



Learning from London Circle

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Executive Summary

Circle is a membership organisation that supports members aged 50+ to build and sustain strong social bonds and take care of their practical needs. Circle was developed by Participle with 250 older people and their families in Southwark, South London, in 2007.

The Circle model 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.

The Circle model is locally rooted but designed from the outset with national scale in mind. Since 2009 the national Circle network, with 5,000 members, has seen the establishment of 3 regional Circles and the creation of London Circle. 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. Members have told us time and again how Circle has transformed their lives. Member testimonies and evidence of social outcomes are included in this report.

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. The savings Circle delivers are not however channelled back into the running of local Circles. To be open to all (a universal, preventative service) and sustainable in the long term, it is likely that Circles need some form of low level core support.

There are two regional Circles in Nottingham and Rochdale which continue to grow and flourish. London Circle however was not able to develop a sustainable business model or secure on-going funding in the current climate. The closure of London Circle in March 2014 represents the end of the first chapter of Circle's history and it therefore feels appropriate to share what Circle has learnt with those who are also trying to forge this difficult path: a dream that every older person in Britain might live to their full and independent potential.

Part One: The Story So Far

1.0 The Challenge

The number of people in the UK aged 65 and over is projected to increase from 10.3 million in 2010 to almost 17 million by 2035.¹ There is a growing gap between the elderly, the very old (those over 85 and the fastest growing group) and the services available.

The social and fiscal challenges presented by these deep demographic shifts are still only beginning to be understood (and are almost always presented as challenges as opposed to opportunities). Just as when Participle started their work in 2007 alarming stories of the effect of government cuts or poor care at the end of life fill our media almost daily.

When William Beveridge designed the welfare state in the 1950s he did not foresee the current shape of the population or these future trends. Statutory services to support an ageing population have therefore never been strong and have been particularly vulnerable to cuts in the current fiscal climate.

As pointed out in a recent IPPR report most care is provided by families, at an estimated value of £55 billion annually.² Here too the demand is outstripping supply. Not enough family members are able to care for their elder relatives: they live at too great a distance or they cannot work flexibly.

It was in this context that Participle raised approximately £1 million funding from partners at DWP, Southwark Local Authority and Sky, to run a systemic, structured but open ended innovation project Ageing: a Life Less Ordinary. Ageing: a Life Less Ordinary started not from the current offer and institutions available, but with people themselves, their friends and families and what they might really like in order to flourish and age with dignity. This innovation process led to the design of the Circle concept and the launch of the first London Circle: Southwark Circle.

Our co-design process taught us that people wanted three things:

- 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.

These core findings underpinned the Circle offer. We also learnt – less tangibly – that the way things are provided is as important as what is provided. 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.

1.1 The Model: How Circle works

Each Circle in the network is run as a local, independent social enterprise, incorporated as a Community Interest Company employing around 5 people, led by a full time director.

Members are asked to pay an annual subscription of £30 (intentionally set low given the aim to provide a universal service) which gives access to a local free phone 0800 number for support:

¹ ONS, 2011, National Population Predictions

² IPPR, 2014, The Generation Strain

'Hello this is Havering Circle', 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.

At the heart of Circle is the shift from a 1950s needs based service to one which aims to foster a core set of capabilities amongst its members. Circle does not assess its members, it meets them where they are and through its social and practical offer fosters relationships, working and learning and active contribution to the community. Participle's Capability Measurement Index used by Circle measures the success of this capability approach.³

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.

London Circle, the design of a hub and spoke approach, was conceived as a first step in a national scaling process. In September 2012 the existing Southwark and Hammersmith & Fulham Circles were folded into a new independent company, London Circle CIC. Additional Circles were launched in Havering in March 2013 and Kensington & Chelsea in July 2013. The central Circle 'hub team' also supported the development of a Circle in Rochdale, which was launched in June 2013.

The new London Circle CIC found independent premises and an expanded team was recruited under the London Circle Chief Executive.

³ A more in depth account of Beveridge 4.0, the philosophy behind Circle and the capabilities agenda can be found at www.participle.net

1.2 The Learning from London Circle

The Offer: Social and practical

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.

In both cases – social and practical – Circle offers a mix of paid for and free social events and helper support, ensuring that a baseline offer is available. This means that on any given day Circle might be hosting a games evening in a member's home, mowing a member's lawn, supporting a member's return home from hospital, walking with someone recovering from a stroke around their local park, heading off on the train for a weekend in York or offering a listening ear at the end of a phone regarding the upset caused by a much loved, unwell pet.

Circle was co-designed with older people who told us they wanted support with building a rich social life. Whilst a broad range of befriending type services and social clubs for seniors exist we have learnt from our members that there is a huge demand for an offer that enables our members to connect with others who are like minded and share interests, without these relationships being defined by age, gender or ethnicity.

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. As many of the case studies in Part Two demonstrate, 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.

Providing practical support has conversely proved more challenging. Requests for practical help are diverse and sporadic. This led to challenges at London Circle in terms of keeping the right balance of paid helpers, member helpers and traditional volunteers. It has also proved to be difficult to make a consistent margin on practical support.

London Circle was committed to providing the London living wage and the reality is that members have consistently compared prices with those of the cash or hidden economy. All Circle helpers are interviewed, provide references and are DBS checked and the quality of their work supervised. These assurances are appreciated by many members and adult children who might be purchasing support from a distance and from Local Authority partners (where we have, for example, provided packages of support to reduce hospital re-admissions), but a significant number of individual members have simply not found Circle competitive when compared with their local cash economy.

We have learnt that practical support has most impact and is highly cost effective when it is part of a structured relationship with a Local Authority partner. Southwark, for example, highly valued the same day turn-around Circle service for fitting key safes which was instrumental in getting people home from hospital quickly and the wrap around practical support reducing hospital re-admissions. However they were unable to find a way to commit to funding support beyond a spot purchasing arrangement with no contribution towards core management costs. Uniquely, the Circle social offer when actively facilitated becomes the practical support: those needing extra support after a small operation or a fall often found it organised by their new friends as illustrated in the case studies in Part Two of this report. It is all about relationships: Circle has successfully learnt how to build robust and diverse communities that can support each other. This takes time, a particular culture and some continued funding.

The Circle Business Model: Combining time, skills and money

Circle has attempted innovation not only in terms of the core service offer, but also in terms of the business model, which might underpin this offer. In keeping with the Beveridge 4.0

philosophy we have shifted from a financial to a resource focus: pooling public, private, community and individual resources.

The current landscape of support enforces clear demarcations between personal finance, state support and voluntary community services. We learnt in our co-design work that these walls do not work for people who feel they must exhaust all their personal resource (energy and finance) before they can seek any formal support (Local Authority or state funded via a third sector organisation). The clear demand was for a mixed economy whereby families could mix some of their own time and paid for solutions, with community and state funded support. This clear demand from those we worked with in the design phase matched our desk based research where we saw that time banking based /volunteer models of support are rarely sustainable in the long term as they too often rely on the energy of one charismatic, individual leader.

Certainly Circle has proven that such a mixed economy is feasible and use of our CRM system has enabled us to support members in different ways – taking payment for some services, exchanging time in other cases, dovetailing with statutory services where appropriate.

The initial business model asked partners for an upfront investment that would support the first three years of a local Circle development. It was intended that after this point a mixed economy of time (members giving their time freely and traditional volunteering) and revenue for services would ensure the sustainability of each local Circle.

Our initial modelling proved over optimistic however for three core reasons:

- Membership revenues proved difficult to collect: asking people for small subscriptions on an annual basis, not automatically renewed;
- Money saved to the public purse could not be easily verified – the financial models built for the first three years of both Southwark and Hammersmith & Fulham Circles for example could not be verified by either Councils. Though they welcomed the focus on calculating cost savings it was never a significant enough priority for their in-house teams to verify estimations. Crucially no mechanism was established for Circles to benefit from savings accruing from Circle;
- Revenue margins on Circle services proved hard to achieve for a number of reasons. Members' reticence for example to spend consistent amounts in a deep recession coupled with finding the right approach for achieving an appropriate margin on social and practical services which staff, motivated by the social mission, were comfortable with. Once these tracks were better aligned in 2013 revenues started to rise significantly averaging £15k per month but this was still below the level required for sustainability based on member revenue alone.

The experience of London Circle has also shown that it is not only the amount of funding received but the way in which it is provided. A lump sum upfront and distance from statutory services enabled Circle to build a wide and diverse membership who appreciated the cultural difference of Circle however it often left Circle isolated from the local relationships needed for sustainability when the individual or department responsible for the initial grant had moved on or the relationships moved from the executive leadership to local delivery teams who were often in a state of flux due to recurrent restructures.

Engaging with the System: Statutory partnerships and adult social care

Circle was designed as an exemplar of what a national ageing service might look like. Again, in keeping with the Beveridge 4.0 philosophy the intention was to move away from centralised institutions to more distributed social networks.

Local Authority partners who funded a Circle usually did so for a number of reasons but in all cases Participle's vision of a future welfare state (Beveridge 4.0) resonated and Circle was seen as a potential model for, and first step in, transforming adult social care provision.

Realising this shared vision has proved to be complex. Whilst, as noted above, the independent nature of Circle as a local CIC has been critical to establishing a different culture, it has often made it difficult for Circle to be an integrated part of the adult social care eco system.

Membership recruitment provides an example. Whilst this was something London Circle was good at, in retrospect it would have made a significant difference to have Local Authority partners driving membership and awareness of Circle through social workers, housing bodies, council newsletters and community programmes, enabling 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.

We have learnt that the strength of local Circles is intimately connected to the strength of the relationship with local statutory bodies and their strategic vision. Where Local Authorities have relied on a hands off commissioning approach Circles have struggled. 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. This has not only ensured that the most vulnerable and in need can be pointed towards Circle but it has also led to broader discussions about the ways in which traditional adult social care can be offered in new and more cost effective ways through Circle. This was always envisaged as a core part of Circle's growth towards a 21st century welfare system and as a way of supporting Circle financially. What was not envisaged was the time this might take and the difficulty of a small organisation such as Circle engaging with the culture and time scales of these larger bodies (discussed in more detail below).

It is important to recognise that Local Authority partners have been under huge financial and operational strain given the cuts to public financing. At the time of Circle's design the churn that was to come was not visible. Staff turnover in particular has made it increasingly hard for Local Authorities to be the active partners that Circle 1.0 needs.

We have learnt that strong alternative approaches are reliant on strong existing state infrastructure and above all a clear vision and strategy within local partnerships that puts prevention at its heart and embraces Circle within this eco system.

Circle's partnerships with the third sector have been uncomfortable in some locations. Whilst every effort has been made not to replicate services provided by existing third sector organisations the relationship between Circle - a newcomer - and incumbents at a time of financial cuts has perhaps inevitably been difficult. In some cases this unease has been exacerbated by a clear direction from funding partners that Circle must set itself apart and provide a different model and a 'new way', distinct from what already exists within the sector.

Circle's approach to partnerships is to forge relationships at a grassroots local level, at London wide 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.

Running Circle: operational learning

Within London Circle each local Circle has been led by a Hub Manager. Successful Hub Managers "own" their local Circle and have the experience and skills to organise themselves, run a series of entwined community based networks and maintain excellent relationships with members, helpers, volunteers and local partner organisations. An unusually tough, if rewarding job, requiring long hours spreading across evenings and weekends and a breadth of people and organisation skills.

London Circle supported each local Circle with a marketing / events function (critical to the success of the social offer), a contact centre for on demand practical support and with a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system that enabled Circle to provide a highly relational, on demand service for relatively low cost. Leadership was also located within London Circle.

Staffing Circles has been a challenge. Whilst Circle has been fortunate to build a talented team, working with older people does not immediately attract a wide pool of applicants. Retention

within a new, small organisation where there is constant awareness that one's job is vulnerable is also a challenge. The importance of longer term stable funding for team building was not fully understood by Circle's funding partners.

Circle people are motivated by Circle's social mission. As alluded to earlier, this sometimes created some tensions with staff feeling uncomfortable about the need to hit monthly revenue targets. Participle's vision was also a critical factor. Participle underestimated the extent to which the Circle team and Circle partners would want, and were motivated by, a link to Participle and by the extent to which Circle would need support with practical delivery. Circle was over dependent on Participle, itself a small organisation without core funding.

Digital: The promise of technology

Underpinning Circle is the Circle CRM system (a bespoke customer relationship software system), which enables a small core team to respond to the demands of the local Circle community in real time. Participle's capability measures also sit on this system enabling low cost, unobtrusive data collection.

The CRM was effective in supporting local community networks although its full potential to deepen relationships is still to be realised.

Behind the plans for London Circle was a belief that the use of technology including the CRM system, could reduce overheads even further within local London Circles. This ambition needs to be refined: whilst the CRM does add to the bespoke nature of the member experience, the culture of local Circles is unsurprisingly strongly related to people on the ground. We can't get away from the need for significant numbers of volunteers and unpaid helpers which also correlates strongly with the need for a staff team equipped to support them and offering the dynamic, social culture which attracts volunteers in the first place. Nottingham Circle for example with the largest core team (three full time and four part time people) has also attracted and retained the largest number of volunteers.

Circle Culture

Circle has innovation at its core given its genesis and its ambition to transform the model for ageing in Britain. This culture and genesis - combined with the need of a small enterprise without core funding to be constantly thinking about future revenue – has, at times, led to a tendency to experiment with the core offer in ways which were distracting and could not be measured rather than maintaining a focussed attention to detailed processes which would have supported scale.

Despite operational challenges, which to some extent are inevitable in small start up organisations, Circle continued to deliver high levels of satisfaction and strong social outcomes for its members. The strength of the Circle culture was its roots in the framework and philosophy of capabilities and the capability for relationships in particular. This philosophy dictated communication style, the hosting of events, and Circles' measurement frameworks.

A positive outcome of Circle culture is both the relationship members have with Circle and the relationship members have with each other. There is a real sense that the Circle belongs to the membership. Co-production principles are embedded and Circle never stops asking people what they want and turning aspirations into a reality for example through the social calendar. Members have become each others solution – with networks of support in place for when the difficult times come e.g. a period of ill health, reflected both in member's testimonies and our social impact reports.

Scaling: The London Circle experience

Circle was designed for national scale. As discussed earlier from the perspective of both mission and revenue (adult children being able and wanting to pay for services) scale was core to the original Circle proposition.

Circle has developed a successful model for local scoping which provides a unique Circle for each locality. During this time Circle researches a wide range of local factors and uses co-design principles to work alongside many local people to understand in a deep way what they want from their Circle. All information gathered informs the launch strategy including adjustments to the social or practical offer.

Circles were structured from their inception as social enterprises. The CIC structure was intended to assure partners of Circle's mission and values whilst also giving it the independence to ensure a strong business culture. Circle was born at the same time as the burgeoning interest and promises of social investment and finance: a structure that would enable Circle to use this source of capital for scale was thus seen to be important.

It was assumed by both Circle and Participle that a combination of strong social outcomes and robust business modelling would mean that, in due course, Circle would attract social investment. In fact as this market developed it became increasingly clear that this would be unlikely to happen: funds were slower to develop than anticipated and rates of return and attitude to risk mean that a universal service like Circle was not seen to be sufficiently "safe" or financially attractive.

These developments within the social finance sector, whilst by no means unique to Circle presented a challenge. Circle turned to grant funding and made an application to The Social Action Fund who agreed to part fund a model to scale Circle throughout London: London Circle was developed. Under this plan the two existing London Circles, Southwark and Hammersmith & Fulham would be folded into the new structure and joined by up to eight further Circles, to cover core costs. London Circle's business plan anticipated cost savings through sharing a back office and that the higher short term costs of managing the network would be met by additional grant funding.

Big Lottery approached Circle and invited an application to support the growth of London Circle and given our assessment of the social investment sector this path was chosen. Eight months and 42 documents later, Circle was turned down. London Circle had learnt that a traditional funder had limited ability to understand the challenges faced by start ups in terms of investment timeframes (with no cushion of reserves, assets to secure loans against, dedicated fundraisers or charitable unrestricted funds).

The situation was exacerbated by the intensity of the demands of the Big Lottery process: it left London Circle still a small organisation without core funding and a service to deliver, with no bandwidth to pursue a Plan B. Over the summer of 2013, six of the fifteen core London Circle staff left. This period culminated with the departure of the London Circle chief executive.

In conclusion therefore we can see that Circle (including London Circle) offers a strong social concept that has delivered measurable outcomes (see Part Two of this report). The 1.0 business model behind London Circle was not however sustainable. London Circle was not able to grow fast enough to cover core costs. Whilst revenues were strong and growing, they did not offer a route to sustainability. In addition, there was no mechanism in place for London Circle to benefit from cost savings to partners.

Part Two: The Evidence

The Circle model seeks 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. This section takes a quick look at the Circle impact on the policy landscape before looking in more detail at Circle’s social impact.

Transforming the Policy Landscape

Circle has successfully contributed to the transformation of service provision and ambition. Demand for Circles has always outstripped the capacity of a small organisation without core funding. In the last 12 months alone 21 Local Authorities and Housing Associations have approached us for information about starting a Circle. In London three Authorities (Camden, Harrow and Wandsworth) have tendered for a Circle like solution in recent months.

The concept of a community based service that focuses on prevention and draws in the young old and family and friends has become a widely shared goal. Today it is hard to encapsulate how radical such an idea was in 2007 when existing providers both state and third sector widely believed their role was to focus on the “needs” of the older old in isolation.

There has been a perception from some that Circle is expensive, despite the testimonials of existing partners that Circle has saved them money. Recent Circle-like tenders therefore have offered sums of money lower than those used to start Circles. Only time will tell if the money available to invest in such membership type organisations can deliver on the promise of something genuinely new and different with significant social impact and cost saving benefits.

Outcome Measures and Capabilities

Circle has used the Participle measurement framework, which means that Circles have collected impact data across three dimensions: money saved; outcomes (a comparison with a core set of statutory outcomes) and capability data (a core set of indicators complemented with qualitative case studies). Collecting financial and outcome data is dependent upon strong collaborations with Local Authority partners. To date only Nottingham Circle and local partners have focused on a full set of data but the most important Capability indicators sit on Circle’s own CRM system and have been collected for all Circles. The Capability data is presented in Appendix A and a selection of Member Stories in Appendix B.

Circle’s social outcomes are strong. Three quarters of Circle members have made new friends and go out more (85,000 new social connections) and thousands of hours of practical support have been provided.

In locations where there is a close relationship between Circle and statutory bodies there have been reductions in the use of statutory services:

- 70% of members reported an increased participation in social activities, making new friends, an increase in confidence and consequently feeling happier;
- 15% felt less unwell and consequently;
- 13% of our members visited their GP less.

London Circle’s same day key safe programme has meant people have been discharged from hospital more quickly and with Circle’s wrap around practical and social support hospital re-admissions have been reduced.

Circle’s social outcomes were independently reviewed by The Social Innovation Partnership, who were appointed by Nesta. They commented that: “The measurement infrastructure in place at Circle is some of the most in-depth we’ve seen in a programme of that scale.”

Appendix A: Capability Measures



developed and powered by **Participle**

Social Impact Summary

Circle is a membership organisation open to anyone over the age of 50, living within the geographic area of a local Circle. Its mission is to build and support the capabilities of its members to lead independent and flourishing lives.

ALL CIRCLES						
Data represents a time period from each Circle's launch to 31 Mar 2014 *Part of London Circle CIC. **Active members as of 31 Mar 2014						
SOUTHWARK* <small>Launched 2009</small>	HAMMERSMITH & FULHAM* <small>Launched 2010</small>	SUFFOLK <small>Launched 2011</small>	NOTTINGHAM <small>Launched 2012</small>	ROCHDALE <small>Launched 2013</small>	HAVERING* <small>Launched 2013</small>	KENSINGTON & CHELSEA* <small>Launched 2013</small>
754	907	1,585	895	541	399	248
ACTIVE MEMBERS*	ACTIVE MEMBERS*	ACTIVE MEMBERS*	ACTIVE MEMBERS*	ACTIVE MEMBERS*	ACTIVE MEMBERS*	ACTIVE MEMBERS*

MEASURING CAPABILITIES IN CIRCLE

Circle's focus is on growing and sustaining members' need to lead flourishing lives. We measure the ways in which our services foster the capabilities of our members in the areas of Relationships, Work & Learning and Environment / Community.

 RELATIONSHIPS	 WORK & LEARNING	 ENVIRONMENT/COMMUNITY
		
<p>Number of social events organised by Circle and attended by Members.</p> <p>Most popular events:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trips away (to York, Greenwich, Oxford etc) • Lunch at local pubs • Coffee and catch up 	<p>Number of times Members have participated in a Circle learning activity, including a social event or practical helper job they were actively involved in.</p> <p>Examples of learning social events:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workshops (for digital photography, knitting etc) • Guided Tours (of cities, museums, gardens etc) • Exhibitions / gallery visits 	<p>Number of Circle Helpers who have completed practical help for Members.</p> <p><i>It is comforting to know that if I ever have a practical need...I am a member of an organisation which can help make it happen." – Suffolk Circle Member</i></p> <p><i>"Those small jobs make a lot of difference." – London Circle Member</i></p>
		
<p>Connections we've achieved between Members at social events and through practical helpers meeting Members</p> <p><i>"I love it, I live on my own and it's great to find people to talk to and discover new places with." – Nottingham Circle Member</i></p> <p><i>"My life was in a downward spiral but Circle has changed my life around." – Rochdale Circle Member</i></p>	<p>Hours of learning through social events and practical help.</p> <p>Examples of learning practical help:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology support (how to use a computer, digital camera, internet, social media, mobile phone, software packages, send e-mails) • Life admin (help getting organised, filling out forms, sorting out bills) • Do It Yourself (how to fix-it projects around the house) 	<p>Number of practical helper jobs completed by Circle Helpers.</p> <p>Frequent practical helper jobs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do It Yourself jobs around the house (basic plumbing, installing locks, assembling furniture, fixing garden gate, painting) • Gardening (tidying, cutting grass) • Technology support • Giving Members lifts to events • Cleaning

Appendix B: Members' Stories

Circle is about a systemic shift in culture: a new offer and some old things offered in new ways. The culture of Circle is critical to its success and is best communicated through the experience of Circle members. A selection of testimonials follow in this section and a number of clear themes emerge about why people joined London Circle and how it made a real and lasting difference to their lives.

Circle is universal and open to all. Circle members are registered blind, disabled, carers, living with cancer or other limiting long-term conditions. They might be struggling to adapt to a new life as a widow, divorcee or retiree. Regardless of their starting position, how they want to be defined is by what it is they can do and offer to others rather than by any 'limitations' with which they might be overcoming.

Members talk of loving the trips to the theatre, ballet or meals out. We have had our own assumptions squashed about what people from all walks of life will choose to spend their money on if given free reign to try something new, different or iconic such as Tea at the Ritz – a very nice way to celebrate a special birthday or Christmas if the alternative is another day in front of the television on your own.

It is important to put aside assumptions about what type of people Circle members are; they are all of us. This is what they have told us Circle means to them:

- Circle offers members a way to take early action and prevent themselves from becoming socially isolated.⁴ Many people recognised that they found themselves upset and spending too much time of their own, with one situation exacerbating the other;
- Circle enables its members to remain independent far longer than they otherwise might have been. People like Ruby, who has spinal degeneration, were able to stay in their homes with a little help from people like Amelia, who had time to look in on her flexibly and consistently because she lives in the same neighbourhood;
- Circle is attractive because of the wide age range of its members: this creates a lively mix of people from across a spectrum of capabilities and interests;
- You can pick and choose what you wanted from Circle, which means that the service can be individualised to suit an active 50 year old or a 90 year old with multiple health problems – or vice versa;
- Circle is able to support people through many important life transitions: from working to retired, from partnered to bereaved, from living in a one place to moving somewhere new, from being intimidated by the onset of health issues to developing strategies to thrive;
- Members feel real ownership of Circle, which was encouraged by paying for their membership and the responsiveness of Circle staff to member suggestions. In addition to its give-and-take approach;
- Circle provides a socially acceptable framework for strangers to reach out to one another and become a community. Often people are reluctant to directly ask for help, or to provide help if it has not been directly requested. Circle gave people an excuse to talk to each other, connecting people who want to give back with those who are feeling less able or less confident.

All the stories below have come from Circle members, however for reasons of confidentiality the names have been changed. We are grateful to all the Circle members who have allowed us to share their lives.

⁴ Studies have shown that social isolation can easily lead to mental and physical illness, including increased risk for depression, high blood pressure, lowered immunity and higher stress levels.
www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/17/loneliness-report-bigger-killer-obesity-lonely-people

Helen Powell

Keywords: Navigating transitions, Prevention

“(After the death of my husband) Circle changed my life. I was so upset then, I cried nonstop for about a month. It really helped me. It brought me out of myself. It was a lifeline. It opened up a whole new world for me. I’ve made friends and got myself steady... Last year I had a rotten birthday, but this year my party was full of Circle friends.”

Helen is a vibrant, take charge kind of person, but she wasn’t always as self-assured as she is now. Initially joining to take advantage of Circle’s Helper service, she was a full time carer for her husband. He was in his late 90s and she in her 70s. She found it difficult to see people or get out of the house much. When he died last year, she fell into a deep depression. Helen says Circle was her lifeline.

Helen has tried other groups similar to Circle, but found their membership too elderly and sedate for her tastes. *“I’m in my 70s and my new friends are in their 60s - we keep each other young,”* she notes. When she heard Circle was closing, it was a shock. *“Last year I lost my husband, and this year I lost my lifeline,”* Luckily, the friendships she’s made with Circle are robust, and they’re planning to stick together. Helen herself has been active in trying to keep the group together on a smaller scale in her neighbourhood. Having this locally based social support network has improved her relationship with her family as well. Her daughter and grandchildren live in Somerset, but had been worrying about Helen previously, checking in by phone everyday. *“They’ve gone on holiday to America now. Before they were frightened to leave me. (My daughter) knows that I’ve got people I can call on now,”* Helen states confidently. Circle was there for her when she was at her most vulnerable, and gave her the opportunity to become the type of person that she seems very happy being now: well-connected, opinionated and active.

Amelia Weston

Keywords: Prevention, Prolonging independence, Connecting people

“(As a Circle Helper) people don’t ask directly for tea and a chat, you need to anticipate. You should be led by them. Go in saying ‘What do you want done?’ and then be prepared to offer advice or come up with a strategy together. It’s all about patience and seeing where the person is going... I like going round the houses and having a chat. They’ve all got stories.”

Amelia is a Helper at Circle, but she considers herself very different from a standard care worker. She is proactive yet led by the members, helping with any and all tasks that need doing. Many of the people she works with are isolated and extremely nervous of strangers. Amelia is able to slowly build up relationships with those who might not otherwise let people in, because she is unrushed and willing to listen. She makes time to socialise and pop by for informal visits. She lives in the neighbourhood and visits the same people consistently, creating stability and trust.

As Amelia knows the members very well, she can spot when someone is showing signs of physical and mental difficulties, and help them keep on top of day-to-day tasks that could otherwise spiral out of control. Due to the trust people have in her, they are also more likely to

let her see things they would otherwise try to hide. The constancy of her presence in older people's lives means that she can help family, friends and other neighbours coordinate their support. Amelia also helps people navigate their medical treatment, contacting nurses and doctors and advocating for clients with dementia. She is a constant, helpful strand throughout people's lives, joining up the dots and helping people feel safe and sorted.

Ruby Walsh

Keywords: Prevention, Prolonging independence

"It's hard to find other people willing to come and do small jobs like helping me around the house and the garden, especially if they aren't local. Professionals will take one look and say 'It's not worth my while to do it.'"

Ruby is ninety years old and has lived in her flat in Hammersmith since 1968. She trained as a psychiatric social worker and managed day nurses before she retired, giving her quite extensive experience with carers before she ever had the need for assistance herself. She's had some spinal deterioration and finds it quite difficult to get around. She lives by herself and still manages to do some cooking and light tidying. Still, she found it useful to be able to call on a Circle helper on a regular basis. *"There are days when people are badly off. It's important to be aware of older people's behaviour and be able to pick up on cues. Amelia (the helper) and I got on."* Ruby has friends and family that check in on her, but they tend to be busy during the day when the majority of help is needed. Although Ruby has great difficulty moving around, she has been able to prolong her independence through the use of Circle helpers. From assistance walking to the bank to maintaining the garden she loves, helpers have offered her practical support that is also friendly. No matter what the task, they will find the time to sit and have a cup of tea with her and give her the local news, helping her stay connected with the outside world. Ruby is aware that her life is changing, but Circle has been able to help her adapt and create strategies for living on her own for as long as she is able.

Antonia Ward

Keywords: Connecting people, Prolonging independence

"I was stuck indoors, miserable and lonely. It's not much fun eating at home on your own any more. Circle got me out and about when I needed it. They gave me the shove I needed to keep going and to keep getting out of the house... Circle was wonderful. Such lovely people, and there was nothing they couldn't do! Without Circle, I think I probably would have been stuck here...it's not the same as going out with friends."

Antonia has always been a sociable person, but problems with her knees meant she couldn't get out as much as she used to. She's in her early 80s, but feels *"twenty five inside. My body just can't keep up!"* Circle helped her reconnect with her community through regular lunch get-togethers and trips to the theatre, motivating her to make the effort to get out of the house. After her first event, Antonia knew she had found a group she could connect with, telling Circle that *"these are my kind of people - you've got me hooked!"*

Although Circle helped her with all sort of practical support, in the end it was the social network it plugged her into that proved the most valuable. After her last knee surgery, Circle staff contacted Antonia to make sure she was okay and had everything she needed. She said she was sorted - several other Circle members she'd made friends with had already called her to arrange for everything she needed while she convalesced. Circle added to this, making it easier for her to get in contact with people and services outside, fixing her laptop so she could do her food shopping online. When she was ready to get out more, they arranged lifts for her provided by other members so they could chat going to and from events.

"Sometimes they just called for a chat, and to make sure I was okay. It was nice to know someone cared."

Olivia Okonkwo

Keyword: Navigating transition, Prevention, Connecting People

"There was that friendship factor. Everyone at the events, all the people you met, were ready to chat to you. I've made lots of friends, and we're all still in touch... Circle was so good. It helped people who were lonely."

Olivia came to the UK from Nigeria in 1965. As a retired nurse, she's "*seen the good, the bad, and the ugly*" she laughs, recalling her early career. She started out in Manchester, but as her children grew up they moved down to London and she wanted to join them. She was visiting in 2009, waiting to find a place in council housing, when she was nearly killed in a notorious South London tower block fire. By the time she found a flat for herself in London, she had been through a major trauma and found herself in a new city with no friendship network. Olivia decided she needed to take action, so she joined Circle. From the start enjoyed it immensely, making use of every opportunity Circle offered her. She used the helper service to help her get her flat in order, washing windows and cushions and rearranging the furniture to make it more homely. Once she was more confident in her new surroundings, she started attending events, seeing the city and making friends. As her Circle networks grew, she went to more events, starting a positive cycle in her life. London started to feel friendlier. Nowadays, Olivia is one of the core group helping former Circle members to meet up regularly in Southwark, which they're calling Southwark Friends. She's living a full and active life with plenty of support from her friends and neighbours. As a nurse and someone who's active in her community, feeling well-connected and confident Olivia feels she can keep an eye out for her neighbours in Peckham.

Cath Wilkinson

Keywords: Connecting people, Prevention

"When my husband died, I felt I was in a no man's land. If you've been partnered for 40 years, going out on your own is not easy... If I was having a choked-up, sad day I would think to myself, 'Buck up, you're going out to Southwark Circle today.' You could be yourself, it was very non-judgmental. There was an extroverted lady there that always cheered me up. It lightened my mood, do you see? I could still be me, but enjoy being around other people. I found it therapeutic and enjoyed it."

Cath turned to Circle when she was newly bereaved and her confidence had left her completely. She felt fragile, but still wanted to get out and be with people. She liked that she could choose the level of engagement that felt right for her: "*Wherever I went, it was my choice.*" She

appreciated the warmth of the people who ran it and how welcome everyone made her feel. *“After my surgery, I couldn’t attend for a while and they noticed my absence and rang me up to make sure I was okay. That’s not the sort of treatment you get everywhere.”* She connected with plenty of local people at the smaller events and even ran into old friends and former co-workers at the larger London-wide ones.

She felt the membership of Circle differed from some of the other social groups for older people, in that they may have been over 50 but still felt young. *“A person’s mental age makes a difference. I could relate to (the people at Circle). We could talk about anything, not just reminisce about the past. We had something to look forward to.”* Circle supported her through tough times, helping her stay positive and avoid slipping into depression. By offering her as much engagement as she wanted, when she wanted it, Circle helped Cath to reclaim her independence.

Bob Bell

Keywords: Navigating transitions, Prevention

Bob’s story speaks for itself. In his words:

“To be quite honest, it was the Circle that revitalised my desire for living. I was 73 and was laid off due to cutbacks. I had been used to being busy, speaking with customers. It was the worst month of my life.

After I found Circle and became a member I went to go see the Lord Mayor’s Show live. I’ve wanted to go see it all my life but had never got round to it. Straight off I met a bloke called John, and we had a good laugh. I knew I’d done the right thing.

Before I met the people from Circle, to say I had depression was putting it mildly. You’re used to being busy and then you’ve got nothing. Without the Circle, I don’t know what I would have done. Like trips to the museum - as a kid, if you offered me a trip to the museum I would have ‘had a toothache’ anything to get out of it! I found them boring but now I love them.

I went to the pantomime with Circle and sat next to my friend Giulia. You know the way they yell? Well Giulia and I were yelling our heads off and went right back to our childhoods. We loved it. Can you put a price on the sound of laughter or the feeling of happiness? That’s what I try to project now, because that’s what the Circle projected on me. I am loving every minute of my life... It’s the Circle that started me down that road.

I owe my let on life to the Circle, because it was them that taught me to look to new horizons and bigger and better things. I think they did an absolutely magnificent job.”

Burcu Yilmaz

Keywords: Navigating transitions, Connecting people

"I live on my own, and I don't see my family much... I know far more local people that live in the area than I would have met before. Circle gives you a structure for social interaction and connectivity... I don't see it as volunteering any more. I see it as getting together with members of my community. We're creating community, which is not so common in big cities any more. I'm doing it for myself and for everyone else who lives here."

Burcu joined Circle when she turned 50 and decided to give up smoking. Looking for a change in routine and to keep busy, she decided to attend a few events. *"It was a local social gathering right on my doorstep. I live close to one of the regular meet-up spots so it was very convenient."* She also liked that it was easy going, with no obligations for attendance. *"It was just a nice way of signposting to people who are lonely. I'm one of the younger members, but I liked that there were older people there. It was great to tap into that wisdom. Most of the members are quite wise, well-seasoned people. They have lots of interesting stories."* She found the conversations *"incredibly therapeutic"* and the breadth of topics refreshing. As she made friends, she discussed everything from travel, life and grief to what made the best window cleanser.

Burcu became more involved in Circle, she began volunteering to host events, helping out at the theatre, concerts, outings and the wine and cheese evening. When she heard Circle was going to close, she decided to step up and take action. She's part of a core group helping to keep the best-loved activities available to other former members. Like many of Circle's younger members, the line between volunteering and simply being an active neighbour and friend has blurred for her. Burcu has something to give to her local community and Circle has helped her find a way to channel that energy, while giving something back to her in the form of a broader support network which would have been there for her as she gets older.

Ray Crouch

Keywords: Prevention, Prolonging independence

"I needed someone to help me with my cleaning and Circle said they could help. All the people they sent were very good and then I started getting them to do other jobs for me... Just little things, but they were really helpful. They helped me get in touch with the eye people at the hospital and they used to stay with me as I found it difficult to hear them sometimes. It was good to have them with me... Circle have been really helpful to me. They were always on the end of the phone and used to call me sometimes to check I was okay."

Ray is in his mid-90s, a successful painter who needed some practical help around the house. While he had a number of friends around him, his gradually failing eyesight and hearing along with decreased mobility meant that small jobs around the house had begun to pile up. When the Circle helpers came, they not only did the jobs they were hired for but also took extra initiative to help Ray get on top of things. *"At first they just came to help with my cleaning. But when they were there they would do other things, like take some bottles to the bottle bank or empty the bins,"* he explains. From there the practical tasks expanded to things like ironing, gardening and taking him to the hospital for appointments. Helpers built up a relationship with Ray and so they knew if anything was amiss and helped him get medical assistance when he needed it. After a heavy snow, Circle helpers called in on Ray at home. He was wearing a hat and gloves as he couldn't see well enough to turn the thermostat up. The helpers sorted it out right away and shovelled his drive as well so he wouldn't slip and fall. Because the Circle helpers were willing to go the extra mile, Ray could stay happy and comfortable in his own home, living a life he enjoyed.

Eddie Cole

Keywords: Prevention, Prolonging independence, Connecting people

"I've never been very well. I was born prematurely and I've been asthmatic for most of my life. I'm now diabetic... there's an awful lot of things I can't do. But I've found Circle tremendously motivational. It's motivation to get out and make up for all the time I have to spend indoors... When you're on your own you settle into a routine. I had lived within walking distance of the Dulwich Picture Gallery since 1951 and I'd only been there once. Circle's gotten me out to see all sorts of exhibitions. John Ruskin said 'Art should lift the heart and soul' and I agree."

Eddie joined Circle because he wanted to get out more and meet people, something his illness has prevented in the past. He's done both in spades. Not only has he built relationships through Circle, he has also brought his friends into the fold, inspiring them to become members. *"We'd have a natter and a joke when we were going round. I bumped into a lot of people I wouldn't have otherwise... Some of the folks I used to see time and time again I bump into at the Sainsbury's and we have a little chat."* Knowing his neighbours prevents the sort of social isolation to which he might otherwise be prone. Circle's events calendar keeps him active and engaged with the world around him. *"(The events) were things that I wanted to do, and I would have done earlier if I'd had the gumption. Now I do. I'm aware of what's available to me."*

Eddie's also made good use of the Helper service, prolonging his independence at home. He finds it somewhat awkward to get up and down repeatedly in small spaces. For example, when his water pipes had had some work done on them, the workmen moved the stop valve to a new place which he was having trouble finding. This wasn't the sort of job you needed to hire a handyman for, but it was stopping him from getting another repair done. A helper came round, he toured the house and eventually the new stop valve was found. Eddie was able to do the repair himself once that was sorted, but it's reassuring to know he could call on Circle for jobs large and small in the future.

Ted and Jen Ellis

Keywords: Connecting people, Asset-based,

"It seemed very down to earth and inclusive. We're believers in community spirit, so it appealed to us... It allowed people on their own to find kindred spirits. The atmosphere was gentle and supportive. It brought people out who were often a little more reluctant to step outside. It's a great strength, being part of a community. Whenever one meets people, you learn a bit more. You learn from them."

Ted and Jen have been married for over 50 years, and lived in London for over 30 years. They've seen a lot of their friends retire to the countryside, but they like what London has to offer and wanted to stay. They joined Circle to be able to give something back to their community and get to know their neighbours better. Like many people, Ted and Jen were concerned about social isolation in Southwark and wanted to help. Yet, it's often difficult for people to reach out to people who seem to be struggling, but whom you haven't met and don't want to offend. Circle

gave them a socially acceptable way to connect with local people who might be feeling lonely or vulnerable. Ted and Jen also liked using the Helper service, as they felt good knowing they were helping local people get back into work in difficult economic times.

It wasn't all giving though - the couple got a lot out of Circle as well. They attended and even hosted a variety of events, but as Ted's hearing deteriorated, he started to prefer smaller gatherings. Part of Circle's allure was its wide range of activities, which they could pick and choose as their interests, abilities and preferences changed over the years. Both Ted and Jen made friendships at Circle and liked seeing people come out of their shells. *"We were grateful to Southwark Circle for a number of things and we were so sad to see it go."*

Ermine Poole

Keywords: Prevention, Navigating Transitions

"Circle was brilliant. I think it saved me... When I joined, I had just gotten divorced. I went out to (the social events) a lot. It was my way of meeting up with the outside world. I was quite lonely. It was good to be out with people who didn't expect anything of you. They had nothing to prove. I could just be me... I really think it did make a difference to my life."

When Ermine joined Circle, she was newly divorced, had just moved into a new house, working part time and taking care of her teenage kids. With that on her plate, it's a wonder she had the energy to get out of bed, much less to a social event. *"It was nice to have something in the diary to look forward to. It was nice to know I had something just for me."* She liked the community feel, but also that she had the option to choose how engaged she wanted to be and what she felt comfortable with. Circle helped her take action to protect herself against loneliness and depression, allowing her to keep going when she might have been feeling low.

At first she used the Helper service, getting her new place set up the way she wanted it. Every aspect of Circle had a personal touch, from the staff that visited her at home to the new friends she was making at events. Ermine was trying new things and meeting new people she might not have otherwise come across. *"I sat next to a lady at the ballet who was from Chelsea. We exchanged emails and now we're friends. I met lots of amazing people who had led wonderful lives."* Ermine's been busy studying lately but she's still in touch with her Circle friends, even though the service has been discontinued. *"Even if it's been a while, I can still turn up and have people there that I know."*

Diana Thompson

Keywords: Asset-based, Connecting people

"If you're older, you've got to have friends who are younger. It does you so much good... The best thing is to get out and see people. It takes your mind off your worries. No use stewing!"

Diana is a rather glamorous older woman. She is the last person you would ever imagine joining a network for people over fifty. Yet, swinging through the room in a beautiful lambskin coat, she seems totally at home at Circle events, calling out to friends and giving friendly advice. She

joined mainly to meet people who share her love of the theatre, but also to rebuild her social networks. *“So many of my old friends have died or moved away from London over the years. It’s nice to meet new people who have the same interests.”* The fact that Circle members come from a range of ages and backgrounds is a big draw. Diana made quite a few new friends in her time at Circle. She’s also reconnected with old friends she hadn’t spoken to in years, who came to Circle events by chance and were delighted to see her. Anyone can experience loneliness, but Circle helped Diana take action to prevent that from happening to her.

Diana has become a resource for others. She’s encouraged countless people to come out of their shells. She’s helped to spread the word about the types of services available in K&C for older people beyond Circle itself, advising people where to go if they have trouble with the council or need financial advice. Diana’s given a lot back to her community, while getting what she needs, when she needs it.

Roisin Berry

Keyword: Navigating transitions

“I couldn’t sit at home and do nothing. I’ve always been a busy person. It’s astonishing the number of people who suggested that I watch daytime television!”

Not long retired, Roisin still works a few days a week but it’s nothing like the busy schedule she was used to. She was transitioning to a new lifestyle, but still wanted to stay busy and active. Circle outings provided a dual benefit, in that they were leisure time but didn’t feel sedate the way some programmes for older people do. *“It was two days a week for me to do whatever most appealed to me. There was terrific variety in the programme.”* Circle was also unique in that it had a wide range of activities available on evenings, weekends and holidays. This allowed Roisin to keep up with work-related activities during the week, and enjoy herself with new friends on the weekends. She went to a spa weekend for the first time with Circle, and into the countryside to visit historic properties. *“It wasn’t the sort of thing you would do by yourself. Unless you got together a big group yourself and hired a coach, you’d never manage it.”* Although she had her own friends outside of Circle, they weren’t always available for the things she wanted to do, cancelling at the last minute due to illness or family obligations. With Circle, she could tap into a much wider group of people who shared her interests. It was normal to strike up a conversation with the person sitting next to you, leading to some lasting friendships and a larger group of friendly acquaintances. Circle has helped Roisin to make necessary adjustments to her life and build up her support networks, boosting self-reliance.

Rob Green

Keywords: Connecting people, Prevention

“I joined mainly for the trips and to meet new people. I’ve been to France twice, Germany, York, Coventry, up and down the Thames... I never used to do things like this. I didn’t want to go on my own. Circle got me out. I’m really pleased I joined.”

Rob was looking to widen his horizons and meet new people, and Circle fitted the bill perfectly for him. He took enthusiastic advantage of the variety the Circle calendar offered, trying out new

things every week. He liked that the group was really owned by its members and encouraged active participation without forcing it on anyone. “*You could contribute ideas about what you wanted to do and you’d see them on the events calendar later on.*” Rob believed in the value of Circle, promoting it in the community whenever he got the opportunity. He’s now part of the core group of people trying to keep its former members together. While they don’t have any outside support or money, the friendships they’ve made are resilient. He knows many people by sight in his neighbourhood, which makes it feel friendlier.

This type of extended local support network is especially useful as Rob is a carer, looking after another disabled friend in London. She is unable to get out much due to her disability, but through Rob she’s connected to a wider world of friends and neighbours. Rob has health issues of his own to manage, but having a group of friends to exercise with has helped him explore all sorts of different classes. While he’s currently into yoga, he’s tried Pilates, tai chi, and even dance classes with his Circle friends. These things wouldn’t have been on his radar without Circle, but once they were offered, he grabbed them with both hands. Now he’s leading an active, healthy life with an extended network to support him and his friend should they need it.

Dorothy Miller

Keywords: Connecting people, Prevention

“The worst thing is going from a house full of noise, kids and pets to nothing... But even married people can be lonely. A lot of women started bringing their husbands. Men tend to sit indoors and this gets them out.”

I’m doing my bit for society. I hate to feel that people are lonely. Not everyone is as clued in as I am about travelling in London, for example. I’ve got a friend with poor eyesight who doesn’t feel comfortable going out alone. So I met up with her and some others (from Circle) in a similar situation in Romford, and we travel together as a group.”

Dorothy joined Circle to meet new people and socialise more often. Her husband is less interested in getting out of the house than she is and Circle was the opportunity she was waiting for. “*I don’t want to sit indoors wasting time,*” she said firmly. “*It’s my life and I want to get out.*” Circle gave her an instant group of like-minded people to plug into. From the first event she attended, she made two “*very good friends*” and from there she was off. She enjoyed meeting people from other parts of London at the larger events and chatting to other Romford locals at the coffee mornings. Although she has to be careful of her arthritis, she’s keeping active and likes to get out with her friends, keeping a special eye out for people that would like to join in but might feel more vulnerable. When she heard London Circle was closing, she stepped right up to take the reins, helping to organise one of two coffee mornings in the area. While they’ve so far been a resounding success, she’s already working on setting up a full calendar of events for former Circle members. When we spoke, she told us she was thinking of taking on some voluntary work but at the moment was too busy organising the new group. It hadn’t occurred to her that this was itself voluntary work, perhaps because Dorothy is so community-minded that it’s simply a part of her life now.

Gwen Phillips

Keywords: Connecting people, Prevention

"I go out on my rounds, you know. Once I get chatting to someone, maybe in the pub, I tell them about the service... It's done a lot of good for a lot of people... Before I retired I was a beauty consultant and I won £500 and a trip to Spain (as a reward for good sales). When I was out helping Southwark Circle at the Tanner Street Fete, I got 26 people to join in one go!"

Gwen was a founding member of Southwark Circle, initially joining because she wanted a little help with a decorating job in her home and the price of the Helper service seemed like a good value. Once she began receiving the monthly events calendar, she liked what she saw and started attending 3-4 events per month. *"You got to choose what you wanted - I liked that."* In her former working life, Gwen was brilliant saleswoman. Once she started to believe in the value of Circle she put those skills to work, reaching out to people both formally, at Circle membership drives, and informally through her existing community relationships. She helped many people to become more socially connected and it was beautiful to watch her skilfully employ her previously dormant talents.

Though we were lucky to have Gwen, Circle benefited her as well - otherwise she couldn't have convinced others the way she did. She made new friends, with whom she's formed a swimming group. They attend a keep-fit class together and go out for meals. Gwen has brought people into Circle, but Circle's also brought people to Gwen, who through Circle has developed into a resource in her own right.

Freya Shaw

Keywords: Connecting people

"Some people find it difficult to live in London. You don't know your next-door neighbour. There's no contact at all. Living on your own is a bother sometimes. It can be soul destroying for people... Friends and families have moved away. It's so difficult to establish new friendships by yourself. And sometimes grandparents are forgotten as soon as the grandkids have grown up and moved out of the house."

Freya describes herself as a *"free spirit."* She was a member of Southwark Circle for years and liked *"that you can pick and choose what you want to do - it's good for independent people like me,"* she explains. A registered psychiatric nurse since 1969, Freya is aware of how tough it can be to get older. Circle offers her insurance against isolation.

Freya is a typical Circle member in that she was always looking out for people. Discussing the farewell party Circle held at the Britannia Pub, she said the group of women she'd been chatting with weren't particular friends of hers. Yet when one of them said she felt ill, Freya sat with her long past everyone else had left. They took the bus home together and Freya had wanted to check up on her the day afterwards but had forgotten to get her number – she contacted Circle

to ring the woman and give her Freya's number and make sure she was okay. The woman was happy to be put back in touch with Freya. Circle provided a structure for people like Freya to dip in and out to socialise when they wanted to, and to act as an informal support system for others without any hint of condescension or obligation. In time, it would have been there to support her as well.

Fiona Kelly

Keywords: Asset-based, connecting people

“Circle has really given me an outlet, in that it's something I could contribute to and be connected to a community of people. It was more about horizontal connections than vertical ones, if you know what I mean - ordinary people with different backgrounds and ideas meeting each other... It's local people helping each other. It made you feel you had something to offer and could make friends.”

Fiona is an accredited guide for the City of London. While she leads a busy life, she liked being part of a community of mutual support that was locally based. It was important to her to be able to make a meaningful contribution as well as drawing inspiration and support from the group. She did this by volunteering her services as a guide, leading themed walks around London for Circle members. Several members recall her Christmas-time Dickens walk as a highlight of their entire Circle experience. Fiona liked being able to dip in and out of the events calendar, leading historic walks in Bletchley Park and meeting like-minded people. She's made several good friends, as well as a wider circle of local connections within her neighbourhood. Like many people, Fiona didn't want to be a passive recipient of services for older people. Circle gave her the framework to engage with her community in a new way, to build up a network of local connections and enrich the lives of others. It also provided her with a safety net of services that improved her home life and would remain available if and when she needed them.

Tony Bonner

Keywords: Connecting people,

“When I retired from my job, I thought I might as well keep my hand in. It gets me out as well, you see? I used to work on the maintenance crew for the University of Arts. I picked up my jobs from a computer, did them, and there was no thank-you from anybody when you finished. It was sterile... I like sitting down and having a chat with the members, having a cuppa. They were the nicest people, always recognised me from the jobs before. Seeing the same person again, they liked it. They always offered me a tea and a biscuit, asked if I needed a break. Even if I were there for a big job, if they mentioned something else small that needed doing, I would just take care of it.”

Tony has lived in South London all his life, “a Bermondsey boy, born and bred”, quick with a laugh and a joke. Since he retired from his more formal position, he works independently as a handyman and Circle Helper. He is older himself and has problems with his back and knees from a lifetime of physical work, so he found doing odd jobs for Circle members in South London a perfect fit. He is a carer to his mum and the flexible hours allowed him to take her to hospital appointments each week.

Even if he hadn't been officially booked for a job, *"I could pop round and do things because I was just in the neighbourhood. If they needed the council to do something, it could take up to 2-3 months. With me, (Circle) could call me as I was leaving a job and ask if I could look in on someone. Even the jobs that were booked ahead of time I got to within a few days."* His members liked the quality of his work and his friendly manner, and went out of their way to request him. *"I had a lady who came especially to the farewell party at the Britannia to see me. She didn't want to lose touch, and said there were plenty of friends in the area she could refer me to for work."* It wasn't just members that appreciated a service with a human touch. Tony himself enjoyed sitting down and having a chat, only tearing himself away if he had another urgent job to get to. Circle reconnected him with his neighbours and gave him a flexible way to continue supporting his family.

Rakesh and Jhumpa Achara

Keywords: Prevention, Connecting people

"While we've both had our health issues, I'm more laid back now and my wife is more active... She likes to go to art galleries, and while I appreciate it, art is not really for me. I'm more interested in going to shows."

Rakesh and his wife Jhumpa joined Southwark Circle early on, attracted by the fact that Circle offered both in-home helper services and outside events. Like many couples, they had different interests and energy levels. Circle gave them a way to socialise as a couple, but still feel free to pursue their individual interests with other friends. They appreciated that there were events held both during the day and in the evening, as they didn't feel comfortable travelling on public transport in the evenings, especially in the wintertime. Many couples in their situation might have stopped going out entirely, but Circle gave them a reason to keep going.

Both Rakesh and Jhumpa had experienced health challenges. Rakesh had bypass surgery shortly before joining Circle, and had a pacemaker put in only this past February. While Jhumpa is the more energetic of the two, she's had problems with her back and a few joint replacements, finding it hard to get around at times. Circle offered them stimulating events when they felt up to it, and support services when they wanted to take it slow. It also connected them into a wider social network of friends who could act as back-up in the event anything unexpected should happen to either of them. *"Did it make a difference to our lives?"* Rakesh muses. *"Of course! We're sorry it had to end."*

Kate Hooper

Keywords: Navigating transitions

"Before Circle I was in a maze! I was doing my best to help myself and make life easier but it didn't happen. Other places were too far away for me and it was always too expensive. My husband was in hospital, so I was very lonely. It was difficult to make friends and get out and about. If I arranged things I never knew whether he would be okay or not. ...Circle was light-hearted, you listen to people and try to help. It made me feel better when I spoke to somebody... Circle made quite a bit of difference in my life. It was great to get out and meet people."

Kate was a full-time carer for her husband and was starting to feel isolated. Circle gave her a place to connect with other people who shared her interests and understood the challenges that come with caring for a partner in ill health. She liked that she could pick up Circle when she had time and hang back when she was too busy to attend. Eventually Kate was persuaded to take a holiday with Circle as a brief respite from her caring responsibilities. *“It was great to get away with other people like me. I enjoyed it, it was quite a laugh... I felt like I could be myself again for a while.”* Kate began to realise that she was taking on too much, but Circle was there to support her. Circle was there for her as and when she needed them, and helped her to see she was allowed a life alongside her caring duties. Circle staff supported her through the difficult process of moving her husband into a care home. *“The staff were always helpful and reassuring. Circle did their best to help,”* Kate recalled.

Marjorie Frost

Keywords: Prolonging independence

“I’m jolly well not going to let a stroke get the best of me.”

Marjorie has been a member of Circle since it opened. Although she is still quite active, a stroke had limited her slightly and affected her confidence. Circle helped her stay connected in the community by helping her arrange her transport, adjusting based on her capabilities and requirements over a long period of time. In the beginning, she relied on Circle to arrange lifts for her as her stroke meant she couldn’t drive. Eventually she was well enough to start driving again, which Circle helped her sort out. After she had another serious stroke later on, Circle helped her figure out her local bus schedule. When she came back, her short-term memory was suffering but she was keen to stay involved with Circle activities. Every month Circle staff would phone her to see what she wanted to attend, organise her transport, and give her several reminder calls so that she would be prepared. This enables Marjorie to maintain her dignity and independence, and keep going out to do the things she enjoyed.

Marjorie sometimes used to call the Circle office 2 or 3 times a day to ask the same questions. The staff would patiently answer them the same way each time, as they didn’t want to make her feel uncomfortable or stupid. It was that sort of dedication and persistence that allowed Marjorie to stay connected with the outside world and thrive despite a major health crisis.

Bea Parker

Keywords: Individualisation, Prolonging independence

“Circle were a life-line to turn to when all else fails, or when other organisations have failed to meet my needs after supporting my husband of 40 years with cancer. The usual helplines just did not ‘come up with the goods’ or individuals did not want to know.”

Like many older people, Bea found herself needing to provide some care for her partner while facing health issues herself, in addition to keeping their household together and staying on top of everyday tasks. Circle supported her practically as well as preventing her from feeling isolated in her community. Circle provided advice on where to get small but overwhelming jobs done. For example, when her back door refused to shut, the manufacturer quoted her a minimum fee of

£120, while Circle was able to get a local person out to help far sooner and for much less money. *“It was all quickly, efficiently done and at little cost,”* Bea says. In addition to practical support, Circle helped Bea to feel less alone. It provided her with information about the local deaf association, as Bea is hard of hearing. Circle staff called the house regularly to check on her welfare, ensuring all was well. Importantly, Circle also provided a way to meet others in a similar situation, which lead to both information sharing and the opportunity to socialise and relax. The different types of support Circle offered helped Bea and her husband to lead the life they wanted, smoothing the way for them in difficult times.