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Self-organised men's mental health and well-being groups: An emerging social development

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Overview

This briefing shares the results of our survey, at the end of 2024, on men's mental health and well-being groups in Wales. We had survey responses back from seventeen of Wales's 22 local authority districts. We did the survey with the help of Men's Sheds Cymru, Helpu Cymru and the organisers of the Side-by-Side event in the Millennium Stadium in November 2023.

About the Research

Male suicide is a serious public health issue. The UK suicide rate for men is more than three times that of women. This is often linked to traditional ideas of masculinity, such as being tough and avoiding help. Many state-funded mental health services are overwhelmed, leading to long wait times for help.

At the same time, there's been growth in community-driven groups focused on men's health and well-being, like Men's Sheds and other peer support initiatives. Even though these groups are gaining traction, there's still not much research on how effective they are or what exactly they do to support mental health.

Our research aimed to begin filling this information gap by surveying groups in Wales. We wanted to understand how these groups operate, including their structures, activities, and beliefs.

The survey covered several topics, including group activities, how often people participate, the types and numbers of participants, the groups' purposes and beliefs, how the groups are staffed, barriers to participation, and methods of publicity.

Who filled in the survey?

We had 30 groups answer the survey. We would guess this is only around 30% of the groups out there in Wales.

What Did We Find?

Activities:

- 40% of groups offer practical activities (building, gardening)
- 79% of the groups promote emotional openness, encouraging men to share personal thoughts and experiences.
- 63% of the groups focused on offering support for personal issues, with 30% offering one-to-one support.

Participation:

- The majority of the groups reported increasing membership.
- The average group attendance was 13 men.
- 73% of the groups said they do not focus on the needs of any specific group of men. Instead, they welcome everyone.
- Of the groups that focused on particular individuals, 23% concentrated on those who were isolated.

Barriers:

- Funding and time are significant barriers for the groups.
- Groups depended on volunteer leaders, who might also have other jobs.
- Most groups did not seek to make a profit and operated without trained or paid professional staff.

Publicity:

- Facebook is the most used platform for group promotion.
- Other methods include Instagram, local press articles, and flyers.

Purpose and approach

- 82% of the groups agreed that they provide companionship for men.
- Most agreed it is fine for men to drop in and out of the group, rather than committing to regular attendance.
- Nearly all of the groups agreed with the idea of supporting women's needs and rights.

Why Are Our Findings Important?

The findings are significant because they show that self-organised men's groups providing up-front emotional support are emerging as a new feature of community-level mental health promotion. Mainstream services can learn from these groups, which operate without professional staff. These groups may help address some of the demand for formal services. Although the lack of trained staff highlights financial constraints, it could also reflect a preference for informal support, which men often find more acceptable. However, this could lead to issues with service quality. Some modest funding could significantly support these groups and reduce the need for costly acute services.

What Next?

More in-depth research is needed, including well-funded studies with broader coverage and more responses. It would be good for researchers to observe first-hand how groups are working, talk to group members about their experiences and learn more about volunteer roles. The point would be to find out how groups can be most effective, although we don't just need one type of group, we need a good range.