

# **Inquiry into the Mental Health of Men and Boys: Submission by the Sport and Recreation Alliance**

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1. The Sport and Recreation Alliance represents over 320 national governing bodies and grass root clubs and believes that the power of sport and recreation can change lives and bring communities and people together. Together with our members and in partnership with the wider sector, we make the most of opportunities and tackle the areas that provide a challenge. We provide advice, support and guidance to our members who represent the outdoor recreation sector, traditional governing bodies of games and sport, county sports partnerships, water pursuits, and movement and dance exercise.
- 1.2. Mental health has long been a key focus for the Alliance in both internal and external capacities. One of the ways in which we have put this focus into practice is the creation of the [Mental Health Charter for Sport and Recreation](#)<sup>1</sup> in partnership with Mind and the Professional Players Federation. The Charter drives over 350 organisations within the sport and recreation sector to create a culture shift to remove the stigma around mental health. As the voice of the sector, we also work with Government, policy makers and the media to make sure grassroots sport and recreation grows and thrives. Having an active nation is important as it delivers huge benefits to society and the millions of participants, volunteers, staff and spectators.

## **2. Executive Summary**

- 2.1. The overwhelming prevalence of ill mental health and the difficulties of addressing mental health illnesses for Government and public services are becoming increasingly apparent. It is understood that the most serious mental health problems exist among men and boys, with suicide being the leading cause of mortality between boys as young as 15 to men 49 years of age. Mental health issues are not only a strain on the individual and direct family and friends, but on public finances too, with the annual economic and social cost amounting to over £100bn a year.
- 2.2. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry but are concerned that the current treatment provisions do not properly reflect the potential of sport and physical activity as a means of preventing mental health problems and tackling the associated stigma and hope that the evidence outlined below can contribute to the Women and Equalities Committee's recommendations put forward to Government.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.sportandrecreation.org.uk/pages/mental-health-charter-homepage](http://www.sportandrecreation.org.uk/pages/mental-health-charter-homepage)

### 3. What issues other than access to healthcare affect the mental health of men and boys?

- 3.1 Whilst access to healthcare is a key determinant of the mental health improvements of men and boys, as an expert and representative of the sector, Mind explains that a broad variety of preventable issues can affect mental health. Such issues include; social isolation, experiencing discrimination, severe or long term stress, drug and alcohol misuse, homelessness, domestic violence/abuse and a long-term physical health condition<sup>2</sup>.
- 3.2 A broad range of literature exists, which highlights the impact of differing levels of physical activity on both physical and mental health. Sport England's Active Lives report showed a positive relationship between physical activity and positive mental wellbeing<sup>3</sup>. The Youth Sport Trust's (YST) impact report released in February 2019 explains that physical activity alone can improve mental, physical and social wellbeing<sup>4</sup>. The YST's research outlines how activity habits are carried into adulthood with active children often growing up to be active adults. As such, it can be assumed that unhealthy children have a tendency to become physically and mentally unhealthier adults.
- 3.3 The Alliance's report, Reconomics outlines that "Mental ill health is linked to poor physical activity levels, increased smoking, increased sugar and fat intake and high levels of stress, all of which contribute to instances of noncommunicable disease"<sup>5</sup>. Evidence from the Alliance's research The Game of Life points out that people with long-term illnesses such as diabetes have double the rate of depression in comparison to the general population<sup>6</sup>. If active habits are not learned from a young age or if opportunities for physical activity are not present for young boys and men, then this may transpire later on as an issue for their mental health.
- 3.4 A further key issue for consideration affecting the mental health of men and young boys is proximity to open green spaces and access to facilities. Public Health England and the UCL institute of Health Equality (2014) established that on average people living in greener urban areas were happier than when they lived in areas with less urban greenery<sup>7</sup>. Not only were people happier living in close proximity to open green spaces but living in built up urban areas can be an issue for mental health, as it was identified that people living in greener areas experienced significantly lower levels of mental distress and significantly higher levels of wellbeing.
- 3.5 An array of issues outside of access to adequate health care, which can be controlled or influenced by Government and local authorities, affect the mental health of men and boys. We are particularly concerned that inequality of living standards, health and household income act as indicators of susceptibility to poor mental health. In this context, sport and physical activity interventions targeted at specific vulnerable groups need to be considered as part of the broader mental health service offering.

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<sup>2</sup> [www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/mental-health-problems-introduction/causes/#.XGaepvZ2tfB](http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/mental-health-problems-introduction/causes/#.XGaepvZ2tfB)

<sup>3</sup> [www.sportengland.org/media/13698/active-lives-children-survey-academic-year-17-18.pdf](http://www.sportengland.org/media/13698/active-lives-children-survey-academic-year-17-18.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [www.youthsporttrust.org/system/files/YST-impact-report-2018-final-revC.pdf](http://www.youthsporttrust.org/system/files/YST-impact-report-2018-final-revC.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> [www.sportandrecreation.org.uk/policy/research-publications/reconomics-plus1](http://www.sportandrecreation.org.uk/policy/research-publications/reconomics-plus1)

<sup>6</sup> [www.sportandrecreation.org.uk/policy/research-publications/game-of-life](http://www.sportandrecreation.org.uk/policy/research-publications/game-of-life)

<sup>7</sup> [assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/357411/Review8\\_Green\\_spaces\\_health\\_inequalities.pdf](http://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/357411/Review8_Green_spaces_health_inequalities.pdf)

#### **4. What measures are needed to most effectively tackle poor mental health in men and boys and what are the barriers that prevent these being implemented?**

4.1 We urge the Committee to consider the valuable role sport and physical activity can play in sustainably reducing stress<sup>8</sup>, long term physical health conditions such as obesity<sup>9</sup> and social isolation, given that 4 in 5 people say they make friends through exercising and sport<sup>10</sup>.

4.2 Seeing as the majority of mental health illnesses emerge before a child's 18th birthday, in order to effectively tackle poor mental health in men and boys, early identification and diagnosis are key<sup>11</sup>. If mental health illnesses are diagnosed from an early age, or better yet prevented before the onset, in the medium to long term we will see a vast improvement in the mental health of future generations of men. Whilst viable substitutes for medical therapies such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for depression are few and far between, the Alliance wishes to highlight a select few examples where physical activity based projects have produced similar positive impacts on individuals' mental wellbeing:

4.2.1 The Youth Sport Trust charity runs a particular project known as Active in Mind<sup>12</sup>. The project has seen 250 young people, aged 15 to 18, become mentors to 750 young people experiencing mental wellbeing issues, supporting them in becoming physically active. Through Active in Mind 68% of mentees said they felt more confident in talking to others than before starting the project, 70% of mentees who participated in the programme reported feeling more confident and 71% said they feel more relaxed.

4.2.2 Coping Through Football assists young people and adults (39% classed as schizophrenic and 95% male) experiencing mental health issues to recover and live independently<sup>13</sup>. The project began with the London Playing Field Foundation approaching NELEFT (North East London Foundation Trust) to explore how football could aid recovery for people experiencing significant mental health issues. Their ethos being that "more people with mental health problems will recover by having a good quality of life which entails developing a greater capacity to manage their own lives and having stronger social relationships, a greater sense of purpose and the skills they need for living and working."

4.2.2.1 The outcomes of the project were extremely successful with 8 out of 10 users previously classified as dependent on illicit drugs and alcohol reporting that the project had resulted in them remaining abstinent or reducing their consumption. A two year research study performed under the National Institute of Health Research Public Health evidenced that the project was associated with improvements in mental health and physical health outcomes.

4.2.3 Results of the England Athletics' RunTogether Community survey which focused specifically on the effects of running, distinguished that 74% of runners said that they felt running was good for their mental wellbeing and 89% of all runners said they had increased happiness as a direct result of running with others or in a group<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> [www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/lets-get-physical-report.pdf](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/lets-get-physical-report.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> [www.hsph.harvard.edu/obesity-prevention-source/obesity-causes/physical-activity-and-obesity/](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/obesity-prevention-source/obesity-causes/physical-activity-and-obesity/)

<sup>10</sup> [sramedia.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/2d77274e-af6d-4420-bdfb-da83c3e64772.pdf](http://sramedia.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/2d77274e-af6d-4420-bdfb-da83c3e64772.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> [sramedia.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/b7a7d5a9-5893-49f0-ae4b-b7deba7d807f.pdf](http://sramedia.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/b7a7d5a9-5893-49f0-ae4b-b7deba7d807f.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> [www.youthsporttrust.org/system/files/YST-impact-report-2018-final-revC.pdf](http://www.youthsporttrust.org/system/files/YST-impact-report-2018-final-revC.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> [www.copingthroughfootball.org/](http://www.copingthroughfootball.org/)

<sup>14</sup> [www.englandathletics.org/about-us/england-athletics-news/](http://www.englandathletics.org/about-us/england-athletics-news/)

- 4.3 An overarching benefit of sports and physical activity programmes is that they facilitate open conversations that tackle the stigma around mental health among men and boys by addressing what can be uncomfortable issues. England Athletics' #RunandTalk programme for instance aims to improve mental health through running by getting people talking about mental health and removing the stigma. Their running groups have reported more openness to talk about mental health problems, with one participant having said "I found out something about someone I never knew tonight and I'm really pleased they shared it with me".
- 4.4 Unfortunately, with all the aforementioned projects being reliant on external funding and not yet incorporated within mainstream mental health service delivery, their potential growth and reach is limited, and the ability to meet the demand for the services is greatly challenged, despite it becoming increasingly apparent that these projects have proved successful as a measure in preventing and treating ill mental health.
- 4.5 The Mental Health Foundation explains that physical activity can play a role in preventing mental health problems and improving quality of life. In fact, the Foundation's report states there is an approximately "20-30% lower risk for depression and dementia, for adults participating in physical activity." The Alliance supports recommendations made within the report for policy makers to reduce "financial barriers many people face by promoting typed of physical activity that are free or cheap to access".<sup>15</sup>
- 4.6 We urge the Women and Equalities Committee to consider the recommendations made within our #RightToBeActive campaign as measures which will help to tackle poor mental health in boys which are:
- 4.6.1 Establishing a new law requiring councils to provide all children with the opportunity to be active and to coordinate and promote physical activity across everything they do;
  - 4.6.2 Creating a long-term, properly funded and child-focussed strategy to transform the physical and mental wellbeing of our children and
  - 4.6.3 Introducing new legislation to make it a requirement for government ministers and public bodies to put the United Nations Rights of the Child, the right to play and lead a healthy life, at the heart of decision making.
- 4.7 In addition, we believe it is vital that both strategy and funding for sport and physical activity interventions aimed at tackling mental health problems are properly joined up within government. This means ensuring that sport and recreation organisations are able to access mental health funds for programmes and that relevant government departments – notably the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) – work jointly to deliver improved mental health outcomes, particularly for children and young people.

## **5. Which groups of men and boys are particularly at risk of poor mental health and what is leading to this?**

- 5.1 A key pattern arising among those suffering from poor mental health conditions is that the majority of illnesses emerge, early on in adolescence or childhood. As reported in the Alliance's foundation report,

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<sup>15</sup> [www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/lets-get-physical-report.pdf](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/lets-get-physical-report.pdf)

Why are We Failing Our Children, 75% of mental health illnesses begin before a child reaches their 18th birthday<sup>16</sup>.

5.2 Further to 5.1, Sport England Active Lives' Children and Young People report evidences that self-scored happiness reduces from 7.9 to 6.2 (mean score out of 10) between the ages of 7-16 years. This change shows that there are significant changes taking place among children within these age groups which may have lasting effects on their mental wellbeing for the remainder of their lives. It is worth noting that mean happiness scores for the 7-16 age group were positively correlated with activity levels, suggesting more active children benefit from better mental wellbeing.

5.3 Evidence from the World Health Organisation (WHO) shows us that while some mental health illnesses are determined at birth that there are a range of societal and economic factors that contribute to poor mental health<sup>17</sup>. The WHO report demonstrates a trend between the income of a household and the prevalence of any common mental disorder. The prevalence of mental disorders remains the highest in the lowest quintile of household income, implying that men and boys from poorer households are at a higher risk of developing a mental illness. These findings are a concern for the Alliance, as we know that children from more disadvantaged backgrounds are already less likely to be active<sup>18</sup>.

5.4 We know that men and boys who have less access to open green spaces are also particularly at risk of developing mental health issues. Evidence quoted within Reconomics Plus suggests that the relationship between green spaces and state of mental wellbeing may be causal – morbidity data demonstrates a direct correlation between lower rates of disease and people with more green space within a kilometre radius of their home<sup>19</sup>. The strongest relationship between the proximity to green space and susceptibility to a disease was the relationship with anxiety disorder and depression.

5.5 Furthermore, a study of over 1000 participants by the University of Exeter established a link between less green urban areas and mental health over time<sup>20</sup>. It was found that individuals who moved to greener areas experienced an immediate improvement in their mental health and that this improvement in their mental health had a sustained effect for three years after the change.

5.6 These findings are again, worrying for the Alliance - in particular the early onset of mental health illnesses. Implementing successful measures to improve the mental wellbeing of men and boys must involve early identification and diagnosis. In order to avoid the future rise of these mental health illnesses, preventative measures must be taken as early as possible and maintained through the childhood and adolescent years. We recommend that the Committee investigates the trends highlighted above and uses these to determine which groups require additional support and attention.

## 6. Conclusion

6.1 With mental health services in crisis as they strive to support an increasing number of unhappy, socially isolated young people suffering with poor mental health who cannot afford private care and only 17.5%

<sup>16</sup> [s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/d5154ac3-e17a-4ac5-af95-c8b46502f1fa.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/d5154ac3-e17a-4ac5-af95-c8b46502f1fa.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> [apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/112828/9789241506809\\_eng.pdf;jsessionid=FA938E5F1177C8C11ED7961476225929?sequence=1](https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/112828/9789241506809_eng.pdf;jsessionid=FA938E5F1177C8C11ED7961476225929?sequence=1)

<sup>18</sup> [www.sportengland.org/activeliveschildren/](http://www.sportengland.org/activeliveschildren/)

<sup>19</sup> [www.sportandrecreation.org.uk/policy/research-publications/reconomics-plus1](http://www.sportandrecreation.org.uk/policy/research-publications/reconomics-plus1)

<sup>20</sup> [s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/7bbac57d-977f-4077-960e-e54ee55b4653.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/7bbac57d-977f-4077-960e-e54ee55b4653.pdf)

of children and young people meeting the Chief Medical Officer's physical activity guidelines, the deterioration of mental health can only be expected to continue among disadvantaged men and boys if a long-term approach, with more active children at the heart of the system, is not taken.

6.2 A review into the measures taken to treat mental health problems among men and boys is welcomed by the Alliance and this must focus on the role sport and physical activity can play in prevention. The Alliance welcomes requests to provide further information including providing oral evidence to the Committee or clarification on any of the above.

**Sport and Recreation Alliance  
February 2019**