

Understanding Community-Based Men's Mental Health and Wellbeing Groups in Wales

Slide One: Introduction

Good afternoon, everyone. Today I will discuss findings from a survey we conducted of community-based men's mental health and wellbeing groups across Wales.

I'll begin by explaining why we undertook the research, before briefly outlining how we conducted the survey and what it focused on. I'll then discuss our findings, including who uses these groups, their purpose, what they do, and the challenges they face. Finally, I'll consider what the findings might mean for social care and public health services, and how they challenge some common assumptions about men and mental health.

The take-home message from this presentation is that community-based men's mental health and wellbeing groups appear to be growing in popularity and are becoming an increasingly important source of support. They provide spaces where men can discuss personal problems and emotional wellbeing at a time when state-funded mental health services are struggling to meet increasing demand, while also challenging assumptions that men are unwilling to talk about mental health. However, despite this apparent growth and importance, we still know relatively little about these groups, how they operate, and the role they play in supporting wellbeing.

Slide Two: Why we did the research

Men's mental health is a significant social care concern in the UK, and suicide is often linked to mental health difficulties. Men die by suicide at more than three times the rate of women, and this gap between the sexes has increased since 1981. The prevention of mental health problems has therefore become a priority for governments across the UK.

Despite the emphasis on preventing mental health problems, many state-funded mental health services are under significant pressure and unable to meet demand. Long waiting times mean that support is often difficult to access when people need it most, and third-sector organisations have called for alternative approaches to tackle this issue, such as peer support.

Many men remain reluctant to seek help or may deny experiencing mental health difficulties and can be unwilling to access or remain engaged with professional support services. Explanations for these behaviours have often centred on adherence to traditional masculine norms, which privilege stoicism and self-reliance and promote emotional suppression, as well as criticisms that services are often 'gender-blind' and a mistrust of mental health professionals. Rather than seeking formal support, many men rely on alternative coping strategies, including substance use.

However, public awareness of men's mental health has grown, and there has been increasing discussion about masculinity and the ways it can shape men's wellbeing. Within this context, some research suggests that men may be becoming more willing to discuss personal difficulties, express vulnerability and be emotionally open.

Alongside these developments, there has been a growth in community-based initiatives aimed at supporting men's mental health and wellbeing. One of the most established examples is Men's Sheds, which bring men together through shared activities

and companionship. This approach is often described as "health by stealth", where activities create opportunities for men to talk about personal issues in an informal setting. Research suggests that participation can improve wellbeing and reduce social isolation.

More recently, there has also been a growth in community-led peer-support and self-help groups focused specifically on men's mental health and wellbeing. They are often volunteer-led, operate outside formal health and social care services, and rely on peer support and shared lived experience. Prominent UK examples include MenWalkTalk, which currently has 21 groups, and Andy's Man Club, which operates in 240 locations.

Peer support is increasingly recognised as beneficial for mental health, and peer-support and self-help groups may represent an important source of support at a time when public services are under increasing pressure. Yet research on men's mental health and wellbeing groups remains limited and has focused largely on Men's Sheds. We know much less about the wider range of groups that have emerged in recent years, how they operate, and the role they play in supporting men's mental health. This evidence gap led us to survey community men's mental health and wellbeing groups across Wales.

Slide Three: About the research

At the end of 2024, a group of colleagues and I from the Centre for Adult Social Care Research at Cardiff University, funded by Health and Care Research Wales, carried out an online survey of men's mental health and wellbeing groups across Wales. The survey was developed with support from Men's Sheds Cymru, Helpu Cymru, and organisers of a men's mental health event held at the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff in 2023.

We drew on our links with Men's Sheds Cymru and Helpu Cymru, who helped circulate the study, and we also contacted groups directly after identifying them through Google searches. Through this combined approach, we received responses from 30 groups across 17 of Wales's 22 local authorities. We estimate that the survey reached around 100 organisations, and it was also shared on LinkedIn, which may have extended its reach further.

The survey was created using the Qualtrics platform and included a combination of fixed-response questions and open-ended questions with free-text responses. We asked groups about who they were for, the activities they offered, how often they met, how they were organised and staffed, the challenges they faced, how they promoted themselves, and the purpose, beliefs and approaches that informed their work

Slide Four: Attendance

In terms of participation, most groups reported increasing membership, suggesting demand is growing rather than declining. Average attendance was around 13 men per group.

Nearly three-quarters of the groups said they were open to all men and did not target any specific subgroup. Where groups did focus on particular participants, the most common groups were men who were socially isolated and men experiencing mental distress. Smaller numbers focused on fathers, gay and bisexual men, homeless men, disabled men, transgender men, victims of domestic abuse, and those recovering from addiction.

This highlights the diversity of groups that now exist across Wales, as well as the role many appear to play in supporting men who may be experiencing isolation or other challenges that affect wellbeing.

Another important finding was flexibility. Most groups agreed it was fine for men to drop in and out rather than committing to regular attendance. That flexibility may be crucial for men whose lives are shaped by insecure work, caring responsibilities, or fluctuating health.

Slide Five: Purpose, values and publicity

When asked about their purpose, more than 80 per cent of groups agreed that providing companionship was central to their work.

Nearly all groups agreed with supporting women's needs and rights, which is important in challenging the idea that men's groups are exclusionary.

In terms of publicity, Facebook was by far the most common way groups reached people, alongside Instagram, local press and

flyers. This tells us something about accessibility, but also about who may still be excluded.

Slide Six: What do these groups actually do?

Around 40 per cent of the groups offered practical, hands-on activities, such as building, woodworking, or gardening, reflecting the approach taken by Men's Sheds.

At the same time, nearly 80 per cent of groups actively promoted emotional openness.

Almost two-thirds of the groups described themselves as offering support for personal issues, and about 30 per cent of the groups provided some form of one-to-one support.

Slide Seven: Barriers and challenges

Many of the groups said they faced significant challenges in functioning and operating.

Funding and time were the biggest barriers reported. Most groups said they depend heavily on volunteer leaders, many of whom were juggling paid employment and other responsibilities.

The vast majority of groups operated on a not-for-profit basis and without trained or paid professional staff.

Slide Eight: Implications for Social Care and Public Health Services.

The findings may have implications for social care and public health services.

Many groups reported increasing attendance at a time when mental health services are under significant pressure. Most were

volunteer-led, operated on a not-for-profit basis, and relied heavily on peer support rather than professionally qualified staff.

This suggests that peer-support and self-help groups may represent an important source of support within local communities. However, the lack of professionally qualified staff also raises important questions about quality, consistency and safeguarding.

The challenge moving forward is how to preserve the informal and accessible nature of these groups, which may be part of their appeal to men who are reluctant to use professional health services, while ensuring that volunteers and group members receive appropriate support.

Slide Nine: Challenging assumptions about men and mental health

The findings are also important because they challenge some long-standing assumptions about men and mental health.

Men are often portrayed as reluctant to talk about emotional difficulties or seek support. Yet our findings suggest a more nuanced picture. Across Wales, many groups were actively encouraging men to discuss personal issues and emotional wellbeing. Nearly 80 per cent reported promoting emotional openness, compared with 40 per cent that offered practical activities traditionally associated with the Men's Sheds model.

This suggests that direct conversations about mental health may be more acceptable to some men than is often assumed and reflects changing ideas of masculinity. Rather than asking whether men are willing to talk, it may be more useful to now consider the conditions under which they feel able to do so. These groups appear to provide safe, informal and non-judgemental spaces where such conversations can take place.

Slide Ten: Conclusions and future research

To conclude, our study suggests that community-based men's mental health and wellbeing groups have become an increasingly important part of the support landscape in Wales.

They appear to be growing in popularity, are often volunteer-led, and provide support in ways that differ from traditional statutory services.

Perhaps most importantly, the findings challenge the simple assumption that men do not talk about mental health. Instead, they suggest that many men are willing to discuss difficult experiences when the right opportunities and support structures are available.

However, this remains an emerging area of research. We still know relatively little about how these groups operate, how participants experience them, and what impact they have on mental health and wellbeing. Further qualitative and evaluative research is needed to understand what works, for whom, and under what circumstances.