



**PARENTING
FOCUS**

MEN'S MINDS MATTER

LEARNING LEGACY



THE STORY

In 2021, Parenting Focus developed the Men's Minds Matter project to support men from the Northwest to improve services and support for their mental and emotional health.

The project was launched in 2021 by Parenting Focus (formerly Parenting NI), supported by the Ideas Fund and the Northwest Community Network. It was born out of a clear recognition that men in the Derry/Londonderry and surrounding areas often faced barriers to accessing emotional health and wellbeing support. Many reported that services felt difficult to approach or were not tailored to their needs, while social isolation and the pressures of fatherhood further impacted their wellbeing.

In response, Men's Minds Matter was co-designed and led by local men, with support from a dedicated Parenting Focus Dads Worker and a community development researcher. The project created safe spaces for men to connect with each other, share experiences, take part in meaningful activities, and develop their voice around health, family life, and community involvement. Over the past three years, this grassroots model has not only supported individual men but also highlighted the importance of father-focused wellbeing initiatives in strengthening families and communities.

From 2022–2025, we connected with men across the city and gathered their ideas about how to improve their mental wellbeing through connection with local communities and with public and community services. Their ideas led to the creation of new spaces where men could connect with each other and with support agencies. They established new men's cafés providing emotional and health support from professionals, empathy tent events in public spaces, and new fishing, walking, and running groups. Key events included a Human Library on International Men's Health Day, residential retreats, and a celebration event bringing together men's groups across the city.

The Ideas Fund (run by the British Science Association and funded by Wellcome), recognised that our learning had the potential to create systemic changes in healthcare systems by addressing the longstanding need for services to more effectively engage men and support their mental and emotional wellbeing. Our achievements in meeting that goal are set out in this document.



KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

1.

New ways of enabling men to connect with each other in communities and public spaces.

2.

New opportunities for men to learn how to give and receive peer support.

3.

New ways to enable men to focus on their emotional wellbeing - supporting self-care and caring for others.

4.

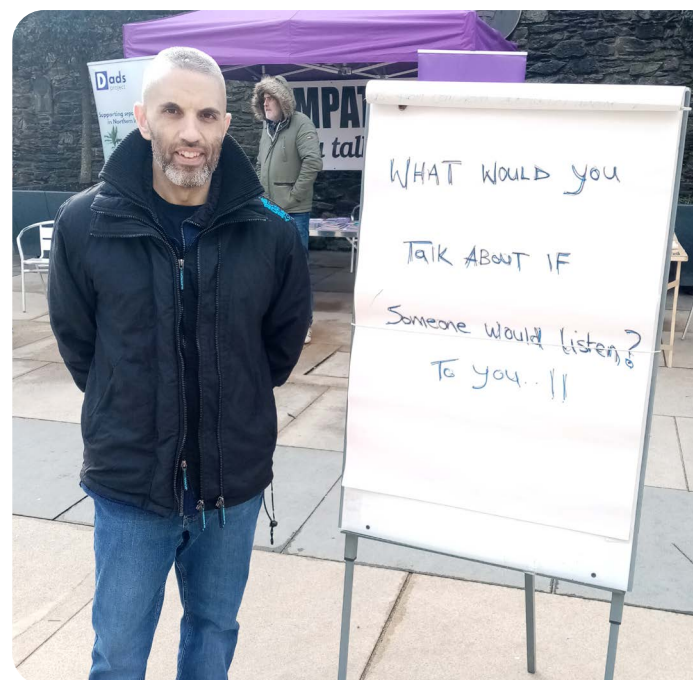
Changing the approach of health and social services to men's wellbeing.

1. NEW WAYS OF ENABLING MEN TO CONNECT WITH EACH OTHER IN COMMUNITIES AND PUBLIC SPACES.

The project developed supportive spaces where men could connect with each other. These new spaces included cafes and groups and a mobile empathy tent. Below the men tell the story of their achievements.

EMPATHY TENT EVENTS

- 'The empathy tent was a psychological safe space – the tent itself was open – there were no sides – and nobody wanted to come in and be under the roof – so we put the chairs outside. Most people talked outside the tent. The conversation was open. We didn't direct it. The longer they talked, the more they opened up.
- The word EMPATHY was the key – depression was not mentioned, and we didn't mention it in conversation. People got more engaged when they saw that it wasn't about mental health issues – there's still a stigma – more about depression than anxiety.
- We might think that men who are out walking are out to enjoy themselves and then we realise that they're out walking to sort their stuff out or to share it with a friend. People are looking for connection'.



CAFÉS AND GROUPS

- These spaces enable us men to come together just to get a break from work life/ partners - a bit of chilled time with other men for an hour. There doesn't have to be a life-threatening reason for a man to come to a support group. We have highlighted the need for men to talk outside the pub. These spaces have changed the local culture.
- It's like a brotherhood; you know you've found your tribe when you can speak without censoring yourself. It's ok not to be ok. I benefit from the company, the friendship and banter – and talking about other stuff – all sorts of things.
- The spaces show that it's possible for grown men to make new friends with other men in adulthood. I became isolated over years of mental health struggles. The groups show that there are many men in our community who feel alone and are reaching out and looking to make men friends later in life – and that this is possible.
- I was isolated. In all my relationships, people were only there when they wanted something from me. I've spoken to more men in the past 9 months than I've spoken to in eight years.
- I was looking for something that was non-Facebook and non-woman hating. I don't want to hate people. I want to associate with people who are focused on survival.
- I saw myself as a neglected child two years ago – I've had lots of therapy over the years. It's only in the last year that I've found myself and found a different voice through connecting with other men. I've started to see my qualities and learnt about volunteering and the value of service.
- The group showed us guys that men can be caring and show their caring side towards each other without feeling less of a man. I was always made to feel I was weird – even in my family – because I showed love and care to my friends and family members.

THESE NEW INITIATIVES ENABLED MEN TO:



Learn how to give and receive support.



Change the approach of community and public services to engaging with men about their mental and emotional wellbeing.



Focus on their emotional wellbeing – their own and that of other men.



2. NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEN TO LEARN HOW TO GIVE AND RECEIVE SUPPORT.

RECEIVING

- 'Peer support enables you to draw from other experiences without trying to direct others.
- Different ages and generations learn from each other; and when you reach out – it reflects on yourself and it's satisfying.
- Sharing was empowering and other men seeing the difference in me, made me feel proud.
- I never wanted anything to do with 'talk-shops'. When I started to connect, I was listening so hard because I wanted to explain to myself why I was feeling what I was feeling. I've learnt how to express myself and to listen to people close to me expressing themselves and absorb what they're saying.
- I wanted to speak with people who have come out the other end. I was looking for advice and help with self-control. The first thing I got out of the group was the realisation that I wasn't alone. And I received guidance from people who had been through it.
- The group has enabled me to realise that I'm not alone; I don't have to hide my feelings or be ashamed of my diagnosis'.

GIVING

- 'Our own experience of peer support increased our sensitivity to other people and our confidence in offering support or fraternity in very small ways, like asking someone who looks troubled if they're all right.
- I'm now more conscious of how other people are. If they're stressed or unfriendly I realise there might be something going on in their life. I have more awareness and a new perspective.
- It now feels natural with other men. The mutuality feels natural – there's solidarity – brotherhood.'

THE REWARDS FROM LEARNING TO GIVE & RECEIVE

- 'There's a need for empathy and opportunities to help. I've gone from wanting to help to knowing that I can help – it's powerful. I get a sense of achievement and joy from this.
- I can have the conversation with other men – even when I'm emotional and vulnerable. I have the tools now. If I have a bad day, it doesn't have to be 2 days or a week. I can deal with my emotions and be curious about them. I was self-involved and one-dimensional and now I'm open to different views and perspectives.
- I can talk to each of the men, and I get different things from listening to each. There's a whole lot more going on than I had thought about or known about – this gave me perspective.
- I used to be really anxious – last year I hardly left the house but connecting with other men has made me see that 'he's a bit like me' and that changes how I see myself.
- I saw myself as a neglected child two years ago – I've had lots of therapy over the years. It's only in the last year that I've found myself and found a different voice through connecting with other men. I've started to see my qualities and learnt about volunteering and the value of service.'

3. NEW WAYS TO ENABLE MEN TO FOCUS ON THEIR EMOTIONAL WELLBEING - SUPPORTING SELF-CARE AND CARING FOR OTHERS.

LANGUAGE

Words and language make a difference when talking about wellbeing. We react differently to words like fun, joy, lightness and happiness. Some men associate the word wellbeing with an App. For each man, use of the right word can enable them to focus on their own wellbeing.

TALKING ABOUT EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

- 'You don't ask yourself how you are emotionally – you need to be asked about your wellbeing as an open question.
- You don't know how well you are – you need to interact with other people. For example, somebody will tell you that you look well – or troubled – and ask if you're all right.
- I would never have talked to others about my self-care habits; I kept it private.
- My new connections provided psychological support and friendship. We have all found different ways of coping and looking after ourselves.
- The project has shown that it's ok for men to talk about emotions and not just football'.

DISPLAYING OUR CARING SIDE

- 'The group showed us guys that men can be caring and show their caring side towards each other without feeling less of a man. I was always made to feel I was weird – even in my family – because I showed love and care to my friends and family members.
- Being able to help others is huge for me. I have a voice and I've been able to help others.'

A FOCUS – BUT NOT A SET PLAN

- 'The groups and activities work in tandem and create a structure in my week. This has replaced my addiction with a healing addiction. Instead of chaos, isolation and disconnection, I have conversation, purpose and ideas for things we could do together.
- The environment was unstructured – there was no set plan (and therefore no chance of failure) but I was making a commitment to myself and to a group of men I had built a relationship with. It consolidated a more positive direction in my life. I had reflected on things and set my intent. It's in my head to keep moving – I'm not consciously doing it'.





FINDING THE JOY OF BEING PRESENT IN YOUR LIFE

- 'When I was no longer able to see my children, I had nobody to share joyful experiences with, so I'd stopped taking an interest or joy in things. I'm taking more interest and joy in things now. I'm in touch with my passions.
- Now I'm alive – conscious of nature, birds singing, children's voices. I've never felt better. I have confidence and see a future for myself. It's a new chapter and I'm following my own script. I was in a cage, and the group was the key to getting out.'

SELF-CARE ACROSS THE AGES

- 'I like the age range of people who come to the groups - from 20-year-olds to people in their 70's. I enjoy the life experience you get from older people. Young people are raw, hurting and just starting their journey. The group has enabled us to apply the focus on emotional wellbeing to different life situations and how to cope and ask for help.
- One of the men's knowledge of alcoholism has been an asset for me. I wouldn't have had that knowledge otherwise – maybe I didn't want to know. Now I find it easy to continue asking for help if I need it.'

“I WANTED TO SPEAK WITH PEOPLE WHO HAVE COME OUT THE OTHER END. THE FIRST THING I GOT OUT OF THE GROUP WAS THE REALISATION THAT I WASN'T ALONE. AND I RECEIVED GUIDANCE FROM PEOPLE WHO HAD BEEN THROUGH IT. ”

4. CHANGING THE APPROACH OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES TO MEN'S WELLBEING.

AWARENESS

- One local family support manager described how contact with the men's project had opened his eyes about how hard it is for individual dads. It highlighted the lack of existing provision for dads, as well as the gaps between what is available and what men know if there for them. It changed his awareness about lack of spaces and services and brought this to the forefront of his mind. He highlighted the fact about the importance of activities being run by men for other men.
- A service experienced dad observed that social workers and health visitors were starting to understand that men can find it challenging to talk about emotion. For him, the project succeeded in diffusing the pervasive problem-solving orientation of health and social services and highlighting the value of listening.
- Men's Minds Matter increased public awareness of men's mental health by attracting local and regional press and radio coverage, as well as generating engaging social media content. A particular highlight was the regional coverage of the Empathy Tent's feature on the People's Lottery, which showcased its potential to support men's mental health and wellbeing.

IMPACT ON HEALTH SERVICE AWARENESS AND PRACTICE

The development of a social prescribing café enabled social workers and the pharmacist to see the impact of a different approach to increasing the involvement of men and dads in conversations about improving their health.

GP practices were enabled to learn and share good practice and information in addressing men's mental health and wellness.

New activities to engage patients with mental health issues such as a fishing group were recognised and funded by the local Health Trust.

- 'When I finished training, I thought I'd be doing bloods all day. It was only when I started doing this work that I realised why it's called a COMMUNITY Pharmacy. Nobody trains you in how to chat to people about their health concerns, but this project demonstrates that this is the way to do it. The conversations we had at the café are what gets you through the day and men are underrepresented in conversations about health.'
- It was great to work with men. Women can't get enough out of you in terms of information, but men are underrepresented in conversations about health.'



IMPACT ON COMMUNITY PROVIDER PRACTICE

The project:

- Empowered a range of local community service providers to combine services to better support, empower and raise awareness for men on developing better mental health.
- Provided mechanisms to connect with men in communities and broaden their sense of connection with their local community and as citizens.
- Engaged and educated practitioners and community workers on the importance of engaging with men to build positive social connections and relationships with other men in their communities.
- Created local interest from community providers in including the empathy tent 'safe space for men' concept in their services. As a result, the empathy tent has been included in addiction recovery events, mental health summits and GP based social worker events.

PRACTICE AND RESEARCH WORKING IN TANDEM

- The project showcased the power of co-production. It created the opportunity for the project worker and researcher to embark on a journey of many months focusing on relationship building and doing with, rather than doing for.
- The practitioner's role was to open up the groups and creating new horizons, activities and opportunities. The research role was about listening, getting it down on paper and putting our experience out there for other people to take on board.
- 'As a practitioner / research team, we spent time on identifying the outcomes of our project. This required learning about what this group of men like, what works for them and developing new initiatives which attract and engage them. It became clear that engaging with men requires different thinking, knowledge and awareness from engaging with women'.



LEGACY OF MEN'S MINDS MATTER

As Men's Minds Matter now draws to a close, its legacy is clear.

Men who once felt isolated have found connection, purpose, and renewed confidence in themselves and as parents. The project has shown that when men are supported to invest in their own wellbeing, the positive impact extends to their children, families, and wider communities.



"IT NOW FEELS NATURAL WITH OTHER MEN. THE MUTUALITY FEELS NATURAL – THERE'S SOLIDARITY – BROTHERHOOD."

It has contributed to shifting public and professional perceptions

It has helped reduce stigma for men and has encouraged men to seek help without fear or judgement

Collaboration with local services has embedded improved awareness re men and the need for more inclusion of men across community/public and social services

Empowered men through accredited learning – 10 participants successfully achieved the OCN Level 1 in Community Independence, building confidence, practical skills, and the capacity to contribute positively to their families and communities.

Empathy tent developed during the project has been gifted by Parenting Focus and will remain available for ongoing use by local community services

Our work has strengthened individuals and local services making it easier for men to access support

Our work has laid the groundwork for other groups and organisations to engage and better include men in services – co-production being the key

PARENTING FOCUS

Parenting Focus, formerly Parenting NI and originally established as the Parents Advice Centre in 1979, has always been committed to supporting parents, amplifying their voices, and strengthening families across Northern Ireland.

Unfortunately, due to funding issues, the Board of Trustees took the very difficult decision to close Parenting Focus at the end of September 2025. This has been a devastating occurrence and will inevitably impact many who have accessed and been supported by the wide range of services and programmes delivered by the organisation – including this initiative, Men's Minds Matter.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to all the men who have contributed their time, energy, and honesty to this innovative project. Their courage in sharing experiences and shaping solutions has been at the heart of Men's Minds Matter.

We also sincerely thank the Ideas Fund for their belief in both the project and the Parenting Focus team, whose support and partnership made this work possible.

We want to acknowledge the outstanding contribution of our esteemed collaborative colleague, the Community Researcher. Without her commitment, expertise, and ability to capture and reflect the voices and experiences of men, we would never have been in the position to fully represent the learning from this project. The role has been central in ensuring that Men's Minds Matter leaves a meaningful and enduring legacy.

Men's Minds Matter has proven that when fathers are supported to look after their mental health,

While the organisation will no longer continue, we are determined that the legacy of Men's Minds Matter lives on. To achieve this, we ask three things:

- 1. That the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister ensures men and dads are included in future policy development.**
- 2. That funders continue to keep men in their vision and prioritise investment in projects that deliver services and supports for men.**
- 3. That the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency ensure services and supports for men in the community and through the health service remain supported, visible, and accessible.**

the benefits ripple through their families and communities. The learning, relationships, and voices captured through this project must not be lost. Even as Parenting Focus closes, we hope the work continues to inspire change and create a lasting impact for men, dads, and families across Northern Ireland.

“ON BEHALF OF PARENTING FOCUS, I WOULD LIKE TO EXTEND MY HEARTFELT THANKS TO ALL THE MEN, PARTNERS, AND FUNDERS WHO MADE THIS PROJECT POSSIBLE.”

**MURIEL BAILEY
HEAD OF SERVICES AND OPERATIONS
PARENTING FOCUS**

DATE: SEPT 2025



PARENTING FOCUS

