

Stories from everyday life

Everyday Life

Young Men & Violence

Impact Report

Dave Thompson
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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE



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With thanks

To all our local member organisations and partners involved in any way with the delivery of Everyday Life. You have helped us reach deeply into the lives of young men, wherever they have found themselves and we could not have engaged with them so successfully without your help. Special thanks to Michael Briggs at East Belfast Community Development Agency (EBCDA) and Teresa Nugent at the Rural Health Partnership for all their support and guidance over the years.

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Dave Thompson is a Belfast-based freelance writer, facilitator & researcher. He has worked across a variety of sectors & says he loves projects where he gets to talk to people about who they are & what's important to them, so that in the end, people understand each other better.

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Background

YouthAction Northern Ireland is a highly respected youth charity, with over 75 years' experience of inspiring young people, tackling inequalities and investing in communities.

The charity is renowned for its work in improving the life chances of young women and young men, from wide ranging communities and with differing abilities. YouthAction Northern Ireland is committed to building good relations and contributing to flourishing communities in a peaceful shared society.

For further information visit www.youthaction.org;

'Violence is part of everyday life'

Many young men have said it. Violence can be recreational, sectarian, online or domestic. It can happen between individuals and in groups, in public or in private. Often fuelled by alcohol, risk taking behaviour and pent-up emotions, insecurities and fears.

Violence is destructive. It disrupts good relationships between people, within and across communities. It creates barriers to learning and can prevent achievement in school or access to work. It has a negative impact on mental health. Young men tread a precarious path of being both a victim and perpetrator of violence.

There are alternatives. **Everyday Life** addresses the complex issue of young men and violence. Funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, Everyday Life worked with 2938 young men from East Belfast, urban and rural areas of Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council, Newry Mourne & Down District Council and Derry City & Strabane District Council.

This is a collection of stories from young men in **Everyday Life**. They have contributed their own experiences and reflected on themselves and how they want to be acknowledged. Their stories are about learning to live, work and lead, to build better connections with parents, partners, friends, employers and communities.

These are stories of young men who want to be positive role models for others, who have learned how to make positive life choices, build resilience, and to cope with the challenges of being a young man. To get the best from everyday life.

The names of the young men have been changed for the purposes of this report.

The Everyday Life performance scorecard is included at the end of the report to demonstrate outcomes.

Kenny's Story

"You want to represent yourself well as a person, as a young man. You want to be the most genuine person you can be."

Kenny, now in his early twenties, grew up in Monkstown. He attends a community boxing club, which has been an important influence on him over the years. *"For a lot of us, the boxing club gave us their time, and now we give them a lot of our time. There's a lot of trust there."* The club also has two full time youth workers. Recently, a worker from YouthAction has been co-delivering a young men's group alongside the two youth workers. Kenny is part of this group, which numbers about twelve young men altogether. They meet every week to talk about their life experience and the pressures of growing up in Monkstown.

The first week, the group talked about values; what they were and why they were important. The following week, the group held a 'values auction' where everybody had to bid for the values they most wanted. Kenny thought the auction was good craic and very intense as it became competitive, but it also prompted conversation about the values the group thought were most desirable. *"Caring would be a big one, you want to care for your friends and family and the people who are around you. If they care for you, you want to care for them, and that includes providing for your family when you are older. Keeping food on the table and providing a home and shelter. You'll have a family at some point, and you will have to step up, and provide."*

How young men are thought of, was also a key part of the discussion, with the group feeling

that it can be easy for young men to be given a bad reputation, when they actually want to make a difference in the community. *"Being respected as a young man would also be a key value. You don't want anyone to look at you in the wrong way or get the wrong impression. Going in for a job, people see you as a white male from a Protestant area; you don't want to be forced out the door. You want to represent yourself well as a person, as a young man. You want to be the most genuine person you can be. It makes a whole world of a difference especially for getting your own place in the community and people knowing who you are and what you can do. Honesty is another one, there's no point being a liar, if you constantly lie no one is going to believe anything you say. Owning up to your own mistakes too, trying to overcome those mistakes and make yourself into a better person."*

As the meetings progressed, there was discussion of specific issues that affect the group members' lives. One of those sessions was about gambling. *"There was a small number of us at that, five or six of us, and we were talking about how much we gamble, how much we spend, who we gamble on."* One of the youth workers helped the group try to calculate how much they might be spending. *"One of the guys deleted the app, after he was shocked by working out how much he was gambling. He went into a complete dark mode -he had a real eye opener about how gambling can really affect you and how much money you can lose. He set it up again later, but he put a deposit limit on it. One bet won and you think you're top of the world, and you do another bet and another bet and then your winnings become a loss. It keeps going on, and sometimes you're betting so much that you don't even realise you're betting."*

For most of the young men in the group, this was the first time they had talked about gambling in this way. This led to further conversation about how to handle betting. *"You can gamble, but you have to gamble responsibly. It's about knowing your limits, and knowing when to cash out and stop betting, controlling what you're spending and putting your money into. It was helpful talking about how gambling is affecting loads of people's lives and the debts people can have. If you go to look for a place for yourself, and the bank or the Housing Executive look at all your bank statements and they see gambling, they're going to turn you away because they're going to think you spend all your money gambling."*

The group were also prompted to think not just about how and when they gamble, but why they gamble, and what it said about their sense of identity when they brag about the wins, but won't talk about the losses.

Another important issue for the group was alcohol. *"We talked about our personal stories and some of us couldn't tell how much we were drinking on a night out because after the first couple, there's a couple after that, and then a couple more. Then you're changing drinks. It's different if you're only going out occasionally, but if it's becoming a repetitive thing, it's more of a worry. Some people think that to get steaming or blocked, or whatever, it's just a thing you do."*

The group also talked about how the amount of alcohol someone drinks is often connected to the group they are with. *"It depends on what group you're in and depends on what your friends are doing. I'm not going to say I didn't have a drink before I was 18, it is a part of growing up, but it is also something I've learned to control. It's not about not having a drink, but you need to know your limits and be aware of how much you're drinking on a night out."*



Brendan and David's story

"I learned not to be so hard on myself. Not trying to not be the alpha male, not to take it all to my head. Just be you and not to try to be something you're not."

Brendan and David were attending the same youth club in Keady when they first heard about a young men's group being set up. *"We all said we'd give it a go and went to the group to see what it was about, and we stuck at it. There was a group of about fifteen lads, from 15 to 18 years old. We looked at what it is to be a man, how to grow up and mature and deal with challenges."*

The first thing the group talked about was about how they defined masculinity. *"The youth worker was asking us what we thought a man was and giving us definitions, and seeing what we thought. There was never a strict definition nothing like 'this is how you be a man' he just tried to make everyone feel they had a similar understanding. We looked at how social media and TV portrays boys and how they have to be real muscular, have an alpha male complex and bravado - which for a group of fifteen rowdy Keady boys was a bit of an issue! There were always stoppages in the middle of meetings because of wrestling! It was good craic, but we were learning at the same time."*

Masculinity and violence was another focus for the group, looking at the effects of social media and the sort of stereotypes that come through Twitter and Instagram pages. *"How you're meant to be well built and over six-foot-tall and then recognising men can be different and don't have to be like that. It's*

ok to be quiet and shy and you don't have to shout over people." The group also learned about to deal with disagreements in a group of young men. *"When something does happen, and there is a fall out, it doesn't always have to be resolved by hurting each other or shouting abuse."* Both Brendan and David felt this was very much in the experience of the group coming from a small town. *"If there was a disagreement, it wouldn't just be two people having a disagreement the whole town would be talking about it. There would be stories going about and it blows out of proportion and then violence can kick in."*

Coming out of that first group both Brendan and David recognised how their thinking had changed. For Brendan, the biggest take away was confidence. *"Confidence was a big one, when you're being asked questions, obviously in a group of 15 people there are going to be separate opinions. But you develop a voice to be able to speak up about*

what you believe. Leadership too, although you're listening to other people's perspectives, you sort of have to talk and make sure everyone is listening, even though at the time I was a participant, I was still trying to make sure someone wasn't telling someone else they were wrong." For David, it was more about self-respect. "I learned not to be so hard on myself. Not trying to not be the alpha male, not to take it all to my head. Just be you and not to try to be something you're not. I think self-respect is a big thing for a lot of young men. They put themselves down and think they're not good enough. The challenge was to speak what was in my head, and not worry about what other people thought. We were all in the young men's group, but there was still a concern about getting judged. It was always in the back of my head."

When they had the opportunity to work with and help lead the next group of young men, both Brendan and David were keen. "The young men's project was quite a big thing. The youth worker said 'would you mind coming in and talking to the younger lads and trying to relate to them?' It was kind of just talking to a younger version of yourself! The new group got every single point we were saying because they were going through it, a year after us."

Having been involved with young men's groups for a few years now, Brendan and David can see recurring issues. "The same things keep coming up and I think they're getting worse. Social media is a real big thing. Celebrities are telling young people you have to be this way. Boys can't show emotion, it's unmanly. The younger generation seem to be growing up faster

- there's twelve and thirteen year olds trying to act like they're eighteen. You're thinking, calm down and go and play with Nerf guns!"

The groups offer young men the opportunity to talk in a safe space and discuss issues openly. "Most people are afraid to express themselves, in case they are mocked. That's a big thing, they're slagging each other off and if you said the wrong thing, you would get slagged for it. There's a fear of trying to say something. And that's not good for mental health; thoughts then build up in someone's head."

Alternative ways to deal with conflict have been a key feature of recent groups. "We've been looking at how to handle yourself in situations; understanding it's ok to use words, rather than try to fight your way out of it, just explain how you feel and walk away. If there's a group, and you walk away, you are likely to be mocked for it, but it's being able to accept that - and continue to walk away. Young men need to understand that is a viable option. That is one of the main difficulties - trying to convince a load of lads under 18, not to fight. But the way we did it was good - we had a lot of different activities and one night we had the police come and do a course on how one punch can kill. They talked about what can happen on a night out. Somebody stands on your foot in the chip shop, and normally nothing will happen. But if it's Saturday night and you've had a few drinks then it can escalate quickly, and you need to focus in that moment. If you punch somebody and they go down -they might not get back up. I thought that was hard hitting."

Lucas's story

"Everybody is equal and should be treated fairly. That's important. People are unique and different and should be respected for their decisions."

Lucas, was born and brought up in Kilkeel, County Down. In his early twenties, he briefly moved away to Belfast for work. Moving home again, he found his circumstances had changed. *"When I came back, I literally didn't know anybody anymore! Everybody I knew had moved away or gone to uni so I was kind of stuck with almost a social awkwardness because everything had changed."* Lucas had been unable to pick up new work, and then, to make matters worse, the pandemic reduced employment options even more.

Lucas heard about Everyday Life. *"I was originally part of a YouthAction programme and was recommended to move into this. I agreed to come along to the group, and I enjoyed it. It was mostly to do with young men, that's why I was interested."*

As with many of the Everyday Life groups, there was plenty of discussion about stereotypes and what is expected of men or women. *"It's always the same, you get into a topic and everyone seems to have an opinion! That's the best thing about being in groups -you get other people's opinions, and you learn from them. We talked about the stereotypes that young men face, stigmas that everybody has to be a certain way because you're a man. And women also have to be a particular way as well -even though that's actually not the case!"*

Lucas feels that a small, remote town like Kilkeel has held on to certain stereotypes.

"I think it's harder in Kilkeel. You're cut off from big cities, away from Belfast, it's forty minutes to Newry. You don't really have as much diversity as you would in other places. You have to be tough; men have to get a job while women sit at home. These are things I have faced myself at home. Getting a job is a big thing, especially with my Dad. He's the person who pushes towards that. As well as that there's being physically tough and strong. You have to be physically strong. That sticks out for me because that's what people expect you to be in Kilkeel. And keep your emotions to yourself as well."

Lucas has found it helpful when the group has been able to identify particular stereotypes and then break them down. The group then builds on what they perceive men should be. *"You begin to realise everybody is equal. There were things you were taught from birth, or as a child. People in school act according to the way they were brought up."*

'You should be this and you shouldn't be that. These things aren't normal if you do something this way or think that way.' But the world is different now, and those things don't matter. You can be whoever you want to be."

The group discussions have left Lucas with a lot to reflect on personally. *"Depression is another big factor. It's like if you're a man, you don't have depression, you shouldn't have depression -even though it's very easy to fall into depression. That's talking from my own experience. I think depression is going to be one of the biggest problems we'll be facing whenever lockdown is over, literally people's mental health is completely destroyed by this."*

Lucas has also examined his own routine and motivations about exercise; which he admits had turned a hobby into a chore. He had very high expectations for himself, which negatively impacted on his mental health. *"I was obsessed with my fitness for a time. That's a big problem in Kilkeel - you have to be physically fit and strong. I was focussed on physical appearance, not the actual health benefits. I would have gone to a gym all the time and it turned into a competition against myself. Now I do some home workouts and I go out every day for a walk. I do take breaks and I don't push myself as much as I used to. I think that's one of those things that's been able to happen over lockdown."* (COVID-19 Pandemic 2020 & 2021 Restrictions)

Lucas thinks his interaction with the group has also changed how he interacts with people. *"Everybody is equal and should be treated fairly. That's important. People are unique and different and should be respected for their decisions. Whenever certain people are saying negative stuff, I instantly go into a mode where I'm saying, 'no, you shouldn't be saying that.' You are expected to stand by and let someone else's problems work their way out - even though you know it's wrong. That's the way this programme helps. It gives you the tools to recognise those rights and wrongs."* But he has learned to choose his moments. *"I've realised I need to sit back and take in other people's responses before making a decision myself and jumping to conclusions. If I saw something I wanted to respond to on social media, I would have taken it seriously. Now I take my time!"*



Ethan's story

*"There is a whole macho side to football ...
All these young men go through this, but unless they're
put into a setting, where they can talk about it and to
tackle it, they probably never will."*

Now in his late twenties, Ethan is in the final stages of completing his Community Youth Work Degree at the Ulster University. His experience of youth work started as a young person, to being a peer mentor and then a series of youth work qualifications leading up to his degree. Coming from east Belfast, Ethan has always been concerned about tackling underachievement particularly with young Protestant men, who, he feels have often been left behind by political leadership and the education system. *"Not doing that well at school, masculinity, feeling left behind by the system -these were massive things for me. So when one of the youth workers at YouthAction asked me to volunteer with young men's work, I was all for it."*

YouthAction have been able to forge a partnership with Bloomfield Football Club. *"I used to coach a team at Bloomfield. They are quite unique, players come from across different levels of education and classes, they have different faiths and religions, but the commonality is that they love football."* YouthAction suggested working with young men, 14-16 years old, in the middle of adolescence going into adulthood. Ethan was able to co-deliver the group alongside the YouthAction worker.

The young men's work at the club has now been ongoing for a while, with groups meeting each week and one to one mentoring also. Ethan particularly enjoyed helping the small groups engage. *"I was able to dip my toe into different stuff. There was a*

residential in Gannaway and we had group work sessions around masculinity and what they thought being a man was, as well as talking about stereotypes and friendship. It was about building relationships with the boys and for myself, being able to reflect and think critically about the questions I was asking them. We were able to bring two Irish league footballers on board. We had a three-day coaching workshop where we used football as a tool to engage, to develop group work."

Ethan thinks that although the young men at the club have diverse backgrounds, mental health is a common need. *"In a football team of say 15 or 16 young men, who are themselves 15 or 16 years old, half of those young men won't stay on to do A-levels,*

some won't achieve A-C GCSEs. A lot of those boys know that, but in merging together and playing football, one thing that I've found is that you could have a young man from a single parent family from a very working-class loyalist council estate, and then they're with a young man who lives in a huge house in Ballyhackamore whose parents are professionals who drive nice cars. But the common theme is mental health and how they deal with their emotions and have been discouraged about speaking out about how they feel and who they are. It doesn't matter who you are, it will affect you."

Stereotypes have contributed to this. "There is a whole macho side to football, in the dressing room and on the pitch, being the bravest and being the fighter or being the strongest. All these young men go through this, but unless they're put into a setting where they can talk about it and to tackle it, they probably never will."

The young men's groups take approaches that open up conversation about mental health and wellbeing and make it something that can be talked about openly. "We approach it that everyone has mental health, it's in us, emotional, physical, spiritual and mental health, these are four things every individual has. We have open conversations about what people know and what they'd like to know. For me personally, I had seen poor mental health through members of my family, and attempted suicides in close friends who were unfortunately successful in taking their own life. There are all those unanswered questions as to why, what were they going through and why couldn't they talk about that?"

Ethan thinks that growing up in east Belfast has particular difficulties for young men, with lots of complex issues around their sense of identity. "I think in a lot of cases young men can see going to university as somehow selfish. Maybe because their parents or their siblings haven't gone to university. Growing up, in my head, it almost felt like me leaving, or turning my back on my community. I had a siege mentality instilled in me, through that tribal feeling of being a young Protestant male, a loyalist from east Belfast. I'm focussing on a working-class experience because that's my own background, but the same might be true of other people. I think that siege mentality exists in young men through a number of different things. It can be within themselves, not wanting to show emotion and wanting to fight the world."

The young men's group provides space to talk about sense of identity, hopes and fears. "The young men we work with are afraid of what they don't know. They're developing their understanding of themselves, and who their friends are, and who their parents are, and aspects of their community, and what they want. It's all relevant."

Ethan feels it's a positive action to ask questions about who you are and what you are about, because the young men are more likely to see and make more choices for themselves. "It's ok, not to know who you are, it's ok to ask that, or ask what you want to do with the rest of your life. I'm still proud to be where I'm from, I'm still proud of who I am and that aspect of my identity, but I can look at it now from a different avenue. I can do more to help people through my own education."

Michael's story

"I think that the work with the youth worker probably expanded my capabilities and helped me become more ready for being the age I am and doing the things that I should be doing and not have problems holding me back."

When Michael was 14 or 15, he began suffering from poor mental health. *"I was going to high school, and the first two years of high school were perfectly fine, but around when I was starting my GCSEs, I began to not enjoy it very much and became pretty depressed and socially anxious, so I stopped going. I would say I didn't have anyone close to talk to. I sort of hung around with people I didn't really talk to. That transition to GCSEs and stuff was a bit overwhelming. I'm not sure why, I just wasn't prepared for it. I couldn't take it and I decided to not go into school. My life changed from going to school every day to not leaving the house at all. I would be in the house all day every day and not going out. I didn't see anyone my age for probably months at a time."*

Michael received help from social services. *"They sent me a person who would come out and meet me for an hour or two once a week. Just to take me out of the house and do something. That was good, but eventually that person had to stop seeing me."* Michael, now about 16, began to meet up with a youth worker from YouthAction. *"He would come out and literally ask me what I wanted to do, usually a walk, or some sort of sport. Just from meeting him the first few times I could already sense that it was going to be a good thing, I felt like I was going to be able to make progress and he could relate to me. I hadn't had a male person there."*

Michael met up with the youth worker once or twice a week. *"We'd either talk about casual things, football or the weather, and that was helpful because all I wanted was someone to talk to and have regular conversation with. We'd also talk about some of the problems I had, like being depressed or anxious. We'd think of ways to resolve them. I think the youth worker did pretty well by introducing me to YouthAction's National Citizen Service, that's a bunch of young people 15-17 years old meeting up and going out on trips. He helped integrate me with people my own age to overcome the problems I had with contact."*

The Northern Ireland National Citizen Service (NINCS) ran over the summer, with different social gatherings, and opportunities for Michael to learn things too, like CPR. Rather than attending a group and talking about mental health issues, Michael found the general social activity helped improve his mental health. *"It was good because I have had previous things that focussed on mental health, like CAMHS or therapy, but I don't feel like those were as effective. At my age, I felt like I just wanted to do things that everyone was doing, rather than in an adult setting."*

"At the beginning, we were all in the one room and we had games and conversation in a circle getting to know each other. We grabbed food too, just hanging out. Everyone was different, for different reasons, and I was in the room with a bunch of people my own age just talking. There was nothing uncomfortable or major that would cause anyone to feel not included or anxious. It was pretty relaxing and safe. It was a good way for me to reconnect with people."

Michael thinks the activity helped him become the kind of person he was when he started secondary school. *"The main difference was; I began to feel like myself at the beginning of high school. When I was depressed or anxious, that was where I wanted to get to. People might say I'm now fixed or I'm better, but it's really about feeling the way I used to. I wasn't scared to go outside any more or intimidated by meeting people my own age. My overall confidence was up and my worries were down."*

Socialising with other young people brought about an important long term change in Michael. *"Just before I began to meet up with the youth worker, I had started to go to the local regional college. I had been forced back into school to sit my GCSEs, and got four of them. I took the decision to go to college, but by Christmas I realised I couldn't do it anymore. It was too stressful, and I dropped out. But after meeting up with the youth worker and doing activities like NCS, and getting used to people my own age, I went back to college to do the same course I was doing. I have two months left and I have two acceptances from Queen's University – so it has definitely helped."*

Reflecting on his time with the youth worker, Michael thinks it helped him prepare to re-engage with people his own age. *"I think that the work with the youth worker probably expanded my capabilities and helped me become more ready for being the age I am and doing the things that I should be doing and not have problems holding me back. Working with him clearly showed me that people in that kind of work are true to what they say, they're honest. I'd say the biggest thing to take away was if you're going through things, YouthAction is a really good way of having someone help you get through that and be able to relate to your problems. It clearly shows there are people out there, good people who can help you."*

Lorcan's story

"People get to talk about random things, focussing on hobbies and interests -what you bring as a person rather than about a certain community."

Lorcan first got involved with YouthAction's National Citizen's Service (NCS) when he was 17 or 18. *"It involved a lot of group work and a lot of team exercises. We went away on two residentials. It was people not just from my local area, around Newry, but from all over Northern Ireland. We collaborated with different NCS projects as far apart as Fermanagh and Belfast."*

NCS usually meets over the summer and autumn months, with residentials and a social action project focusing on something decided by the group. Part of the programme for NCS looks at stereotypes and promoting inclusion. *"It has people from all aspects of life, a mix of genders, a variety of different socio-economic backgrounds and different sexualities. It's about inclusivity and trying to reduce stereotypes within communities, Protestant and Catholic people involved working together, to get them together to do activities, including outdoor activities."*

The diversity of young people was what interested Lorcan most. *"I was always involved in youth projects and I've had a real passion for being involved in representing young people from different aspects and different walks of life. I've had friends from different backgrounds and I liked widening it out a bit more and meeting people from all over Northern Ireland. I live in a mostly Catholic area so to meet up with other Protestant men or women, that just wouldn't happen if I didn't do youth projects."*

A typical meet up at NCS involved the young people getting to know each other through games or icebreakers, before eventually going on residential. Lorcan's first residential was in Newcastle, at Greenhill YMCA. Helping the group to get to know each other better was always a key part. *"There are smart ways of doing it, the activities are aimed at thinking about you as a person, as opposed to a person who is Catholic, or Protestant, or from Armagh or from Newry. You might be talking about fun things about yourself, to get away from particular identities. To be able to say, 'right, I've got other things I'm really proud of and they represent me better than I'm Catholic and I'm from here, or I'm Protestant and I'm from there, or I'm straight, or I'm gay, or lesbian or whatever.' People get to talk about random things, focussing on hobbies and interests -what you bring as a person rather than about a certain community."*

Lorcan's second residential was in Tanagh Outdoor Centre in Monaghan and he felt this

further increased the group's understanding of each other. *"At the start of NCS you are meeting up once a week, but a residential forces you into getting involved with other people. If you're away for a whole weekend you have to get along with people and work alongside them. You can't really avoid them! There's so much more time, you get to know people a lot better."*

Lorcan's group chose to focus their social action project on elderly people. *"We worked as a group and decided to create a music video for a care home with people who had Alzheimer's. Music has a really good impact on Alzheimer's, it triggers thoughts in the brain. We all dressed up as different pop artists over different decades. Some dressed up as people from the nineteen twenties, thirties, forties etcetera. We had two or three songs from each decade; we made a video from each song and then we put it all together. We all met up and went to the care home and played it to the older people - they all seemed to love it!"*

Lorcan returned to NCS the following year to be a mentor. *"As a leader you had more responsibility, you're still heavily involved but you take a more responsible role. I was acquiring leadership skills, but still meeting people and hearing their story and their background."*

Lorcan feels NCS helped him become more confident and prepared him for university in London. *"When I went over there it was crazy, everyone is so diverse and so different to each other, everyone has their own personality and attributes. It's not just the typical Catholic/Protestant, male/female division, you have people with so many different cultural and religious backgrounds."*



Lorcan also got involved in the British Irish Parliamentary Assembly (BIPA), through YouthAction. This was a collaboration alongside Youth Work Ireland; Youth Scotland; Youth CYMRU & UK Youth to talk about the impact of Brexit on these islands. The British Parliamentary Assembly wanted to hear young people's perspectives on what they thought was going to happen, especially with the Irish border. *"At that time Brexit seemed fresh and we didn't know what borders would look like in Northern Ireland. Quite a few of us had been involved with cross border projects and we were looking at funding and where that would come from post EU -and generally thinking about preparing for the UK's exit. It got me really interested in politics. I was also involved in the local youth council in Newry, which is more about local politics. I was doing social sciences at A-level, nothing to do with politics, but politics was something I got involved in and enjoyed, so I decided to go and study it and see what was like!"*

Ben's story

"I was trying to defuse situations in my head, to bring myself back into normal thinking. Instead of just reacting, you stop and think about it. Slow everything down..."

Ben went to an all-boys school in Belfast, but by the time he was 14 or 15 he was feeling under pressure at school and finding it hard to control his anger. *"I was getting quite angry at things and losing my temper. Then I would get into fights and stuff."* Ben found it hard to figure out the cause of his anger and what provoked such extreme reactions inside him. *"I was just angry at life at the time. I was feeling really down, not depressed, I just hated the world -or something! Whenever something did annoy me, my reaction was a lot worse. I ended up getting into trouble and then looking back on what I did and thinking, why did I do that? School wasn't really something I got used to, there was a wee bit of picking on each other in school that got me angry. As I got older, I was fighting more in school."*

Things came to a head when Ben was suspended from school. *"Someone had deleted my stuff from a pen drive, a whole year's work, and I turned round and punched him. I couldn't control it -it meant I had to do a lot of work again."* Ben was asked to go and see the school counsellor, who met with him a few times, before giving Ben's Mum the phone number for a youth worker from YouthAction who could work with him to learn more about his anger and how to control it.

Ben's relationship with the youth worker developed quickly. *"Me and him sort of always got on well from the start, because he was more understanding towards me - he was able to think how I thought. He's older but he was thinking from my point of view instead of his point of view, and he's quite easy to talk*

to. Whenever we first got together, he talked to me about what anger was."

Over time, they talked about practical ways for Ben to cope when he felt angry. *"One of the main things that stuck out to me was talking about the red mist coming across the front of your brain - you're just angry at the situation. It was something I was thinking about when I was trying to defuse situations in my head, to bring myself back into normal thinking. Instead of just reacting, you stop and think about it. Slow everything down, slow your thinking, it's all about the mindset you have. I also learned to think about the build up to it, what got me into the situation I was in, to see how my anger gradually built up."*

Ben learned to try different techniques, finding what worked and what didn't. Slowly, things changed. *"I realised I was using techniques in small situations. If my Mum was telling me to do something, instead of me turning round and yelling, I would tell her I was going to do it. I was going about a thing differently and thinking about what I was going to do before I did it. I realised I was going into a lot of situations and I was dealing with them badly. But then, over time, there were less and less situations where I was getting angry, and then anger wasn't really coming into play at all."*

Ben then formed a young men's group with some of his friends from where he lived in east Belfast. *"A couple of months in, the youth worker was bringing a young men's group away and he offered to bring me and a friend to see what it was like. Me and my mate went along, made a load of friends and really enjoyed ourselves. After that the youth worker suggested starting a group with my mates. We talked about the kind of things that would affect a young man where we lived, things we come into contact with every day. We did lots of teamwork games and got to know each other better, as well as group work. We did a residential at Gannaway near Millisle -it was good craic."*

Over the twelve-week programme, the group connected with lots of local organisations such as the Connswater Greenway Project and Belfast City Council. Local Councillors and MLAs also met with the group. The group talked about anti-social behaviour in the local area and how Ben's group might use their influence on others to stop it. *"We told them some of the things we wanted to happen in the park they actually listened and took it on board."*

The group also talked about mental health and built up a high level of trust with each other. *"We were talking about what was going on for us - there's a lot of suicides going on in Belfast and we talked about how to look out for each other. We've always been good friends and have grown up together, so we weren't too embarrassed to share with each other. I'm sure there were some things that people didn't say, but we were telling each other problems, which was the main thing."*

After the group finished up, Ben felt they lost touch a little during the COVID-19 lockdown. But in the future, Ben is keen to volunteer to help with other young men's groups. *"I'm sick of doing nothing, I got injured at football so now I'm looking for something to do -I like to be on the go!"*



Kevin's story

"We shared our own experiences of situations that could have led to violence... violence doesn't achieve anything good... The alternatives aren't really learnt, but we were able to talk about those alternatives."

Kevin was 17 and attending a youth club called REACT, in Armagh, when one of the youth workers from YouthAction offered to set up an Everyday Life young men's group. *"React was predominantly female, there's nothing wrong with that, I enjoy it! And I've nothing against working with girls! But obviously you have more in common in a young men's group. The youth worker told us a bit about what we would do and so three or four of us who knew each other joined up."*

The group met on Tuesday evenings towards the end of 2019. The original intention was that they would sometimes meet up with another Everyday Life group from Keady, but this was prevented by COVID-19 lockdown conditions coming in during March 2020. The first few sessions looked at the stigmas around being a young man and the kind of experiences young men go through. Violence was a key issue. *"We shared our own experiences of situations that could have led to violence. I have been in tense situations before, but violence doesn't achieve anything good. You can be put in the situation where someone doesn't agree with that. The alternatives aren't really learnt, but we were able to talk about those alternatives. For example, with a person who was trying to fight with you, learning how to walk away, asking someone else for help, or seeking advice. You shouldn't be ashamed to try to get out of those situations."*

The group talked about how violence is connected to a lack of ability or opportunity for young men to talk about what's going on for them internally. *"We discussed young men and not talking about feelings, and the violent outcomes of situations. Sometimes displaying emotions is considered as feminine -it's not- but a lot of people see it that way. Some men can be picked on or bullied for having those emotions. They can repress that or not talk about it, for fear of what people will say. It's peer pressure."*

The group began meeting in person, later switching to Zoom during COVID restrictions, and then, when restrictions eased, they began to meet each other for walks. *"Walking was easier. Walks allow space for individual conversation because we could be in pairs - the path is often narrow because we walked round the Palace Stables in Armagh. Two laps - it's quite big!"* Having known each

other to begin with, and remaining a small group, they found they could be very open with each other. *"I personally have never had any really bad experiences, but I know that, if I was to talk about it, I'd be very comfortable in that group because we all know each other and what is talked about stays in the room and no one judges anyone else. It's a safe space."*

The group also spent time exploring and unpacking stereotypes, relating to both genders. *"There are stigmas around behaviour, emotions, violence, discrimination, racism all of that. And it's not just about the younger generation, it's also about the older generation. That generation has obviously been through a lot of that -and they haven't always got to talk about it. Now these services that encourage people to talk about their mental health are growing, and we're being taught that it's ok to talk."*

Kevin has also found the group to be a good place to ask questions, for example, when the youth worker gave a talk on HIV. *"We looked at the stigma around it, and at the local and national stats. It surprised me how treatable it was. I didn't really have a notion what it was. You hear from movies or TV*

shows and you see it as this big bad thing, obviously it's not something you want to get, but it is treatable. And you shouldn't be ashamed of having it."

The group continues to meet, but Kevin is keen to help recruit other young men and volunteer to help with leading the group. *"We have looked at trying to get people in and looking at what the programme would be. We know what's good and what works, and how to give people reassurance and make them feel comfortable."*

Kevin is currently studying Health and Social Care and enjoys learning about a topic where people are encouraged to talk about themselves. He is considering going into social work. *"The young men's group is really good for social work because you're hearing personal stories. It gives you more ground to talk, it strengthened my relationships, even with a friend, because it gave us topics to talk about that I didn't think we would talk about; you hear other perspectives. So, you get an idea of how services need to be and what service users actually need. Why people go somewhere for help and what they get."*



Stephen's story

"If your name is constantly brought up, there'll be questions about you, and then it goes downhill from there... It puts something on your shoulder that you don't want to be there. They just try to control you."

Stephen, now in his early twenties, grew up in Monkstown, near a local boxing club. The club offers a youth service and employs two local youth workers. *"I grew up going to the boxing club, I started there in my early teens and I've stayed in the group over time."* Stephen has found that the club has been a source of enjoyment, but also support. *"Growing up, it turned us into the people we are because of the support that we got. It helped me in loads of ways. The leaders have always been willing to speak to me about anything and I can open up to them. I feel confident up there and the person I want to be, and they've helped me become that person."*

Stephen thinks his life would have been very different if it hadn't been for the boxing club. *"If it wasn't there, I don't know what we would have got up to! It's been about teaching you how to be a young man, what you can do and what you can't do. Helping you not to go off the rails really. They look after us. They didn't want us growing up as young men to get a bad name, they tried to bring us in and do helpful stuff around the community. People would think of us differently and stop thinking of us as thugs, that's what people think because they see a group of lads!"* Over the last few years the young men associated with the boxing club have been offering services to the local community such as gardening for pensioners, cutting grass, power hosing and litter picking and community clean ups. *"When younger people see us doing stuff like this, it's good*

for them to see it, they look up to us. Cause we're doing something good. You hope that's what they will want to do and change the way the estate is."

Recently a YouthAction youth worker has been working alongside the two youth workers at the club, to co-deliver the young men's group Stephen is part of. The group, about twelve young men altogether, meets every week and provides an opportunity to talk about their lived experience. It is a space to share their stories about the pressures of growing up and life in Monkstown.

One of the sessions that stood out for Stephen was about looking at culture and identity. *"We've done a session on your background - what does it mean to be a Protestant living in a Protestant area, or a*

Protestant living in a Catholic area, or to live in a mixed area?" The group have begun to talk about religion and what it means to them. "Some of us didn't even know half the things about it, so we're going to do another session about being a Protestant and what it means to be Protestant and the differences between Catholics and Protestants."

Stephen feels that developing his understanding of other people's background and culture is important. "It's about being a young man, in the real world. In my experience, the majority of people I've worked with in Belfast are Catholic. Some Protestants feel they can't show their identity depending on where they are working because they're too scared. But in my head, it's stupid. Whether you're a Protestant or a Catholic, we're all human, and at the end of the day we shouldn't be fighting over stuff, it's just going to keep happening. Some people realise as they get older that there is no difference, but sometimes you still get that same mentality -people can keep their reasons the same 'til the day they die!"

The young men's group have also talked about the effect of paramilitary organisations in Monkstown. "Some young men may do things that get them into bother, house robberies or breaking into cars, and then they either have to join the organisation or something may happen..." Enormous pressure can be put on young people. "If your name is constantly brought up, there'll be questions about you, and then it goes downhill from there. They've got you by the balls then.

They've put a target on your head basically, and it puts something on your shoulder that you don't want to be there. They just try to control you. There shouldn't be paramilitaries, they're just selling drugs and controlling people. They have bad backgrounds and they're negative people, and I don't want that. I'd rather be positive."

Stephen feels that the options for young people in these situations are limited. "Some people take it; they just have to take it. They feel the pressure, they'd be scared obviously, but the paramilitaries are just too controlling. That's why the best way is to keep yourself out of trouble."

This is why places such as the boxing club and activities such as the young men's groups are important. "The boxing club take anyone they feel may be going down the wrong path and bring them in, sit them down and have a chat and see if there's any possibility they could wise up or sort themselves out, or whatever they need. They don't want young people getting involved with the paramilitaries or getting involved taking drugs or alcohol. They try to keep people on the straight and narrow and give them the best possibility of whatever they want to do in life. The group is there to support you. You want to be good to yourself and be better, talking about the future and the good things, not the bad things. You get a different view on life. Not anti-social behaviour, drugs or alcohol, you're going down a different path."

Daithi's story

"We were always arguing, bickering and the teachers were getting sick of it! But ever since this group has started it's brought us together... We've been able to share stuff and hear each other's opinions. I would say he's become one of my best friends."

Daithi was 14 and had been regularly attending his local youth club in Newry when a YouthAction worker was invited in to start up a young men's group. *"I've always enjoyed the club. It's about the people -being able to go and have the craic with others and talk to people and socialise."* The group has been running for a few months and is made up of young men of a similar age to Daithi. The sessions often centre around some games and activities, a bit of football 'out the back' and a lot of discussion about masculinity and what it means to be a young man growing up.

Daithi thinks that sometimes young men get a bad reputation. *"Masculinity is about learning about how to respect people and communicate with others. Some people think of young men as not good and they're always fighting -there's some that do that, but not all. There are people who think all young men are violent -but I'm a big softie, so I am -I'm just very tall! I don't know why people think they have to cross the street to avoid this big fella coming towards them. Maybe that's just me thinking that!"*

The group often focuses on the issues the young men bring into the room, such as the stresses of school, someone getting bullied, getting into an argument or a fight and breakdowns in friendships. Daithi feels life at school is never short of difficulties. *"I used to always get bullied. People used to say I had*

a bit of weight on, not that I ever really noticed, but I have stretched, and everything has changed -I've been going upwards! Now that people see how tall I am, people don't say anything to me anymore! Bullying is a big issue though, but there's a lot of different things happening in school, exam stress, people coming in wearing trainers getting detentions and letters home for not having the right shoes... It would be good if somebody who was struggling with school work could get extra help. I know they already do that a bit, but sometimes, sometimes it's explaining it, people will understand something that is being taught from a different perspective. A bit more explanation on how to do the work would help because exams are a big thing."

Mental health has been a huge aspect, particularly with exam stress, and the group is an opportunity for the young men to be a support network for each other. *"We help each other out, because we know the others would do it for us if they knew that we were struggling. We want to help them out. One of my friends has been going through a lot of mental health stuff, and we've always been there for him and check that he's ok, and talk about what's been happening."*

The young men's group has also offered Daithi opportunities for new friendships. *"It's changed the way I used to be, it's brought me and one of the other fellas together. In*

primary school we weren't the best of friends, we didn't really get along. We were always arguing, bickering and the teachers were getting sick of it! But ever since this group has started it's brought us together. It was always immaturity, but we've been able to share stuff and hear each other's opinions. I would say he's become one of my best friends."

Daithi has also become more comfortable with the whole group. "In the larger group, when we had just started, it was hard to get to know the others because we were often in our own small groups. It was hard to get to know what people were into and their sense of humour. That's a big thing for me, I'm always messing! Humour is my way of making friends and it was hard to get a read on people. That was the thing that challenged me the most."

Another challenge, however, was about improving how he communicates with others. "I think I've changed a lot since I started. Before the group, if I said something, I would say 'sorry' after it, if someone didn't agree with something I said. But now I've realised just communicating is good, and not to be saying sorry for telling someone your opinion on stuff. I have got a bit better in how I speak. I've learned you have to be yourself, that's all you can do, and if others don't like it, they just have to get on with it! That's what I would take away. I've met loads of new people, I've been myself, and people have just accepted me. If I was in a group of people and they all think they're so cool, I'd still be talking about Star Wars, even if they didn't understand what I'm on about or what references I'm making, I'd still just talk about that!"



Eoin's story

"People always say young men don't talk, but sometimes they aren't given the opportunity. Unless you ask them directly, you aren't going to get any answers."

Eoin took part in youth groups throughout his teenage years. *"Like most of the young men I was always involved in a local youth club in Keady in various programmes. My cousin worked for YouthAction, he and another started the young men's group and I became involved. I didn't pay much heed to what the programme was about at the start, it was me and my mates and were there for the craic! As young fellas, at that age we took ourselves very seriously and it was all about acting the hard man, the big man, but that group gave us the space to relax, do a few activities and learn a bit. It was somewhere for us to go and we had a good laugh. We talked about masculinity, what being a man means for you, the pressures young men face, and understanding violence."*

Growing up, Eoin felt there was a lot of 'negative masculinity', especially about mental health. *"I found it quite awkward and quite hard to talk about how I felt. If you talked about anything, you looked weak. In school everybody had a persona, you were a tough lad, although in my case, I was never a tough lad, I was the joker. If anything was getting you down, you laughed it off, you put on the macho act that you didn't care."*

But this 'macho act' could also have serious consequences. *"There could be a lot of violence on nights out. For you to be respected, you had to be able to fight or stick up for yourself. There was a lot of that. There was also a drinking culture, if you didn't drink or go out and get full, people lost respect for you."*

Over time, Eoin began to volunteer with young men's groups. *"Moving into volunteering I was able to facilitate discussion, helping to get young people involved and help them build relationships. You could see more of what the groups were getting out of it and I was able to evaluate it. I've always tried to think about why I enjoyed the sessions, but every young person will have a different experience, so we try to have a constant conversation about what is working, or not working, for them."*

Again and again, Eoin found there was a need to create space for young men to talk. *"You find that once you ask them questions, they talk. People always say young men don't talk, but sometimes they aren't given the opportunity. Unless you ask them directly,*

you aren't going to get any answers. When it comes to anti-social behaviour or violence, sometimes young men aren't asked why that happens. Nobody actually asks why - and sometimes that's where you get the best responses, because it gives them a chance to stop and think about it."

Eoin then began to achieve qualifications in youth work. "When I left school, I didn't know what I wanted to do but I always had a passion for youth work, but then I started to get qualifications through YouthAction who gave me a work placement and I worked there for a year. I did my certificate course in youth work and got into university."

Eoin found the first academic year to be a challenge, however. "There was a stress factor. I wasn't listening to all the work we did - I was holding everything into myself; pressure about money, difficulties with work, pressure of university work itself. I was beaten up on a night out, too - so it was everything. I felt fed up and demotivated. I couldn't see the end goal for that first year." Feeling there was no way forward, Eoin made the decision to drop out of the course. A helpful mentor, back at YouthAction, advised him to finish the first year, defer the next year and just take a break. "A bit of time away gave me the opportunity to think about what I really wanted to do. I always enjoyed people and in the end I was able to knuckle down and get the degree course done. I went back to university and back on my placement and ended up loving it. I found a

wee bit of a passion again."

Eoin has found that there will always be challenges, however, even when he eventually began working for YouthAction after university. "I hadn't much experience with mentoring and I found it quite challenging, just based on not fully knowing how to support someone. But that came with practice and understanding the role better and conversations with senior staff. It's an ongoing challenge, because every young person is different, but you have to trust in your own skill set that you can be a help to someone."

Eoin thinks the biggest current challenge for many young men is the impact of the Covid-19 restrictions. "In rural areas especially, young people don't have any sort of socialisation. They haven't got a wee town where they can walk down and meet a friend, and that is likely to cause a massive impact on mental health. Physical health as well, so many young people were involved in sports. We just hope the young people will be keen to get involved in everything once we get to normality again. Over lockdown I've had more numbers in the young men's groups, they just want to be involved in something."



The football players' story

"They had the attitude, when they were in school, of getting out of school and getting into a job. I think people are looking more at different options now and doing more with their lives."

Bloomfield Football Club's committee were keen to start an Everyday Life group with YouthAction, primarily as a resource to promote better mental health with some of their players. The group, who are all around the age of 16 coming 17, have now been together for a couple of years. *"We all really wanted to get involved, we saw it as a good opportunity, and there was coaching involved as well."*

To begin with, some of the Linfield FC coaches came to Bloomfield to do coaching and then some group work sessions over the summer. After that, the group met up in the changing rooms once a week and covered a variety of topics. *"We've talked about the attitudes of young men and masculinity and stuff. We discuss why it's thought about the way it is and what you can do about it."*

"The youth worker talked about drugs and alcohol awareness, and how it can affect your mental health in the long term. It wasn't something I had ever really thought about, to be honest, but I learned something new."

Social group can be a factor, however.

"Sometimes the peer pressure is important, if you're a younger player with older players, because they're doing it, you want to do it."

In general, the group have been learning to talk to each other openly, building up teamwork and trust. This was helped a lot by the residential to

the Gannaway Outdoor Centre at Millisle, where the group began to relax more with each other. The sessions had been looking at young men and violence, but in-depth conversation started late on the Saturday night as the young men shared stories of different incidents they were aware of. *"Round school, someone can say the wrong thing to someone who is having a bad day and you be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and then there's fighting and getting into trouble."*

The group also talked about ways to keep out of trouble. *"A lot of it was about picking the right choice of friends, if you know that your mates are doing something wrong, then making the choice to not do what they're doing. It might mean staying by yourself, if your mates are in the wrong."*

Conversation about violence also included the influence of paramilitaries. *"It's one of the biggest pressures that comes to my mind and*

getting involved with them at a young age can just ruin your life. It can start out as something simple and then it just escalates. If people buy drugs off them, and then get themselves into debt with them, they end up working for them and selling the drugs. That ends up leading to violence and that has happened here a lot over the years.” The young men accept that there are no straightforward solutions. Unsurprisingly, given they play on a football team together, they didn’t think the way out was something that could be achieved individually. *“It sounds easy to say ‘just leave’, but everyone knows it’s not as simple as that. You need to talk to people about it, tell people about the situation you’re in and let them help, because you can’t do it by yourself.”*

The first lockdown, due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, meant that the group began meeting online in the afternoons, for two sessions per week. Sometimes this was just for fun, with quizzes or games, or even sessions where there were coaches online who did some football coaching sessions. But the group also talked about the stress of the lockdown, particularly when schoolwork had to be completed. *“You were meant to be doing schoolwork, but you could be in bed all day! It was hard to get motivated to get up and do schoolwork, because teachers wouldn’t know if you weren’t doing it.”* The group talked about ways to cope with the problem. *“The most important thing for me, anyway, was trying to get into some sort of routine. At the start of it, I was sitting on the PlayStation all day, then going to bed at three or four in the morning and then wakening up in the middle of the day. It was important to get some sort of routine, to pick out things you were going to do with your day and then try to do them.”*

There was also conversation about achievement at school and the kind of future the young men wanted. As they are all coming close to the point when they can legally leave school, the group has begun to reflect on the differences between their generation and older members in their family circles. *“A lot of people are not really successful with jobs. You look at a lot of the older people; you don’t see a lot of them do much with their lives. They had the attitude, when they were in school, of getting out of school and getting into a job. I think people are looking more at different options now and doing more with their lives.”*

“There was maybe more of a financial struggle before, but now there’s a situation where you don’t have to rush out of school. Back then you didn’t need a whole lot of qualifications to get a job, but now your basic GCSEs are needed, it’s a lot harder now.”

“For me, my Dad’s side of the family all work in the printing industry. It’s not really something that I’m looking to do. I think my Dad was able to leave school with barely any qualifications, and he was able to go and work for his dad, and then once he got qualifications for that job, he was able to find a better paid job. I think he has seen how different it is for me, and for my brother as well. My brother has just left school and become an electrician, and I think I’m going to do something different as well.”

“My cousins went to university and it’s something I would like to do as well. My Mum and Dad and aunts and uncles have all had basic jobs. My granda worked in the shipyard, but my cousins are the first ones to go to university. I’m not sure what I want to do yet.”

Gary's story

"I used to be much quieter but being part of the group has helped me find my voice more."

Gary, now in his early twenties, started on the Amplify project (a scheme looking at personal development, good relations and citizenship) with YouthAction in Kilkeel. When Amplify finished, he was offered the chance to join Everyday Life. Unemployed at the time, Gary had been taking a course in ICT locally, but there hadn't been enough people to keep it going, and so the course ended. *"I had nothing else to do and I didn't want to be sitting in the house doing nothing, I wanted to get out and meet new people."*

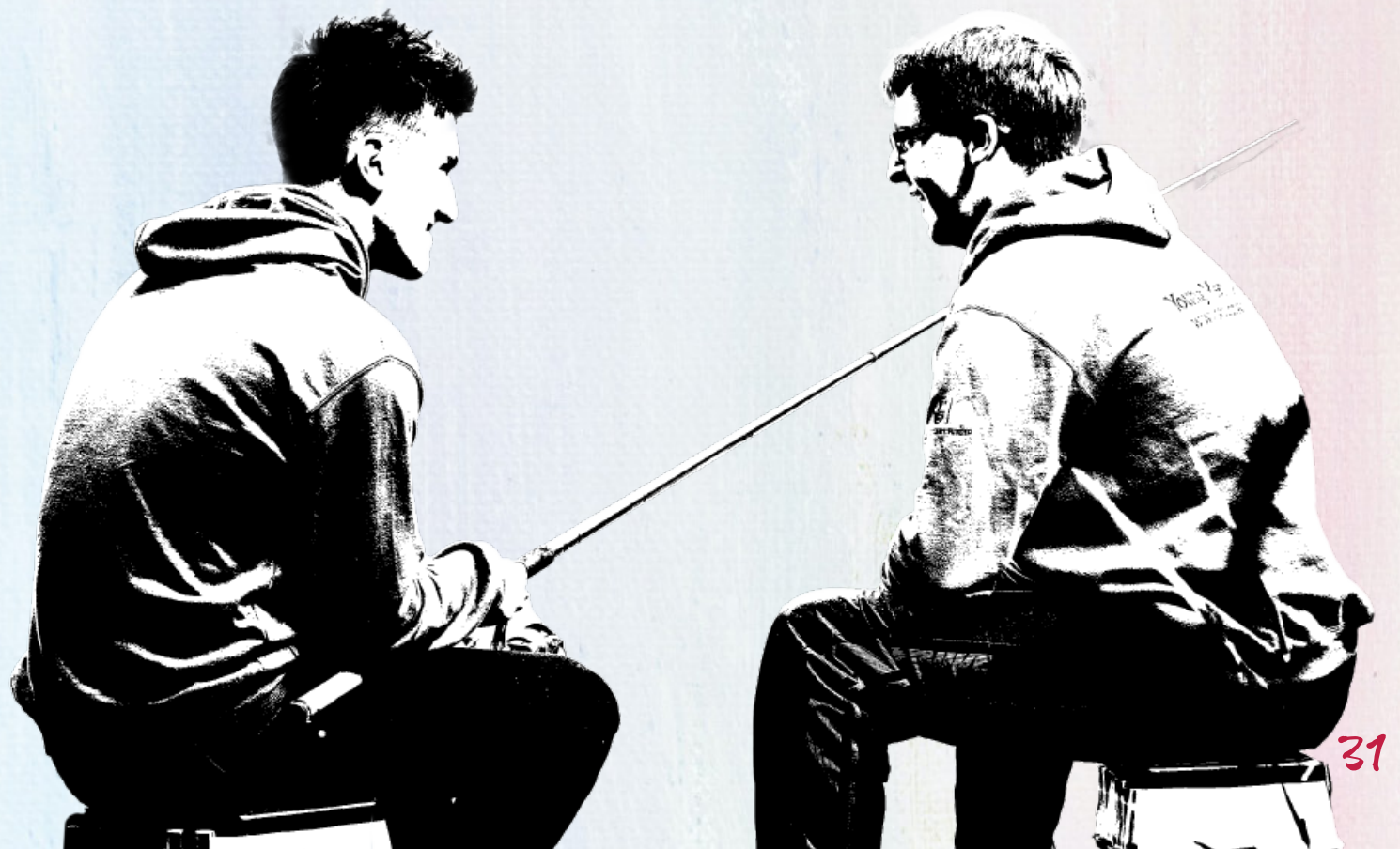
The Everyday Life group offered Gary the chance not only to connect with others, but also to acquire some qualifications, such as a level 1 qualification in youth work. The group was small, but enjoyed hanging out together, often meeting at a local gym, or going out for a walk.

There were lots of activities, such as LifeMaps that look at key moments and experiences, to help group discussion, particularly about mental health. Face to face meeting was disrupted by the spread of COVID-19, however. Continued restrictions have made things difficult for the group. *"Obviously, I can't go out anywhere, can't see friends and family and can't do driving lessons, which I had started pre pandemic, so I'm bored! Any other week, I'd be out and about. I help with coaching at a local football club and that has stopped. But the online group has helped keep me busy so that I'm doing stuff during the day."*

During lockdown YouthAction sent out 'pick me up' packs with seeds to plant (flowerpot included) and the ingredients to make cupcakes. *"The flower grew - but it is dead now! I shared lots of photos of the cupcakes - we were always looking for general things to keep our mental health positive."* Gary feels the group has been an important aspect of this. *"We all have near enough the same interests and personality and get along well. The most important thing is that we do help each other out and keep in touch."*

The group has continued to talk about masculinity and the role that has played in their lives. This has been a positive experience for Gary, particularly building confidence and self-esteem. *"I used to be much quieter but being part of the group has helped me find my voice more. Confidence is important, I've learned to talk out more in the group. I do feel that I'm more vocal, which really helps when I am football coaching and working with the under twelves team."*

He thinks this confidence will be important in other areas of his life. *"I would like to play guitar more. I've been playing semi-acoustic guitar for a few years and I'm learning to play in front of people. Hopefully when COVID-19 restrictions change, I'll be able to get out there and meet more people. Employers are looking for more qualifications for jobs and stuff, and I'd really like to do something in IT, -but there isn't anything available just at the moment."*



Nathan's story

"I've noticed a lot more mental health issues, maybe more people are now saying they're anxious. Perhaps anxiety is more common now because social media has melted everyone's brains!"

Nathan first got involved with YouthAction programmes in his mid-teens, somewhere around 2014. By the time he was 18 or 19, he had become involved with the young men's groups. *"I was involved around the start of the project. I live in a very small rural area, in south Armagh. There's not much transportation, there's a bus maybe once every four hours! Growing up there were two other boys in the area. I was very isolated and there wasn't much opportunity to be sociable. The projects gave me the chance to just go once or twice a week to have some craic in a room full of boys."*

"At 16 or 17, when I was coming to a group, I was never really that worried about 'masculinity'. I never really understood the concept and I still don't really think I understand it! I never really felt that I was or wasn't a man – for me the main issue was the isolation and getting to be around people. The mental health side of the group was important for me. I've been a bit stressed and depressed in my life, so the group helped. The youth workers did LifeMaps training with us, that was beneficial. That exercise was really about conceiving your mental health as health, rather than a list of illnesses and symptoms. It's something you need to maintain, and actively exercise. There's no magic bullet that will suddenly make you happy."

Moving on from being a group member, Nathan volunteered to help lead groups for a couple of years, with some paid work with groups over the summer and the occasional residential. *"The groups' participants changed but there was a similar core there in each one. We talked about violence, masculinity and what it means to be a man."* Some groups were harder than others. *"You try your best to engage by any means necessary! There was a lot of drug use in one group, that hindered the work. But those are the groups that need it the most – you could explicitly see the issues in their lives that needed resolved."*

Having worked with different groups, Nathan has seen some common themes emerging. Approaches in education, coupled with young men's sometimes explosive reactions, can be

a bad combination. *"There can be a lot of issues with schools. You get young men getting kicked out of classrooms, particularly if the school is very proud of their attainment records. If they don't think you are going to pass the GCSE, they won't let you sit the exam. That's taking the opportunity out from under someone. I find young men get antagonised a lot by school, that has a lot to do with its structure. A lot of the issues from school come from the young men's tendency to react in a way schools don't want them to. What youth work can provide is very different."*

Everyday Life groups provide spaces for young men to talk about and reflect on how they respond to intense situations. *"Controlling your reactions to conflict and being provoked is something that needs developed, so the group work focuses on violence and conflict, in general. If you get fourteen or fifteen young men into a room, eventually there's going to be a few fights! It becomes about how the youth workers and the rest of the group learn to diffuse situations. We try to show the young men how to break an argument, not because of who's right and who's wrong, but just because it's time to wise up because they're fighting over the last Subway sandwich – or whatever it was!"*

Adding to his own experience growing up, Nathan continues to think that mental health issues, anxiety particularly, remain an issue for young men. *"I've noticed a lot more mental health issues, maybe more people are now saying they're anxious. Perhaps anxiety is more common now because social media has melted everyone's brains! With young men in general, they won't tell you*

they're anxious, but if you watch, you can see physical symptoms in group settings, fidgeting, shaking, rustling. Sometimes you see it in them being quite angry when they feel they've been slighted. But I'm no psychiatrist!"

Given the spread of Covid-19, the effect of restrictions and the economic consequences that are likely to be felt for some time yet, Nathan is concerned about the future for many young men. *"I think anxiety has increased because most young men don't see a particularly bright future for themselves economically. It used to be if you had a university degree, you would do better than your parents. Now a university degree is seen as the base line -and a lot of the young men in these groups are not going to university. We've done some activities where there was a meditation, I think we did some yoga, although some of the harder groups were not talked into yoga! But I feel like we live in a real, 'automised' age, particularly now with COVID but it was there before that too. Everyone is very individual, there's a very small sense of community that in most places has been eroded away. That can leave young men despairing -any way you can alleviate loneliness, in this incredibly lonely time, is going to be hugely beneficial to the young men."*

Everyday Life Performance Scorecard

2016 - 2020

| What will we do? (Project outcomes) | How much did we do? (Summary) | How well did we do it? Is anyone better off? (Evidence) |
|--|---|---|
| <p>Outcome 1 ~ Young people will have better relationships with their support networks and communities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 70% of 2700 young men designing their own well-being plans; setting personal goals and action plans. - 70% of 300 young men shaping group work and leading on social action projects. - Meetings of community partners and young men to co-design and deliver project. <p>Outcome 2 ~ Young men with increased skills, ready to cope with violence in their everyday lives.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Young men with ability to understand masculinity and being a man in today's world. - Young men with the ability to understand the triggers to conflict and violence in everyday settings. - Young men report they have tried out techniques to avoid violence and conflict in their own lives. | <p>2938 young men aged 14 – 25 years in East Belfast, rural South Armagh and the North West participated in Everyday Life activities and programmes.</p> <p>42% urban.</p> <p>58% rural.</p> <p>45% from Protestant/ unionist communities.</p> <p>55% from Roman Catholic/ nationalist communities.</p> <p>Ethnic background</p> <p>92% white.</p> <p>0.5% other Asian.</p> <p>1.5% Irish travellers.</p> <p>6% Other.</p> <p>140 young men undertook leadership roles through the young men's structured volunteering scheme.</p> <p>121 young men gained a qualification at levels 1 – 3.</p> <p>9 young men completed the Ulster University level 4 Certificate in Youth Studies and 2 progress to BSc. (East Belfast).</p> <p>160 young men achieved a Millennium Volunteer Award.</p> <p>24 young men completed ASDAN Youth Achievement Awards.</p> | <p>Young men talking.....</p> <p><i>"I gained more experience working with young people & I'll try to be a good role model to them". (Young man)</i></p> <p><i>"When looking back on my experience with the mentoring scheme, the key point that I have learnt from it is that a person can access support to help them for the future in areas such as mental or physical health without having to undergo a large amount of change. As the mentoring is flexibly fixated around the wants, needs, enjoyments etc. of the individual, it results in a very positive experience for them that will help them get to the levels in targeted areas mentioned whilst doing so in a comfortable way." (Young male mentee)</i></p> <p><i>"Being respected as a young man, would also be a key value. You don't want anyone to look at you in the wrong way or get the wrong impression." (Young man)</i></p> <p><i>"I feel that I have learned to communicate with my peers and got to know people in other organisations. In violent situations, I would think about them more now than I would have before." (Young man)</i></p> <p><i>"I had never done Pilates before so this was a first for me. I would never have seen myself doing this, it was very relaxing." (Young man)</i></p> |

Outcome 3 ~ Young men with increased leadership skills and resilience to apply to their learning, life and work, through volunteering and social action.

- 90% of young men with well-being plans and personal goals set.
- 75 young men complete leadership training and achieve a qualification.
- Number of young men actively volunteering in their community, demonstrating their skills and progression routes.

Outcome 4 ~ More young men with better relationships with their peers, parents, children, local residents, community groups and employers.

- Number of young men undertaking intensive peer mentoring.
- Number of employers contributing to the project.
- The level of understanding of residents/ community organisations of young men's contribution locally.

110 local youth groups and local partnerships developed and supported throughout the project.

Influencing actions carried out: (examples)

East Belfast Young Male Volunteer scheme delivered Youth Bank; training 37 young men to support 7 projects with 269 young men, across the area.

Participation in Northern Ireland Executive Office consultations on The Programme for Government.

Young male leaders delivered workshops at conference in Newry to 300 young men.

5 Nations workshop on Brexit in Killarney involving 25 young people from 5 organisations in Ireland/UK.

1 young man, 1 young woman and 1 young transgendered person participated on a 4 day symposium with 20 other young people from Republic of Ireland; Scotland; Wales & England held in Carlingford, Co. Louth to look at the issues of BREXIT and the impact on young people.

7 young men participated in British Irish Parliamentary Assembly (BIPA) group attending residentials in London on 14th - 16th September 2018; Carlingford on 23rd - 25th November 2018 and Edinburgh on 29th - 31st March 2019.

Young men help organise and participate at two of the Southern Area Men's Health Steering Group annual conferences - The Main Man in 2019 and Dementia - Men in the Middle in 2020

"I think the project was for us because we are developing as men. It was to show us that no matter what size, build or sexuality you are, that you are still a man and that you don't have to be the stereotypical male. It made us more aware of our actions, like one punch can kill and there are other ways of sorting it (violence) out." (Young man)

"I think the baselines were good because things change from the start to the end. Through the sessions we have changed our opinions and we are more aware of the issues that we face. We were putting the highest on some questions at the start but because we are now more aware at the end, we could put ourselves down properly. I think that I have learned so much about me as a person and I have more knowledge around the issues I face as a young man." (Young man)

"I feel that I am more confident in my ability, and I know that I can push myself to do things. I am more aware of my strength and weaknesses and myself as a person. I have more of an understanding of how my own mental health is, and I think that my own mental health has improved being on the programme." (Young man)

"You are taking your stress and anger and turning it into something productive by exercising, and it is a good way to clear your head and feel better." (Young man).

"I enjoyed talking in the group about our opinions on what is expected to be a male and violence to do with young lads getting the blame for things. It has helped me to talk about these things more." (Young man)

"Just to help young men, people react to things like puberty different & it can have a bad impact on them." (Young man)

6 Young Male Volunteers participated on a residential on 13th & 14th May 2019 with other young people attending Ulster University Sectarianism Conference at UU campus, Belfast.

10 young men participated in the planning group for Youth Work Generation Project delivered to 20 young people (2021).

10 young men participated in young people's event in the US Consulate in Belfast (2019).

3 young men; 10 organisations; 12 male staff members interviewed for radio broadcast during international Men's Health Week (2019).

Orangefield young men's group worked with Belfast City Council, East Belfast Greenway and MLAs to promote better use of the park by young men.

Bloomfield young men contributed to shaping of a new youth work strategy for East Belfast.

Armagh young men's group contributed to Armagh Youth Providers multi agency partnership to identify meeting spaces and places for young people.

Resources produced:

Young Men's Child Sexual Exploitation Information Leaflet & Posters (SBNI).

Young Men Crime & Violence Summary (Queens University).

OCN Level 1 & 2 qualification tailored for young men developed.

Young Men's Development Worker completed Dissertation on youth work programme with Keady young men.

"I've learned how to be patient. Fishing can help with that, you have to wait on the fish to take the bait, you aren't going to cast in and catch straight away; time keeping as I had to be there on time." (Young man)

"To get people that have very little to do and get them involved in things and learn stuff." (Young man)

"We've been looking at how to handle yourself in situations; understanding it's ok to use words, rather than try to fight your way out of it, just explain how you feel and walk away." (Young man)

Is anyone better off?

(community perspectives)

The Safe Guarding Board NI Chair Bernie McNally letter to YouthAction NI :

"What the boys and young men involved have produced is simply, excellent. SBNI has made a commitment to keep the issue of CSE of boys and young men 'on the Agenda' and as such we attended the Northern Ireland Confederation for Health and Social Care Conference in May 2017. The conference was opened by the Permanent Secretary for Health Richard Pengelly and attended by senior leaders across the health and social care sector. We hosted 3 'café conversations' on 'Co production in tackling child sexual exploitation of boys and young men', using the resources designed by the YouthAction boys and young men. As a result, the key messages that the young men wanted to say have been heard by key influencers in the health and social care system, they are making a difference to the lives of other young people and they have had their own knowledge of this issue significantly heightened".

David Hammerton, Chairperson of the Senior's Network, in a thank you letter to the Keady group:

"I find it encouraging that by volunteering, you have helped improve the lives of older people in your community and in your Borough. I have received letters of thanks from some of those who received these packs saying how it has helped them to feel 'less isolated' and 'more included in the community'. Each of you has helped to make this difference to someone's life. You should all be proud that you did."

Parent

"I am over the moon that Caelan has introduced X to other people his age and helped him mix well with them by being flexible and caring as well as understanding X"

Parent

"I was a bit apprehensive about him starting this project because we weren't familiar with Armagh or the NCS Project & he didn't know a single person but it has been the best experience for him. He's loved every minute of it, made new friends & I'm super proud of him".

Parent

"YouthAction has been a very valuable resource for my teenage son and has also supported myself through challenging times. I was first directed to YouthAction NI a few years ago by my son's school, as a result of my son being bullied he became very aggressive, and needed anger management help. I was introduced to Jonny Ashe, who went out of his way to build a rapport with my son and equipped him with skills to deal with the anger, he also helped build his confidence up. My son was taken on a residential trip, and has been part of a youth group Jonny organised, this was very helpful as a lot of useful topics relevant to young males was discussed for e.g. mental health. There was team building exercises, a chance to make new friends and learn new skills. Jonny has been a great support to my son, and has gave him a lot of good advice and coping skills in different areas where there have been issues, Jonny has also made himself available at short notice when there has been a crisis. Jonny is always willing to help and is still a very important part of my son's life 3 years later"

(Reference: Everyday Life project files; Annual reports to National Lottery; LINKS evaluation reports NCB; Impact Report (David Thompson); Quarterly YouthAction NI performance scorecards; Annual YouthAction NI performance scorecard.)

YouthAction

NORTHERN IRELAND

For further information on YouthAction's ongoing work with young men, contact:

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