



Improving social connections, wellbeing and aspirations among boys and young men experiencing loneliness and isolation through the Offload and Movember Ahead of the Game programmes.

Evaluation Report
Edge Hill University, September 2026



Funded by
UK Government



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To cite this report, please use the following reference:

WILCOCK, R. and SMITH, A. (2026). *Improving social connections, wellbeing and aspirations among boys and young men experiencing loneliness and isolation through the Offload and Movember Ahead of the Game programmes*. Ormskirk, Lancashire: Edge Hill University.

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Glossary

Term	Definition
AP	Alternative provision is education arranged by local authorities for children of compulsory school age who, due to exclusion, illness, or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education.
Boys and young men	In this research the term boys and young men is being used to refer to those aged 11-24.
CCOs	Club Community Organisations are charitable arms of professional sports clubs which are independently governed, funded, and staffed.
Co-creation	Process of collaboration between people who use services and those who provide them.
Community Life Survey	A key evidence source for understanding more about community engagement, volunteering and social cohesion, sampling adults (aged 16+) throughout England.
DCMS	The Department for Culture, Media, and Sport.
EHU	Edge Hill University.
Gender-responsive	An approach taken that responds to the specific needs, experiences and challenges that boys and young men face and uses “male-friendly” activities and language framed around “men’s skills, interests and hobbies” (Galdas et al., 2023: 6; Galdas et al., 2025).
Isolation	Social isolation is the objective state of having minimal social contact or few social ties (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018).
Loneliness	‘A subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want’ (DCMS, 2018: 18). Chronic loneliness refers to loneliness that is experienced often or always.
MAOTG	Movember Ahead of the Game.
NEET	Young people who are Not in Education, Employment or Training.
RL Cares	Rugby League Cares, the official charity of Rugby League.
Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS)	A short version of the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) to monitor mental wellbeing.
UCLA-3	University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) three-item loneliness scale to measure loneliness levels.

Executive summary

Existing evidence highlights that young people are disproportionately more likely to experience loneliness (Christiansen et al., 2021; Hey et al., 2023; Qualter et al., 2021), and boys and young men are also more likely to think loneliness is something to be embarrassed about and to suggest that feeling lonely is 'your fault' (DHSC, 2025a). In addition, young people who are NEET are more likely to experience chronic loneliness (DHSC, 2025b), and 55% of NEET young people are male (ONS, 2026).

Evidence suggests that sports-based programmes can promote positive healthy behaviours and encourage social connections through the brand of professional sport as a 'hook' (Brazier et al., 2025; Duffell et al., 2025). Therefore, the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) provided funding to Rugby League Cares (RL Cares) to deliver two pilots, aiming to understand whether place-based community sport programmes could help address challenges associated with loneliness and social isolation among boys and young men and improve their social connections, wellbeing and aspirations:

- **Movember Ahead of the Game (MAOTG)** – a prevention programme for boys and young men (aged 11-18) and their support network of trusted adults, including parents, guardians, youth workers, youth group leaders and volunteers, to teach them how to talk about mental health.
- **Offload** – an early intervention 6-week targeted behaviour change programme that supports young men (aged 16-24) to develop their knowledge and understanding of social connections, wellbeing, aspirations and how to manage challenges in life.

RL Cares managed the programmes and commissioned four Club Community Organisations (CCOs) linked to professional rugby league teams across Wigan and Wakefield to act as the delivery partners. Researchers from the Centre for Mental Health, Sport and Physical Activity Research and the Faculty of Education at Edge Hill University were commissioned by RL Cares to independently evaluate the pilot programmes.

The evaluation aimed:

- To explore whether the programmes improve the social connections, wellbeing and aspirations of boys and young men aged 11-18 (MAOTG), and NEET young men aged 16-24 (Offload).
- To generate new learning and actionable recommendations on what works well, and what needs to be adapted, to support the potential future scale-up of MAOTG and Offload, or similar programmes, to support boys and young men.

Programme engagement, key outcomes and learning

Findings from both programmes provided evidence of the positive benefits of engaging with these programmes for boys' and young men's social connections, wellbeing and aspirations. However, small sample sizes meant it was challenging to detect whether there had been statistically significant improvements in loneliness and wellbeing levels.

New learning was also generated about how to engage and support boys and young men experiencing, or at risk of, loneliness, social isolation or NEET through place-based programmes in their local communities.

Executive summary

Table A: Overview of engagement numbers and outcomes achieved in the pilots of MAOTG and Offload

	Movember Ahead of the Game	Offload
Engagement numbers	MAOTG reached the target of 1000 participants. This reach included: • 897 boys and young men, against a target of 858. • 88 parents, compared to a target of 107. • 73 trusted adults against a target of 36.	Offload aimed to reach 300 disengaged and hard-to-reach young men in a new programme over a 6-month period. This reach included: • 346 young men engaged, a 15% increase on the target. • 235 of these young men attended at least one Offload session.
Improved connections	• 9 in 10 participants felt a lot or a little more confident providing help to a friend who might be going through a tough time. • 90% reported being more likely to seek help for their mental health from those around them.	• Many of the young men made new friends through the Offload programme. • Reduced social isolation and re-integration with local communities was achieved by participants reporting increased confidence when using public transport and going to shops. Participants also reported playing sports, and starting to volunteer at local sports clubs because of attending the programme.
Improved wellbeing	• 90% of participants had a better understanding of what behaviours can help to keep them mentally fit. • 87% were more confident in recognising signs and symptoms of anxiety and depression. • 84% strongly agreed or agreed that the person's stories of mental health helped them understand the messages shared and supported reported improvements in wellbeing.	• Improved emotional regulation and resilience to manage situations that were frustrating or overwhelming were reported as positively impacting wellbeing. • Positively sharing feelings of happiness with others and when life felt good, rather than masking those feelings with jokes, played an important role in overall reported improvements in wellbeing.
Improved aspirations	• 92% of participants strongly agreed or agreed that they learned something new.	• Participants reported improved aspirations to do well at college, began to consider future employment prospects, and expressed a wish to re-engage with college studies. • Improved agency and motivation encouraged participants to engage in positive behaviours and lifestyle choices.
Delivery and adaptations	• MAOTG facilitators should remain adaptive to the needs of participants and include multiple activities and breaks to further support engagement. • Where possible, MAOTG facilitators should make use of resources at delivery sites (e.g., available equipment and games).	• A relaxed and safe atmosphere was essential for maintaining participants' engagement with Offload. • The delivery by male role models, including former and current professional sports players, was important for challenging male stereotypes. • Young men attending Offload enjoyed the discussions and interactive activities to support learning. The ongoing co-creation with young men supported their maintained engagement and reported improvements in social connections, wellbeing and aspirations.

Executive summary

Key process findings

Partnership building

- Building strong new partnerships based on trust and reciprocity required significant upfront investment, typically between one and four months.
- Word of mouth was an important recruitment strategy for developing partnerships and maximising the engagement of boys and young men.
- The new partnerships benefited boys' and young men's social connections, wellbeing and aspirations by introducing them to a credible community sports organisation where they could access additional activities and opportunities. This may support further reach and engagement of boys and young men experiencing, or at risk of, loneliness, social isolation or NEET beyond the programme(s) duration.
- Adaptations such as online workshops were necessary to strengthen the delivery of MAOTG to the parents/guardians and trusted adults of boys and young men.
- The Offload pilot developed new partnerships with alternative provision (AP) colleges because the programme aligned closely with the settings' values and curriculum.

Place-based working and recruiting to programmes

- Community organisations like the CCOs in this pilot are important in facilitating the effective delivery of place-based programmes supporting boys and young men who are experiencing, or at risk of, social isolation, loneliness and being NEET.
- Programmes focused on the boys and young men's strengths and leveraged gender-responsive approaches, including solution-focused learning, non-clinical settings and language (e.g., 'Join men like you' / 'Come be a part of'), practical delivery through interactive games to reinforce learning, and using sports brand and male sporting role models with lived experiences as a hook to engage boys and young men. This was perceived to be appealing, non-threatening and supportive for their wellbeing.
- In MAOTG, the limited effectiveness of email communication with volunteer-led organisations was overcome when the CCOs complemented email communication with phone calls and attending scheduled groups to speak with youth group volunteers face-to-face.
- The development of open (where participants sign up individually) and closed groups (via colleges or youth organisations) supported recruitment to Offload. Closed groups typically engaged more boys and young men, while open groups were less likely to be attended because of transport and financial constraints and because participants were unfamiliar with others. Place-based working and provision of community programmes should therefore ideally include sessions delivered at central locations that are well-connected to public transport. Subsidised travel and attendance at session one with a trusted adult (e.g., support worker) may also reduce access barriers to open sessions.

Key recommendations

The recommendations are highlighted at the end of the report on **pages 27 and 28**.

Background

Loneliness and social isolation among boys and young men

Loneliness is typically understood as “a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want” (DCMS, 2018: 18). Loneliness is notably different from the objective experience of social isolation or lack of interactions with friends, family or members of the wider community (DCMS, 2018).

Recent Community Life Survey data indicates that the rate of loneliness appears highest among young people aged 16-24 (DCMS, 2025; see also, Hey et al., 2023). Long-term levels of loneliness are strongly associated with poor mental health, mental illness (specifically symptoms of anxiety and depression) and/or poor physical health (e.g. cardiovascular disease, asthma, rheumatoid arthritis, hypertension) (Burke et al., 2026; Christiansen et al., 2021; Qualter et al., 2010, 2013). Similarly, social isolation, which can be a result of a lack of social ties and quality social networks, is associated with poor mental health, stigma, suicide, and early mortality (DHSC, 2025b; McKenzie et al., 2026; Oliffe et al., 2019).

Although boys and young men typically report lower levels of loneliness than girls and young women, this may be due to underreporting by males compared to females (Christiansen et al., 2021; Hey et al., 2023; Qualter et al., 2021). The BBC Loneliness Experiment identified that men were more likely to perceive a stigma associated with loneliness (Barreto et al., 2022). Additionally, many young men report finding it difficult to express their feelings or to seek help for challenges associated with loneliness, social isolation and mental health (DHSC, 2025b), while boys and young men (especially those from less advantaged backgrounds) are also more likely to have lower educational attainment, think loneliness is something to be embarrassed about, and to suggest that feeling lonely is “your fault” (Co-op Foundation, 2021; DHSC, 2025a). Chronic loneliness is also more likely to impact those identified as NEET (DHSC, 2025a), with recent estimates between October and December 2025 suggesting that 55% of young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) are male (ONS, 2026).

Reducing loneliness and increasing meaningful social connections can therefore be an important first step in improving the health and wellbeing of boys and young men, and in mitigating the effects of feeling lonely and socially isolated.

Commissioning the pilot programmes

Rugby League Cares (RL Cares) is the official charity of Rugby League, dedicated to enhancing and enriching lives through the power and positive influence of the sport. The charity provides support to people who play rugby league, or live and work in communities where rugby league is played. These communities are generally ones facing deprivation, inequality and reduced access to mental health services. As part of their community pillar, RL Cares has a long history of delivering place-based mental wellbeing programmes that support social connections and reduce loneliness and isolation among men in local communities.

Over a 10-year period, RL Cares has developed the Offload programme, co-creating curricula and resources alongside local communities to provide men with the knowledge, skills and tools to manage their mental wellbeing. A team of ex-professional players have been trained to deliver the programme, with continuing professional development opportunities and access to a clinical governance team supporting the growth of the Offload programme. Previous published evidence highlights that Offload creates safe, non-judgemental and comfortable settings that use male-relevant language (e.g., non-clinical), sporting analogies, humour and activity to encourage men to seek support for their mental health and wellbeing (see Wilcock and Smith, 2019; Wilcock et al., 2021).

Since 2018, RL Cares have also been Movember’s implementation partner and manage their wider delivery partners, training facilitators and provide quality assurance of the Movember Ahead of the Game (MAOTG) programme – a mental health literacy and resilience programme across the UK for 11-18-year-olds. MAOTG uses sport to teach young players, parents and trusted adults to talk about mental health. The programme was designed by the University of Wollongong (NSW, Australia) in 2014 and has been delivered and scaled by Movember and partners across Australia, Canada, Ireland and the UK. It has been shown to support improved mental health literacy of younger participants, including knowledge about mental health disorders (e.g., depression and anxiety), the importance of seeking help, and how to personally help their peers who may be experiencing poor mental health or mental ill health (Lim et al., 2025; Vella et al., 2024).

Given the longstanding experience of RL Cares in delivering impactful evidence-based community programmes, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) commissioned RL Cares to pilot adapted versions of MAOTG and Offload with boys and young men.

Moveover Ahead of the Game (MAOTG) is a universal prevention programme delivered through community sport. The programme involves a one-off workshop for boys and young men (aged 11-18) and extends to their support network of parents/guardians and trusted adults, teaching them how to recognise mental health issues, what to do, when to get help and how to be there for a peer.

Adaptation for this pilot: In this pilot, the original MAOTG programme was adapted for delivery in broader community youth settings, including youth zones and hubs, alternative provision groups, and uniformed organisations (e.g., Scouts, Cadets). The workshop for trusted adults was further adapted to use more appropriate language and examples suited to community youth work.

The MAOTG workshops explore topics that include recognising mental health warning signs, starting conversations about mental health, help-seeking behaviours and how to access support, and the 'ALEC model' (Ask, Listen, Encourage, Check In) to provide participants with key strategies to support their own and others' mental health and wellbeing. Each workshop lasts around 60 minutes and is facilitated by trained delivery partners through a combination of a slide deck, sharing of lived experiences, games, interactive activities and takeaway resources. There are workshops designed for young people, parents/trusted adults and community sports coaches.

Offload is an early intervention 6-week targeted behaviour change programme. The programme provides men with the knowledge, skills and tools to manage their mental wellbeing, and is delivered into community settings and workplaces.

Adaptation for this pilot: The original programme content was adapted to better include the voices of young men aged 16-24. Specifically, diverse young men at risk of loneliness, social isolation and who had experienced time as NEET were engaged via co-creation workshops.

These co-creation workshops allowed RL Cares and the CCOs to better identify the appropriate delivery style and language necessary to convey the topics selected. The programme took place over 6 weeks with one 2-hour session delivered each week.

The six Offload workshop sessions were:

- 1. Real talk, building trust and respect:** Participants learn to build trust and respect by identifying shared experiences and core relationship values. They practice active listening and clear communication to foster positive, lasting connections.
- 2. Communication matters:** Participants learn to recognise how people, groups and social media shape their mindset, behaviour and opportunities, identify positive and negative influences, understand healthy relationship characteristics and boundaries, reflect on their role in influencing others, and commit to one action to surround themselves with positive role models and contribute positively both online and offline.
- 3. Emotions and keeping your cool:** Participants learn to recognise and manage their emotions, build trust and respectful communication through active listening, identify and choose positive influences and healthy relationship boundaries, practise practical "keeping your cool" strategies, and commit to actions that improve their relationships and decision-making.
- 4. Pressure and seeking support:** Participants learn to manage pressure using a 3-step plan and mindfulness to stay focused and in control, and to use their voice; asking, listening, encouraging and checking in to seek and provide support through effective communication and teamwork.
- 5. Strengths and building confidence:** Participants identify and celebrate their strengths, build self-belief and confidence through practical group activities and reflection, practice small achievable steps (growth-mindset) to overcome setbacks and commit to one real-world challenge to grow their confidence with peer support.
- 6. Aspirations and your support team:** Participants identify and challenge limiting beliefs, set short and long term goals, map practical steps and support networks to overcome barriers, and commit to immediate actions toward a positive future.

Table 1: Overview of the MAOTG and Offload programmes

Programme	Target audience	Objectives	Target number of participants
Movember Ahead of the Game The workshops teach young people and their network of trusted adults how to talk about mental health. The sessions were delivered by the CCOs through a presentation and activities to deliver the key outcomes.	1. Boys and young men aged 11-18 years at risk of loneliness and isolation 2. Trusted adults - youth workers, volunteers, and managers 3. Parents and guardians	• Reach and engage boys and young men at risk of loneliness and isolation. • Increase awareness of isolation, loneliness, and the impact on mental health. • Improve wellbeing, confidence and aspirations of boys and young men who participate in the programme. • Improve RL Cares' understanding of delivering this intervention outside of sport-focused settings.	1000 participants: 858 boys and young men 36 trusted adults 107 parents and guardians
Offload A 6-week behaviour change programme that supports young people's knowledge and understanding of trust and respect, communication, emotions, pressure and help-seeking, building confidence and aspirations. Delivered by former rugby league players through round table discussions, sharing of lived experiences, games and solution-focused practical and interactive activities.	Young men aged 16-24 years at risk of loneliness and isolation and becoming, or identified as, NEET.	• Reach and engage young men who are NEET and at risk of loneliness and isolation. • Increase awareness of isolation, loneliness and the impact on mental health. • Improve wellbeing, confidence and aspirations of boys and young men who participate in the programme. • Improve RL Cares understanding of delivering interventions with this target group.	300 young men

Delivering the pilot programmes

The pilot took place between November 2025 and March 2026 across Wigan and Wakefield. These two districts were recommended by RL Cares based on Indices of Multiple Deprivation data. Neighbourhoods in the Wigan district were on average in the 50% most deprived in England, with Wakefield recorded in the 40% most deprived (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2025). Previously, MAOTG and Offload have been successfully implemented across Wigan and Wakefield, providing confidence that meaningful partnerships, reporting structures and delivery frameworks could be mobilised within six months, via four Club Community Organisations (CCOs).

The four CCOs were:

1. Wigan Warriors Foundation (Wigan)
2. Wakefield Trinity Community Foundation (Wakefield)
3. Castleford Tigers Foundation (Wakefield)
4. Featherstone Rovers Foundation (Wakefield)

The pilot aimed to explore whether prevention and early intervention programmes may achieve the following three key outcomes:

1. **Improved connections:** Boys and young men have improved quantity and quality of social connections with peers and trusted adults, and an increased sense of belonging.
2. **Improved wellbeing:** Boys and young men have improved wellbeing and life satisfaction as they develop emotional regulation skills and resilience to adverse events and emotions.
3. **Improved aspirations:** Boys and young men feel an increased sense of purpose and agency, as well as an improvement in their self-confidence.

Evaluation

Researchers from the Centre of Mental Health, Sport and Physical Activity Research and the Faculty of Education at Edge Hill University were commissioned by RL Cares to independently evaluate the pilot. The objectives of the evaluation were:

1. To explore whether the programmes improve the social connections, wellbeing and aspirations of NEET young men aged 16-24 (Offload), and boys and young men aged 11-18 (MAOTG).
2. To generate new learning and actionable recommendations on what works well, and what needs to be adapted, to support the potential future scale-up of MAOTG and Offload or similar programmes to support boys and young men. This includes furthering understanding of approaches to identify, reach and engage the target groups including the adults supporting boys and young men.

Methods

A mixed-methods approach was adopted to evaluate the MAOTG and Offload pilot programmes. A formal review and approval process was conducted by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure that the research was ethical, safe, and compliant with regulations. The project was approved by the Education Research Ethics Committee (ETH2425-0208*) at Edge Hill University. Data Collection took place between November 2025 and March 2026.

Quantitative evaluation

Movement Ahead of the Game

Following the workshop, the boys and young men were invited by the CCOs to complete an evaluation survey. The evaluation surveys were administered and collected by the CCOs who then shared them with the EHU research team to conduct independent, secondary data analysis.

MAOTG participants' engagement with the post-workshop survey:

351 MAOTG participants engaged completed the post-workshop survey

Offload

The Offload participants were invited to take part in the research study. Stage 1 included a pre- and post-survey in weeks 1 and 6. The measures used were the:

- Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS)
- Three-item UCLA Loneliness scale, including the direct measure of loneliness used in the Community Life Survey (see Appendix 2).

Each participant was provided with a participant information sheet. The distribution, supervision and collection of the surveys was done by the EHU research team, RL Cares facilitators, and CCOs staff. If participants chose not to take part in the research project, they were still able to take part in Offload. All participants completed the consent form and anonymously completed the surveys digitally using the JISC online surveys platform or via pencil-and-paper.

Offload participants' engagement with the pre- and post-surveys

- **86** Young men completed the pre-surveys
- **40** Young men completed both pre- and post-surveys

Qualitative evaluation

Interviews and focus groups:

The research team invited RL Cares staff, facilitators, CCOs staff and youth organisation stakeholders involved in the management and coordination of MAOTG and Offload, and boys and young men who took part in Offload to take part in either a focus group, semi-structured interview or visual and creative activities to share their views and experiences of the programmes.

All participants from Offload were provided with a participant information sheet and provided written and verbal consent to take part and chose their preferred method to share their experiences of the programme.

Youth organisations stakeholders in settings where MAOTG was delivered did not respond to the invitation to take part in the evaluation. These organisations, mainly volunteer-led, struggled to find the time and capacity to support the evaluation. The key outcomes and process findings reported are therefore limited by the absence of the views and experiences of those stakeholders. To help mitigate this, RL Cares and the CCOs communicated with the MAOTG stakeholders to gather informal insight which was then provided to the EHU research team.

Offload participants' engagement in either an interview, focus group, or visual activities:

- 39 boys and young men took part in 1 interview and 9 focus groups.

Staff and stakeholders engagement in either an interview or focus group:

- Interviews (n=15) and focus groups (n=2) with 19 MAOTG and Offload programme managers, CCOs and facilitators
- Interviews with 8 Offload youth organisation stakeholders

Location:

Focus groups and interviews with Offload participants took place after the final session at the site in which the participants engaged with the programme and lasted between 12 and 35 minutes.

RL Cares staff, facilitators, CCOs and youth organisation stakeholders took part in a semi-structured one-to-one interview or a focus group either online or at their workplace. Interviews and focus groups lasted between 20 minutes and 1 hour.

Data analysis

The post-programme evaluation survey responses for the MAOTG workshop were analysed using Microsoft Excel.

Pre-post scores for SWEMWBS, UCLA-3 Loneliness and direct measure of loneliness were initially assessed for normality using a Shapiro-Wilk test. Thereafter, a paired samples t-test was completed for SWEMWBS, with a Wilcoxon signed-rank test completed for UCLA-3 Loneliness and direct measure of loneliness.

All focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded with the interviewee's permission and transcribed verbatim (word for word). Each participant was provided with a pseudonym (false name) for the purpose of reporting and to protect their anonymity.

All transcripts were analysed in line with Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-stage thematic analysis. The data sets were coded, and the themes and sub-themes were refined and agreed by all authors.

Limitations and mitigations

Engagement with wellbeing and loneliness survey questions: There was a small sample size of 40 Offload participants who completed the pre-post surveys evaluating impacts on wellbeing and loneliness among boys and young men. Some participants did not want to take part and reasons cited included low literacy levels, stigma associated with loneliness and an unwillingness to complete the pre-post surveys as part of this evaluation. This small sample size limits the statistical power of the analysis to detect significant differences within the data. The limited sample also impacts the generalisability of these quantitative results. As such these results should be viewed as indicative only and interpreted with caution.

Attendance: Some Offload participants did not attend week 1 or 6 sessions and therefore did not have the opportunity to complete the survey data collection. Some possible reasons for intermittent engagement with the programme included the stigma associated with attending loneliness and mental health interventions, changing schedules, change of delivery site and limited access to and finances for travel to sessions.

Data collection: Participants were not invited to participate in the surveys if their cohorts ended after 31st March 2026.

Engagement in the evaluation where MAOTG was delivered: Many of the youth centres, clubs or groups where MAOTG was delivered were voluntary organisations and these organisations did not respond to the invitation to take part in an interview. Significant time constraints and the need for research ethics approval to be provided meant that the MAOTG participants aged under 16 were not invited to take part in interviews.



Key outcomes and impact

The evaluation found positive impacts on the social connections, wellbeing and aspirations of boys and young men who engaged with MAOTG and Offload. In this section we share:

- Who each programme reached.
- How each programme achieved the intended outcomes.
- How each programme was delivered and adapted to support engagement.

Movember Ahead of the Game pilot delivery and engagement

The MAOTG programme in this pilot aimed to reach 1000 participants, including 858 boys and young men, 107 parents and guardians, and 36 trusted adults (including youth workers, volunteers and managers).

The MAOTG programme successfully reached 897 boys and young men in broader community youth settings outside of sport that they are already connected with (e.g., youth zones, Cadets, Scouts). In addition, the programme engaged with 88 parents/guardians of the boys and young men, and 73 trusted adults who are in their support network through community youth settings (see Table 2).

Table 2: Number of participants in MAOTG: Young people, trusted adults, parents and guardians

	Boys and young men	Parents/guardians	Trusted adults	Total
Wigan	307	30	43	380
Wakefield	190	33	10	233
Castleford	210	17	10	237
Featherstone	190	8	10	208
Total	897	88	73	1058

Movember Ahead of the Game pilot evaluation: Key outcomes

The key outcomes for MAOTG indicate how universal prevention programmes involving one workshop can provide support for boys and young men to further develop their social connections, wellbeing and aspirations in settings that they were already connected with. This is reported against each outcome below (see Figure 1).

Improved social connections:

The post-programme evaluation survey responses indicated that the knowledge gained through the workshop supported nine-in-ten boys and young men to feel more confident in providing help to a friend who might be going through a tough time. Additionally, most participants suggested that they would now be more likely to seek help for their mental health from those around them having engaged in the programme.

Stakeholders where MAOTG was delivered told the CCOs that the programme positively supported social connections, particularly relating to talking to their peers about their mental health and wellbeing. They suggested, via the CCOs staff, that they *‘didn’t think we’d go through things like that ... like the ALEC (Ask, Listen, Encourage, Check In) model’*. The ALEC model supports boys and young men’s social connections by giving them tools and techniques to look out for each other. This was positively received in the youth settings, as one member of staff from a youth organisation echoed that it *‘makes them think about [wellbeing] and make them talk to each other about it’*. Although MAOTG is a one-off workshop, the facilitators often provided take away tasks such as *‘go up to people and ask how they are or go through your contacts in your phone and be in contact with someone that you haven’t been in a while and just check up on them’* to support ongoing positive effects of improved social connections, wellbeing and aspirations.

Improved wellbeing:

90% of boys and young men reported that they had a better understanding of what behaviours can help to keep them mentally fit, suggesting improvements in their knowledge regarding supporting their wellbeing. Relating to symptoms of mental ill-health, 87% reported that they felt more confident in recognising signs and symptoms of anxiety and depression.

The participants reported being more willing to seek help from family, friends, peers and those around them to support their wellbeing. They also reported feeling more confident offering support to their friends, being more likely to seek support from their friends and family and feeling better able to support their own and others' wellbeing.

Improved aspirations:

Relating to their aspirations, 91% of the boys and young men participating in MAOTG reported that they had learned something new during the workshops. This learning included the signs and symptoms of anxiety and depression, and where and from whom to seek support for their mental health.



Figure 1: Post-programme evaluation survey responses from 351 boys and young men completing the MAOTG, evidencing the three outcomes including social connections, wellbeing and aspirations.

Offload pilot delivery and engagement

The Offload pilot aimed to reach **300 young men** who were identified as, or at risk of, social isolation, experiencing loneliness, or NEET. Offload successfully **engaged 346 young men and 235 of those took part in at least one session** (see Table 3). These young men were perceived as traditionally hard to reach and engage because they were disengaged from education, employment and training, dis-engaged with statutory services and programmes, and were from areas more deprived than the England average. At baseline (week 1), survey respondents reported higher than the England average levels of direct and indirect loneliness (DCMS, 2025a), and similar levels of wellbeing to England levels (Ng Fat et al., 2017):

- 11% of survey respondents reported that they always or often felt lonely, compared to 7% in England.
- 20% reported high levels of indirect loneliness, compared to 10% in England.
- A mean wellbeing score of 24.7 indicating average to moderate wellbeing, against an average of 23.5 in a UK sample.

These comparisons indicate that the Offload programme was successful in reaching the target group of boys and young men experiencing loneliness and social isolation.

Table 3: Number of participants that engaged and attended Offload.

	Total number engaged	Total number attended
Wigan	130	114
Wakefield	81	42
Castleford	83	49
Featherstone	52	30
Total	346	235

Some participants joined the programme in week 1, others joined the programme in the subsequent weeks. Engagement of this nature is common among this group as they develop trust and familiarity. Those who later joined the programme usually did so because their friend attended or through word of mouth from the organisation or education setting where the sessions were based.

The programme was delivered by former rugby league players, who used their own lived experiences of playing rugby league or managing poor mental health or mental illness to inspire and encourage young men to adopt positive coping strategies and become more socially connected to others in their community.

Offload pilot evaluation: Key outcomes

The key outcomes for Offload highlight how targeted early intervention programmes for longer periods (e.g., 6 weekly sessions) can support boys and young men who are experiencing, or at risk of, loneliness, social isolation and are NEET to create social connections and improve their wellbeing and aspirations.

Improved social connections and reduced isolation

Prior to attending the Offload sessions, some of the boys and young men knew each other (typically if they engaged via their college), but most of the boys and young men did not know each other. Many shared that Offload created a space for *‘people from different backgrounds [who] like sport or if they’re not sporty’* to come *‘together just to talk about their coping mechanisms and stuff’*. They said that they valued how this communication could take place with people they knew, or people new to them, in a non-judgemental environment. Some of the participants discussed that they were surprised at how willing they were to share personal experiences during the sessions.

The statistical analysis of the 40 pre-post surveys revealed no statistically significant difference in loneliness levels pre-post programme. It is possible that the non-significant findings are due to the small sample size. Existing research has reported limited quantitative evidence for the impact of community programmes on loneliness among young people (Tierney et al., 2024), while interventions with school-aged youth have reported only small significant differences in loneliness that raise concerns regarding study design and measures used (Burke et al., 2026). It is also noted that the reliance of self-reporting scales may not capture the full emotional experiences of loneliness among young people (Burke et al., 2026). This makes comparing the data reported in this pilot to other studies and community programmes extremely difficult. The qualitative data suggested there is promising evidence that Offload can support a reduction in social isolation and loneliness levels and increased social connections among boys and young men.

Several participants, RL Cares facilitators, the CCOs staff and stakeholders shared stories about how the boys and young men were beginning to become more socially connected. Many participants reported that Offload is space for *'lads getting together, getting to know each other, creating bonds'*, where they had made new friendships and social connections with others that they attended Offload with. For many, this became a connection with someone they could now lean on for support if they needed to because they too took part in Offload together so would *'understand what they mean'*. Others commented that it was important to connect *'with others because you never know what people are feeling until you actually have a deep conversation with them'*. Alternative provision (AP) college staff also reported an increase in the participants' willingness to share how they were feeling and ask for further support if they felt they needed it. Some of the young men mentioned feeling more comfortable discussing their mental health and wellbeing with their families when they were facing mental health and/or other lifestyle challenges.

Some participants commented that prior to engaging with Offload they had experienced high levels of social isolation. Offload provided a safe, controlled social situation with limited numbers of participants to support a gentle re-integration into their local community and established peer support networks. One participant shared that thanks to Offload they had found new routes for connecting with others: *'[since Offload] we're all on a group chat, I just say in the group chat'*. Since engaging with Offload one participant told us that he *'went to Wakefield that week'* and emphasised that *'that's a big thing for me, I don't do places like that, I don't do like big, loads of people'*. Other examples included *'going to the shops'* and volunteering at local sports clubs. Examples like these illustrate the potential of sports-based programmes like Offload to enhance social connections and confidence, self-esteem and self-worth. These factors are key for re-integrating boys and young men that are socially isolated, experiencing loneliness or time as NEET back into social settings and networks.

Improved wellbeing: emotional regulation skills and resilience

Throughout the interviews and focus groups, young men, CCOs staff and RL Cares facilitators shared that the interactive and discussion-based nature of the sessions encouraged conversations about feelings and experiences. One participant reflected that since taking part in Offload *'I'm more talkative so that's helped and that helps in general life altogether'*. For many, this enabled them to better articulate how they were feeling and what support they felt they needed to overcome experiences of poor wellbeing, low mood or feelings of anger and frustration. The statistical analysis of the 40 pre-post surveys revealed no significant difference in wellbeing levels pre-post programme, though it is possible that the non-significant findings are due to the small sample size. However, during the focus groups, the young men attributed improvements to their wellbeing and emotional regulation to the programme's supportive environment, safe to be vulnerable, and engaging in activities that *'taught'* them how to talk about their feelings and experiences. They commonly referred to Offload helping them to regulate emotions, one participant shared that they now *'feel like a lot calmer as a person. So, I tended to be more aggressive, more violent, but I think coming to these sessions I've just chilled that on like quite a bit'*. Participants were positive about the breathing exercises they had practiced in sessions as a way to manage this. In addition, some participants explained that attending Offload made them feel empowered to seek further support. As one participant said: *'I got offered by college a person to talk to, and I was so non-hesitant to say no. But after these sessions, I actually asked if that offer is still available... it's getting set up, starting this week'*.

The stakeholders reported that the participants began to show improvements in their wellbeing and life satisfaction because Offload encouraged the boys and young men to think more positively about themselves, in ways that they often did not previously. Some of the activities in the sessions asked them to respond to pressured situations (both fictitious and real) and identify their 'superpowers' (perceived strengths) and 'kryptonites' (perceived weaknesses). Many of the participants shared that they enjoyed those sessions because it *'helped me to understand myself better'*. Furthermore, the programme challenged stereotypical masculine responses to happiness, including understating their happiness masculine responses to happiness, being unable to show enthusiasm or a positive emotional response, expressing happiness only as a result of a specific achievement or using humour rather than showing vulnerability. Speaking about the changes that they have observed in a participant, one college tutor said that *'he's softened his responses to topics, he's not laughing everything off ... He wouldn't admit anything's good, that [he] has an emotional attachment to it'* and when the young person was asked *'would you do it [the Offload programme] again?'* He responded *'yeah ... huh cheers' ... now for him to just say those small [words] ... he smiled'*. This highlighted how programmes like Offload can challenge masculine stereotypes through gender-responsive approaches to delivery and language choices, which in turn can encourage boys and young men to share and celebrate enjoyment rather than masking it through jokes.

Improved aspirations: increased motivation and re-integration with college

During discussions with the boys and young men it became increasingly apparent that the programme had positively impacted their aspirations. One participant reflected that *'sitting at home in bed ain't going to get you nowhere' and that the programme encouraged them to 'go do what you got to do ... you got goals and go do it'*. Many shared that engaging with Offload increased their motivation to change some of their current behaviours and lifestyle choices for more positive ones. Examples included beginning to participate in, or increasing their, engagement with, sport and physical activity and *'eating a healthier diet'* to support better health outcomes, both for their physical health and mental health. Other examples included spending less time in bed, challenging negative thoughts and believing more in their ability to achieve their goals. Some participants also shared that attending Offload has encouraged them to think about their future job prospects and careers in ways they had not yet considered. For example, one participant shared his new ambition to work in *'public services, like either police or fire'*.

Many of the young men that engaged with Offload were enrolled on courses at alternative provision colleges and attended Offload through their college. In many cases, the young men and boys shared that they decided to come to Offload because they *'got asked ... selected from different courses ... to come to this'* or were *'strongly encouraged'* to attend due to lack of engagement or refusing to attend college increasing their risk of becoming NEET. These participants were perceived by staff as likely to benefit from the programme's aims of improving social connections, wellbeing, and aspirations. While encouragement from college staff was cited as the reason that participants attended session one, many of the participants shared that they felt inspired to keep coming back to the programme because it was helping their thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

In several instances, the participants reported that since attending Offload they had begun to re-engage and re-integrate with college and their studies. One facilitator shared that a college teacher had highlighted that *'it's so good that two of the lads have engaged in the sessions because they haven't engaged in anything recently'* and by attending Offload, they have since seen *'a remarkable turnaround in the engagement in the lessons'*.



Delivery and adaptations

Prior to the delivery of each programme in this pilot, RL Cares facilitators and CCOs had already attended a three-to-five-day intensive training programme to support their existing delivery of MAOTG and Offload programmes. To support the necessary adaptations of each programme in this pilot, RL Cares provided further training to the RL Cares facilitators and the CCOs staff:

- **MAOTG:** A two-day training workshop focused on adapting the programme and its resources for broader community youth settings with boys and young men aged 11-18, as well as their parents and trusted adults.
- **Offload:** An additional one-day training workshop (supported by a counsellor with experience of working with NEET, and isolated young people), focused on the 6-week curriculum, working with and engaging socially isolated and NEET young men, adaptive and responsive delivery, escalation policy and support (including clinical governance for facilitators), and evaluation and research.

The evaluation generated new learning and actionable recommendations on what worked well, and what needs to be adapted, to support the potential future scale-up of MAOTG and Offload or similar programmes to support boys and young men. We have considered the delivery and necessary adaptations for each programme below.

Programme specific learnings:

Movember Ahead of the Game

Activity-led delivery approach: The standard MAOTG programme was piloted in broader community youth settings using the same content and resources. When discussing their experiences of delivering MAOTG within youth organisations, the CCOs reported that *'we have to try and keep it [delivery] quite active. So if you're just sat talking to them, you find that you lose the engagement'* because *'those young people aren't expecting like almost a structured learning session'*. Compared to community sport and educational settings, in the youth settings it often took around 20 minutes to build relationships and gain the participants' engagement. A necessary condition for supporting their engagement was *'more of an active delivery which works more than just a lecturing type of delivery'*. Some of the activities were structured and related to the programme content, and others included activities such as pool and darts. Some CCOs staff shared the impact to engagement of this approach and told us that *'I was a bit worried ... we were sitting there, asking the questions and no one was saying anything'*, and after introducing some games and activities and *'just having fun with them'* that they *'warmed up to us, they got to know us'*.

Time allocated to deliver the workshop: Integrating a more activity-led approach helped ensure the engagement of boys and young men in the workshop and supported the programme to positively impact their social connections, wellbeing and aspirations. However, this created a challenge for the facilitators to fit the content of the session into one hour in the youth settings. Some extended the delivery if they and the organisation had the time capacity, but this was not always possible or feasible. The teams tried to support extending delivery times when booking in future sessions by *'doubling the time'* and *'looking at two-hour slots'* to enable time within the workshop for the boys and young men to have breaks and *'five minutes to look on their phone, things like that'*. The conversations did raise questions about the potential to extend the workshop length in these settings to better respond to the needs and participation of the boys and young men.

Offload

Many of the young men shared that they were apprehensive about joining the Offload programme, and it was their support workers and tutors that encouraged them to attend. Following this initial apprehension, many of the participants said that they continued to attend because:

- The sessions were fun, interactive, non-judgemental and inclusive.
- The environment was safe and supportive.
- They enjoyed the facilitators and their lived experience as a professional sports person.
- They enjoyed the links to sport and rugby league.
- They were able to attend with their friends or others similar to themselves.
- Their peers were engaging and encouraged them to join the programme as well.

For example, one participant said that *'it's just the environment, it's the groups, it's the activities you do. You [facilitators] come off right friendly ... welcoming'*. Other participants commented that they thought the programme would include *'more sports and rugby'*. Some of the stakeholders suggested that this was a reason for participants becoming disengaged with the programme. While those attending the full programme enjoyed the discussion-based nature, they also reported, *'I realised it wasn't about sports ... I still came every week ... but I'm not a sit down in class person, I can't sit still ... so do more outside'*. This was also supported by the stakeholders and facilitators.

These findings support the necessary continuation of co-creation to support the programme's design. They also offer further consideration for how sports-based activities may become embedded into the programme to scaffold learning to influence the positive outcomes associated with social connections, wellbeing and aspirations that sport can contribute to.

Delivery environment: Stakeholders reported that many young men who are classed as NEET or experiencing social isolation and loneliness do not always have a safe space that they can access to meet others similar to themselves, or individuals that they trust enough to seek support for their mental health and wellbeing from. A key factor for the participants' decision to keep attending Offload was the relaxed and safe environment that the RL Cares facilitators and CCOs created. This was important because the boys and young men did not feel pressured to share anything they did not feel comfortable sharing.

Some cohorts delivered at rugby stadiums were able to offer facilities for participants to make a hot drink and eat snacks and biscuits which positively influenced participants' engagement with the programme. One college tutor suggested making *'the tea and coffee element ... a constant availability'* because *'having the option of standing up, making a cup of tea, and listening to what is getting said, it's a nice way for them to say, okay I can hear you but I don't have to show you [talk or share]'*. The boys and young men agreed that it was *'comforting'*, made them *'feel comfortable'* and created a *'relaxed environment'*.

The programme facilitators also acknowledged the need for a welcoming environment *'where they [boys and young men] can get a drink as well and ... sort of feel at home and feel safe'* and the refreshments were a key factor in their acceptance of the delivery spaces, especially in new environments. Generally, this enabled more informal and organic 'chat' to take place before the programme session officially began. Where refreshments were not offered, participants reporting wanting them as a change.

Location: Some of the cohorts took part in Offload at rugby league stadiums and others took place at the college site or local community centres. All participants that took part at the stadium liked attending the sessions there because it was a stigma-free environment. Some participants also supported the rugby team and enjoyed seeing the first team players training. The participants that attended sessions that took place at their college site or local community centre preferred the convenience of accessing the programme at places they were already familiar with and go to. A couple of cohorts aimed to deliver some sessions in a local community centre and others in the stadium. However, in some cases when the sessions moved from the community centre to the stadium, many participants did not attend that week. They said that they were *'unfamiliar with the stadium'* and indicated that this change exacerbated their apprehension of attending the programme. Instead, the delivery was returned to the local community centre and all participants re-engaged. In other cases, participants shared that they would like to attend at least one session at the rugby league stadium if the college or youth organisation were able to provide transport. This highlighted the need to deliver community place-based programmes in settings that the participants are familiar with and feel safe in. An example of a community place-based setting is depicted in the image below. The boys and young men set up the room to their preference.



Facilitators: The male participants and AP college staff (all of whom were female and referred to themselves as a 'second mum') said that the participants positively received the male facilitators. Reasons cited included the limited male role models in the young men's personal lives and within college, that the facilitators were previous or current professional sports players, that the facilitators challenged masculine stereotypes and were able to support the young men in gendered ways the female staff felt they could not. Some participants also said that they enjoyed hearing about the playing experiences of the facilitators and their jobs since retirement from professional sport. They shared that the facilitators are '*people who are just like sporty and we're very like-minded*' and acted as positive role models to support their aspirations.

Some of the college tutors shared how the male facilitators supported the positive social connections and wellbeing outcomes for the young men, because they saw '*that sportsmen have got vulnerabilities and they [facilitators] shared them*' and challenged the '*the stereotype of sports men, "I am man, I am sport, I am strong"*' sharing that '*these boys ... they need that reality, they need to be involved in positive masculinity*'. In addition, the facilitators reflected that '*I think they [boys and young men] sort of see us as we're people on the pitch*', and it comes as a '*surprise to them when we start speaking about certain things [feeling and emotions]*'. This challenged perceptions that professional sportsmen are indestructible and demonstrated to the boys and young men that sports players too show vulnerability, encouraging them to be idolised off the pitch as well. Using former sports people to facilitate the sessions provided an '*avenue for them [boys and young] to be able to open up*' and develop trusted social connections with their peers to support their wellbeing and aspirations.



Process findings

The evaluation gained valuable and significant insight and learning into the role of sport as a 'hook' to support the social connections, wellbeing and aspirations of boys and young men experiencing social isolation, loneliness, or identified as NEET. In this section we outline two key learning areas:

1. Partnership building
2. Place-based working and recruiting to programmes

Partnership building

RL Cares has strong working relationships within Wigan and Wakefield districts, including with the professional Rugby League clubs and their CCOs partners, of which are delivery partners for RL Cares. CCOs of professional sports clubs are important assets for place-based approaches as they engage their hard-to-reach communities who are less likely to seek help. They are centrally located in neighbourhoods and communities, positively impacting health and wellbeing outcomes like loneliness, isolation, mental health, and wellbeing through prevention and early intervention programmes (Brazier et al., 2025; Duffell et al., 2025; Wilcock et al., 2021).

To engage boys and young men with both MAOTG and Offload, RL Cares and the CCOs needed to develop new, trusting and reciprocal connections and partnerships within local networks of youth organisations, statutory services and charities across Wigan and Wakefield.

To begin the partnership building process, in October 2025, RL Cares, CCOs and EHU held stakeholder meetings hosted at Featherstone Rovers' Millennium Stadium and Wigan Warriors' The Brick Community Stadium to discuss the MAOTG and Offload pilot programme. The aim was to connect face-to-face with the youth networks across the Wigan and Wakefield districts who would potentially be involved in identifying and referring young men to the Offload programme or host MAOTG workshops at their organisation with boys and young men, trusted adults and their parents/guardians. This outreach included organisations such as local councils, alternative education provision settings, Fire Service, youth charities, Youth Justice System, youth zones and clubs, the Job Centre and Uniformed organisations (e.g., Scouts, Cadets, Army Squadrons).

Key learnings:

- **Significant upfront investment is required when creating strong local partnerships.** Typically, it took between one and four months after the stakeholder launch event to create meaningful connections between CCOs and youth organisations that translated into programme bookings.
- **Allocation of one staff member (ideally full-time) is required to mobilise the partnerships.** The CCOs reported that *'we've had no real contact with youth groups before - unless we've been running them ourselves'*. The increased resource supported communication in convenient ways (e.g., via phone calls and emails), organising meetings at convenient times, and dropping into community youth groups to connect with delivery teams.
- **Word-of-mouth is an important recruitment strategy to support the development of networks of partnerships** across uniformed organisations and broader youth organisations, statutory services and charities. The CCOs shared that *'trying to get into the Scouts and such as the Explorer groups, has been quite difficult, and it's one of them where you need to do a couple first to get word of mouth going'*. This is demonstrated by 86% of programme delivery commencing in the second half of the pilot.

Programme specific learnings:

Movember Ahead of the Game

Engagement with youth organisations: Piloting MAOTG in youth settings developed the credibility of the CCOs across the networks of youth organisations and enabled them to be viewed as a *'a well governed organisation that's got safeguarding procedures in place'* (CCOs) that can support the social connections, wellbeing and aspirations of boys and young men across Wigan and Wakefield. This benefited the young people by introducing them to a community sports organisation where they can access further programmes, activities and opportunities to volunteer.

Engagement with trusted adults: The development of trusted and reciprocal partnerships across youth networks supported the successful reach of the targeted number of trusted adults. The lead contact in the youth organisation supported the buy-in and engagement of their youth workers, volunteers and manager to participate in the workshop.

Engagement with parents/guardians: RL Cares and the CCOs navigated *'the difficulty with the youth clubs ... trying to get that triangulation ... that you want to be delivering it to the coaches, to the children and to the parents because then everyone's on the same wavelength'* (CCOs). They reported that the youth centres and organisations *'very much aimed for the children to get themselves there to the youth club so that the parents don't have to drop them off'* (CCOs) which supported the reach of boys and young men. While it was difficult to engage parent/guardians, the programme successfully reached 82% of its target of 107 parents/guardians by adapting the recruitment strategy. This involved working with the youth organisations and offering workshops for parents both online and in-person during their sessions. Youth organisations supported recruitment of parents/guardians through their communication channels which supported the achieved reach.

Offload

Partnerships with alternative provision: One positive unintended outcome of the Offload pilot programme was the development of partnerships between RL Cares, the CCOs, and alternative provision (AP) colleges. This allowed the CCOs to engage with young men who were at risk of, or classed as, socially isolated and/or on the verge of becoming NEET due to low attendance or college refusal. A programme manager from RL Cares discussed that they thought that referrals into Offload would come *'from statutory services and youth offending teams'*. Instead, the CCOs *'thinking outside of the box, where are these other young people?'*, began to develop partnerships with organisations in educational settings where young men experiencing isolation, loneliness or at risk of becoming NEET may be present, or in the case of statutory education, be absent or refusing to attend.

The AP colleges included those that offer alternative and vocational education to young people aged 16-24 years with Education, Health and Care plans (EHCP), Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs (SEMH), or classed as NEET. Some were identified as schools and colleges, while others were charity-based organisations offering work-experience led curriculum. All AP colleges supported the development of key personal skills including communication, teamwork and problem-solving as part of their curricula.

Many of the AP college staff said that Offload aligned with their AP curricula and supported the personal development of their male learners. They reported that *'we are classed as an inclusive college ... a lot of our values is ambition, collaboration, inclusion, and respect ... Offload is about that'*, while also discussing that their learners are often *'not invited'* or excluded from programmes like Offload, or that they are unable to meet their needs. The ongoing co-creation approach and externality of the programme enabled the colleges *'to put as much scaffold and wrap around whilst they're in with us to get them ready for the next step in their academic or ... independent journey'* and emphasised that Offload reinforced the messages and development that the college promoted.

Both the CCOs and AP colleges staff reported that *'it's been quite easy to get that two-hour period'* (CCOs) to deliver Offload because of their shared aims and values, and the flexibility in the AP college's curricula timetable to allow for a two-hour period. The CCOs existing partnerships and experience in education and school settings facilitated successful integration into AP colleges and broadened their educational offer. The CCOs and AP college staff were keen for Offload to continue and be developed across alternative education, as well as maintaining the new partnerships developed during this pilot.

Place-based working and recruiting to programmes

Key learnings:

The latest available data from the Department for Education (2025b) highlighted that 5% of 16-17-year-olds in Wigan, and 4.2% of the same population in Wakefield are classed as NEET, or their activity not known. Of those identified as a vulnerable group, 27.3% of 16-17-year-olds in Wigan, and 25.8% of the same population in Wakefield are classed as NEET, or their activity not known (see Appendix 1).

The youth sector stakeholders in this pilot agreed that community organisations (like the CCOs in this pilot) have an important and positive role in the offer of place-based programmes for boys and young men who are identified as, or at risk of, social isolation, loneliness and time as NEET because:

- They focused on the boys and young men's strengths and gender-responsive approaches, including solution-focused learning, non-clinical settings and language (e.g., 'Join men like you' / 'Come be a part of'), practical delivery through interactive games to reinforce learning, using sports brand and male sporting role models with lived experiences, as a hook to engage boys and young men in settings.
- Used community assets and the brand of the CCOs as a 'hook' to engage and connect with boys and young men.

One stakeholder who attended the stakeholder meeting at Featherstone Rovers Millennium Stadium said that they were *'just sat there thinking this is spot on, it's really needed'* and the *'focus on male mental health, getting them talking and trying to do it in a way that is more male'* was *'really needed for the type of kids that are in Wakefield'*.

A key strength in this pilot was the place-based ways of working to engage the intended beneficiaries and become integrated into the youth network. RL Cares and the CCOs reported that it was *'really resource intensive, whether that's engaging young boys in the Offload programme and literally driving to their houses to offer transport, or ... going to uniformed organisations on a Wednesday night and just showing up to have a conversation'*.

This generated *'a very different way of working' that was 'a very ground up way of working'*. These ways did increase the demand and resources placed on the delivery teams. However, working in such ways supported the engagement of 'hard-to-reach' groups because they were met in settings that they 'go to', were familiar and could access. This is explored in more detail next.



Programme specific learnings:

Movember Ahead of the Game

Recruitment strategy: A shared challenge across the two areas was establishing effective communication with the youth organisations to support recruitment to the MAOTG programme. The recruitment strategy included targeting youth centres, zones and uniformed organisations that had regular engagement with boys and young men. While organisations provided access to the participants that would benefit from attending a programme aimed to develop social connections, support wellbeing and promote aspirations, the CCOs had to negotiate variable working patterns and constraints related to volunteer-led provision, where *‘a lot of them don't look at their emails, they're all volunteers, they don't work full time doing that’*. To navigate this, the staff reported that their recruitment approach involved *‘emails or ringing the numbers that are on their websites’*, as well as *‘just turning up just at their session asking to speak to someone, see if we can deliver’*.

Club community organisation size: The variable sizes of the CCOs in this pilot impacted the reach and ability to be responsive and book in sessions. The variations in the organisational size of the CCOs included the number of full-time and part-time staff employed, and the number of staff trained to deliver MAOTG. One of the larger teams reflected that *‘because we've got six or seven staff trained across MAOTG training. We can get stuff booked in, then just allocate staff thereafter’*, whereas smaller teams were more likely to be *‘dictated by specific diaries’*. Although this did not affect the reach of boys and young men within the funded period, the time constraints meant that much of their delivery was towards the latter stages of the funding period. Necessary time should be allocated within funding cycles to train up CCOs team of staff, build partnerships and recruit boys and young men, their parents/guardians and trusted adults to support the positive impact to social connections, wellbeing and aspirations of those experiencing, or at risk of, social isolation and loneliness.

Attendance at youth groups: In comparison to the wider community sport and school delivery of MAOTG, attendance at youth organisations sessions was not compulsory. This meant that the number of attendees at each session could not necessarily be anticipated or estimated. The CCOs reflected that the youth organisations would *‘tell kids you're coming in’* and *‘try and get as many to come X night’*, but do not have the control to say, *‘you must be here Tuesday at six o'clock because we're doing Ahead of the Game’*. The implications of this meant they needed to broaden recruitment and offer multiple sessions at the same site to follow up from word-of-mouth interest.



Offload

The pilot enabled RL Cares and the CCOs to further target young men who are socially isolated, lonely, or NEET. While the CCOs had trust and support from their newly developed partnerships, they initially experienced limited trust from the young men themselves. One stakeholder working as a support worker in a local council shared that *'our young people who are NEET are not going to be the sort of young people that are going to pop along to a drop in to find out more information'*. Another stakeholder working in the Youth Justice sector encouraged two boys to attend the Offload programme and offered free transport to facilitate their access to the delivery location. However, both participants became closed (i.e., signed off) on his caseload in the week between session one and two and *'went really uncommunicative about it. So you'd ring and they wouldn't answer'*. This meant that *'once they were closed ... we didn't have any power over them really, they were both 18'* and continued support with transport was not possible to provide.

Our findings here indicate that the status of young men's involvement with statutory services and youth organisations affects the level of resources (including financial and human resources) that they can offer to support their initial and continued engagement with early intervention programmes like Offload. This experience aligned with similar geographical challenges identified among men (DHSC, 2025b; Wilcock et al., 2021).

An adaptation made was to offer open and closed groups in this pilot to mitigate the challenges experienced with accessing NEET young people and draw upon relevant existing on the ground relationships to support the development and sustainability of the programme. This generated more strategic approaches to recruitment and engagement.

- **Open groups:** Participants self-referred or attended without prior booking. Sessions were hosted at Rugby Stadia or community venues.
- **Closed groups:** Participants were identified by a stakeholder, and participation was only available to those who were part of that organisation or institution. (e.g., college). Sessions were hosted at either the Rugby stadia or the stakeholder's site.

Open groups: Recruiting into the open groups proved more challenging and was more time-consuming and often resulted in lower numbers. One staff member shared that *'it's something [open groups] that really hasn't taken off and we've pushed it and we've tried really hard to get people through'*. The open sessions typically required the young men to sign themselves up, or via a support worker referral, and travel independently to and from the delivery site and cover the travel cost themselves.

In response to co-creation findings that young men preferred to know programme facilitators in advance, some staff met with potential participants prior to the programme starting to create familiarity and build early support. This included visiting partner organisations (e.g., youth charities) to meet staff and participants, as well as home visits alongside support workers to share the programme and its aims.

This process alone often took over a month before the potential groups started and did help some participants attend at least one Offload session and engage in activities to support social connections, their wellbeing and aspirations.

This engagement to create familiarity was necessary to support young men's attendance, and the time to build relationships and create trust before starting groups should be allocated in the set-up phase.

Closed groups were an effective way to recruit young men experiencing social isolation, loneliness and at risk of becoming NEET to the Offload programme. This was often because the CCOs *'already do a lot of provision at the college, they can just pass us on to the right people'*.

Attendance was higher because support workers, college tutors and youth organisations supported the translation between registration to the programme and actual attendance numbers. They did this by:

1. Attending the Offload programme with the participants to remove the barrier of attending a new setting alone.
2. Providing (free) transport to the delivery sites (including stadiums and local community centres). This included buses from college or collecting participants from their home addresses.

The evaluation found that both 'closed' and 'open' sessions can be effective with this cohort. While 'open' sessions saw lower attendance, word-of-mouth engagement did begin to build, and given more time, recruitment to these sessions could become increasingly successful, like the delivery of Offload in other areas, where experience shows that within 12–18 months of launching similar services, word of mouth becomes the primary referral route. The camaraderie, relationships developed, sports-men facilitating, enjoyment of the programme, and support with transport sustained participants engagement with the programme.

Recommendations

Key recommendations

Considering the findings of this evaluation and the wider evidence base, the following recommendations are made for policy makers, CCOs and youth organisations wishing to use place-based community programmes to improve social connections, wellbeing and aspirations among boys and young men at risk of loneliness and isolation:

- 1. Integration into local networks:** CCOs should endeavour to integrate into, and work with, diverse existing locally trusted youth networks and organisations to engage boys and young men. This may include joining existing networks of youth organisations across local districts and agreed frequency of communication and review with individual local youth organisation partners.
- 2. Co-production:** CCOs and youth organisations should ensure programmes are co-produced collaboratively with a range of stakeholders (e.g. boys and young men, practitioners, youth organisations, policy makers, academics and researchers). Programmes should make use of existing non-clinical community-based assets, and involve the delivery of non-threatening, solutions-focused, activities by relatable people from the communities where boys and young men live. This will better support programmes to (1) meet the diverse needs of boys and young men and avoid reinforcing rigid gender norms and values and maximising the longer-term effectiveness of programmes, and (2) gain earlier buy-in, acceptability and ownership from local youth networks.
- 3. Gender-responsive approaches:** Inclusive, gender-responsive approaches (including appealing culturally relevant brands such as rugby league) and language which help promote healthy masculinities are important for strengthening social connections, wellbeing and aspirations.
- 4. Delivery environment:** Place-based community programmes should endeavour to provide opportunities for boys and young men with shared experiences and interests to connect meaningfully with peers in safe, familiar and appealing settings which encourage openness, respect and camaraderie.
- 5. Inclusive approaches to peer relationships:** While developing authentic and supportive relationships with peers and associated masculine values is important, caution needs to be given to how programmes are delivered to boys and young men with complex and diverse experiences so that programmes do not negatively and unintentionally impact wellbeing.
- 6. Differentiated support pathways:** Prevention and early intervention pathways offered separately and/or together (as appropriate) which account for the lived experience of boys and young men can help strengthen the effectiveness of programmes.
- 7. Time for partnership building:** Sufficient time (at least 4 months) and resources need to be allocated to the development of new, mutually agreed and trusting relationships between CCOs and youth organisations during the initial stages of programme development if boys and young men are to be effectively reached and benefit from place-based programmes.
- 8. Age- and culturally- appropriate inclusive and participatory evaluation methods:** Methods used as part of programme monitoring and evaluation as an essential way to understand the diverse experiences of boys and young men. The selection of validated measures should consider age, language and literacy-levels, to ensure they are appropriate for the participants. To better support engagement with programme evaluations, these should include mixed-methods, and where possible, be co-produced with boys and young men to enable them to share their experiences and outcomes through methods they prefer.
- 9. Evaluation:** Monitoring and evaluation processes need to be built-in from the start of future scaled-up programmes if their benefits to boys and young men are to be captured accurately and reported in a timely manner. The development of positive relationships between CCOs, youth organisations and evaluation partners can support participants' engagement with evaluation. This will further help to provide evidence of how programmes help improve social connections, wellbeing and aspirations for different groups of boys and young men, in different community settings, and why.

Recommendations

To support future implementation of the MAOTG and Offload programmes with boys and young men, the following recommendations are made:

Movember Ahead of the Game (MAOTG)

1. This evaluation provides further promising evidence and early findings for the MAOTG programme in improving social connections, wellbeing and aspirations among boys and young men. There would be benefit in undertaking further evaluation in future in order to test and understand the impact and cost-effectiveness of these programmes.
2. Providers should be willing to adapt programme delivery to suit the diverse needs of boys and young men in new youth-oriented settings based in local communities.
3. The number of trained programme facilitators should be maximised by CCOs and other youth organisation delivery partners to ensure demand can be effectively met in a timely manner.
4. Ensure adequate support and resources are available to support programme monitoring and evaluation. This may include attending MAOTG workshops to build relationships with stakeholders and participants and inviting them to take part in the evaluation. In addition, evaluation activities should take place in-person, and during times the boys and young men and stakeholders attend the youth groups.

Offload

1. This evaluation provides further promising evidence and early findings for the Offload programme in improving social connections, wellbeing and aspirations among boys and young men. There would be benefit in undertaking further evaluation in future in order to test and understand the impact and cost-effectiveness of these programmes.
2. Further develop existing approaches to programme delivery by including participants in the co-production of programme design, resource and evaluation approaches.
3. Ensure that a period of familiarisation with participants is built-in to the start of programme delivery to strengthen trust, maximise engagement, and likelihood of long-term behaviour change.
4. Continue to leverage the success of elite athletes delivering the Offload programme. This connected well with the boys and young men by providing role models willing to open up and share their personal experiences around mental health. There is a requirement to scale up the recruitment, training, and quality assurance programme to diversify the workforce across a range of sports to reach a wider geographical audience across the country.
5. Consider expanding delivery into relevant educational settings (including further education and sixth-form colleges) and continue to use relatable male delivery staff who can act as trusted and respectable role models with lived experience.
6. Ensure adequate support and resources are available to support programme monitoring and evaluation.

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Appendix 1: Local context: Wigan and Wakefield

Table 4: Select demographic data for Wigan and Wakefield (from Department for Education, 2025b; Department of Health and Social Care (2025a))

	Wigan	Wakefield	England
NEET or activity not known, ages 16 to 17 (2024)	5.0%	4.2%	5.6%
Vulnerable groups NEETS and not known, aged 16 to 17 (2024)	27.3%	25.8%	28.2%
Participation in education and training, aged 16 to 17 (2024)	90.3%	91.8%	92.0%
School attendance - persistent absentees, ages 16 to 17 (2024)	25.2%	26.8%	25.8%
% 19 year olds achieving GCSE 9 – 4 standard pass in English and maths between ages 16 and 19 (2024)	24.5%	13.2%	19.7%
Children in low income families (all dependent children under 20) (2023/24)	15.0%	18.8%	17.0%
School pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs (2024/25)	4.8%	4.0%	4.0%
Looked after children whose emotional wellbeing is a cause for concern (2023/24)	40.0%	42.0%	41.0%
Suicide rate (Male) (per 100,000) (2022-24)	28.8	24.4	16.8

Appendix 2: Data collection methods

Pre-post measures

To evaluate individual level change, the following measures were used:

- Improved mental wellbeing: Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale ([SWEMWBS](#))
- Improved social connections: [UCLA-3 loneliness and Community Life Survey](#) measures of loneliness

Focus group guide with boys and young men

A combination of focus group style conversations, flip chart paper / stick notes and voice notes:

- Why did you decide to come to [insert programme name]?
- What are your opinions of the programme / what did you think of it?
- What, if anything, was good about it?
- What, if anything, was not so good about it?
- What, if anything, was the most important thing you took away from the workshop?
- Did you learn any practical coping strategies, if so, what were these?
- Why did you keep coming back each week? (Offload)
- Programme length?
- If you could change one thing about the programme, what would it be?
- Have you noticed any changes to your mental fitness since the programme? How? (they use this terminology in the programmes)
- Has [programme name] made you more likely to talk to those close to you about your experiences? Do you know where to seek help?
- Since taking part, have your hopes or goals for the future changed? If so, how?
- Can you talk to me about any new goals that you now feel confident about pursuing/following?

Interview guide with Foundations, stakeholders and facilitators

Locality

- Can you tell me about [area]?
- What are the main challenges young men and boys face in [area]?
- What are the most common mental health challenges young men and boys face?
- What support is available?

Programmes

- What are the aims of [Offload/MAOTG] programme? Did the programme achieve these?
- In your opinion, what went well about Offload, and what could be improved?
- In your opinion, what went well about MAOTG, and what could be improved?
- How relevant and helpful do you think the programme was for young men and boys?
- From your perspective, how well were the programmes implemented?
- Did the delivery formats work for young men and boys? Why?
- Were there any barriers to delivering the programme?
- What outcomes have you observed in the young men and boys that took part?
- Did the programme support the participants to socially connect with others? How?
- Since taking part, have any of the participants suggested how their hopes or goals for the future changed?
- Have they shared any new goals that they now feel confident about pursuing/following?
- Staff resourcing for programmes for youth groups/NEETS?
- Where should delivery need to take place?

Recruitment

- Can you talk me through your recruitment approach to support young men and boys in accessing the [Offload/MAOTG] programme?
- What challenges did you face and how did you overcome them?
- What worked well in your recruitment approach?
- How well did different stakeholders engage with you to support the programme and signpost young men and boys?
- Do you feel that the programmes objectives aligned to other stakeholders? How could this be sustained and/or improved?
- Do you have any suggestions for how to build strong partnerships across [area] with your Foundation to support a successful delivery of Offload and MAOTG?

Improving social connections, wellbeing and aspirations among boys and young men experiencing loneliness and isolation through the Offload and Movember Ahead of the Game programmes.

Centre for Mental Health, Sport and Physical Activity Research and Faculty of Education

Edge Hill University, September 2026