



First report

'A Boy Today'

**The world into which a boy today
in the UK is growing up.**

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Remit of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Issues Affecting Men and Boys

'To raise awareness of disadvantages and poor outcomes faced by men and boys in education, mental and physical health and law; to influence attitudes, role models, policy and legislation that will lead to positive differences to their well-being and lives.'

Foreword by the Vice-Chair: Nick Fletcher MP

A Boy Today

When I first became the MP for Don Valley in 2019, one of the key issues that I wanted to raise in Parliament were the challenges and issues that affected men and boys in our society as I felt these were being overlooked by society and in particular in public policy. This included education, health (including mental health), fatherhood and broadly, how society supported men and boys who were disadvantaged in these and other areas. I also knew from speaking to many of my constituents, male and female, there was a sense that this was an issue that was not being addressed. Many mothers were concerned about their sons' education and issues affecting their husbands such as the risk of prostate cancer and unemployment.

Under the chairmanship of Mark Jenkinson MP (Workington), a group of parliamentarians came together in March 2021 who shared the view that there was a need to better understand and raise the profile of a range of challenges experienced by men and boys. We believe that these issues need to be raised not only within Parliament, but also across the broader political world including the civil service, think tanks, sector representative bodies and the media. We think the education and health sectors should in particular take note.

We also fully recognise there are many inter-sectional issues that overlay the challenges boys' and young men face as well such as "class", place and ethnicity, which also need to be considered in more depth.

Between April and July 2021 we took evidence in four sessions, from seven leading UK experts which help paint a picture of the disadvantages and problems that so many boys face and the ideas they have to solve them.

We looked at the life of a boy today in four sections: Family Life/Fatherlessness, Education, Community/Social influences and Health.

Despite the fact that our speakers gave evidence about different aspects of a boy's life some common themes emerged. They showed that official statistics for

areas of male disadvantage are available but that, for a variety of reasons, they are not acted upon or, sometimes, not even noticed.

The speakers identified a number of factors that cause disadvantages, including biological/natural differences between women and men as well as societal and institutional factors that can either cause disadvantage or amplify those that already exist.

The future work of this APPG will be to look in more depth, to 'shine a light' on particular aspects and bring forward recommendations for action by government, policymakers and different sectors.

My final note is that if we are to live in a fully inclusive country, we need to address the disadvantages that men and boys face alongside the disadvantages women and girls face. We all live in our society together – boys are sons, brothers and future husbands, partners, dads and work colleagues. Resolving the issues boys face today means a better society for all, now and in the future.

Nick Fletcher MP (Don Valley)

Vice-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Issues Affecting Men and Boys

Headline Statistics

The facts and figures about male disadvantage are all in the public domain, published by reputable bodies such as the Office for National Statistics. The House of Commons also published an important research paper for the International Men's Day debate in the House of Commons chamber on 19 November 2020¹. The statistics include:

- Boys lag behind girls at every stage of education and boys are more likely to be excluded from school¹;
- An estimated 13.2% of men aged 16 to 24 years were NEETS (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and for women the proportion was 10%²;
- Suicide death rates among men are three times higher than for women¹;
- Life expectancy at birth is 3.7 years lower for men than women – 79.4 for men and 83.1 for women¹;
- Men are more likely to die of a cancer or Covid, with mortality for the latter widening for working age adults (Covid mortality rates for working age men are 31 deaths per 100,000 compared with equivalent female death rates of 17 per thousand, respectively)³;
- Among rough sleepers 83% are male¹, and,
- Men make up 96% of the prison population⁴.

Our speakers agreed that these statistics, although widely available, are partially ignored or remain hidden so that men and boys' issues are 'flying under the radar' and therefore no systemic/structural, political/policy or professional practice action is taken.

For example: there is a proposal for a Women's Health Strategy, which is welcome, but no plans for an equivalent for men and boys, even though men and boys have specific health issues to overcome too.

¹ House of Commons Library: Debate Pack for International Men's Day 2020 (19 November 2020) - <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CDP-2020-0138/CDP-2020-0138.pdf>

² Office for National Statistics: Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK: March 2021 - <https://bit.ly/3f0g1xo>

³ Office for National Statistics: Coronavirus (COVID-19) and the different effects on men and women in the UK, March 2020 to February 2021 - <https://bit.ly/3ifvxvK>

⁴ Ministry of Justice: Prison population figures (2020) - <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-population-figures-2020>

Executive Summary

(i) Executive Summary: Evidence Sessions

Before embarking on detailed work in particular policy areas, the APPG decided to try to give a general picture of the world into which a boy today is growing up in the UK.

This report seeks to highlight some of the issues that negatively affect boys and young men in the UK today. We also requested that the speakers put forward policies and ideas to address these problems.

Between April and July 2021, oral evidence was taken in four sessions in the form of presentations from seven leading UK experts which provides a snapshot of the disadvantages and challenges that so many boys face and the ideas they have to solve them. These covered four sections: Family Life/Fatherlessness, Education, Community/Social influences and Health.

Despite the fact that our speakers gave evidence about different aspects of a boy's life some common themes emerged. They also put forward a range of policies and ideas they felt would help to tackle these issues and themes which are summarised below. We think the Government and policy makers should take note of these recommendations and more broadly, start to take concerted action on areas of male disadvantage.

The future work of this APPG will be to look in more depth at particular areas and bring forward recommendations for action by government, policymakers and different sectors.

For references to statistics in the speakers' evidence, please contact the speakers.

(ii) Executive Summary: Common Themes

Throughout the four sessions, the seven speakers had many insights with a common thread between many of them:

- men and boys have significant areas of disadvantage;
- these disadvantages are shown in official statistics and are hidden 'in plain sight';
- the mainstream narrative tends to ignore or diminish their importance, so disadvantaged men and boys are not receiving the support they deserve;
- it is not true that boys and men are not seeking help or speaking up – and there are a number of myths, assumptions and presumptions (mistakes) about men, boys and masculinity;

- the importance of positive male role models;
- trauma (sometimes referred as Adverse Childhood Experiences - ACEs) that occurs in the lives of boys has a direct impact on their current life (education attainment and offending) but also will still have an impact in later life too;
- a better understanding of male psychology is vital in understanding and addressing the impact of fatherlessness, educational underachievement, crime, health and mental health and that tailored interventions are key, and;
- the Government, policymakers and particular sectors (especially health and education) need to be far more proactive in recognising and then addressing these needs and issues.

In summary, the APPG believed three themes emerged:

- Theme 1: The mainstream narrative on men and boys leads to a lack of action on the disadvantages and issues negatively affecting them – even when the figures are in plain sight.
- Theme 2: The psychological, behavioural and developmental differences between boys and girls needs to be better understood alongside not making assumptions about men and boys’ help-seeking.
- Theme 3: There is little acknowledgement of the long-lasting impact of early trauma on boys and men and also the need for positive role models.

(iii) Executive Summary: Policy Recommendations

Many of our speakers highlighted that a significant problem is the current and dominant narrative which hides or ignores areas of male disadvantage; however, there are many opportunities for policy action.

Each of our seven speakers made individual policy recommendations. These are shown in detail together in Annex 1. The future work of this APPG will be to examine each area in more detail and we will be drawing on these recommendations in that work.

The summary of the individual speakers’ policy recommendations in their areas of expertise include:

- **Family (Fatherlessness)** – The policy recommendations focussed on the need to formally recognise growing up in a fatherless household as being a risk factor for adverse educational and personal development. In addition, there needs to be more funding for schemes that focus on this group, including for mentoring, a boys reading library and a formal flagging system for boys as they move from primary to secondary school.

- **Education (Boys' Educational Underachievement)** – The policy recommendations focussed on the need for a better understanding of the developmental differences and the impact of the school environment on boys' learning. They also focussed on addressing key areas such as motivation, despondency, parent/teaching relationships, highlight the need for a more relational approach that emphasises the economic value of education by connecting learning with the lives and aspirations of working class boys in particular. Common myths need to be dispelled about the motivation of boys and their parents.
- **Community (Societal Stereotypes and their effect on young male wellbeing)** – The policy recommendations focussed more on the need to tackle growing societal and gender stereotypical norms that view men, boys and masculinity as inherently bad/negative. This means problems they face are not tackled or recognised and the positive aspects of men and masculinity are not celebrated. This narrative exacerbates and reinforces these disadvantages. The female-dominated field of psychology is an area that needs to focus more on male psychology.
- **(Health) Mental and Physical Health of Boys and Men** – The policy recommendations focussed firstly on the recognition that men and women do have differences when it comes to health and this should lead to a men's health strategy being developed in tandem with a women's health strategy. Secondly, the health and social care system needs to change the way it approaches the issue of boys' mental health. This include believing there are higher rates of mental health issues in girls than boys, victim blaming boys and assuming that young men have the same social cues around 'masculinity' as their forebears. It was important also to target mental health support in places where boys and men go.

Executive Summary: Next Steps for Government, Policymakers and Statutory Agencies

Following the evidence sessions, the view of the members of the APPG is that there is clearly a need for the government, policymakers, statutory agencies and sectors (particularly education and health) to take concerted and coordinated action in focussing on:

- Addressing areas of disadvantage facing boys in Britain today, especially given that the data and issues are clearly available and visible;
- Improving the understanding of male psychology and biology and translating that into policies, programmes and funding streams that address the issues and challenges that we highlight;
- Ensuring that public services and communications are as boy/male friendly as possible, and,

- Being proactive in addressing societal and cultural myths around male behaviour, help-seeking and motivations.

The APPG also believes that the views and proposals of national experts, including those who spoke at the evidence sessions, should be taken into account in addressing the above.

The APPG will be focussing its future work on a deeper understanding of a range of these issues including men's health, fathers/fatherlessness and education/skills.

Evidence Session 1 (13th April 2021)

Family (Fatherlessness)

Key Questions

- What is the effect of an absent father on a boy?
- Can positive role-models and other male relationships help fatherless boys?

Speaker 1: Sonia Shaljean, Chief Executive, Lads Need Dads (LND)

Video Recording

About Sonia Shaljean

Sonia is the founder and Managing Director of *Lads Need Dads (LND)*, an awarding winning Community Interest Company in Essex (<https://ladsneeddads.org/>) that empowers boys who have limited access to male role models with the aim of reducing their risk of underachieving, offending, exclusion or dropping out of school. Prior to this she worked in the field of criminal justice, substance and alcohol misuse, domestic abuse, anger management, homelessness and complex families for over 20 years. Sonia regularly appears in the national media, at Select Committees and speaks on national panels.

Sonia is also a Trustee with the Men and Boys Coalition, a National Charity which highlights and tackles issues where the needs of men and boys are unmet.

Statistics

At the meeting, Sonia presented the following statistics outlining the scale of fatherlessness⁵

- In the UK 1.1 million children are growing up with little or no contact with their father;
- Of the 2.9 million children who live in lone parent families, 90% of those lone parent families are headed by a woman;

⁵ Where the phrase fatherlessness is used, this also means where there is no positive adult male role holder at home.

- Men make up 75% of suicides and the rate amongst boys is much higher than girls yet boys are six times less likely to seek help;
- Boys are at least three times likelier to be permanently excluded from school than girls;
- 86% of boys in custody were excluded from school;
- Among male prisoners under 18 in England and Wales, 76% grew up with an absent father, and,
- 35% fewer males than females go to university

In further research conducted by LND with teachers across Essex, 71% stated that they agreed that a lack of a father at home negatively affected the educational performance of boys. The split was 76% Secondary, 65% Primary, 72% Special schools.

The Outcome and Impact of Fatherlessness

Sonia stated that young boys whose father is absent or who have no appropriate male role model at home have a higher risk of:

- low self-esteem;
- mental health issues;
- under-achieving at school
- dropping out of education;
- antisocial behaviour;
- substance misuse, and,
- being engaged in criminal activity.

She further described the emotional and behavioural impact of absent fathers on boys which they see every day with the boys that present to LND:

- a sense of rejection which can lead to unworthiness, self-doubt/hatred;
- a feeling of being adrift, rudderless and lost;
- a crisis of identity because they do not have not have a male at home to identify with (in the school system this is compounded as it is a "man desert" particularly in the early years/nursery and primary sector);
- they are susceptible to anger, bouts of rage, a lack of motivation and have difficulties in forming relationships;
- they are at higher risk of joining gangs because boys have a natural, innate sense of wanting to belong;
- they develop a poor judge of character;
- they are more likely to underachieve in their studies, and,
- they are at risk of developing addictions (in an attempt to fill voids in their life).

Sonia explained that there is a clear correlation between the characteristics shown by the boys supported by LND and the national statistics.

In addition, fatherless boys can have a lack of confidence in being a parent themselves when they become a father, so the cycle continues.

How LND intervenes

LND supports boys over 11 years, the age when problems start to appear and can start to progress to become long-term issues. They are one of the only providers in the UK of long-term early intervention. They work specifically with boys aged 11 to 15 through until they are 18.

The LND programme has four components using trained male mentors:

- Group work development sessions and outdoor activities – (Equip)
- Practical life-skill training and community volunteering – (Engage)
- Peer mentor training, inspirational speakers / trips – (Inspire)
- Open ended support after completion – (Ambassadors)

A Reading Mentors Programme, matching male mentors to boys with absent fathers in Year 6 Primary Schools, was trialled in Tendring in 2021 when pupils returned to school (March – July 21) and has been a great success in terms of counteracting the detrimental impact Covid-19 had on their learning and helped to raise boys' confidence, emotional literacy, reading and literacy skills.

The reading mentors programme has also been of great success in terms of the impact on boys, although Covid-19 has unfortunately provided an additional barrier for the recruitment of volunteers.

Lads Need Dads also provide support for mothers/carers to ensure they are engaged and supportive of the programme. Mums and carers receive weekly telephone support and signposting, so they can access further support or intervention if required. Regular progress meetings are provided to update mums and carers regarding their child's progress. This ensures that the boys have affirmation that their participation is recognised as being positive and also that the initiative itself is seen as positive.

LND are able to demonstrate overwhelming success for their programme for those that complete it, including:

- Leaving school with five or more GCSE's;
- Not excluded from school;
- Do not become NEET (Not in education, employment or training);
- Do not enter the criminal justice system, and,
- Are emotionally literate and mentally more resilient

LND have also compiled [short video interviews](#) with boys on their courses who attest to the benefits they have experienced.

Successful strategies

1: Recognising the impact of fatherlessness in public policy and service delivery

Sonia stated that policy makers and society in general should not underestimate the potential negative impact on boys who grow up in a household without their father⁵ (or a positive male role model at home). This should be recognised throughout public policy.

2: Increased funding for targeted schemes for fatherless boys

The funding environment remains difficult for LND and therefore will be the same for any other similar initiatives. This is partly because the education system does not sufficiently recognise fatherlessness for boys as being a problem at a national or local level. More funding would allow for a growth in the support for boys in this situation.

The cost-benefit analysis would clearly be positive as programmes would save public money in the longer term by reducing costs to the criminal justice system and public health. These programmes would also support more boys in the situation to become better qualified and therefore more likely to make a positive contribution to economic growth more widely.

In addition, better support for boys without fathers would contribute to a more inclusive and positive society. It is not the fault of boys that they have no father at home.

3: Reading programmes for boys

Sonia reiterated the need for boys without fathers at home to be able to access support by reading with volunteer male mentors and emphasised that the reading materials should be boy-friendly. Reading together with a male gave boys confidence that reading was important and valuable from both a learning perspective but also as a form of enjoyment.

This would help mothers too by relieving some pressure at home to support boys with their reading, especially if the household is a single-parent/income household. These households are more likely to be subject to irregular work patterns (for example, zero-hour contracts), which is not always conducive to creating a supportive educational environment at home.

4: Introduce a primary to secondary school “Flagging” system

In addition to a range of issues on funding and the recruitment of volunteers/mentors, LND proposes a flagging system. This is where, in the transition from primary to secondary school, along with other data already recorded (such as special needs or ethnicity), ‘absent father’ is identified so that these vulnerable children can be offered appropriate support early. Currently, this information is not known to secondary schools as it is not collected. Primary schools are more aware of the individual circumstances of their pupils.

Such a flagging system would allow head-teachers to identify the at-risk boys and use interventions, such as those successfully implemented by LND, to prevent school exclusions, crime, gangs, substance misuse and suicides.

5: Engaging and understanding the needs of ‘single’ mothers and carers with support schemes for boys

Policymakers and service providers should not ignore the needs of the mothers of sons who have no fathers in the home. If mothers have emotional, mental health, long-term physical health conditions, addiction issues - this will exacerbate the lack of a father in the home. In addition, engaging mothers to ensure they are supportive of programmes such as those run by LND is vital

Policy Recommendations from Sonia Shaljean

These are to be found in Annex 1

Additional questions in the ‘Family’ section to be addressed by the APPG in the future

- How are boys affected by child abuse, including within families?
 - How are boys affected by divorce and separation?
 - Does the current Family Court system treat fathers fairly?
-

Evidence Session 2 (11 May 2021)

Education (Boys' Educational Underachievement)

Key questions

- How far are boys falling behind girls in school education?
- How many fewer boys than girls go on to higher education?
- When did these differences start?
- What reasons are proposed for the differences?
- What policy actions are available to address the difference?

Speaker 2: Professor Gijsbert Stoet, Professor of Psychology, University of Essex

Video Recording

About Professor Gijsbert Stoet

Gijsbert is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Essex. He studied psychology in the Netherlands and Germany. Following this, he worked for eight years at Washington University in St. Louis, USA, where he studied the neurobiology of information processing. His current work focuses on individual and group differences in cognitive abilities, such as differences in school achievement of boys and girls.

Professor Stoet began his presentation by stating that British boys fall behind girls in educational achievement in all stages of our education system. He then highlighted key points at each educational stage.

0-5 Early years foundation stage

Boys scored lower in 16 of the 17 assessment areas (technology being the exception). Boys' language development is slower than girls, this is irrespective of the educational level of parents.

Professor Stoet asserted that research data shows clearly that the "boy problem" starts early so they are behind when they come into school and fall further behind during school.

6-11 Primary education

Boys suffer from more developmental problems than girls, such as:

- Stuttering (three to ten times more)

- Dyslexia (five to ten times more)
- Colour blindness (almost exclusively male)
- A variety of attention problems (three to ten times more)
- There are long waiting lists for seeing language support services
- Boys make up 90% of primary school exclusions, which show schools really struggle with the behaviour of boys.

12 – 18 Secondary education

In GCSE's, boys fall behind girls in nearly all subjects. They make up only 45% of A level students and perform worse than girls in almost every subject.

18+ Tertiary education

Boys make up around 45% of university entries, they again fall behind and are awarded fewer First class degrees.

International standing

The "boy problem" in schools is an international phenomenon as the above results are also found internationally, across ethnic and socio-economic groups.

General points

There is no clear evidence that the feminisation of education has played a role, however, the school environment (as in the structural, personal, curriculum/pedagogical and functional factors of an educational institution) is generally less attractive to boys than girls. It is an area that requires for greater research.

Children from single parent households do struggle – that is the same for boys and girls, however, for boys with multiple problems single parenthood compounds them and makes their situation even worse.

Analysis

Boys fall behind girls in reading and language skills and this is key because language skills are so important for all non-language subjects including areas such as maths, IT, trades and engineering. Falling behind in reading and language contributes to falling behind in nearly all other subjects.

Boys develop at different (slower) speeds and at different times to girls especially at the early years' foundation stage and also at puberty. As girls mature more quickly than boys at puberty, they become more responsible more quickly and that matters in areas such as homework. There are also two additional factors.

- The school environment is less attractive to boys than girls, and,
- Boys are led by their peers more and they have a different way of wanting to “show off” than girls.

Boys need more direction and to be told what to do. Over the past number of years, schools have given more responsibility to children to make important choices such as what specific subjects to choose in the middle of secondary school, more responsibility on the type of homework to be done and what to study. For girls that is easier to do between 12 and 15 so boys may benefit from a more directive approach, telling them what they should do and when. This becomes an even greater issue for boys who are not ready to take such important decisions and therefore make the wrong ones and fall further behind – their internalised conclusion becomes “school is not for me”.

Professor Stoet also felt we need to be more aware of the biological differences between boys and girls and schools/teachers need to be aware and that they cannot be erased so you need to create a school system that suits all children. There is no easy solution for this, but we need to be more aware of it.

The UK is outstanding in the way it monitors how well children do in school; however, better access to this data should be given to researchers. The Government has a phenomenal national pupil database but is extremely hard to access. It seems closed off for research, which hampers the understanding of a variety of problems. A lot of time/money is spent collecting this data so it should be used to enhance understanding.

Policy Recommendations from Professor Gijsbert Stoet

These are to be found in Annex 1

Speaker 3: Dr Erik Cownie, School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences, Ulster University

[Video Recording](#)

About Dr Erik Cownie

Eric is a full-time Lecturer at the Ulster University (School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences) and a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (HEA). He is involved in Ulster University's *Taking Boys Seriously* research project, which aims to better understand and address the low attainment of young males from disadvantaged backgrounds and their low levels of participation in Higher Education.

Dr Cownie and his colleagues identified three learning barriers affecting boys' education. The overlaying issue of poverty also plays an important role. They conclude that to tackle boys' underachievement requires an understanding of these three barriers and an education sector-wide commitment to address them.

The sections below summarise his thoughts on these issues.

Barrier 1: Motivation

For many boys, self-esteem is established through social interaction, not academic performance and that the cost of academic achievement can include alienation from peers who are non-achievers.

Boys' motivation also comes from understanding the tangible benefit and value of what they need to study. They need to see a tangible connection between the school curriculum and their life experience and career/employment aspirations.

When girls are asked about their motivation, many say they want to please their teacher and make them proud. You hear that less often from boys.

Some boys view doing well at school as a "feminine" activity, so introducing boy-orientated activities and connecting them with learning is a way around this.

Some boys are not good at sports like football or boxing but may be interested in computers and gaming, for example. For the latter, coding sessions have been found to be helpful. It is key for boys to finding what makes them tick and make them feel good about themselves, to know they are good at something.

Dr Cownie has been running pilot projects with post-primary boys aimed at increasing levels of motivation amongst boys. These pilot projects include:

- Developing relational learning;
- Pastoral care aimed at helping boys to value education and making boys feel good about their academic progress, and,
- Directly connecting learning with their lives and aspirations – an economic value relational approach.

An example of one school's transformational results came from inviting tradesmen to talk about their experiences. They connected the need to succeed in subjects that would enable them to enter the careers of their choice, including a trade apprenticeship.

A tradesman visited one school and much to the consternation of the staff he said how much he had hated maths and believed it was utterly pointless – until he realised he needed it to fulfil his ambition to be an electrician. For a large section of boys this was transformational to their attitude to maths. The tradesmen said "I needed to do it, so I put up with it [and passed my exams]."

Barrier 2: Despondency

A very common problem for some boys, which often starts in primary school, is that they fall behind with literacy and numeracy skills and they then lose hope of catching up. They can become despondent and so give up trying. This problem particularly affects poor working-class boys, who also have the lowest attainment outcomes.

If this is not attended to early enough it is carried forward into secondary schools. It becomes a downward spiral and highlights three critical issues that Dr Cownie believes need to be resourced:

- Early detection systems to spot barriers to learning;
- Effective and individually-tailored interventions to address these barriers, and,
- Programmes and initiatives to develop and sustain higher levels of boys' resilience ("Bouncebackability") in terms of educational development – to handle bumps in the road in their learning.

Some schools involved in the project have looked at the communication between feeder primary and secondary schools to ensure early learning issues are detected and resolved. This is to make sure they do not become deep seated and intractable. In addition, mentoring for Year 8 boys has played a crucial role in this.

Community interventions are really important. One example is the 'Box Clever' project in Monkstown, County Antrim. This reaches out to the most hard-to-reach and disengaged boys: Year 11 school refusers. Boys turn up twice a week and receive life coaching in areas of improvement from specially trained youth workers. The 'deal' is they can only join if they go to school for the other three days and do not get into trouble. Boys routinely exit with 5 GCSEs and successfully go onto post-16 education or employment.

Barrier 3: The relationship between boys and their teacher

Research has shown that the quality of the relationship between boys and their teacher(s) is a strong predictor of their eventual attainment. The research developed a number of learning relational principles that are being road tested in pilot schemes. These are based on youth work methodologies with commitments to:

- Communicate consistent and persistent care;
- Display positive attitudes of acceptance and affirmation, and,
- Engage boys in their learning by linking subjects to their everyday lives.

By adopting these principles, a school leader has highlighted a step change in pupil/teacher relationship in his schools. The level of boys' engagement

improved and it also significantly heightened boys' expectations of their own academic performance.

There is a need to prioritise the cultivation of teacher/pupil relationships as part of teacher training and professional development.

Additional Issues

Poverty

Dr Cownie set out that there is a long standing correlation between poverty and low attainment. The poorest pupils have the lowest attainment and it is the single biggest indicator of low attainment. It causes families, especially parents, to de-prioritise and become fatalistic about education.

For example, there was an influx of Eastern European children to Northern Ireland recently and, to help introduce them to English, they were taught to recite nursery rhymes. It was successful, but also a tragedy because, when they introduced this to local children, they did not know the nursery rhymes!

Poorer children are growing up in households that are not conducive to learning. Some have parents been failed by the education system and lack the capacity to prepare their children for school and support their education. A drive for 'school readiness' is important. For example, some boys coming into school are not able to hold a pencil properly. Other boys are unable to sit still and concentrate while girls often find that much easier.

Parental Confidence and Involvement

There is a persistent myth that working class parents are not interested in their children's education, especially boys. This is not the reality, but there is a large section of parents who lack the confidence in helping their boys. One mother said "I was ashamed to admit it, but, when my son asked for help with his homework, I told him he did not have to do his homework or bother. It was easier to say that, than admit that I could not read and write."

Another example is attendance at parent's evenings. Some schools are holding them in the community centre of the housing estate they live in, which has increased engagement. Any package or initiatives to support pupils with their education has to support their parents too.

Policy Recommendations from Dr Erik Cownie

These are to be found in Annex 1

Evidence Session 3 (8th June 2021)

Community (The Effect of Societal/Cultural Stereotypes)

Key questions

- What is the portrayal of men and boys in society and does this have an adverse effect on them?
- Does the lack of male-only spaces contribute to the problem?
- Where are boys at risk of sexual abuse and violence (including gang violence)?
- What effect is the current criminal justice system having on men/boys?

Speaker 4: Professor Naomi Murphy, The Fens Unit, HMP Whitemoor

Video Recording

About Professor Naomi Murphy

Naomi is the Clinical Director of *The Fens Unit* at HMP Whitemoor and an honorary Professor of Psychology at Nottingham Trent University. She has 24 years of experience working with men who offend, both in the community and at all levels of security in the health and justice systems. She is co-editor of *Treating Personality Disorder* and writes mainly on the relationship between trauma and mental health and offending.

Boys to Men in the Criminal Justice System

Professor Naomi Murphy explained that her qualification to speak about male experience is rooted in 24 year's work in the prison sector, where 90% of her clients have been male. She has a focus on 'untreatable' psychopaths and has jointly developed the first and highly acclaimed mental health *in-reach* team in a male prison.

Professor Murphy started with the following quotes:

- Anais Nin: "We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are."
- Roberto Bolano: "People see what they want to see, and what people want to see isn't always the truth."

In Professor Murphy's view, if our perceptions are wrong, then any action plan that will come from it is unlikely to be helpful. There is a crisis of masculinity illustrated by the fact that our mostly male prisons are bursting at the seams.

Even after many years of highlighting sex differences, we still have not got to grips with why this is. This might be because the perception that we are using to try and resolve these problems is perhaps distorted and it may be that we need to take a fresh look to gain a new perspective.

Different attitudes to offending

Professor Murphy stated that we are very familiar with the idea that women in prison are a traumatised population and that prison may not be the right solution to how we deal with and support women who have offended.

However, with men, we are fed a constant narrative that crime is inevitable, that they are born with genes for violence, and that masculinity is so damaged that we have to teach our boys why it is wrong to rape, as if we do not, that is how they will act.

She invited us to see that the mental health of men in prison is really not so very different from women in prison. She has worked with women who offend both in prisons and in hospitals. There are actually multiple points in life where society could be strengthened to stop crime becoming inevitable or to prevent suicide from being the outcome.

Her team has collected data in the prison service on what is known about the history of men referred to her service, which is perhaps the 'last chance saloon' for men in prison.

By the time men get to her they have typically all been assessed on multiple occasions by a probation officer and by a psychologist and many of them have multiple reports. However, Professor Murphy states:

"We have an idea about what their history is when they come to us, yet six months after they've been with us we see a statistically significant increase in the kind of disclosures that men talk about. These are typically disclosures of vulnerability. The men are highly resistant to sharing stories about their vulnerability, about trauma early on in life and mostly men take much longer to talk about that than they talk about their offending. We also know that some men take much longer than six months to disclose."

The table below shows the increase in disclosure before and after six months in her unit.

Adversity	On admission	At 6m
Physical abuse	35%	73%
Neglect	34%	81%
Emotional abuse	10%	81%
Sexual abuse	26%	66%
Witnessed DV	15%	44%
LA Care	27%	53%
Bullied	7%	77%
Poverty	3%	16%
Peer pressured violence	2%	20%
Sexual assault (A)	0%	16%
Physical assault (As adult)	2%	37%

Of those being supported by Professor Murphy, she stated that at least:

- 73% have experienced abuse;
- 81% have been physically or emotionally neglected;
- 81% have been subjected to emotional abuse such as active denigration by their parents.
- 66% have been sexually abused; often been sexually abused by multiple perpetrators not just one individual (at multiple points during their childhood) and of those 52% have been sexually abused by a woman, or women, during that time;
- 44% of men have witnessed domestic violence;
- 53% were spent periods in local authority care;
- 77% were bullied during childhood;
- 16% identified themselves as being raised in poverty by not having enough food, not having adequate clothing and not having things like washing machines, and,
- 20% were pressurised by older peers to engage in violence or crime.

Similarities and differences in experiences of male and female offenders

Professor Murphy stated that the stories that she hears in prison from men relating to child abuse are not dissimilar to the kinds of accounts that were heard from the girls in the Rochdale and Rotherham child abuse scandals. This includes where child abuse took place where older peers were befriending them and were offering money and incentives to engage in criminal activity. Naomi hears the same kind of stories about boyhood from the men she works with:

- 16% have been sexually assaulted in adulthood, and,
- 37% have been assaulted in adulthood - a large number of them have been expelled due to acting out behaviour in childhood.

She stated that a boy who ends up in prison is most likely to have been born to a young mother, often a care-leaver or someone with a history of abuse herself, and so they have been exposed to poor parenting themselves. In addition, she stated that those children learn how to regulate their emotions from how they are parented so if their parents did not get good parenting, it is hard for them to know how to respond to their own children.

Boys are far more vulnerable than girls, they are much more likely to die from the same illnesses as girls. Alongside that physical vulnerability, boys are likelier to bear the brunt of violence. Some parents will not hit their daughters but they will beat their sons because they see that as being somehow acceptable.

Masculinity and Society

In terms of barriers to change, Professor Murphy believes we have a real issue in British society of the denigration of masculinity. She stated that we have allowed the notion of "toxic masculinity" to take root. She does not question the notion that society is largely patriarchal or that we have a problem with sexism, however when you front load the noun "masculinity" with a term like "toxic", what implicit message does this drip feed to boys? We know that self-esteem has a big role to play in mental health, so how is this slow drip-feed of discourse about toxic masculinity helpful for boys?

She further stated that society tends to suppress stories about women as dangerous and over-emphasise the stories about men as bad and dangerous. However, a third of domestic abuse victims are male and yet the overwhelming majority of hostels for domestic abuse survivors are for women only. Young boys live in these hostels which are staffed by women only; what message does that give to these boys? Men are too dangerous to have any contact with?

Professor Murphy also believes there is a real problem with the lack of positive male role models. It's important that men are supported to maintain a relationship with their children and that we find ways to provide boys with a range of male role models.

Policy Recommendations from Professor Murphy

These are to be found in Annex 1

Speaker 5: Martin Seager, consultant clinical psychologist

Video Recording

About Martin Seager

Martin is a consultant clinical psychologist and psychotherapist. He worked in the NHS for over 30 years and was head of psychological services in two large mental health Trusts. He specialises in male psychology and mental health, including suicide, and is a co-founder of both the Male Psychology Network and the Male Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society.

Gamma Bias: Systematic anti-male bias in the mainstream gender narrative in the West

Martin explained that he had to come to realise that there were specific issues which made male psychology different from mainstream psychology and that these differences were not being addressed.

Over the last ten years or so he and his colleagues have undertaken research, gathered the evidence, and have been trying to influence thinking and practice in relation to men and boys within the psychology profession and wider society.

At first it met with a lot of resistance and misinterpretation. For example, when trying to get a section of the British Psychological Society to address male gender issues. However this has now been achieved.

They have also helped set up the first male psychology module in the UK in the University of Sunderland. He expressed shock that there is only one such module and that most psychologists are not taught anything directly about male gender experience. He also commented that only 20% of psychologists are men.

For him and his colleagues, being invited to address the APPG Men and Boys was another important milestone in getting 'male gender blindness' recognised as a key public health issue for our society.

Martin stated that we are frequently telling men and boys to "open up", but the bigger truth is that we are not listening or empathic even when they do.

Those working in this area have realised that there is a systemic bias in operation whenever the issue of male gender is raised. This has therefore become a major focus of their scientific efforts: to try to define, conceptualise

and measure this bias, which he and others such as Dr John Barry⁶ have described as Gamma Bias.

Gamma bias Framework

Martin’s team have now arrived at a clear theoretical framework into which all the examples of bias can now be fitted. We are calling this **Gamma bias**. Within gender research, **Alpha** bias denotes when gender differences are magnified and **Beta** bias when gender differences are minimised or ignored. The term “gamma bias” reflects a combination of alpha and beta bias.

	GOOD	HARM
DO (active)	CELEBRATION F - m	PERPETRATION M - f
RECEIVE (passive)	PRIVILEGE M - f	VICTIMHOOD F - m

Gamma bias can best be illustrated by the “*Gender Distortion Matrix*” (see diagram above) which provides a systematic grid of four boxes depicting four primary areas where gender behaviour can be evaluated: DO GOOD, DO HARM, RECEIVE GOOD, RECEIVE HARM.

When men do good deeds, their gender is not made an issue at all, but when they do harm their gender is made **the** issue. The same applies to when men receive harm (no gender issue) and when good things happen to them (their gender is **the** issue). This therefore creates an overall distortion that creates the false picture that there is a bad and privileged gender (male) and a good and disadvantaged one (female) even in mature western democracies.

Concepts such as “hegemonic”, “patriarchal” and “toxic masculinity” have become mainstream and remain unquestioned despite being untested and undefined in operational or scientific terms. We have gone from respecting gender as an embodied aspect of humanity, to seeing it as a collection of social constructed stereotypes. However, core gender differences are based on evolved universal archetypes which can be shaped culturally and expressed differently for social reasons.

⁶ Dr John Barry is an internationally recognised expert on male psychology. John co-founded both the Male Psychology Network, the Male Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society (BPS), and The Centre for Male Psychology. He has been the lead organiser of the Male Psychology Conference (2014-2019, until covid-19 lockdowns). He is also co-editor of the Palgrave Handbook of Male Psychology and Mental Health (2019), and co-author (with Louise Liddon) of the new book *Perspectives in Male Psychology*, Wiley, 2021.

Examples of gamma-bias

Martin stated that we are now at a cultural low point. The tiny number of damaged and psychopathic men who kill women are seen as somehow typical of the whole gender and prove the need to educate all boys, whereas the countless acts of heroism, risk-taking and protection undertaken by vast numbers of men everyday are not seen as reflective of masculinity.

Even the celebration of heroes (and it was recently D-Day #77) is never made a **gender** issue in terms of *positive masculinity*. We talk about the "men AND women heroes" even when females made up less than a tenth of a percent (2 in 22,000). Rather than focus on the sacrifice and heroism of the 99.99% men and praise their gender, we describe this event in gender neutral terms but would not do the same if the genders were reversed.

On the other hand, when we rightly condemn men who have committed sexual violence and domestic abuse, we never include in the narrative the significant minority of women who are also abusers.

Martin concluded that we include women in the good publicity even when they are the tiniest minority and exclude them from bad publicity even when they are a sizeable minority.

Boys growing up in the UK today are being told that, because of their gender, they are more likely to be thought of as potential criminals and abusers than as good or brave citizens, fathers, brothers, husbands, or sons. This demonisation of the whole gender because of the actions of a damaged few has no regard for science or statistical laws. Men are in fact the only demographic towards whom such unfettered prejudice is still tolerated.

He also spoke about domestic abuse as a good example of how Gamma Bias persists in the face of hard evidence. Looking at all the research evidence, the lowest estimate for the proportion of domestic abuse victims who are male is 33%. Many studies point to a much higher proportion, 40% or 50% and yet the narrative, the policies and the funding remain completely gender specific.

Domestic abuse is portrayed as something men do to women when in truth it is something that some intimate partners do to each other, regardless of gender.

When males obviously make up the largest number of victims or the disadvantaged (suicide, homelessness, educational performance, life expectancy, deaths at work (military and civilian), prison sentencing, parental rights) there is a deafening silence. Diversity is our current mantra, but all identities are being celebrated except males.

Ashamed to be male

We have now reached the point where we are encouraged to be proud of and celebrate every single identity bar one, being male. Current attitudes towards masculinity mean that we are not only expected *not* to be proud of being male, but often actively encouraged to be *ashamed* of it.

It is assumed these days that there is something inherently wrong with being male that needs fixing, correcting or even curing. These messages are both implicit and explicit and are damaging to young boys who need to grow up feeling valued, heard, and respected. They are also bad for the health of society given that men, women, and children must live together in families and communities.

These attitudes appear to be a combination of two primary factors:

- an evolutionary hard-wired instinct to protect women and children and expect men to take more risks, offer protection and even give or lose their lives (for example, news reports even today single out women and children as having preferred victim status).
- a post-feminist belief-system and narrative in academia, politics and the media that assumes that women are the “second sex” and still need to “catch up”.

The data on education, life expectancy and suicide for example show that men and boys are disadvantaged in many areas.

Policy Recommendations from Martin Seager

These are to be found in Annex 1

Evidence Session 4 (6th July 2021)

Health (The Mental and Physical Health of Boys and Men)

Key questions

- What are the male-specific illnesses and are men getting fair treatment from the NHS/health system?
- How are men currently affected by mental health?
- How is men's mental health different from women's?
- Why are so many men abusing drugs or alcohol?
- Why do so many men take their own lives?

Speaker 6: Martin Tod, Chief Executive, Men's Health Forum

[Video Recording](#)

About Martin Tod

Martin is the Chief Executive Officer of the Men's Health Forum; a charity supporting men's health in England, Wales and Scotland. Prior to that, he worked for Shelter in a range of roles, including Head of Corporate Fundraising, Head of Strategy Development and Deputy Director of Communications, Policy and Campaigns.

Martin introduced his presentation by stating that many issues that lead to poor health outcomes for men start in boyhood and ultimately lead to premature death.

Premature mortality (as defined by Public Health England)

- Male deaths: - under 75 38.6%
- Female deaths: - under 75 26.5%

One man in five dies under 65

- Male deaths: - under 65 19.1% (22% at 67)
- Female deaths: - under 65 12.5%

Martin stated that the above pattern holds true for every age group, other than 80+ where there are not enough men "left". Treatment for cardio-vascular diseases has had a significant effect on closing the gap over the past decades, however the statistics have plateaued in the last few years. Shockingly, suicide

remains the number one cause of death for males in the 20– 49 age range. Heart disease remains the biggest killer of men over 50.

Martin noted that 75% of all suicides are male. In addition, men are much more likely to die of all cancers than females, apart from breast cancer. Looking through the lens of boys, many of the issues that might evidence themselves through suicide can be traced back to childhood experiences. The misuse of alcohol (which can be for self-medication) is an issue for males, as they make up three quarters of those who die from alcohol related illness.

Martin went on to note that it is not helpful to see this as a “men versus women” issue. The gap between deprived men and women and prosperous men and women shows that the gap between prosperous and deprived men is the largest:

Life expectancy by deprivation decile:

- Deprived males 71.4
- Prosperous males 83.5

- Deprived females 78.7
- Prosperous females 86.4

There are many factors in life where men are more unequal than women. There are more male billionaires than women, but more rough sleepers are men. Most people in prison are men, most who die from suicide are men. Men occupy both ends of various spectrums and there is usually a bigger gap between men and men, than, men and women.

There is a view/myth that men are less likely to go to the doctor than women.

This is not in the case for boys or older men; according to Martin the statistics are very similar for men and women. In some areas, such as bowel cancer, men present earlier than women. There is however a significant gap between young men and women, with women’s statistics also including engagement with health services because of pregnancy-related issues. The latter can reinforce this myth.

The impact of Covid-19

On the impact of COVID-19, Martin explained that at every age group, males are likelier to die from COVID-19 than women, for a variety of reasons. This is true for flu as well, which demonstrates how it can be unhelpful to minimise or mock male illness.

For example, it is little known or publicised that 95% of doctors who have died of COVID-19 were men, however men only make up 55% of doctors. The same in nursing where 30% of nurses who have died were men, however men only make up 10% of the nurse population.

Research shows that men are much more likely to say they will have the COVID-19 and flu vaccine, but they do not take the vaccines at the same level. This means those who are much more likely to contract COVID-19, much more likely to be hospitalised and much more likely to die of it, are the least vaccinated group. The NHS is aware of this and working hard to deal with it, however, Martin claimed there has been no public discussion about this at all.

He also pointed out that there were no gendered figures available at the beginning of the pandemic and for some time afterwards. The gender gap on vaccinations is buried in page 55 of a weekly report produced by Public Health England, showing that sometimes poor issues of men's health are hiding in plain sight.

An area where men are significantly under-represented, in all age groups, relates to mental health. A recent study by the National Confidential Inquiry into Suicide and Safety in Mental Health⁷, seen by Martin, showed that the overwhelming majority of men who had taken their own life had accessed some sort of health service. Men not talking about their problems is a myth; however, there are barriers to accessing help around issues of shaming or perceived weakness by others.

Policy Recommendations from Martin Tod

These are to be found in Annex 1

Speaker 7: Natasha Devon MBE, founder of the Mental Health Media Charter

[Video Recording](#)

About Natasha Devon MBE

Natasha is a writer, presenter and activist. She tours schools, universities and events throughout the UK and beyond, delivering talks as well as conducting research on mental health, body image, gender and equality. She is the founder of the *Mental Health Media Charter*, which scrutinises the way the media report on mental health.

⁷ <https://sites.manchester.ac.uk/ncish/reports/suicide-by-middle-aged-men/>

Barriers to men and boys' mental health

Natasha introduced her presentation by stating there are many common misconceptions, myths or mistakes that exist around male mental health, particularly in young men.

Mistake #1: There are higher rates of mental health issues in girls than boys

Natasha stated that according to the WHO, women are globally three times more likely to receive a diagnosis of depression than men. This does not mean that women are three times more likely to experience depression than men, it simply means they are more likely to be diagnosed.

Furthermore, she stated that there were a number of mistakes/myths which were not borne by the evidence.

In the UK two thirds of teenagers prescribed with antidepressants are girls, for a variety of reasons. However, boys' mental health conditions are less often recognised. Self-harm is often used as a barometer of mental health in young people and two thirds of admissions are girls. However, Natasha pointed to research showing that shows boys self-harm in atypical ways, such as getting into fights they know they can't win or punching inanimate objects (for example, walls). In other words, metrics for mental health diagnoses, are normally geared to typical female symptoms.

From as young as five years of age, girls are more likely to be diagnosed with emotional disorders. Boys are more likely to be labelled with behavioural disorders. Natasha suggested this might be down to adults having set ideas about how girls and boys should behave, resulting in misdiagnosis following individuals as they get older.

Citing research from University College London and the National Children's Bureau, Natasha pointed out that 25% of 14-year-old girls self-expressed mental health problems, but only 18% of parents expressed awareness of such issues. However, 9% of 14-year-old boys expressed mental health problems, with 12% of parents expressing awareness.

Natasha disagrees with the view that men, certainly young men, do not talk about their mental health. However, boys are less likely to report in normally recognised ways.

Mistake #2: Victim-blaming

Natasha reiterated that she believes it is a mistake to say that young women and girls are more likely to experience mental health issues than young men or boys. Rather, men and boys are flying under the radar. In Natasha's view, a significant reason for this is because of victim blaming.

Stating statistics from the Samaritans show that men are three times more likely to die as a result of suicide, Natasha went on to illustrate how typical campaigns to deal with male suicide perpetuate the myth that men don't talk or present to mental health experts, by expressing messages such as "Men, have you thought about talking..?"

Natasha sees this as men being blamed for the high suicide statistics, whereas a better approach would be to look at the culture and society that men and boys are growing up in, which is making them less likely or able to talk. And if they are talking, why are they not being heard or listened to?

Mistake #3: Young men have the same social cues around 'masculinity' as their forebears

In Natasha's experience, young men are comfortable talking to their peers about their mental health and they are comfortable supporting peers when they come to them with these issues. Young men believe that a lack of talking applies more to older generations than it does to them.

Boys and young men are far more likely to talk in environments that people would not expect - these are places where they feel they belong and are not being judged. There are not necessarily those waiting to be on the receiving end of mental health disclosures such as; parents, counsellors, doctors, for example.

Natasha believes death from suicide has a lot to do with the psychological need for purpose. She believes this is why middle-aged men are in the high-risk category, having lost the role of father, or nearing retirement and the loss of work-based meaning in their lives.

For men, 14 is the average onset age of depression and 50% of all mental health manifest by the age of 15, 75% by the age of 25. It is possible that the problems that led middle aged men to crisis point began much earlier when they were at school. This means young men are flying under the radar when it comes to mental health detection and treatment.

Successful Strategies

CALM

Natasha stated that the *Campaign Against Living Miserably* (CALM) is one of the most successful charities looking at male mental health issues and reducing rates of suicide. A key to their success is to take mental health support to where men are already talking, rather than expecting men to go to support groups or therapy. The sort of places where Natasha is seeing good results are gyms, sports clubs, music band practice and barber's shops, especially with Afro-Caribbean young men.

Where's Your Head At?

Natasha is involved with a campaign called, '*Where's your head at?*', which aims to make it mandatory by law to have mental health first aid in all work places, in the same way that we have physical first aid. Mental health first-aiders are trained to spot symptoms of poor mental health in their colleagues, to understand how best to approach them and to sign post them to appropriate information and support. This campaign is supported by Dean Russell MP (Watford), and pledges to train up 1,000 mental health first aiders, including bar tenders, barbers and people who work in gyms.

School Counsellors

We need to rethink the role that counsellors are playing in schools. Boys are more likely to go to guidance counsellors than mental health counsellors. There is a lot of evidence to suggest that 'shoulder to shoulder' communication (as when walking) is much more effective for boys than sitting in front of a desk.

Role models

Boys and young men need to see how to speak about mental health issues as a man. Research in primary schools has shown how girls will typically list seven or eight emotions that they will experience regularly; this list will continue to grow as they go through school. However, boys will oscillate between happiness and anger. Natasha believes that boys know other emotions and the words for them, but they are being socialised in such a way as to believe that certain emotions are not appropriate for boys and men. Social media is giving boys advice on how to express mental health issues from men who live in a very masculine environment.

Challenge the media narrative

Natasha has founded a campaign called the '*Mental Health Media Charter*⁸ which scrutinises and challenges the way media reports on mental health issues.

Policy Recommendations from Natasha Devon

These are to be found in Annex 1

⁸ <https://www.natashadevon.com/the-mental-health-media-charter>

Conclusion, Policies and Future work

Common Themes

In conclusion, there were three overarching themes that the evidence and insights from the seven national experts coalesced around:

Theme 1: The mainstream narrative leads to a lack of action on disadvantage and issues negatively affecting them even when the facts are in plain sight

Men and boys have significant areas of disadvantage and these disadvantages are shown in official statistics and are hidden "in plain sight". The current cultural narrative amplifies this "hiding" of the statistics and the related issues. The narrative leads to the negative actions of a small minority of men being transposed onto all men and boys and concluding that all are less deserving of support, with boys being taught or feeling that their gender is inherently a problem.

The speakers showed this by discussing victim blaming, myths/assumptions, the lack of celebration of men and boys' achievements and the lack of focussed gender-specific policy action or interest, even though the latter is clearly needed and identifiable. For example, knowledge about boys' educational underachievement, while widely known for over 30 years, does not lead to any political action nor a whole-system action approach by the education sector/establishment.

In summary: "Women have problems, men are problems" and "Men are inherently at fault for their own problems"

Theme 2: The psychological, behavioural and developmental differences between boys and girls needs to be better understood

Many of the problems men face are amplified by a failure to recognise and then consider areas of psychology and biology where men and women differ. This is overlaid with the mainstream narrative mentioned above. This is also hindered by the female domination in psychology as it has led to a focus on female psychology.

The lack of understanding blended with the cultural narrative means:

- Male offending is seen to result from something inherent in being male, while female offending is attributed to "trauma";
- Boys' educational underachievement is not considered in the context of biological development difference between boys and girls, whether the

school-environment is actually boy-friendly and whether there is an impact of fatherlessness;

- More men, especially of working age, have died from Covid-19 but this is little recognised or talked about, and,
- Myths, mistakes and stereotypes take root and become more deeply embedded. This means there is a common view that the poor uptake of support services is due to boys and men not wanting to rather than questions being asked whether they are appropriate. Misconceptions such as “boys don’t talk”, “boys have fewer mental health problems than girls” and the damaging “toxic masculinity” become the default. These need to be challenged.

There was a clear view that we need a better understanding of male psychology and biology, which will then lead to better support for vulnerable boys so they are not victim-blamed and gender-informed support is provided.

More male-friendly approaches include taking the support to where men are – the barbers, the gym and the sports club. Many successful interventions for boys involve participation in an activity with other boys and with positive male role-models.

In summary: We should not be asking “Why don’t men talk more?”, we should be asking “Why aren’t we listening and are we doing enough to hear them?”

Theme 3: The long lasting impact of early trauma on boys and men

The other common theme was that trauma (sometimes referred as Adverse Childhood Experiences - ACEs) that occur in the lives of boys have a direct impact on their current life (education attainment and offending) but will still also have an impact in later life too.

This is often not understood and when reasons are sought for it, often the default explanation is that it is men’s fault or something that is intrinsic in being male.

This can be seen in failing to look for childhood trauma or societal reasons for criminal behaviour, violence and suicide, for example.

In summary: We should not be making assumptions about men’s behaviour without looking for childhood trauma reasons first.

Policies

Our speakers show that a significant problem is the current, dominant narrative which hides or ignores areas of male disadvantage – often in “plain sight”. However, there are many opportunities for policy action.

Each of our seven speakers made policy recommendations. These are shown together in Annex 1.

Next Steps for Government, Policy-Makers and Statutory Agencies

Following the evidence sessions, the view of the members of the APPG is that there is clearly a need for the government, policy-makers, statutory agencies and some sectors (particularly in education and health) to take concerted and coordinated action in focussing on:

- Addressing areas of disadvantage facing boys in Britain today, especially given that the data and issues are clearly available;
- Improving the understanding of male psychology and biology;
- Ensuring that public services and communications are as boy/male-friendly as possible;
- Being proactive in addressing societal and cultural myths around boys' behaviour, help-seeking and motivations;
- Recognising that living in an inclusive and fair society can only become a reality if issues facing men and boys are tackled alongside those of women and girls.

The APPG also believes that the views and proposals of national experts, including those who spoke at the evidence sessions, should be taken into account in addressing the above.

Future work

The future work of this APPG will be to take individual topics from this longer agenda and enquire into each in greater depth, inviting additional expert speakers and bring forward specific recommendations for policy action.

Annex 1: Speakers' Policy Recommendations

Sonia Shaljean, Chief Executive, Lads Need Dads (LND)	
1	Boys growing up in fatherlessness households should be formally recognised by policy makers and the educational establishment as being at risk in educational achievement and personal development.
2	There needs to be greater access to funding at a national and local level for schemes that target fatherless boys.
3	Boy-friendly reading programmes with volunteer mentors should be rolled out across the UK.
4	A flagging system between primary and secondary schools should be introduced which indicates to secondary schools where a boy is from a single-parent household.
5	For any programmes supporting boys in fatherless households, there needs to be positive engagement with the boys' mothers or carers.
Professor Gijsbert Stoet, Professor of Psychology at the University of Essex	
6	Teacher training should feature developmental/biology and psychology differences between girls and boys. For example, how do boys differ from girls in language development and at what ages is this critical or how does puberty affect their learning development?
7	More research is needed on how the school environment impacts boys and girls.
8	A more directive educational approach for boys, especially teenage boys, is needed.
9	There needs to be more investment in raising boys' literacy skills, including the encouragement of reading for fun.
10	Better support should be given to children in need, with better access to "Thrive Groups" and also psychological and language support.
11	Distractions for boys, such as playing video games, should be limited at home.
12	There should be greater access for educational researchers to educational data.
Dr Erik Cownie, School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences, Ulster University	
13	The important areas of Motivation, Despondency and the Pupil/Teacher relationships should be formally addressed with regard to improving Boys' education.
14	There should be improved transition and communication procedures between primary and secondary schools to ensure early learning issues are detected and resolved.
15	There should be one-to-one mentoring for low-achieving boys in their first year of secondary school.
16	It is crucial to directly connect learning with the lives and aspirations of boys – an economic value/relational approach is needed.
17	There should be greater pastoral care aimed at helping boys to value education and making boys feel good about their academic progress.
18	Teachers should adopt pedagogies that help boys become more resilient to barriers that affect the on-going progress of their learning.
19	There should be community based interventions that engage with hard to reach and disengaged boys.
20	There needs to be improved life skills training and one-to-one support for boys around subjects identified by their schools. This includes incentives to maintain engagement and learning. Results to this type of intervention have been spectacular.
21	There should be an emphasis on cultivating teacher/pupil relationships as part of

	teacher training and professional development.
22	Myths that working class parents are not interested in their son's education should be dispelled – there is a large section of parents who lack the confidence in helping their sons.
23	We need to improve the confidence of working-class parents in education and their own self-confidence in how they can support their boys.
24	We have to tackle poverty to support the creation of better home environments that are conducive to learning.
Professor Naomi Murphy, The Fens Unit, HMP Whitemoor	
25	Society, policy makers and justice institutions should be willing to hear about the vulnerability of boys without victim blaming or assuming they are not telling the truth.
26	As a society, we need to engage in more balanced debate about the sexes, and create ways for all people in society to feel they matter and belong.
27	Greater investment is needed for parenting skills and make sure that people know what it takes to be a parent.
28	There has to be the prioritisation of creating loving, caring environments for those who cannot be cared for at home.
29	We need to invest in finding ways to create and publicise positive male role models.
Martin Seager, consultant clinical psychologist	
30	There needs to be a closer link between policy and good data.
31	The societal and political narrative with respect to men and boys has to be far more positive and inclusive including the promotion of positive male role-models.
32	Male psychology and the differences between female psychology should be included on psychology training and academic courses.
Martin Tod, Chief Executive, Men's Health Forum	
33	Men and women do have differences when it comes to health issues and how they should be treated. He stressed that a men's health strategy should be developed in tandem with a women's health strategy.
Natasha Devon MBE, founder of the Mental Health Media Charter	
34	Society, policymakers and the health and social care system need to stop making mistakes in their thinking and approaches regarding boys' mental health such as: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There are higher rates of mental health issues in girls than boys 2. Victim blaming 3. Assuming young men have the same social cues around "masculinity" as their Forebears
35	There is a need to take mental health support to where men are/go.
36	There should be more mental health first aider training for those working in bars, gyms and hairdressers/barbers.
37	We need to rethink the role that counsellors are playing in schools. Boys are more likely to go to guidance counsellors than mental health counsellors.
38	There needs to be more encouragement for boys to identify and verbalise their emotions.
39	There has been more challenge to the media's narrative on mental health and the Mental Health Media Charter should be adopted.

Annex 2: Members

Members of Parliament:

Scott Benton MP
Ben Bradley MP (Vice-Chair)
Steve Brine MP
Philip Davies MP
Nick Fletcher MP (Vice-Chair)
Neale Hanvey MP
Mark Jenkinson MP (Chair)
Julian Knight MP
Ian Levy MP
Henry Smith MP
Joy Morrissey MP

Members of the House of Lords:

Lord Alton
Baroness Eaton (Vice-Chair)
Baroness Hamwee
Baroness Masham
Lord Ponsonby (Vice-Chair)
Lord Stevenson
Lord Mackenzie
Lord Farmer
Baroness Morrissey
Baroness Fox
Baroness Uddin
Lord Mackenzie
Lord Sikka
Baroness Grey-Thompson

Annex 3: Authors and Secretariat

This policy report has been authored by:

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- Mike Bell and Christopher Badley, Equi-Law (who also act as the secretariat): www.equi-law.uk

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