

# Boys in Mind

## About Oxford Health and 'Boys in Mind'

Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust provides physical, mental, health and social care for people of all ages across Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Swindon, Wiltshire, Bath and North East Somerset.

As part of a wider strategy, 'Boys in Mind', Oxford Health partnered with Into Films to make a short film called "A letter to my younger self", which is a series of reflexive testimonies from a group of young men and one bereaved mother, on the subject of male mental health.

## About Amplified

Funded and supported by NHS England, Amplified is a multi-year programme, led by YoungMinds and NEL Commissioning Support Unit, to support and build participation in every part of the children and young people's mental health system.

This means both:

- The participation of children, young people and their families in the commissioning, design and delivery of the mental health services they use;
- The participation of children and young people and their families in decisions about their individual mental health and care and treatment.

Our goals are to:

- Build the knowledge, confidence and skills of professionals across the mental health system around participation;
- Increase the participation of young people and their families in the children and young people's mental health system – at individual, organisational, local and national levels by helping more settings embed participation in what they do.

[www.youngminds.org.uk/amplified](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/amplified)

## Summary findings - engaging young men around mental health

### Participation and the right project

Ensure young people are involved from the outset in agreeing the aims of the project and provide a creative focus around something like a film. We found it was easier to engage boys and young men in a film project than it has been with other forms of participation, that are less activity based. That said, it was still challenging to find young men prepared to be open about their mental health challenges, however as relationships and trust developed, they became more willing to be open up about their own experiences.

### The right place and people

Many of those who had the most to contribute needed space, time and support to share their views and experiences. They needed to trust those involved and know their views would be valued and respected. Some of the young men who shared their experiences were reluctant to do so publicly and had to be met individually, so they could retain their anonymity. There was also value in providing opportunities for the young men to meet together as a group as they could lend either other peer support.

### What does the perfect wellbeing service look like for young men?

- Range of services
  - Online booking system
  - Choice of worker/support staff member
  - Outreach service – meet where you want
  - Inclusive, participatory
  - Flexible
- Encouraging and safe environment
  - Age appropriate
  - Private
  - Warm, comforting
- Effective workforce
  - Range of accessible and genuine, diverse and trustworthy professionals
  - Reliable – you say it, you do it! Professionals
  - Communication between professionals and teams
  - Listening skills
  - Provide feedback.

### What is the right support network?

1. Boys and young men said it's important to 'stay well', maintaining a strong social network and keeping in contact with friends outside of school; keeping busy with a range of hobbies and interests;
2. Reach out to friends and family and school staff, accept it is ok to ask for help;
3. Range and flexibility of available services – local, online, school, CAMHS;
4. Participatory services and appealing projects to be involved with;
5. Moving on – knowing that future support is available and how to access it.

## Introduction

The film is part of a broader strategy, 'Boys in Mind' which, is supported by a core group of representatives from Bath and North East Somerset CAMHS, Public Health, Education and young people, as well as a wider reference group of representatives from primary, secondary and special schools, local youth organisations and a parent/carer forum.

The 'Boys in Mind' strategy aims to:

- Raise awareness of the effects of gender conditioning and stereotyping on the behaviour of boys and young men;
- Seek ways to reduce stigma around mental illness and poor well-being amongst boys and young men;
- Review existing PSHE resources and school mental health programmes to take account of what it means to be a boy for example through reviewing language and advice given;
- Explore ways of encouraging help-seeking behaviour amongst boys and young men;
- Identify links with alcohol and risk-taking behaviours as coping strategies for boys and young men.

**Early consultation with boys and young men informed the strategy and identified key priorities, which can be summarised here as:**

### 1. Attitudes towards masculinity:

From young males' perspective, boys said they find it hard to ask for and access support. They feel they have to be strong and cope on their own.

Young boys we spoke to said that it is a struggle for them to admit they are having problems and this is mainly due to "toxic masculinity" i.e. not being allowed to be open and express themselves without being judged by the stereotypical view of what is socially acceptable. They also told us that they feel they are treated differently to their female peers by teaching staff.

*"We're taught not to really talk about how we feel."*

*"If you show emotion you're seen as weak/looked down on."*

### 2. Targeted education:

More targeted education for boys and men is therefore needed to break down stereotypes, experienced stigma and gender bias. There needs to be understanding and acceptance that males, as well as females, can experience mental health difficulties during their young lives and need accessible and appropriate support.

*"Teach that it's all right for boys to show their emotions."*

*"More education on where to get help/when you should seek help/what the warning signs are."*

*"We need to educate society about stereotypes and expectations."*

### 3. Provision of appropriate support:

Boys said they need private, safe places in which to access support and need people they can trust who have skills to offer support and help. They said the ways they can be expected to ask for and access support aren't always helpful. They don't want it to be "over-emotional or too public". *"The familiar model of seeing a counsellor in school and having to leave lessons would be hell! Everyone would know and ask, and it would be extremely awkward."*

This can be especially hard to find for gay, bisexual and trans boys and men who as well as the stigma in accessing support, as well as the stigma around their sexuality – it's too much to deal with.

In schools, the majority of the teachers are female and in most cases, the staff who specifically deal with mental health and student wellbeing are women too. Boys said that one of the problems in accessing support is that they would have preferred to speak with another male, ideally someone who they looked up to.

### 4. Training for school staff to address gender inequalities:

Boys said they feel they are treated differently to their female peers by teaching staff, citing that female staff can often be particularly bad in this respect. Schools can feel a hostile environment and as a result, it's not surprising boys are reluctant to show or admit any weakness. School staff need to be trained in the wellbeing needs and dangers for young boys and men. Boys said they display their difficulties in less obvious ways e.g.

*"If you notice a boy is quiet, not caring about things in the usual way, not taking part or hunched up and separating themselves from what's going on, always very defensive – all those things may be a sign. They might not make a scene or act up."*

One young person with ASD spoke a lot about bad behaviour being interpreted as a boy just deliberately being disruptive, instead of anyone considering underlying issues. And he said that then damaged relationships with teachers so then there were even less people that he'd feel able to speak to if he was ready to. This young man also found that if he showed any weakness, which was often the way he'd react if someone said anything about his family or if he was just having a really down day, a lot of teachers would use it against him instead of supporting him.

### 5. Issues associated with bullying for boys:

Bullying can be a factor and girls bullying boys, in particular, is not tackled effectively. It is difficult for a boy to challenge the bullying as it feeds the image of being weak. In a similar way, males are often less able to admit they are being abused. SPACE said that domestic violence and abuse is not taken seriously and that men maybe too embarrassed to admit this is happening to them because it damages their 'macho' image.

### **Why was this film created?**

Suicide is the leading cause of death among men and women aged between 20 and 34 years of age in England and Wales, with males having considerably higher rates than females (13.8 per 100,000 for males in 2011-13, compared to 4.0 for females). Public Health England identify young men as being at particular risk alongside people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ).

This project sits within the focus area of integrating suicide prevention work within the broader framework of promoting mental health and wellbeing. It builds on existing understanding about the key risk factors for adult male suicide identified by the 2014 Samaritan's Report, '[Men, Suicide and Society](#)' and seeks to identify ways in which early intervention with boys can mitigate against these.

### **How this film was created?**

As an Amplified Trailblazer, Oxford Health consulted with YoungMinds to shape the content and format of the film, including key messages in relation to its audience. Oxford Health then partnered with Into Film and Suited and Booted, to make the film and provide a moving stimulus for discussion in-and-outside of the classroom <https://www.intofilm.org/news-and-views/articles/keeping-boys-in-mind>.

YoungMinds and Oxford Health then co-designed a series of workshop activities for both adult and young audiences, in order to help parents, practitioners and school children engage in the topic in a meaningful way. This builds on Oxford Health's existing 'Positive Mental Health' resource packs for secondary and primary schools.

### **Who is this resource for?**

The film is a useful resource to use with young people, parents and professionals and has so far been well received.

### **About YoungMinds**

YoungMinds is the national charity leading the fight for a future where all young minds are supported and empowered, whatever the challenges. The participation of children and young people is at the centre of our work, with the experiences of young people shaping the issues we fight for. All of our work- whether for professionals, families or young people themselves- is designed, led and delivered in partnership with young people. [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)