Centred Plan

- The person who owns the Person-Centred Plan and their family members are given information on Circles of Support in the learning and development opportunities provided at this stage.
- The planning team are given information on Circles of Support and on how to work in partnership with the person who owns the Person-Centred Plan and their Circle of Support.
- The planning team established at Stage I ultimately leads to the formation of a Circle of Support for the person who owns the Person-Centred Plan.
- Where a Circle of Support already exists, the members are involved in Person-Centred Planning from the outset. They can access information and participate in active learning on Person-Centred Planning. The role of the Circle of Support in Person-Centred Planning is explained and discussed.
- The person who supports putting the Person-Centred Plan together makes sure the person who owns the Person-Centred Plan and their Circle of Support understand the Person-Centred Planning policy.
- Where the person who owns the Person-Centred Plan has no family or community involvement, the organisation seeks to address the lack of social relationships at an early stage of planning. The person who supports putting the Person-Centred Plan together leads on this task.
- The person who supports putting the Person-Centred Plan together works closely with the person who owns the Person-Centred Plan and their Circle of Support to get to know the person's interests, strengths, likes and dislikes. They work together as they start to gather information for goal setting and evaluation.
- The person who supports putting the Person-Centred Plan together may also work with the person who owns the Person-Centred Plan and their Circle of

Support to ensure the right communication supports and technology are in place to maximise engagement in the PCP process.

- Person-Centred Planning is reliant on paid staff only when necessary, for example, only when significant efforts have been made to establish a Circle of Support have been unsuccessful. There should be a gradual process where paid support reduces over time as a person who owns the Person-Centred Plan gains independence, increases social networks, and their Circle of Support is established.

### Stage 2 – Putting a Person-Centred Plan together

- At Stage 2, the planning team and the Circle of Support assist the person who owns the Person-Centred Plan to share their dreams and aspirations and set their goals. The person who supports putting the Person-Centred Plan together ensures this information is shared with those that support the person to put their Person-Centred Plan into action.
- Members of the Circle of Support attend Person-Centred Planning meetings. These are usually organised by the person who owns the Person-Centred Plan and the person supporting them to put their Person-Centred Plan together. There may be several meetings to develop the Person-Centred Plan before putting it into action, or to amend the Person-Centred Plan as necessary.
- Members of the Circle of Support check that the Person-Centred Planning process is accessible to the person who owns the Person-Centred Plan.
- Communication is key at this stage and it is essential that the planning team and Circle of Support work together to support the person who owns the Person-Centred Plan.

### Stage 3 – Putting a Person-Centred Plan into action

- At Stage 3, the Circle of Support ensures that a clear action plan is in place. The Circle of Support work alongside the planning team to monitor evidence and review the progress of the plan.

- The action plan is developed by the person who owns the Person-Centred Plan and the person who supports them to put their Person-Centred Plan together.
- Evidence is collected by the person who owns the Person-Centred Plan and the person supporting them to put the Person-Centred Plan into action.
- Members of the Circle of Support may assist the person who owns the Person-Centred Plan to put specific goals into action. They link with the person who supports putting the Person-Centred Plan together and others supporting putting the Person-Centred Plan into action.
- The person who supports putting the Person-Centred Plan into action liaises with the Circle of Support to ensure actions and goals are progressed and supported. The person who owns the Person-Centred Plan and the person supporting them to put their Person-Centred Plan together will carry out informal reviews and involve members of the Circle of Support as appropriate.
- The Circle of Support helps the person who owns the Person-Centred Plan to address any barriers or challenges that arise in the implementation of the action plan and the achievement of goals. There is ongoing communication with those supporting the person to put their Person-Centred Plan into action.
- The Circle of Support encourages independence and supports positive risk-taking.
- Members of the Circle of Support promote community participation, active citizenship, and the development of valued social roles.

#### Stage 4 – Finding out if Person-Centred Planning is working

- At Stage 4, the Circle of Support reflects on the Person-Centred Planning process and how it is working.

- Member of the Circle of Support are involved in formal and informal reviews. They discuss and evaluate the outcomes achieved. They do this in partnership with the person who owns the Person-Centred Plan and their planning team.
- The person who owns the Person-Centred Plan and the person who supports them to put their Person-Centred Plan together co-ordinate a formal review of the action plan.
- Members of the Circle of Support might support the person who owns the Person-Centred Plan to make a complaint, pass on a compliment, lobby for change, highlight good practice.
- Members of the Circle of Support could assist the person who owns the Person-Centred Plan to complete an evaluation tool, for example, the Easy to Read evaluation tool which accompanies the Framework document.

## 6. Examples of Circles of Support in action



### **Jessica's Story – Setting up a Circle of Support**

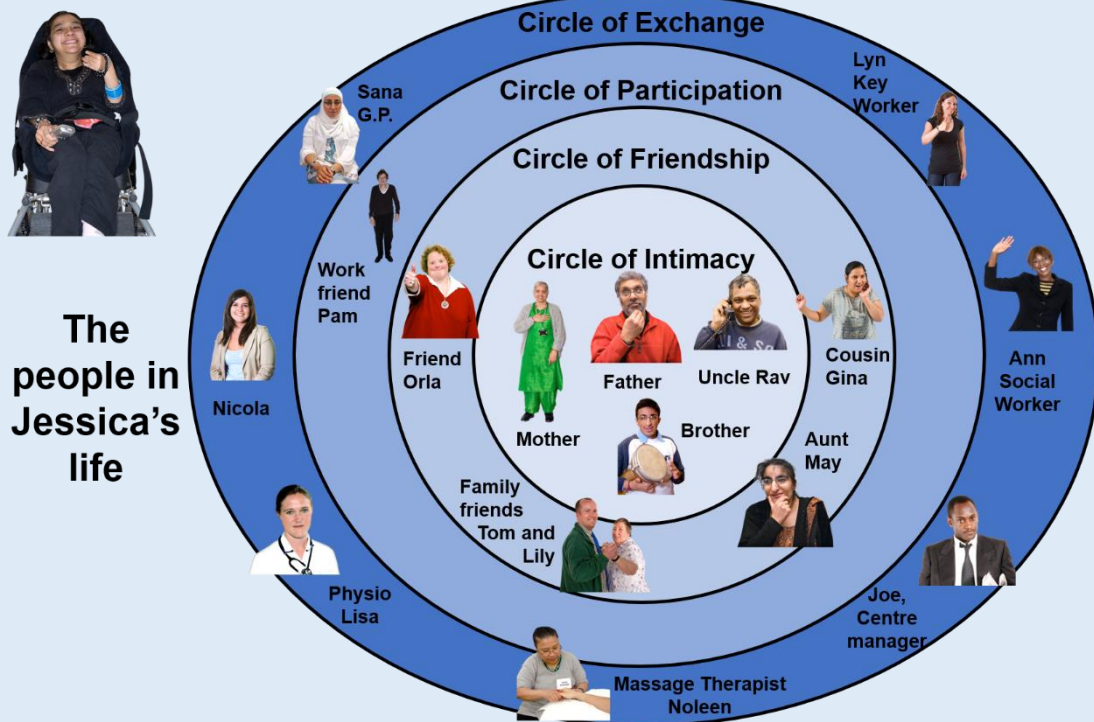
Jessica is a thirty-five-year old woman with an intellectual and a physical disability. Jessica needs support to communicate her preferences and ideas. Nicola is the person supporting Jessica to put her Person-Centred Plan together. They are looking at Stage I of the Framework – getting

ready to do a Person-Centred Plan. Nicola is aware that Jessica's planning team is made up of her parents and paid staff from her day service. Jessica's mother has been unwell recently and her father has been caring for both Jessica and her mother.

Nicola talks with Jessica about the idea of a Circle of Support. Jessica is not sure what this means and how it might work for her. They decide to spend some time thinking about a Circle of Support and start by listing all the important people in Jessica's life. Together, they look at Jessica's life story book and photo albums. A life story book is a written or visual account of a person's life. Jessica and Nicola make a list of the places that Jessica likes to go to in her community. Then, Jessica and Nicola use photos and drawings to make a poster of Jessica's network showing the key people in each layer of the Circle of Support.

Jessica is from a small, close family. She has strong relationships with her parents and brother. Jessica is close to her Uncle Rav – they share a sense of humour and enjoy spending time together watching movies and listening to music.

Nicola and Jessica see that there are few people in Jessica's circle of participation. Most people in the circle of exchange are paid staff from disability services. Jessica does not take part in any groups in her community, but she does work one morning a week in a local shop. Although she uses several community facilities, she does not know anyone in these places by name.



Jessica decides that she would like to try to get to know more people outside her family and service. This is one of the goals she would like to work on in her Person-Centred Plan. A Circle of Support could be the first step in this goal.

Jessica and Nicola find some Easy to Read information and videos on Circles of Support online. Jessica's friend Orla already has a Circle of Support. Jessica arranges to meet up with Orla to get more information.

Jessica thinks she would like to start with a small Circle of Support. She wants to ask her Uncle Rav, keyworker Lyn, friend Tom, and work friend Pam to be part of her Circle of Support. Nicola will be the facilitator whilst the Circle of Support is set up but will pass on this job and step away eventually. As Jessica gets to know more people in layers 2 and 3, her Circle of Support could grow.

Jessica and Nicola plan an 'afternoon tea' and make invitations to send to Rav, Lyn, Tom and Pam. Jessica also wants to invite her parents and Lily to the afternoon tea so they can hear about the Circle of Support and Person-Centred Planning and understand how it might work.



Dear Uncle Rav

I would like to invite you to come to Afternoon Tea

The afternoon is about my plans to live my best life  
and how you could support me

Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> July at 3.00

At The Oaks Centre

Love Jessica



Nicola says she will bring some information on Circles of Support and Person-Centred Planning and will assist Jessica to answer questions. They decide that it will be important to explain:

- Why Jessica thinks a Circle of Support could help her
- Why each person has been asked to take part
- What the commitment will be
- How the meetings might work
- The different roles in a Circle of Support.



### **Liam's Story – A Circle of Support meets for the first time**

Liam is a sixty-year old man with physical and sensory disabilities. He lives independently and has a part-time job in a college. Liam felt frustrated that he did not achieve the goals in his last Person-Centred Plan. He feels this was mainly due to a lack of staff resources.

Liam heard about Circles of Support at a local advocacy group and approached his social worker, Niamh, for advice on how to set up a Circle of Support.

Having identified the people in his network, Liam invited the following people to join his Circle of Support:

- Ann – his sister
- James – his cousin with a shared interest in sport
- David – his keyworker from a disability service
- Marie – a neighbour
- Ray – a friend from the Men's shed.

Liam spoke directly with each person and gave them some information leaflets about Circles of Support. His service provider put together a short video which he asked them to watch. Marie felt she could not participate; she is keen to help but has family commitments which limit her availability. Liam understands that this is not personal, and that Marie will continue to be his friend and support him. Liam decides to ask Louise, a work colleague, to join his Circle of Support. She is delighted to be asked and accepts.

Liam decides to hold his first meeting in the evening. This suits Liam best and will suit members of his Circle of Support that work during the day. Niamh agrees to support Liam at the first meeting but will not stay involved after this.

Liam wants to have the meeting at home, and he agrees to organise tea/coffee and biscuits. Marie bakes a cake which she drops to Liam's house on the day of the first meeting. Liam and Niamh agree an agenda before the meeting.

**Liam's Circle of Support Meeting  
Agenda – 5<sup>th</sup> July**

1. Introductions
2. Ice-breaker
3. Liam will talk about his person-centred plan and personal goals
4. The Circle of Support will decide how often to meet
5. The Circle of Support will decide how to set the agenda
6. Roles in the Circle of Support
7. Questions
8. Date for the next meeting

On the day of the meeting, Niamh arrives early to support Liam to set everything up. Liam decides he would like to sit around the kitchen table so everyone can see and hear each other.

Liam opens the meeting and Niamh offers to facilitate and take notes. The meeting starts with introductions. Each person talks about their relationship with Liam – how they met, how long they have known each other, shared interests, etc.

Liam leads an ice-breaker activity to help people relax and get to know one another. He plays a game called 'dinner party' where everyone names five people, famous or otherwise, that they would like to invite to a diner party. This works well and the members of the Circle of Support learn a little about each person's interests.

Liam suggests they try a short activity like this at every meeting. Louise proposes that they take it in turns to come up with an activity and Ray offers to prepare one for the next meeting.

Liam talks about his life now and shares his Person-Centred Plan with the group, highlighting the goals that he would like to achieve and describing the barriers faced in the past year. Liam wants to make real progress with his goals this year and would like help from the Circle of Support to monitor how things are going. The members of the Circle of Support agree to make this a priority.

Liam would like to attend more sporting events in his local community and further afield. Transport and access can be a problem and Liam needs support for some trips. The members of the Circle of Support agree to get more information before the next meeting. David will support Liam to look at upcoming events which he would like to attend. Ann will find out about public transport and accessible options. James suggests that he could accompany Liam to one sporting event each month if transport could be arranged. Louise will research volunteers in the local community, and Ray will assist Liam to link with the local GAA club. Niamh notes the actions and the person responsible for each one.

The Circle of Support agrees to meet every month for two hours. David will take over the role of facilitator and will support Liam to prepare and send out an agenda before the meeting. Ann agrees to be timekeeper, and Louise will take notes and write up the minutes. The Circle of Support decides that these roles should move to other members after six months.

James explains that he lives a distance away and is often away on business. He is worried that he will miss a meeting. Liam suggests that he could link in by phone or skype if he cannot be physically present. James did not realise that Liam used video chat and is very happy to establish more contact in this way. He suggests they could also watch some sporting events together using video chat.

David agrees to spend time with Liam to check that he has access to the most appropriate technology. Liam suggests that updating his technology skills is another goal he would like to work on.

Liam explains that he does not want anyone in the Circle of Support to feel under pressure. The members agree to be open and honest about what they can and cannot do.

Before Niamh brings the meeting to a close, a date is set for the next meeting.

Liam sends Marie a note to thank her for the cake and to tell her that all went well at the meeting. He sends a postcard to each person in his Circle of Support to thank them for coming to the first meeting and to remind them of the date of the next meeting.



## **Helen's story – Keeping a Circle of Support going**

Helen is a young woman with autism. She lives at home with her mother and has recently moved to an adult day service in the local town. Helen's mother, Ailish, set up a Circle of Support for her whilst she was preparing to transition from school to adult services.

Helen's Circle of Support is made up of Ailish, her SNA Joanne, Aunt Breda, neighbour Betty and a family friend Neil. The Circle of Support has been running for two years and has achieved many positive outcomes for Helen, including the introduction of new hobbies and experiences, trips to new places, and work experience. There have been some difficulties along the way, but the members of the Circle of Support have always worked together with a 'can do' attitude, solving problems as they arise and managing risks.

Ailish is keen that the Circle of Support would continue when Helen moves to adult services. She has acted as facilitator for the Circle of Support for the last two years and would like to reduce her input gradually. Joanne has decided it is the right time to step away. Ailish would like to invite young people of Helen's age to join the Circle of Support as she feels it would be good for Helen to have peers involved with similar interests. Ailish thinks about the future with the next big step in Helen's life being a move away from home. She would like the Circle of Support to offer support and guidance with this. She is reassured to know that there are people to look out for Helen outside of the family. Neil is an artist and has suggested creating a drawing/piece of artwork to depict what Helen's life could look like in five-years-time. This might help new members to the Circle of Support or new staff working with Helen to understand her personality and talents.

Helen's Circle of Support meets every six to eight weeks at her home. Helen is at the centre of the meeting although she does not always stay in the room for the full meeting.

She loves to greet people as they arrive and to prepare the tea and biscuits. At the start of each meeting, Helen likes to show photos or videos of things that she has enjoyed and experienced since the last meeting. The members of the Circle of Support then review the minutes and actions from the last meeting and talk about any positive outcomes or challenges that arose. Ailish gives an update on developments in Helen's life and on the progress with each goal.

The Circle of Support celebrates major events and achievements in Helen's life, for example, when she graduated from school, the members of the Circle of Support organised a celebratory picnic and walk in a local park.

Noel is the manager of the day service which Helen now attends. Noel met with the Circle of Support to learn more about Helen and find out how the centre can support them going forward. When Helen's SNA leaves the Circle of Support, Noel agrees to support Ailish to recruit young volunteers to the Circle of Support. He also links Helen's keyworker, Amy, to the Circle of Support as she can support Helen to put her Person-Centred Plan together. The staff in the day service will support Helen to put specific goals into action.

Noel and Ailish agree to gather feedback and formally review the Person-Centred Planning process and the Circle of Support on an annual basis. They decide that a simple survey followed by a short meeting would be the best way to do this. They make sure that in sharing information, they follow all data protection laws, and send a reminder to everyone about this.

## 7. Bibliography

- Emma Fialka Feldman, Micah Fialka Feldman, and Janice Fialka - Inclusion Includes Belonging: How to Create and Sustain a Circle of Support.
- Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities (2015) A Guide to Circles of Support (2015) – this is an Easy to Read guide.
- Max Neill and Helen Sanderson - Circles of Support and Personalisation.
- Resourcing Families – Circles of Support.
- Resourcing Inclusive Communities (2019) Circles of Support – A manual for getting started.
- Snow, Judith, A. (1998) What's Really Worth Doing and How to do it – A Book for People Who Love Someone Labelled Disabled (Possibly Yourself), Inclusion Press, Ontario Canada.



