Our Lenses

A report on stage 1 of the Positive Masculinities project in Greater Manchester

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1.   Overview

Too many women and girls in Greater Manchester feel unsafe and experience gender-based violence.[1] Many of the current approaches are not very effective in tackling these problems. While there continue to be efforts to change male behaviours, these are largely based on men and boys being seen solely as the problem.

Changing male behaviours requires men to play an active role in 'being the change'. For as long as we continue to see men and boys solely as the problem, we will fail to realise their potential to be an active part of the solution.

The Positive Masculinities project started in February 2023 with the hope of getting closer to addressing the problem of gender-based violence. We want to find different, more effective solutions, including to significantly lower the amount of gender-based violence. We aim to do this by drawing on the positive aspects of masculinity, so that men and boys are a key part of the solution, at least as much as women and girls.

2.   Approach

The Positive Masculinities project has spent one year developing and building a baseline understanding of what men and boys think about masculinity by listening to them. Our long-term goal is to use this greater understanding to generate ideas that will significantly reduce gender-based violence.

The project has been jointly delivered by Unlimited Potential and Salford Foundation, with a focus on men and boys aged nine and over. Salford Foundation took a largely school-based session approach to engage boys aged 9-16, while Unlimited Potential used a wide range of spaces to engage men aged 16 and over.

The project was initially titled Positive Masculin**ity**. We quickly learned from men and boys, however, that there are wildly different versions of masculinity to which they subscribe, dependent on socialisation, experience, culture or faith. So, to reflect this, we adjusted the title of the project to Positive Masculin**ities**.

We were very aware of the complexities of engaging a large number of men and boys in conversations around masculinities. These included

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[1] Gender-based violence against women and girls means violence that is directed against a woman or a girl because she is a woman or a girl or that affects women and girls disproportionately. (Istanbul Convention, 2011: Article 3). In Greater Manchester, gender-based violence also includes violence directed at trans, gender-queer and non-binary people who are attacked for not conforming to gender norms.

accessing specific spaces to reach certain communities, or getting into the necessary depth of conversation due to many men and boys feeling obliged to defend their masculinity. We understood that there would also be challenge in translating conversations with men and boys into insight that presented solutions to gender-based violence.

Understanding that this was never going to happen overnight and that solutions to gender-based violence require a deep understanding of what is in the heads of men and boys, we decided to spend the year just engaging as many men and boys as possible in conversation about what masculinity or 'being a man' really meant to them and their context.

3.   Engagement

The project took a community engagement approach in several neighbourhoods in two boroughs in Greater Manchester:
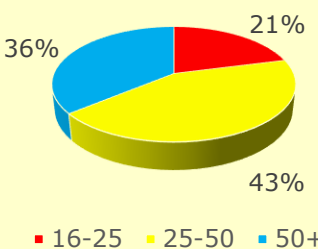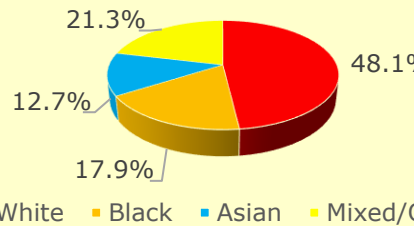- Bolton - Great Lever, Queen's Park, Rumworth
- Salford - Little Hulton, Walkden

Within these locations, we engaged in conversation with 2,736 men and 573 boys, totalling 3,309 individuals. The disparity in numbers is due to the difference in approach between engaging men and engaging boys. Engaging men took a single interaction approach, enabling large numbers of men to be reached in short periods of time. The work with boys was delivered in a programme style with an average of six interactions per young person. This level of engagement supported a real depth of diverse insight into masculinities.

We kept a consistent focus on reaching a wide diversity of men and boys to gain insights that reflected the populations of our target areas. Using a mixture of census data, conversations with local people active within the community and support from schools and local VCSE organisations, we developed a good understanding of the demographics of the locations where we were engaging and therefore the types of spaces that the project needed to reach.

Examples of spaces where we went are: primary and secondary schools; colleges; local businesses (takeaways, dentists, cafés, pubs); faith centres (churches, mosques and temples); health centres; leisure centres, gyms and sports facilities; libraries; community groups; probation services; and residential homes.

This enabled us to engage a wide diversity of men and boys:

Year Group (boys)		year 5	110

Year Group (boys)
- Year 5
- Year 6
- Year 7
- Year 8
- Year 9
- Year 10

Age (Men)
21%, 36%, 43%
- 16-25
- 25-50
- 50+

Ethnicity (Men)
21.3%, 12.7%, 17.9%, 48.1%
- White
- Black
- Asian
- Mixed/Other

year 5	110
year 6	106
year 7	212
year 8	120
year 9	9
year 10	16
16-25	575
25-50	1,176
50+	985
Asian	347
Black	490
White	1,316
Mixed/Other	583

We engaged a wide age range to understand any intergenerational influences, and because gender-based violence occurs in all age groups.

In addition, amongst the 2,736 men engaged:
- 204 (7.46%) self-identified as disabled and/or neurodiverse
- 157 (5.74%) self-identified as LGBTQ+

As these numbers reflect only those who self-identified, it is likely that the actual numbers and proportions of these men were higher than above.

4. Key Lenses on Masculinity

In this first stage of the project, we have sought to reflect and articulate our understanding of how men and boys in Greater Manchester see masculinity and how they think. This should help to identify both risk and protective factors.

From the engagement with men and boys, four key lenses emerged.

4.1. Fatherhood and Family

When engaging men and boys in conversation around masculinities, one of the primary lenses that they consider is fatherhood. Be it the dad that raised them, the dad they are, or the dad they one day wish to be. From our learning, many men are hugely motivated by experiences of positive fatherhood. For many boys, the importance of establishing romantic success was evident. They often expressed desires to build a traditional family where they could maintain fatherhood 'duties' of protecting and providing for their family.

Many men noted that fatherhood and family was often the thing that encouraged them to be a 'better man'. Others would identify the 'duty' of being a good role model to their children or being a support system to their partner. Men articulated those support systems in many different ways, from those that underpinned by love and nurture to others that had elements of protection and control.

Fathers often talked about their role towards daughters as being very different to that towards sons. They did not feel as obliged to protect their sons from the dangers of the outside world (mainly noted as other men), but dads expressed a strong 'duty' of protection for their daughters. Towards sons, the role was much more about creating strong boys, boys that just get on with life, who are not easily shaken by the world and are stoic, well respected and well socialised into what it meant to 'be a man' according to their father's understanding and own socialisation.

Although many men communicated fatherhood as a positive motivating force, many also articulated it as a burden. This was in the sense of being a 'certain kind of man' leaving many fathers feeling incapable or not good enough. Expectations on fathers to be the breadwinner and main provider left many men feeling an immense pressure of caring for their family. This was complemented by many boys' understanding of their 'duties' and desires for manhood being hugely influenced by being a provider for a family.

This 'duty' to protect and provide unlocked a second lens on masculinity that dominated many conversations with men: 'protector, provider and power'.

4.2. Protector, Provider and Power

Often featuring in many conversations around men's role as fathers or their 'duty' to their families was many men discussing being expected to protect and provide and how that came with an innate sense of power.

Many men often discussed the protection lens in terms of them needing to protect women (often from other men). Only when discussing themselves, male family members or very close friends did men talk about protecting other men.

In discussion, however, many men did not apply protecting women only to family members or close friends. They clearly felt a profound 'duty' to protect women in general, often assuming that women are more vulnerable and less capable of protecting themselves.

Many men talked about the provider lens when discussing relationships or family. This meant the need for men, especially fathers, to provide for their family. Also, the desire that many men held to provide for parents, with many expressing a desire to take care of their parents. In certain communities, this was an expectation rather than a desire. Many men from south Asian backgrounds felt obliged to provide for parents. While they saw it as an honour to be able to do so, there was much more pressure for men from south Asian backgrounds to provide for their own family as well as their parents.

Many younger men and boys discussed the provider lens when talking about romantic relationships. The expectation to pay on dates or appear able to provide in the initial stages of relationships is what many younger men and boys identified as a sort of pressure of providing.

Many men talked about the power lens from a perspective of control and authority. Many men and boys expressed that it is their 'duty' to be in control, and to be physically and socially assertive. The work with boys highlighted that this is heavily ingrained within many of them, with the desire to appear assertive in peer settings.

The pressure on men to appear assertive, powerful and/or in control led to conversations around the expectations placed upon men and boys to be emotionally stoic. This complements the third key lens on masculinity: the causes and effects of male isolation and loneliness.

4.3. Loneliness and Isolation

Loneliness is the subjective 'social pain' from a discrepancy between desired and actual social connections. Social isolation is the objective state of having a small network of kin and non-kin relationships and thus few or infrequent interactions with others.

The key lens of loneliness and isolation was not initially apparent in the early stages of learning. Instead, there was frequent discussion around 'brotherhood' from two key standpoints:
- Men needed to form greater bonds with other men. In times of need, men wanted to be able to go to their friends to talk about it and ask for help. They often felt, however, that it would be frowned upon if they leaned on another man.
- Men needed to form a sort of 'army' to 'protect' masculinity. This argument came mainly from older men and was communicated as the ideas that people no longer want men to be 'real men' and that there is a need for men to stand together and protect what it meant to be a man.

It later became apparent that many of these conversations were much more centred in many men feeling isolated and lonely, especially in times of need. The expectation placed upon men to be physically strong, resilient and constantly emotionally stoic means that, in moments of real need, many men are often unable to lean on others out of a fear of judgement. Many men talked about the feeling that they are there for others, but no one is there for them.

The distinctions between isolation and loneliness also became apparent. In moments of need, men will often isolate themselves from others in an attempt to avoid showing that they are struggling. That, in turn, creates a real sense of loneliness for them.

Many men also discussed the difference in expectations on men being a reason why many men feel isolated or lonely. Many men spoke of being expected to be two versions of themselves: one that they needed to be for their partner or their family; and the other that they needed to be for peers. This pressure of being expected to be two people at once often meant that men reached a point where they had to choose which version of themselves is more important.

In clearer terms, many men felt that they were expected to demonstrate a more emotional, loving and nurturing side of themselves when with their partner or family, but felt that their peers would not appreciate or respect this. Once in relationships, therefore, many men often isolate themselves from peers, resulting in increasing feelings of loneliness.

4.4. Social Expectation

Perhaps the broadest key lens on masculinity, but one which became more and more apparent throughout was the general socialisation of boys and men. We started the project very aware of the things that existed in the 'man box', such as:

The 'Man Box'

- be physically and emotionally strong

- be a 'good' father and strong role model

- be a protector and provider

- be assertive/in control and hold power (especially over women)

All of these feelings and expectations were solidified throughout the conversations with boys and men. Many boys and men instead wish to be a very different kind of boy or man, following a more 'gentle' version of masculinity. Many boys and men, however, felt held back or heavily responsible to exist in a way that reflects the social expectations within the 'man box'.

On the other hand, there are also many boys and men who wish to be everything that exists within the 'man box': to continue to be traditionally 'masculine' and not let go of what it means to be 'a man'.

This situation creates real tensions between different groups of men. One example is intergenerational differences. Many older men communicated that they felt that younger men do not know how 'to be men', being too weak or too soft. The older men also felt that the younger generation are 'destroying' masculinity. Many younger men felt, however, that they were being told to be a certain kind of man. Rather than wishing to abide by that, they wanted to be different from it.

5. Other Significant Themes

As well as the four key lenses, several other significant themes emerged from listening to men and boys, although they were not dominant.

5.1. Financial success

Many boys placed strong emphasis on being the provider for a family and on displaying superficial indications of wealth (such as fast cars and big houses). Many boys also placed significant emphasis on 'hustle culture' and the idea of 'escaping the matrix'. Rather than traditional 9-5 jobs, what they desired was passive income streams. This view appears to be largely influenced by online promotion of trading or drop shipping, which paints an ideal life of earning money from anywhere in the world and doing very little work for high financial reward.

5.2. Faith and culture as blueprints for masculinity

Many men who actively follow a faith such as Christianity or Islam (the two most prominent within the populations covered) are hugely guided by it in relation to their masculinity. Many such men said that it is not just important that they are a good man, but that they are, for example, a good Christian man or a good Muslim man. This translated, for example, into fathers wishing to raise good Christian or Muslim children. While their masculinity was influenced by many other factors, these men felt guided towards a certain way of being a man not only by their religion or belief, but also by their culture.

5.3. Neurodiversity and loneliness

Many men who identified as neurodiverse shared a common experience of prolonged loneliness. Many spoke of a lack of friends or social interaction. While some wanted to increase their social interactions, others wanted to overcome their feelings of loneliness.

5.4. Response to facilitators of different sexes

The work with boys was delivered by mix gendered facilitators. It was observed that boys were much more open with the male facilitators in terms of opinions. By contrast, boys showed much more emotional vulnerability with the female facilitator.

6.   Wider Applicability

Beyond the reduction of gender-based violence, the emerging learning about masculinities from the project suggests wider applicability in fields that see a disproportionate impact by or on boys and men, such as:

- educational achievements
- placement in children's homes
- mental illness
- alcohol dependency
- substance misuse
- adults 'going missing'
- rough sleeping
- violent crime
- imprisonment
- drug-related deaths
- suicide
- life expectancy

7.   What next?

The longer-term project proposal is based on the seven steps of innovation (Nesta).

The work described in this report is stage 1:

1. Opportunities and challenges: This stage is about asking the right questions, and getting a clearer picture through better data. Methods used here build understanding about the opportunities and challenges around a particular issue, helping to inspire new ideas.

In stage 1, the Positive Masculinities project has built a clearer understanding about the opportunities and challenges around positive masculinities, helping to inspire new ideas.

Given all the learning from stage 1, and the theory of change that has been produced a result, we can look towards developing and testing ideas of what might influence male thinking and behaviour most effectively in stage 2 (generating ideas) and stage 3 (developing and testing).

2. <u>Generating ideas:</u> This is the stage where ideas are explored and developed. Ideas can come from all kinds of places. Methods used here encourage creative thinking, exploration and ways of sourcing ideas and learning from others.

We will evolve creative thinking to develop and explore ideas about effective engagement and dialogue with men and boys. In terms of systems change, stage 2 might lead to redefining purpose.

Based on our learning about key lenses on masculinity and our consequent theory of change from stage 1, we have developed several ideas to be tested to see what does – and does not – affect male thinking and behaviours:

Fatherhood and family: the hypothesis that fatherhood is a major motivator in shifting male behaviours, both towards men 'showing up' better for women and girls, and also encouraging better socialisation and behaviours amongst boys.

Mindset and language: the hypothesis that reframing traditionally 'masculine' words such as strength, which place pressure on men and boys to act and think a certain way as a 'protector' and 'provider', will allow for them to feel less burdened by perceived social expectation, 'duty' and innate sense of power, creating greater scope to adopt healthier framing of language, and therefore healthier thinking and behaviours.

Spaces to encourage human connection and sustainable social networks: the hypothesis that, if men and boys have better spaces to build and sustain healthy peer relationships, in which supportive and nurturing aspects are appreciated and respected, they will form healthier relationships and social networks, leading to reduced isolation and loneliness, and therefore reduced negative behaviours towards themselves and others.

We will refine these hypotheses, so that they can be developed and tested in practice in stage 3 with men and boys in different communities and neighbourhoods.

By the end of stage 2, we expect the standard of evidence (Nesta) to be at level 1: we can give an account of impact - able to describe what we do and why it matters, logically, coherently and convincingly.

3. Developing and testing: This stage is about testing ideas in practice. Finding out what works and what does not is important so that plans can be refined and improved. Methods used here support experimentation and prototyping.

We will test our ideas in practice for effectiveness in both the existing project localities and new ones in Greater Manchester, ideally with control or comparison localities. Experimentation and prototyping will be used to find out what does and does not work and for whom. In terms of system change, stage 3 is likely to involve community capability and shared power.

We will test with boys (11-16), young men (16-25) and adult men (25+), how well or not each hypothesis resonates, and if and how they affect male thinking and behaviour. We will do this in neighbourhoods both in the two existing locations (Bolton and Salford) and also in two new locations (likely to be from Rochdale, Stockport, Tameside and Trafford).

This should also help us to understand whether any of our learning or hypotheses were peculiarly influenced by specific characteristics of location or community, and what appears to resonate most regardless of place or identity.

The emphasis during stage 3 is on learning about what is more or less likely to affect male thinking and behaviours, including with regard to reducing gender-based violence.

By the end of stage 3, we expect the standard of evidence (Nesta) to be at level 2: we capture data that shows positive change, but cannot confirm that we caused it.

With our developing understanding of what does – and does not – affect male thinking and behaviour, including with regard to reducing gender-based violence, the longer-term project will then seek to progress through the four subsequent stages of innovation, which are, in summary:

4. Making the case: This stage is about making the case that an idea works better than what is already there, helping to attract the support of others. Understanding how to best use the evidence gathered through testing is important here.

We will outline a strategy and make the case for the approaches that appear to work, in order to attract wider support, with a view towards eventual spread and adoption across Greater Manchester. In terms of system change, this will require system leadership and mission-based teams.

By the end of stage 4, we expect the [standard of evidence](#) (Nesta) to be at level 3: we can demonstrate causality, using a control or comparison group in which there is less or no impact.

5. <u>Delivering and implementing:</u> This stage is about moving the idea from concept to reality. The methods used here focus on embedding an innovation into everyday practice, which may involve cultural and behavioural, as well as organisational, shifts.

6. <u>Growing and spreading:</u> At this stage, there are a range of strategies for growing and spreading an innovation. Support for innovations at this stage involves providing access to funding, advice, networks and new opportunities.

7. <u>Changing systems:</u> This stage involves changes in the public and private sector over long periods of time, and interventions which drive the interaction of many elements and new ways of thinking. The success of some innovations sometimes depends on changing entire systems or developing new ones.

8. System Change

As a social innovation, the project has attracted interest from GoodLives GM, which looks to develop a system shifting capability for Greater Manchester.

The core purpose of GoodLives GM is to reduce inequalities by naming and tackling system barriers to innovation in Greater Manchester.

GoodLivesGM seeks to shift system conditions:
- *directly* by engaging and convening system leaders and supporting them to collaborate and learn about how to identify and remove system barriers; and
- *indirectly* by identifying, connecting, elevating and amplifying great work to tackle inequalities taking place across Greater Manchester

Key system barriers are seen by GoodLives GM to be:
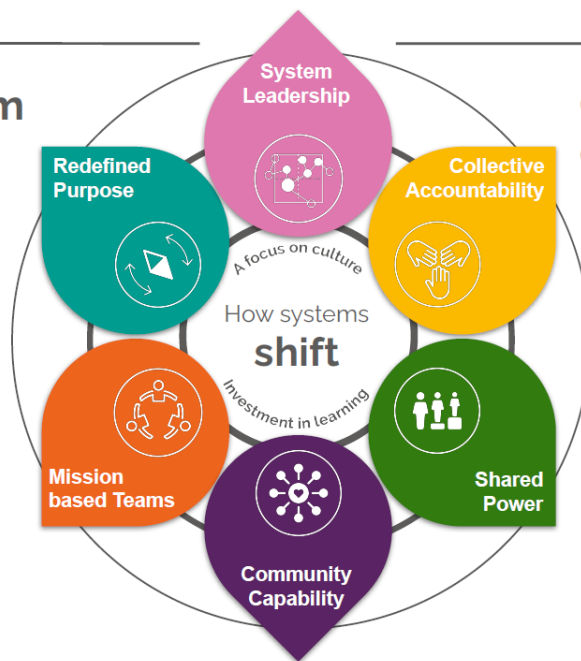
Naming and tackling system barriers

Community organisations operating at the margins, on short-term funding

Formal governance primarily accountable to national government rather than local people

Leadership exercised primarily within organisations and job descriptions

Exhausted front line teams focused on managing demand and risk

Power, resources and decision-making concentrated in statutory services

Purpose and outcomes defined primarily within services against national KPIs

The system enablers are described in the GoodLives GM Compass:

Growing system enablers

GoodLivesGM Compass

System Leadership

Redefined Purpose

Collective Accountability

A focus on culture

How systems **shift**

Investment in learning

Mission based Teams

Community Capability

Shared Power

The Compass describes how our systems need to change - what they need to look like and how they should work differently - to support community-led solutions that have the potential to transform how people thrive in Greater Manchester.

Solutions that the GoodLivesGM network identifies, connects, elevates and amplifies will be redesigning at least one of these six system enablers.

The 'look for' characteristics of these system enablers are:

GoodLives GM Compass initial 'Look fors'

Redefined Purpose	System Leadership	Collective Accountability	Shared Power	Community Capability	Mission-based Teams
Reframed challenge	Embraces uncertainty and complexity	Participative/ representative/ democratic governance	Self identification for individuals and communities	Codesign and Co-production	Role descriptions that focus on people and places (not services)
Widely publicised case for change and mission	Future and learning focused	Models for risk sharing across organisations and sectors and with communities	Community ownership; community wealth building	Trauma informed and restorative practice	Adoption of relational/human centred approaches
Disruptive narrative	Emphasises soft power over hierarchy/ command and control	New outcome measures and metrics; measuring what matters	Creative use of digital technology with an emphasis on equity of access	Approaches to positive risk management	Cross-sector roles and teams; colocation
Explicit and intentional about shifting systems	Values/mission-led individuals and teams	Radically reduced bureaucracy	Data and information sharing; making data usable	Asset/strengths based approaches	Well supported (development, resources) volunteering and peer-peer roles
Emergence as a strategy	Distributed and collaborative models; multiple organisations/sectors	Transparency in decision making	New models of finance and investment vehicles	Alternatives to services	Multiple routes into employment
Alignment of mission and approaches; 'being the change'	Adaptive	Multiple opportunities for community engagement and feedback and access to evaluation findings.	New models of commissioning	Prevention and/or recovery focus	Flexible and hybrid working

There are four GoodLives GM functions to bring the Compass to life: