

## **Celebrating the Completing the Circle Project: widening access to Circles for people convicted of sexual offences**

Circles UK recently hosted an on-line seminar to celebrate the successes of the 'Completing the Circle' project and the lessons arising from it. The 'Completing the Circle' project was an ambitious four-year programme which sought to end the 'postcode lottery' of access to the community safety and rehabilitative benefits of Circles.

### ***What are Circles ('Circles of Support and Accountability')?***

Circles UK's vision is of '**no more victims**'. Its mission is to enhance public safety by working with individuals who have sexually abused others, and are at risk of doing so again, to self-manage inappropriate thoughts and behaviours, reintegrate safely into society, and lead responsible lives.

The Circles model (also known as Circles of Support and Accountability) is a complementary approach which harnesses the strengths and resources of local people to augment the statutory risk management of sexual harm causers in the community. In the Circles model the abuser becomes the 'Core Member' of an 'inner Circle' made up of 4-6 professionally trained and supervised Volunteers. The Circle seeks to prevent further sexual abuse by reducing stigma and social isolation; factors known to be strongly associated with sexual recidivism. The Circle focuses on a person's 'positives' and 'strengths' and seeks to support him/her to access safe social outlets and opportunities, avoid dangerous and enabling situations and behaviours and manage day to day challenges. In so doing the Circle serves to reduce the risk of reoffending associated with alienation and the attendant risk of harm to existing and potential victims.

Circles UK was established in 2008 to set up and oversee organisations to deliver Circles in England and Wales. Organisations which run Circles must become members of Circles UK and operate within the requirements of a Code of Practice. These Circles 'Providers', as they are known, are also subject to biennial audits by Circles UK to ensure that quality and safety standards are maintained. There are currently nine Circles Providers working across England and Wales.

Since 2008 over 900 Circles have run successfully with a known reoffending rate of less than 7%.

### ***What was the Completing the Circle Project?***

In 2015, the National Lottery Community Fund awarded over £2million to a consortium of Circle Providers, led by Circles UK. This consortium was given just 4 years to set up and run 188 new Circles in parts of England and Wales where they had not existed before. As the intention of the project was to ensure that communities in every part of the country would have access to Circles, the project was called 'Completing the Circle, or 'CtC' for short. Circles

delivery was expanded to five previously un-served parts of the country - Merseyside, Lancashire, Lincolnshire, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, Northamptonshire, and London.

***What were the main successes?***

All 188 Circles were established and completed in the parts of the country where no such service has been available before

778 Volunteers were recruited, trained, and closely supervised to provide the 188 new Circles.

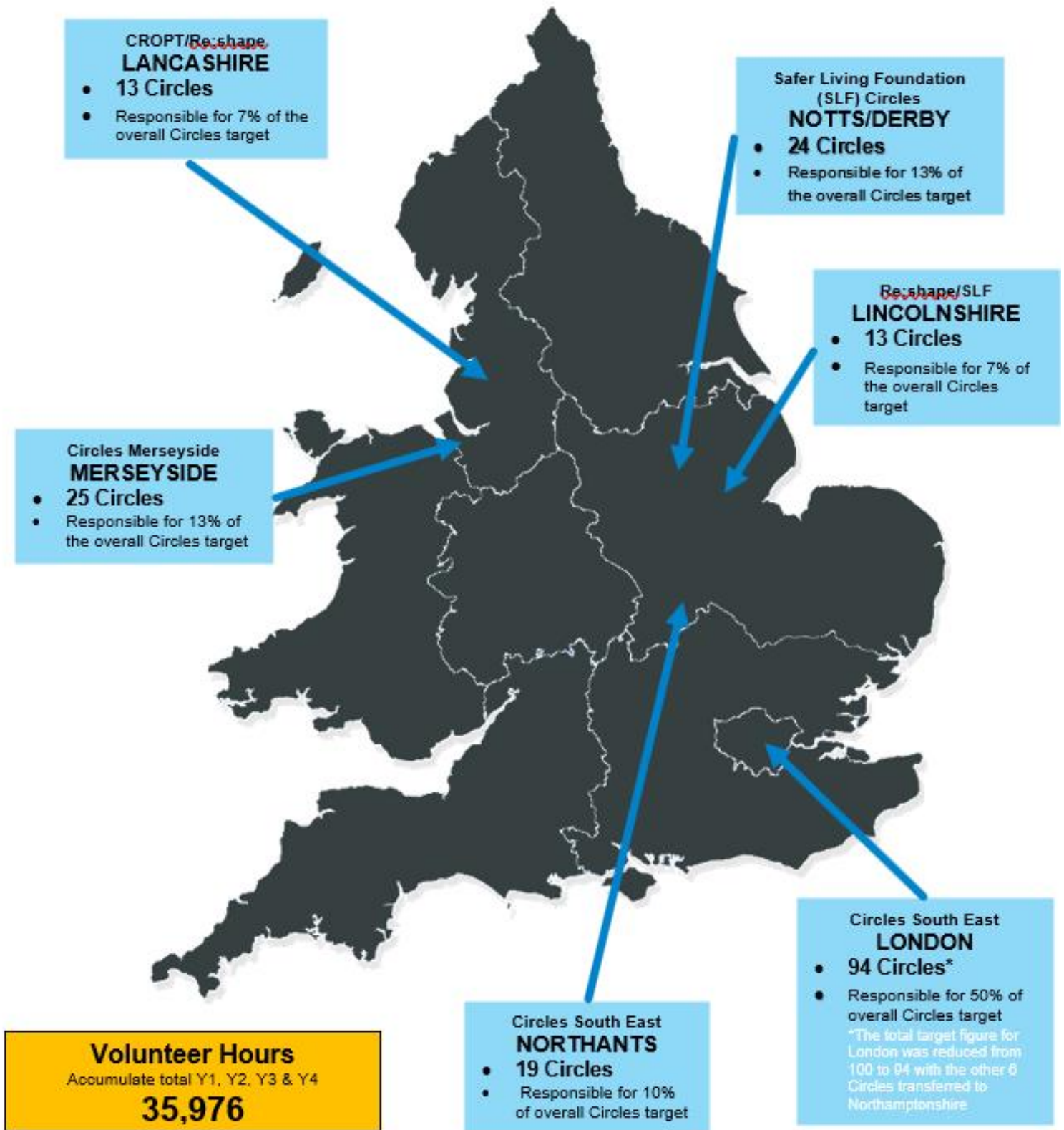
In addition to many hours of mandatory core training, 291 Volunteers received additional supplemental training.

103 Volunteers were supported to achieve National Open College Network accredited certification.

These Volunteers gave 35,976 hours of their time to help reduce sexual harm within their communities and roughly the same amount of time travelling to and from Circle meetings and activities.

The goal of helping sexual harm causers (Core Members in a Circle) to safely reintegrate into their communities was achieved. An independent evaluation showed that dynamic risk factors reduced and 'protective' factors across a range of variables, including employment, purposeful activities and hobbies, stable emotional relationships, and emotional wellbeing, improved.

The following map shows the areas in England and Wales where Circles were successfully established due to the Completing the Circle project:

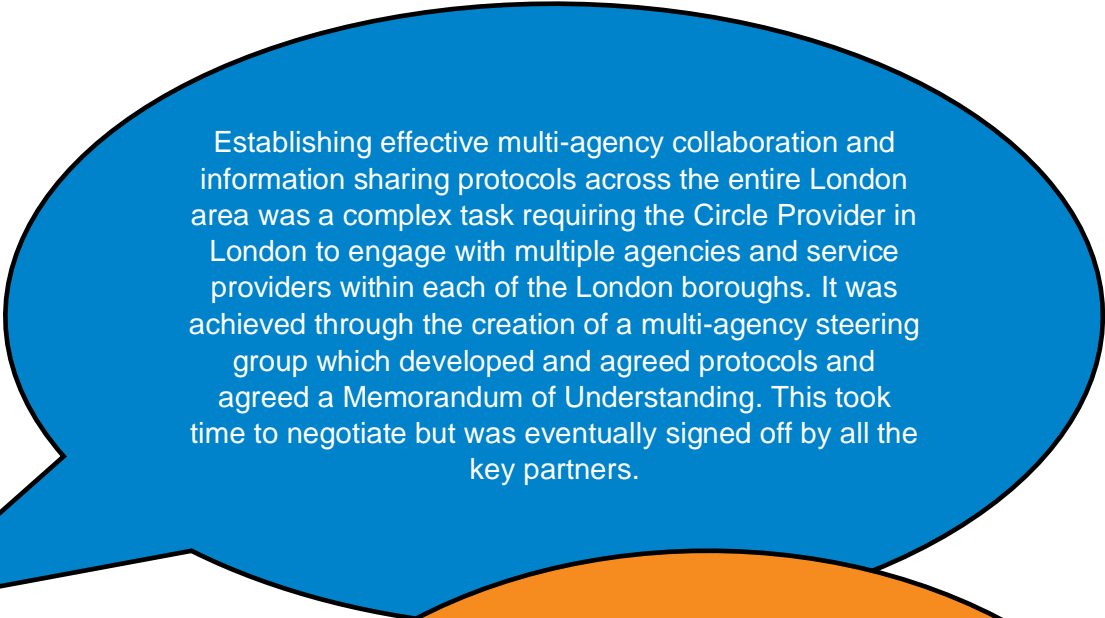


## *How were these results achieved – a case study*

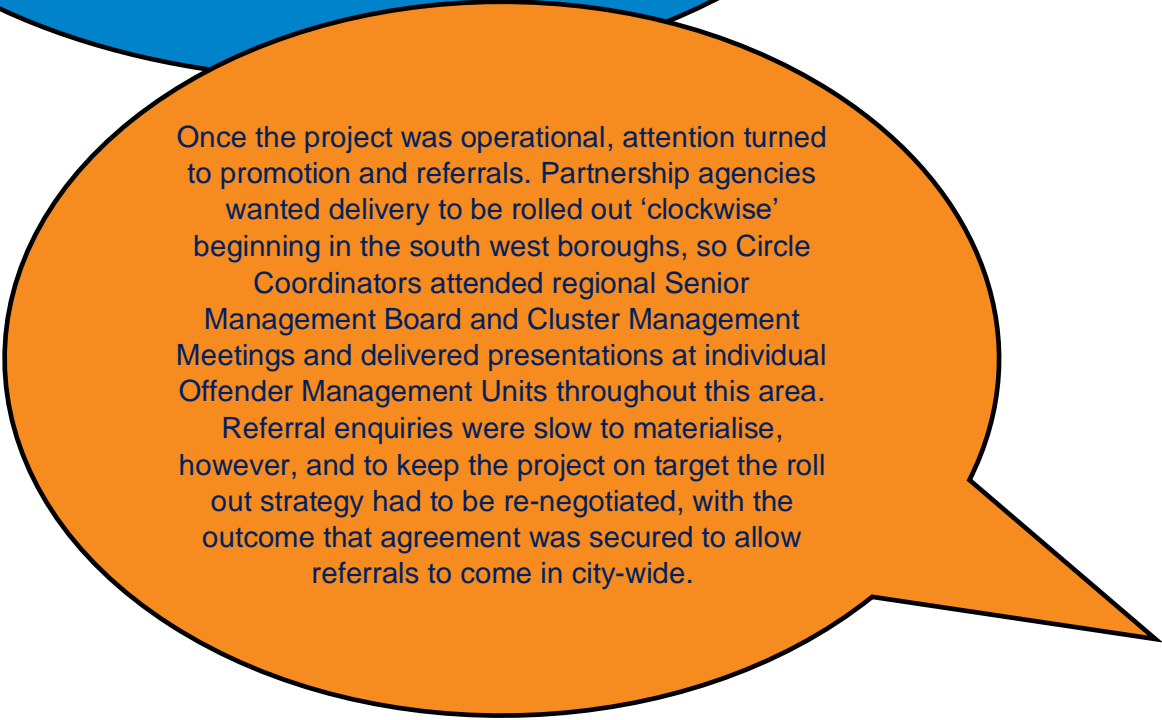
To illustrate some of the issues that had to be overcome to make the project such a success, the London roll out will be used as a case study.

London was the largest of the geographical areas involved in the project. There are more registered sex offenders (RSOs) living in the capital city than in any other area of England and Wales, with recent Ministry of Justice (MoJ) figures reporting 6,581 Registered Sex Offenders being managed under Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPAs). Even though the benefits of adding Circles to the existing range of public protection measures in London were self-evident from the start and the project was welcomed by statutory and other-sector partners, establishing 94 new Circles from scratch without pre-existing infrastructures, partnership relationships or a volunteer recruitment strategy in place presented significant challenges.

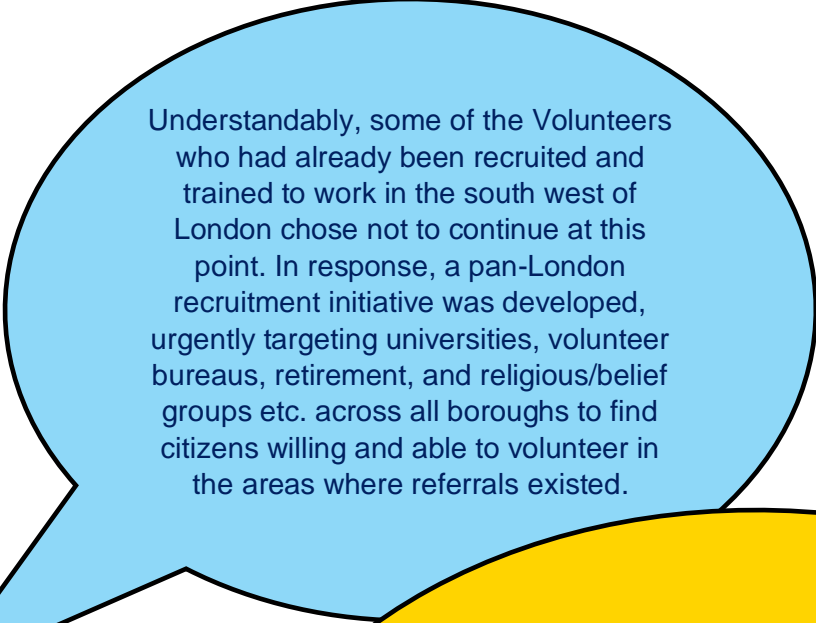
## *What were the main challenges and how were they overcome?*



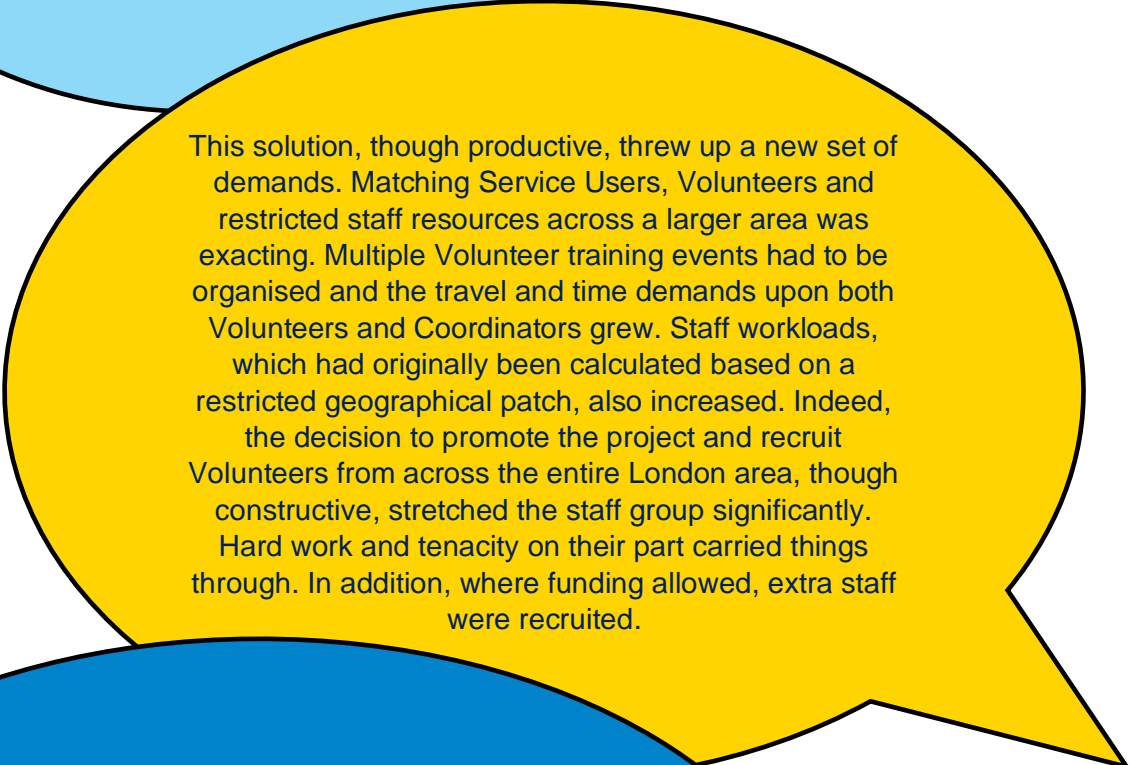
Establishing effective multi-agency collaboration and information sharing protocols across the entire London area was a complex task requiring the Circle Provider in London to engage with multiple agencies and service providers within each of the London boroughs. It was achieved through the creation of a multi-agency steering group which developed and agreed protocols and agreed a Memorandum of Understanding. This took time to negotiate but was eventually signed off by all the key partners.



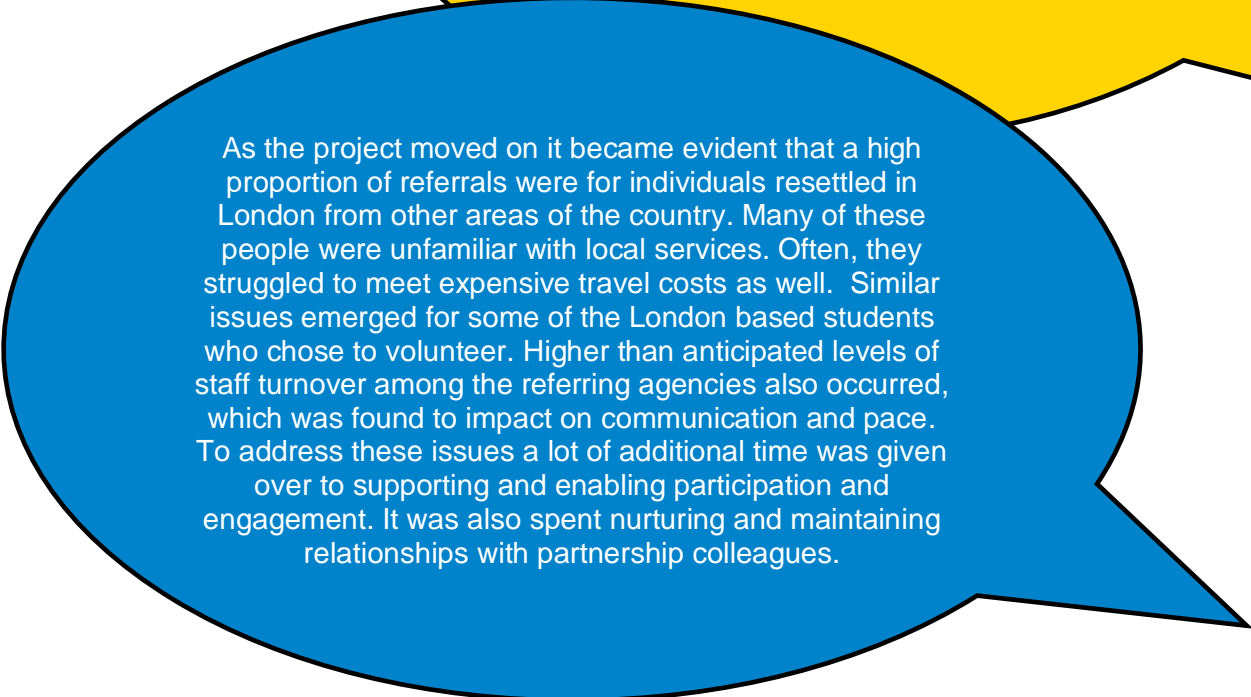
Once the project was operational, attention turned to promotion and referrals. Partnership agencies wanted delivery to be rolled out 'clockwise' beginning in the south west boroughs, so Circle Coordinators attended regional Senior Management Board and Cluster Management Meetings and delivered presentations at individual Offender Management Units throughout this area. Referral enquiries were slow to materialise, however, and to keep the project on target the roll out strategy had to be re-negotiated, with the outcome that agreement was secured to allow referrals to come in city-wide.



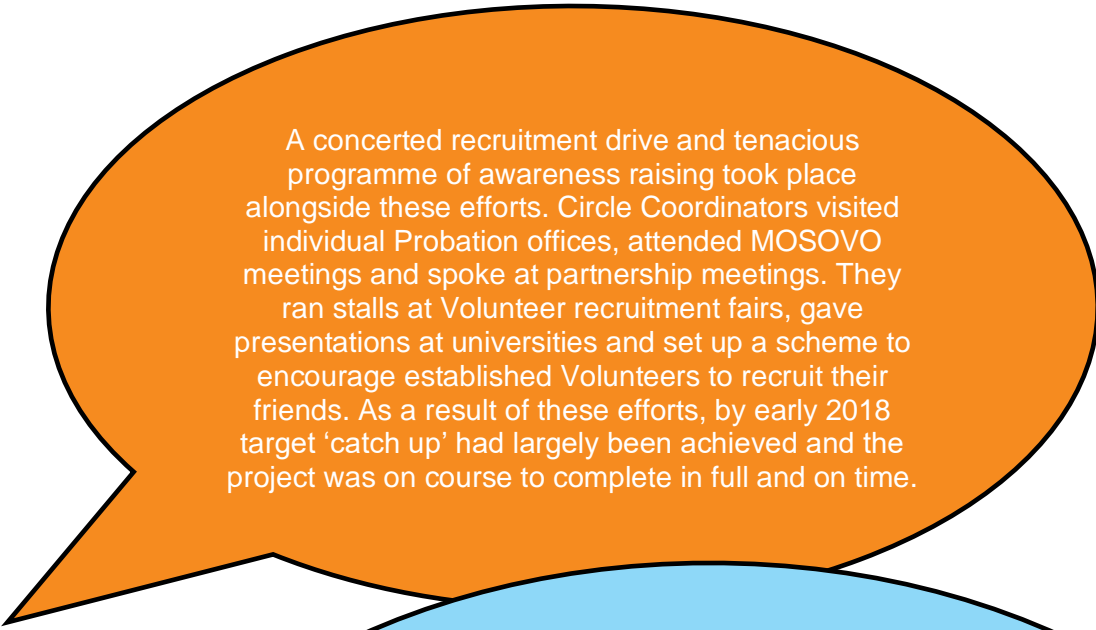
Understandably, some of the Volunteers who had already been recruited and trained to work in the south west of London chose not to continue at this point. In response, a pan-London recruitment initiative was developed, urgently targeting universities, volunteer bureaux, retirement, and religious/belief groups etc. across all boroughs to find citizens willing and able to volunteer in the areas where referrals existed.



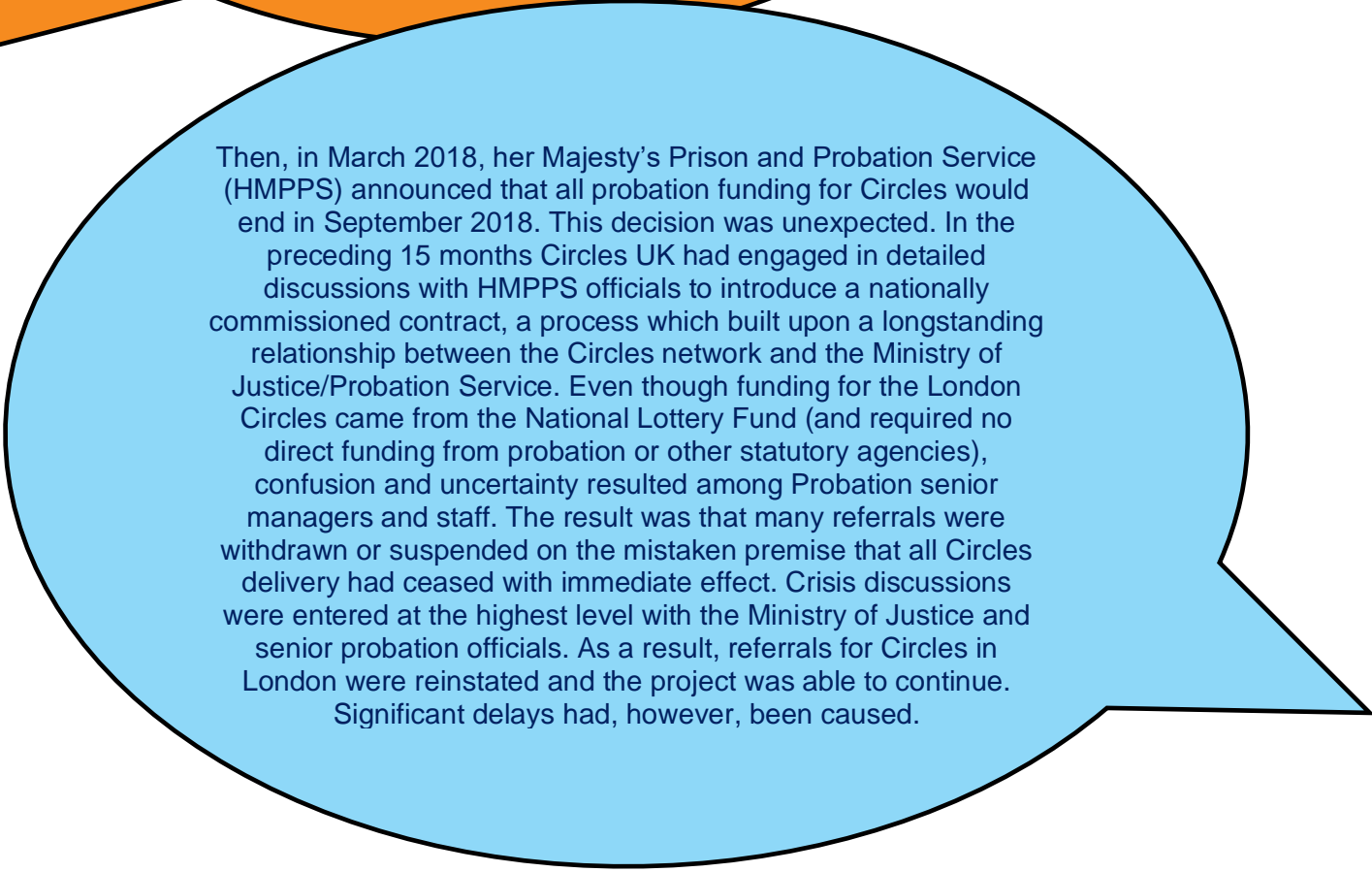
This solution, though productive, threw up a new set of demands. Matching Service Users, Volunteers and restricted staff resources across a larger area was exacting. Multiple Volunteer training events had to be organised and the travel and time demands upon both Volunteers and Coordinators grew. Staff workloads, which had originally been calculated based on a restricted geographical patch, also increased. Indeed, the decision to promote the project and recruit Volunteers from across the entire London area, though constructive, stretched the staff group significantly. Hard work and tenacity on their part carried things through. In addition, where funding allowed, extra staff were recruited.



As the project moved on it became evident that a high proportion of referrals were for individuals resettled in London from other areas of the country. Many of these people were unfamiliar with local services. Often, they struggled to meet expensive travel costs as well. Similar issues emerged for some of the London based students who chose to volunteer. Higher than anticipated levels of staff turnover among the referring agencies also occurred, which was found to impact on communication and pace. To address these issues a lot of additional time was given over to supporting and enabling participation and engagement. It was also spent nurturing and maintaining relationships with partnership colleagues.



A concerted recruitment drive and tenacious programme of awareness raising took place alongside these efforts. Circle Coordinators visited individual Probation offices, attended MOSOVO meetings and spoke at partnership meetings. They ran stalls at Volunteer recruitment fairs, gave presentations at universities and set up a scheme to encourage established Volunteers to recruit their friends. As a result of these efforts, by early 2018 target 'catch up' had largely been achieved and the project was on course to complete in full and on time.

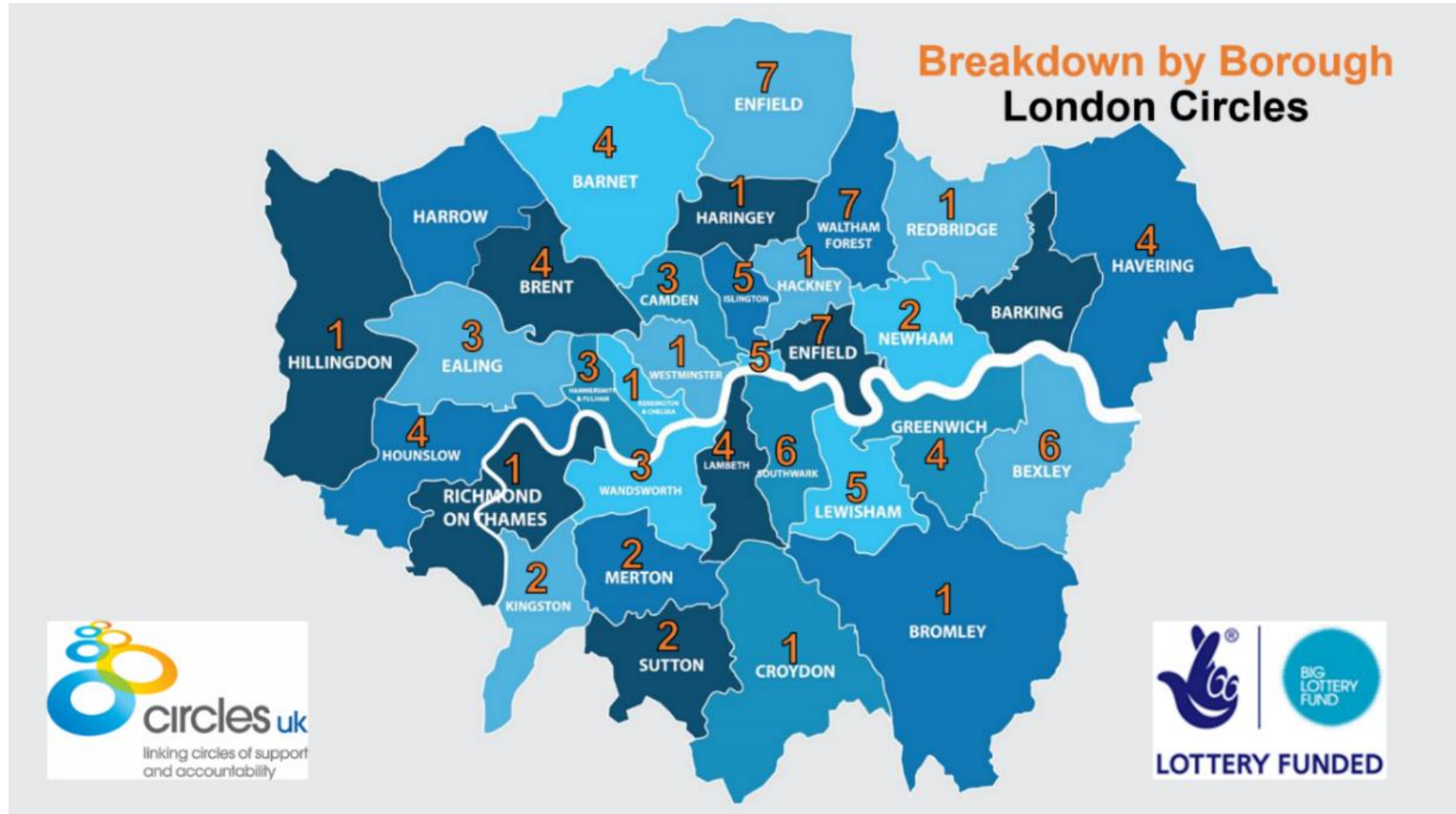


Then, in March 2018, Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) announced that all probation funding for Circles would end in September 2018. This decision was unexpected. In the preceding 15 months Circles UK had engaged in detailed discussions with HMPPS officials to introduce a nationally commissioned contract, a process which built upon a longstanding relationship between the Circles network and the Ministry of Justice/Probation Service. Even though funding for the London Circles came from the National Lottery Fund (and required no direct funding from probation or other statutory agencies), confusion and uncertainty resulted among Probation senior managers and staff. The result was that many referrals were withdrawn or suspended on the mistaken premise that all Circles delivery had ceased with immediate effect. Crisis discussions were entered at the highest level with the Ministry of Justice and senior probation officials. As a result, referrals for Circles in London were reinstated and the project was able to continue. Significant delays had, however, been caused.

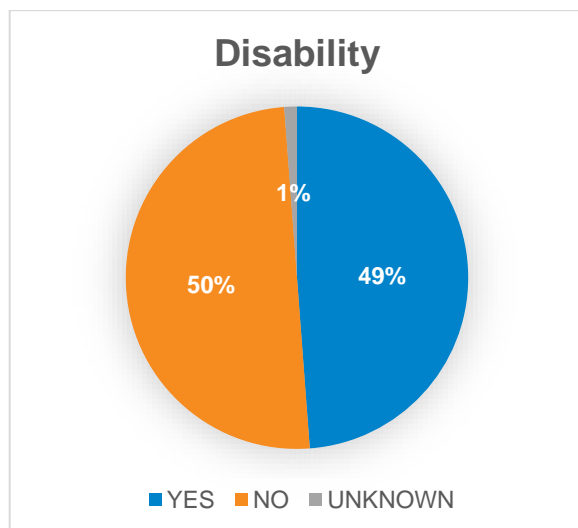
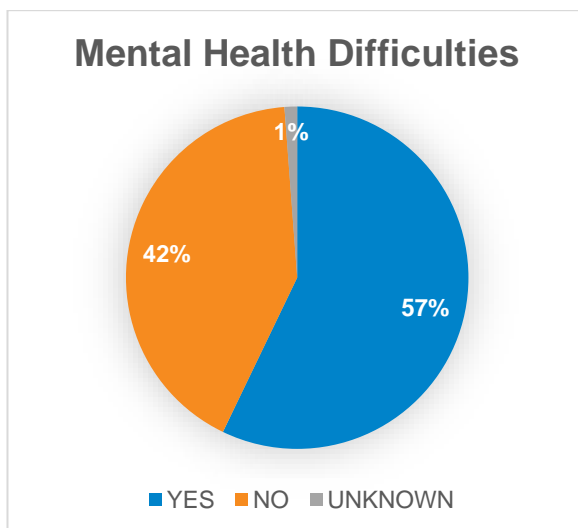
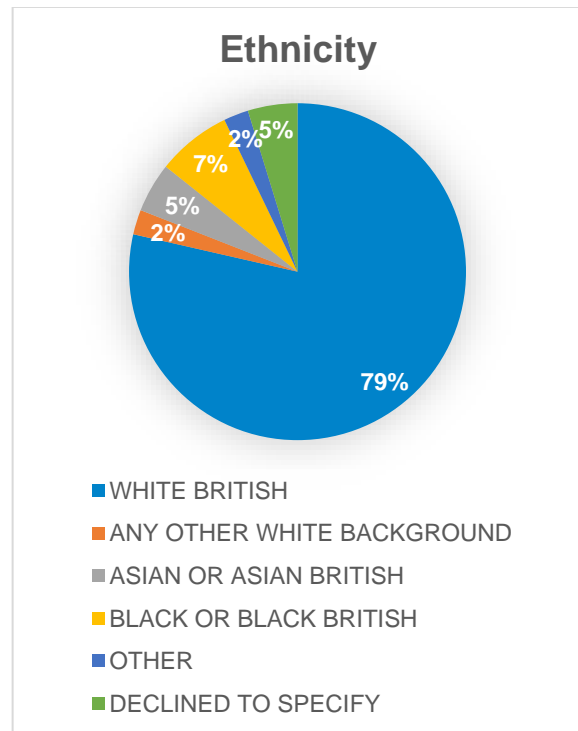
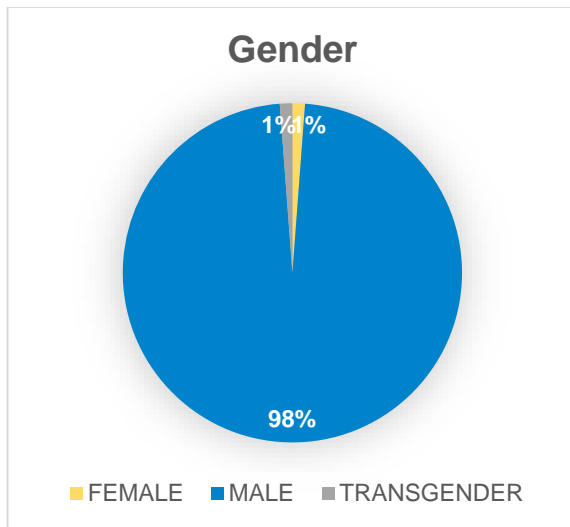
**Despite the challenges faced, by October 2019 the goal of establishing 94 Circles in London had been achieved. Multi Agency relationships have remained robust ever since. The pay-off delivered by the project in London is such that the National Probation Service has since provided ongoing funding. Financial support has also been given by the City Bridge Trust. That the people of London still benefit from the improvements in public protection afforded by Circles is testament to the creative 'can-do' attitude of Circle Volunteers and staff. Their example is repeated across the country.**

## Results by Borough

The following map of London shows the boroughs where Circles were successfully established and delivered. Circles were provided in 30 of the 32 boroughs – an outstanding achievement for a small staff team, particularly given the challenges and setbacks they encountered.

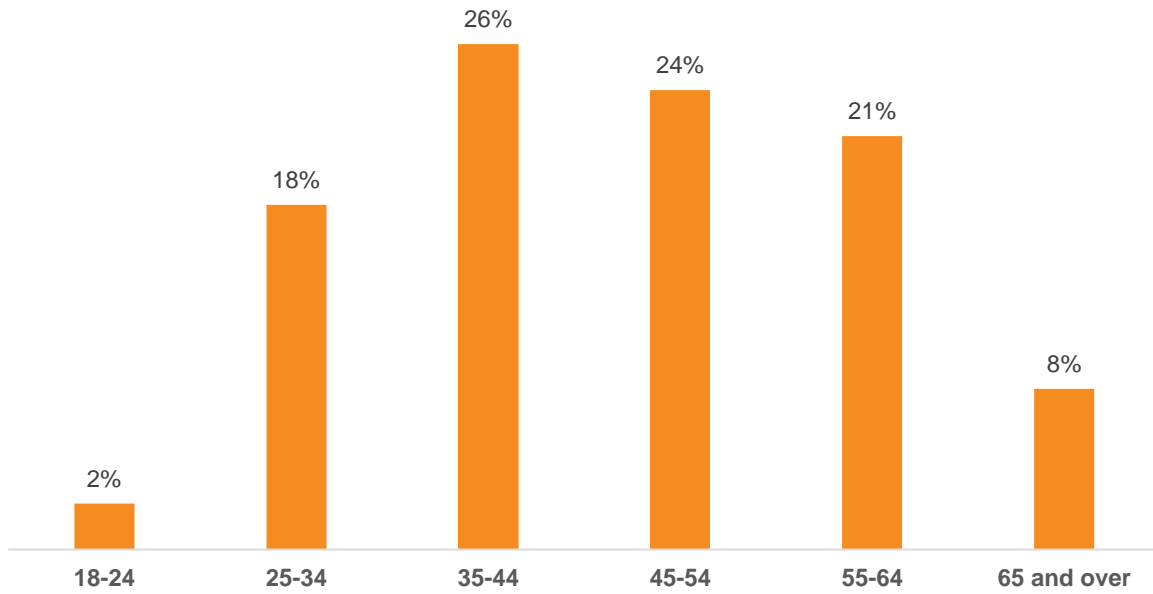


## Other Demographic Results

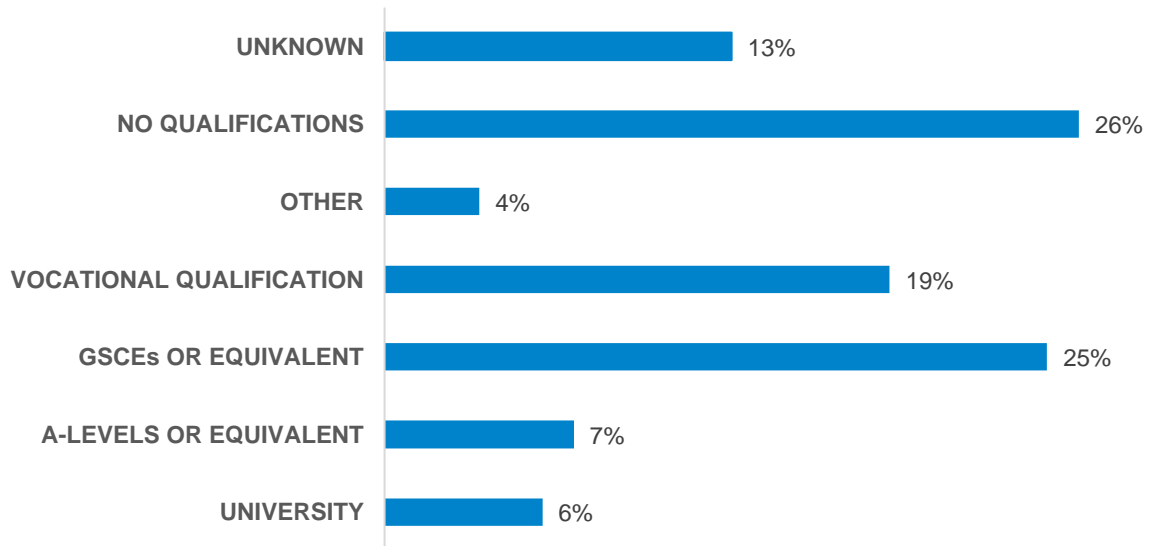




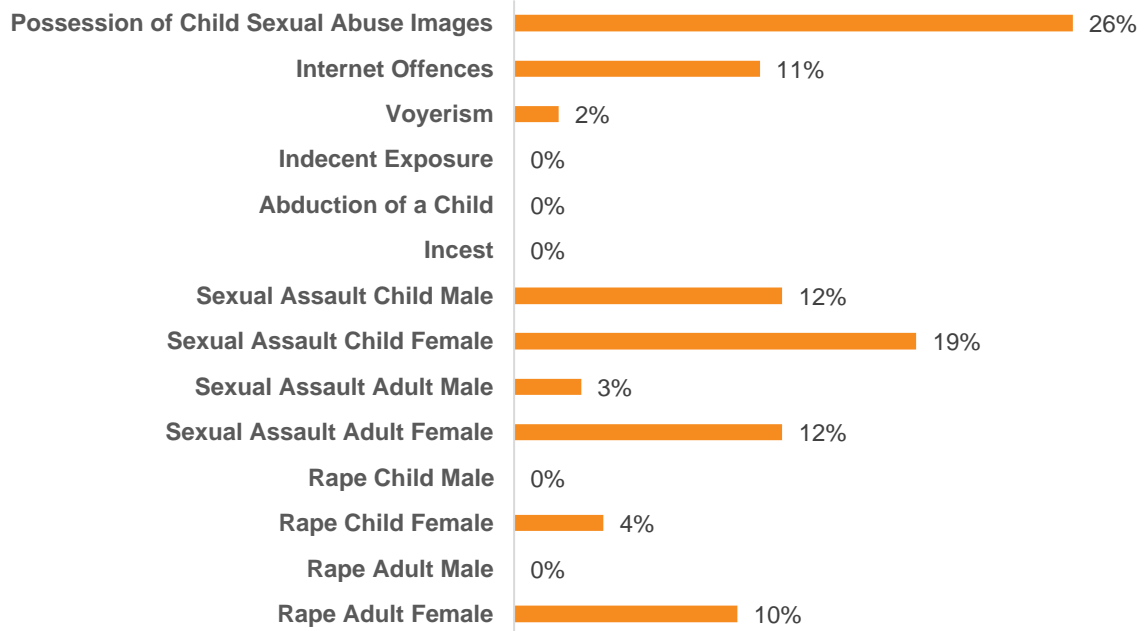
### Age at Acceptance to Circle



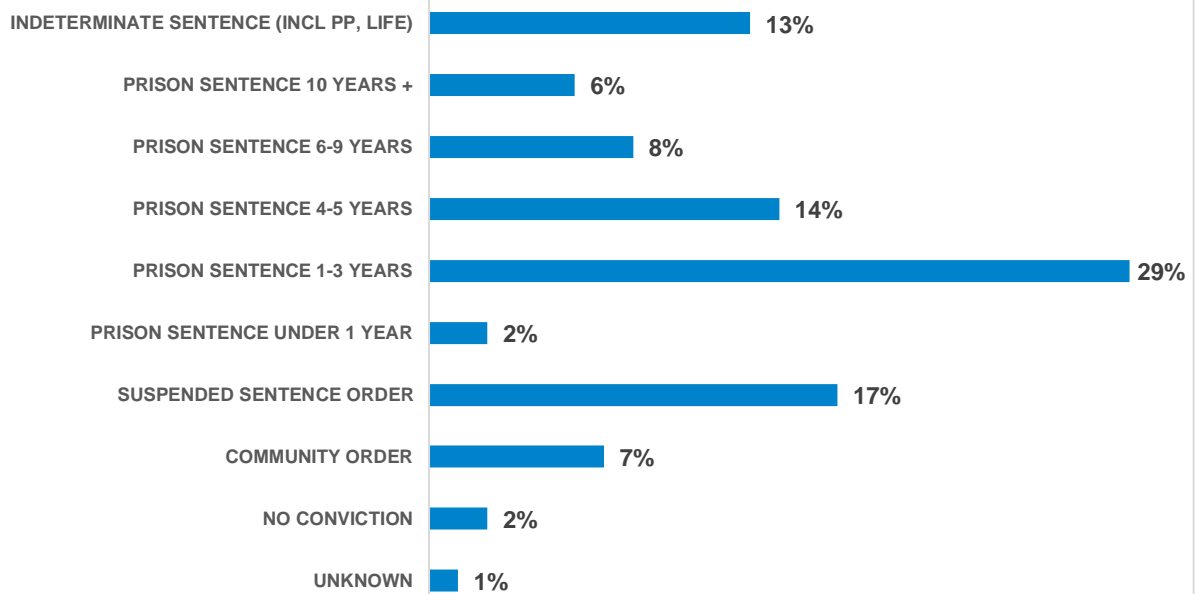
### Education



## Index Offences



## Sentence for Index Offence



## Conclusion

This article/blog has outlined the successes, challenges and learning of the operational delivery of the Completing the Circle project. It does not include the results of an independent evaluation of the project. This can be found in a separate article / blog which can be accessed here: <https://bit.ly/2PVtJ1d>

Circles UK would like to express its sincere appreciation to the National Lottery for funding the project, the Sexual Offences, Crime and Misconduct Research Unit (SOCMRU), Nottingham Trent University and the Circles Providers who participated as delivery partners. These were:

- Circles South East <https://circlessoutheast.org.uk/>
- The Safer Living Foundation <https://www.saferlivingfoundation.org/>
- Change, Grow, Live <https://www.changegrowlive.org/>
- re;shape (no longer operational)
- CROPT (no longer operational)