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**Working with Young Men in Brighton and Hove**

*Executive Summary*

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This report was commissioned by ***A Better Brighton & Hove***, a “think tank” co-founded by Brighton & Hove City Council and the Pebble Trust (a local charity). The Board of *A Better Brighton & Hove* brings together Council officers, university representatives, business people, third sector participants and the Lord Lieutenant of Sussex. Its remit is wide, but its ambition is simple: to commission work to improve the lives of those living in our city.

The “Working with Young Men” project was commissioned by the Board, funded by the Pebble Trust and supported by Board members and, in particular, Toby Buckle, to whom we owe a great debt of gratitude.

We felt that there was a gap in research into the issues facing young men in our city, and an opportunity to explore best practices among the many dedicated professionals and volunteers who seek to help this group.

We hope that this report will help to inform those who work with and support young men. We hope that it will help to shine a light on their needs and how they might best be met. We hope, above all, that it will stimulate ongoing discussion and encourage all to continue to exchange views and learnings, by including this group’s needs specifically in the design of services and in the way public services and third sector organisations work together.

A link to the full report is available here:

<https://thepebbletrust.squarespace.com/s/WWYM-FinalReport.docx>

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The report authors would like to acknowledge the significant contributions made by project Steering Group members throughout the course of the study and also to those practitioners and managers who facilitated access to young men to interview. We would also like to recognise here the very significant contributions made to the course of the project by the initial Reference Group members, the young men who shared their lived experiences of growing up in Brighton and Hove, and the practitioners who also took part in interviews.

The two peer-researchers, Elijah and Kieran, carried out interviews, assisted with analysis and helped to ensure that the project remained true to its original aims, as much as possible.

Additionally, several members of the original research team were unable to see this through to the end due to work pressures, especially with the onset of the pandemic, and also as a result in job or role changes. We would, therefore, like to acknowledge here the significant contributions made by Gemma North (especially in relation to the original literature review), Ian Dore and Paul Teverson (especially in relation to the examination of existing data and the ‘deep dive’ process, and Sarah Wilkins, especially for the work with the original reference group whose input helped devise appropriate frameworks for interviews and interview questions. All were involved in the initial project planning and renegotiating the plans as circumstances changed, as well as in some of the interviewing of staff from local organisations working with young men, and their contributions have shaped the progress of the project.

Finally, we would like to thank the Better Brighton team for their support and understanding as obstacles and events required changes to original plans, and of course for their funding without which a project of this scale and depth could not have been completed.

**Introduction**

*“There are plenty of people that really do care and really want to make a change”*

*“I just wanted someone to give me a hug and tell me that they saw me”*

The project was commissioned as a result of concerns among local statutory and non-statutory services and other stakeholders about young men across the city, regarding their wellbeing, safety, risk and life opportunities.

The project was tasked with exploring ideas relating to ‘what works’ with and for such young men, and importantly to obtain the perspectives of such young men as well as those of practitioners and service managers via interviews.

The young men interviewed shared a range of experiences and perspectives, both in terms of their own lives and needs, and of the services and practitioners they have come into contact with. The practitioners and service managers too have a wealth of experience and insight. The report, its findings and recommendations are largely based on these experiences, perspectives and insight. The project also looked into and drew upon anonymised records of individual young men within Brighton and Hove, who have a history of engaging with local services.

This project and its associated research processes, were informed and framed by analysis of relevant research[[1]](#footnote-1), both UK based and more widely, and by local contextual data and population profiles.

In particular the project adopted a position of regarding young men positively, but for whom many of the more challenging and problematic aspects of their lives reflect broader social challenges – including issues relating masculinity and identity, education and employment, health, home and family, exploitation and offending, and more.

The project explores each of these issues and associated responses of practitioners and services, in order to deepen insight and understanding and offer potential ways forward to support young men more effectively.

**Young men, practitioners and services in context**

The project seeks to explore two key issues:

* *the issues experienced by young men (aged 14-25) in need of support, and the associated behaviours of these young men;*
* *approaches and interventions adopted by practitioners and services with young men in response to these issues and behaviours.*

The particular context presented by Brighton and Hove as a vibrant coastal city, only an hour from London, also is highlighted. The context of Brighton and Hove as both a popular, public facing city, with a transient population often in contrast to the lived experiences of many of the young men which this project focuses on, is also important to consider.

The changing shape and focus of services which have evolved over the past 20 years, firstly under the then New Labour ‘social inclusion’ agenda of the first part of the new millennium, followed by a period of adjustments arising from austerity measures, changes in government and associated shifts in national and local policy are also acknowledged. More recently, threats of exploitation, radicalisation and of course the COVID pandemic, have all had an influence on young men’s lives and on those who seek to support them.

**Methodology**

A total of 20 practitioners and services managers were interviewed, from both statutory and non-statutory organisations, covering a wide range of generalised and targeted services across education, health, social work, offending, community and training provision.

Engaging directly with young men to be interviewed was not without challenge, given the often changing and fragmented nature of the lives of those with whom we wished to engage. We were also keen to ensure those we interviewed had the support of local services, as well as from their own personal network of family and friends. The project of course, also spanned the onset of the coronavirus pandemic and the subsequent impact this has had on services and young men across the city. In particular access to and engaging with young men was challenged by the need to conduct interviews by remote mean. In depth interviews were subsequently undertaken with eight young men, referred by and having engaged with a range of the services above.

Throughout the project and the subsequent report, the voices of young men are foregrounded, both through the interviews undertaken but also through the participation of a young men’s reference group and with young men as peer researchers. The reference group and peer researchers worked alongside an experienced team of researchers from the University of Brighton, all of whom are also experienced practitioners themselves.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the significant contributions made by project Steering Group members throughout the course of the study and also to those practitioners and managers who facilitated access to young men to interview.

**FINDINGS**

This section summarises the key findings from the thematic analysis of qualitative data collected from interviews with service managers, practitioners and with young men. In this summary, we aim to make connections across the intersecting themes, and draw conclusions from these findings. This analysis acknowledges the complexity of young men’s lives and processes by which services seek to interact and intervene with young men. Many of these issues and findings will be familiar to those involved in working with young men and the findings of the research are supported by and reflect literature in the field.

***The Brighton and Hove context***

Brighton and Hove has a public face, with a high proportion of students within the resident population, and a public ‘image’ which attracts large numbers of visitors. Both the public and more hidden aspects of place are relevant and impact upon the ways in which young men engage with each other, the local and the transient parts of the population and with local services. Within this one city and its surrounding areas, there are places that are perceived by young men and practitioners as being more or less accessible and safe for young men, based on prior associations and reputation, which also impact upon engagement with services. In addition, many young men ‘know’ only a relatively small part of their local area in any detail.

***Young men in Brighton and Hove***

The lived experiences of young men in Brighton and Hove are mediated by this local context and associated socio-economic factors. Underpinning this, are conceptualisations of masculinity, and the influence of intersectional identities. Principally, young men are considered not fully socialised to understand their emotionality or express it appropriately. According to pracitioners, young men’s lack of emotional intelligence leads to unhealthy emotional expression, including violence and a relatively low rate of recognition of emotions in general. Practitioners saw this restricted emotionality as an obstacle to help-seeking for young men. For the young men themselves, help-seeking is ‘non-masculine’ and is regarded as a sign of weakness. If they were to seek help from practitioners, they face possible ridicule and rejection from their peers, including loss of status in social groupings.

An absence of positive role models is regarded as restricting emotionality among young men. There is concern among some professionals that there the over-representation of women working in services with young men perpetuates this. In some cases, young men reported favourable experiences of contact with male role models in the services they access, providing them with realistic and healthier ways of ‘being men’.

More broadly, gender stereotypes are thought influence the quality of service offered to young men, and the accessibility of the services. There are concerns that young men are conceptualised more readily as perpetrators rather than victims, and that youth work with young men is generally undervalued. Further to this, whilst not explored in depth, issues associated with class, race and ethnicity, and sexual and gender identity may be problematised by a lack of diversity among professionals, meaning that services are not perceived as accessible to or oriented to supporting all young men equally.

***Family and home***

The home environment experienced by young men plays a pivotal role in influencing their overall well-being, and their goals, aspirations and life opportunities. This home context, experiences and relationships need to be taken into consideration when planning interventions and services for young men. Experiences of poverty and trauma have deep and long-lasting impact on the present and future lives. A trauma-informed approach to practice is key to understanding the experiences and impact of these experiences during work with young men, including the impact of trauma upon likelihood of forming, and ability to form, healthy and safe working relationships which form a basis for future relationships.

Leaving home and care are known and unsurprisingly key transitions and associated transitions between children’s and adult social services are vitally important. Services that stop abruptly at key ages or fail to support young men during such transitions can negatively impact their potential to make progress in work, education and family life.

***School and employment***

Whilst young men reported less than positive experiences of educational institutions, it is not uncommon for the young men to reflect upon and value the support and guidance received from significant adults at school/college. Such relationships are commonly those that are experienced as providing sustained acknowledgement, regard and acceptance, including at times, elements of personalised direction and guidance.

Historically, such relationships and interventions have also been experienced through collaboration between the school/college and ‘alternative’ provision, facilitated through complementary partnerships, often with third sector/community-based services. Educational institutions would seem to have reduced capacity to work in partnership with such services and projects currently, as a result of reduced services, many of which were effective in providing opportunities for young men who found it hard to engage in more formalised, ‘mainstream’ provision.

Routes to training and employment can be inconsistent and lack of the flexibility of such provision does not always acknowledge and respond to the reality of some young men’s complex and fractured everyday lives. This impacts on employment aspirations and trajectories, where often the pathway to offending and risk of exploitation, further disadvantages some young men.

***Mental health and substance use***

Young men in Brighton and Hove experience a diversity of mental health issues, including anxiety, stress, depression, feelings of meaningless, and suicidality. Poor mental health is associated with bullying, school exams, childhood trauma, national and global events, and substance use. In relation to substance use, Cannabis, MDMA, Xanax, and Spice were referred to as being commonly used by young men in relation to their need to escape difficult realities and to assuage mental distress, whilst seemingly becoming more vulnerable to ‘county lines’ and other organised and exploitative processes.

Young men and professionals alike believe that key to improving young men’s mental health is helping them to understand their emotionality, and to make links between how they are feeling and their traumatic pasts and presents. Professionals however are at times critical of mental health provision for young men. Their concerns include those related to accessibility, waiting times, quick-fix approaches, restrictive eligibility criteria, and the problematic transition from child to adult services.

***Offending***

The complexity of young men’s lives is further evidenced within experiences of offending. Young men’s criminal ‘careers’ often begin with drug-related activities, including use of drugs and supply of illegal substances. Engagement in and being victim of violent offences also initiate criminality, and experiences at home and within the family are potential triggers.

The power of labelling and stereotyping of young men within society is significant, with messages about the perceived riskiness of young men being privileged over messages about vulnerability. This extends into and contributes to defining the experience of young men as offenders. Such masked vulnerability is regarded as playing a part in the criminal exploitation of young men in Brighton and Hove and beyond, being perhaps even more prevalent than previously recognised. Whether this relates to exploitation through drug use or to other forms of criminal activity and / or sexual exploitation, the impact and dangers experienced are very real for some of our local young men.

***Engaging and intervening with young men: services and provision***

There was limited discussion or acknowledgment of specific models of intervention amongst those interviewed. However, a recognition that services that are more accessible to young men and are more likely to bring about sustained change and transformation, when based upon positive regard, genuine interest and commitment and sustained trust and relationship building over time, were articulated both within the interviews conducted with services and those with young men.

The commitment of practitioners and service leads is clear. Many of those interviewed spoke warmly and with insight and compassion about young men. However, at times, increased workloads and higher thresholds, has lessened the responsiveness of services has, in some cases has resulted in young men no longer having access particularly to mental health support when needed. Nevertheless, there was an acknowledgement and understanding of the context and needs within young men’s lives amongst those interviewed, along with some frustration with the limitation and fragmentation of services.

A range of services are provided, some ‘targeted’, others offering a more holistic approach. The balance between the two is crucial. It is important that provision for young men is responsive to the breadth and depth of their complex lived experiences, and also offers specialised support where needed. One cannot exist without the other. Young men value services which are both consistent and boundaried, and yet responsive and flexible. It is also likely that one type or mode of provision will not engage or ‘suit’ all young men, nor their ‘stage’ in readiness for accessing help, and in this regard, breadth of provision, including the more recent resurgence in outdoor, creative and activity-based direct work, is a strength as well as a potential risk.

There is a clear need for collaborative, inter-agency engagement, both at the level of service and organisational leads, and at practitioner level, particularly in relation to active collaborative engagement between organisations and services, whilst reducing competition for funding.

**Conclusions**

The following recommendations have been distilled from the analysis of interview data, considered in the wider context of relevant literature and an understanding of the local context for both services and young men. Emphasis is given largely to cross-cutting themes and recommendations, rather than on specific organisations, services or provision. Following these recommendations, an outline of pointers for a future practice ‘pilot study’ is provided.

***Young men, contexts and identity***

* A recognition and understanding of the systemic and ecological context in which young men reside, and how masculinity and related intersectionalities frame and impact on the lives and experiences of young men, is to be fostered amongst services and practitioners. Whilst at the point of commissioning, the remit was less about masculinity than about interventions, the literature review and data collected illustrates the interconnectedness of these concepts and practices.
* Diverse spaces (physical locations and temporal opportunities) for young men to consider their beliefs about masculinity should be developed. These should include possibilities for exploring and developing identities and behaviours which are centred on emotional literacy and regulation. Such spaces and opportunities should encourage young men to interrogate theirs and other’s beliefs about “what men should be like”, and help them develop alternative conceptualisations of masculinity, including addressing barriers to help-seeking and their ability to access services. In particular, key to helping young men to understand and manage effectively their mental health, is encouraging them to attend to and develop their emotional literacy, contextualized within their lived experience.
* Services and organisations should work towards diversifying their workforce in order to better represent the identities and experiences of young men they are orientated to supporting. This should also include the provision of activities which may be of interest to young men and which model and exemplify positive experiences and representations of masculinity, through role modelling by practitioners and peers. Critically, such services should be codesigned with young men to ensure appropriateness of planned interventions and modes of delivery, as well as with the promotion of such services.
* Any new interventions or models of working with young men should have evaluation embedded from the very start of the process. The literature and practice review carried out as part of this project clearly identifies this as a relative weakness in respect of existing projects where evaluation is limited and is largely related to funders’ needs or requirements.
* Young men should be consulted regarding the physical location of service and issues of accessibility and safety in the broadest sense. Neighbourhood-based projects and interventions may promote engagement and accessibility given issues of travel/transport cost within the city.
* Caution should be exercised when adopting specific interventions and models of intervention from elsewhere in order to ensure applicability and lack of disconnect with features of the specific local area / context. However, when appropriately adapted to local needs and particular requirements, such models can provide a starting point for devising interventions.

***Relationships and interventions***

* An understanding and acknowledgment of young men’s ‘home’ context is vital to effective, professional relationships and interventions. Where possible, work with parents or carers should also be fostered as key to supporting and enabling support and progress for young men, albeit not always as joint work with parents /carers.
* The significant impact of trauma upon young men’s well-being and development on many levels requires practitioner awareness and understanding. Services and interventions should be planned and provided on this basis accordingly, perhaps increasing the awareness and understanding of trauma upon relationships including ‘helping’ relationships within both design and delivery of interventions and services across all areas of service provision. For example, drawing upon a trauma-informed approach when seeking to understand apparent lack or engagement or disengagement and the impact of services then being withdrawn. The importance of a trauma-informed approach extends beyond statutory services.
* Provision of services should be based on the promotion and development of sustained, person-centred relationships, which affirm and validate young men, whilst exploring identities, choices and behaviours. Such provision and relationships should encompass flexibility and choice, insofar as is possible, in engagement and the focus of interventions should ensure relationships and interventions acknowledge, recognise and work with young men in the context of their sometimes complex and fractured lives. This means a degree of flexibility regarding mode of contact, length of contact and hours of contact, as well as some consideration of the nature of, and boundaries to, the working relationship are key.
* Exploitation, in all forms, needs to be understood in terms of its dynamics, processes and impact, when designing practice interventions in order to establish trust and support changes to patterns of thinking and behaviour. Understanding this from the young men’s perspectives is key to providing an engaging service. More punitive approaches have been the norm within public policy in the arenas of youth justice and organised crime (Thompson, 2019) and so supportive interventions, as far as possible, should be the first priority, again, recognising the vulnerability to exploitation to harm.
* Opportunities for person-centred mentoring or coaching and individualised support/guidance to be facilitated in schools and colleges and encouraged where possible, through employers and training providers.

***Structures and services***

* Services to develop clear protocols for working and engaging with young men which are held and adhered consistently to within teams.
* Consideration of furthering key-worker / mentor models and strategies for services for young men who are engaged with multiple service provision.
* Collaborative ‘alternative’ pathways to be developed in partnership with community/third sector providers to complement ‘statutory’ provision.
* Personalised approaches to mental healthcare that accounts for trauma experienced will help to ensure that young men receive the appropriate level and form of intervention, although access to services also requires some consideration.
* It is important to consider the accessibility and meaningfulness of services and processes designed to tackle ‘adult’ offending behaviour, and the safety and relatability elements of these for young men. Without this, some young men will not see these interventions as ‘applying’ to their situations, thus limiting impact.
* Service mangers, leaders and strategists should maintain openness and awareness of how funding, conceptualisations of risk, and other ‘threshold’ strategies can disadvantage young men in need
* Commitment needs to be made to strategies which foster inter-agency working, from signposting/referring where appropriate and sufficient to be effective, through to collaborative provision to meet specific need; support to be given to practitioners to support such agility and “boundary spanning”, with such interventions, when needed, adopting a more mentor or coaching style relationship supporting engagement with relevant services more directly.
* Arising from observations outlined in the body of the report regarding data integrity and systems for inputting and reviewing data, consideration of the best practices in respect of both systems themselves, but also training of practitioners regarding rationale and processes for accurate inputting of data.

***Recommendations for a ‘pilot study’***

* Embed evaluation in a rigorous and planned manner as part of the intervention design and delivery process.
* Ensure co-design and evaluation with young men to ensure centrality of their voices and experiences and hence maximise likely engagement.
* Build upon the learning from this project with respect to the importance of flexibility of timing, mode of contact, control and choices being embedded in the approach taken and the importance of authentic relationships based upon genuine interest, recognition, and care in order to ‘succeed’.
* Specifically, the motivational interviewing basis of the **Roca High-Risk Young Men Intervention Model**[[2]](#footnote-2) holds some significant potential, especially when adapted to incorporate the relationship elements referred to above, and a trauma- informed approach to practice.
* Maximise inter-agency collaboration within system design, along with use and accessibility as key considerations for future service developments.
* Young men’s experiences and narratives positioned centre stage of all recording, planning and delivery of services cannot be overstated.

***Next steps***

* The findings of this report will be used within Brighton & Hove City Council and across related public, community and voluntary sector services and organisations to inform best practice in working with young men.

* Specifically, the research outcomes and recommendations will be taken to the Brighton & Hove Strategic Adolescent Management Board and to the Sussex Violence Reduction Partnership for discussion. These discussions will focus on how to integrate learning from the research and how this learning will inform city wide actions.
* In addition, organisations and partnerships from the community and voluntary sector will be invited to apply to the Pebble Trust for funding to support a pilot project based on the findings of this report.

This Executive Summary ends with voices of two young men who experienced positive outcomes from service interventions in Brighton and Hove:

*there isn't a point in my life that I can't say it hasn't helped out, because I wouldn't have the job that I've got now and I wouldn't, I definitely wouldn't have the flat; I'm living pretty well at the moment and that, in my opinion comes down to* [named practitioner], *because they really settled me down, made me realise there was more to life than just hanging out with my mate and causing shit.*

*if I didn’t have the support from* [named practitioner], *my parents and my girlfriend, I wouldn’t be where I am now and I wouldn’t be as turned around and I wouldn’t have had as much faith in, that I can actually do stuff*

1. A review of relevant literature is included in the full project report [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://rocainc.org/work/young-men-program/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)