



Taking Boys Seriously: Policy Roundtable

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Introduction

This Policy Brief presents research evidence, key themes and policy recommendations discussed at an ARK policy roundtable event in June 2026 on the Taking Boys Seriously (TBS) Project. The roundtable was attended by representatives from the youth and education sectors, elected representatives, government departments and arm's length bodies, the community and voluntary sector, the private sector and academia.

The aim:

To envisage how a substantial TBS evidence base grounded in longitudinal participatory action research with adolescent boys, educators, schools, youth services and local communities can inform and shape educational and cross-departmental policies and strategies to tackle compounded educational disadvantage.

Seven recommendations were put forward and discussed with an emphasis on identifying the gifts that individuals and organisations could bring to further action, scale, and embed these. The recommendations summarised here are elaborated on later in this report:

1. Embed relational education underpinned by the 10 TBS principles.
2. Invest in collaborative training that promotes relational approaches, empowering practices, and critical engagement with masculinities.
3. Strengthen the educational ecosystem by investing in the regional NI Boys' Impact Hub.
4. Implement community-based strategies for tackling Compounded Educational Disadvantage by investing in youth services within local communities.
5. Reframe masculinities moving from deficit to strengths-based framing and the development of a regional Empowering Boys Programme.
6. Realign measurement and reward systems in education to promote relational outcomes and democratic practices.
7. Build a long-term, cross-departmental strategy for work with boys and young men that links TBS evidence with wider research on men's health, wellbeing, justice, and socio-economic outcomes.

Context

A persistent multi-generational attainment gap among working-class boys, particularly pronounced in disadvantaged communities, remains a systemic challenge in the UK (Hillman and Brooks 2025). The issue manifests in:

- Lower literacy and numeracy in primary school
- Reduced GCSE performance across core subjects
- Higher rates of exclusion and disciplinary action
- Lower participation in higher education

Traditional remedial approaches that focus on behaviour, motivation, or individual deficit are insufficient. The TBS longitudinal Participatory Action Research (PAR) project has partnered with thousands of boys and educators between 2006 and 2026 to better understand the challenges and, importantly, how to make the system better. Based on a twenty-year evidence base, the research offers critical insights for policymaking focused on tackling educational disadvantage and working effectively with boys and young men in diverse educational and community settings.

Evidence from twenty years of TBS work

Compounded Educational Disadvantage

The findings of the work show how educational underachievement of boys and young men is a product of *Compounded Educational Disadvantage* (CED) rather than individual deficit. Compounded Educational Disadvantage refers to the interplay of systemic issues that impact boys. This is represented by bricks in a backpack; the more bricks the harder it is for a boy to progress through the system. These structural pressures include poverty, restrictive masculinities and inconsistent educational practices. Framing underachievement as systemic challenges deficit narratives and emphasises the need for place-based, structural interventions (Cowie et al, 2023).

Relational Education

The evidence highlights the need for policy, pedagogy, and practice-level interventions that recognise boys' lived experiences, foster relational engagement, target multi-layered disadvantage and support autonomy, agency, and appreciation.

TBS developed 10 Principles of Relational Education (tinyurl.com/TBSprinciples) that have been operationalised in classrooms, schools, alternative education centres, and youth work organisations. The principles are designed to:

- Prioritise strong, respectful relationships
- Foster dignity, respect, and voice
- Use context-based, experiential learning
- Promote positive identity formation and wellbeing
- Enable creative learning environments
- Engage boys meaningfully and affirm masculinities

Trials in both Northern Ireland (Hamilton et al, 2024) and England (Blower et al, 2025) with over 550 adolescent boys across more than 50 schools and youth organisations demonstrate that relational approaches improve engagement, attendance, wellbeing, and learning outcomes. Central to this is the Boys and Young Men's Quadrant, a four-stage engagement framework that supports and measures boy's development across five domains - *voice*, *influence*, *interdependence*, *belonging* and *identity*. Using the Quadrant schools can operationalise the TBS model by:

1. Obtaining a **Baseline Measure through the Empowering Boys Questionnaire** – gather boys' perspectives
2. Developing **Intentional Practice** - adapt teaching to respond to the feedback from boys

3. Developing **Collaborative Inquiry** - share and refine practice across staff and partners
4. **Measuring Again** – ensure boys’ voices continue to shape practice

Participatory Action Research and Ecosystem Approach

Participatory Action Research positions boys, young men, and educators as co-producers of knowledge, and appreciative inquiry focuses on what works, rather than deficits. The concept of the ‘gift’ is used to ensure ownership and engagement. These approaches are embedded into the Boys’ and Young Men’s Quadrant, providing a framework for educators to facilitate participatory strengths-based inquiry to inform practice, rather than simply being tasked with implementing a prescriptive curriculum. The evidence shows that the educational ecosystem integrates schools, youth services, communities, and funders, ensuring shared responsibility (Hamilton et al, 2025). Outcomes include:

- Locally grounded interventions
- Boys shaping solutions
- Strengthened practitioner engagement
- Enhanced legitimacy and uptake

The ecosystem approach has been adopted by the Boys Impact movement which was set up to address the gap in GCSE outcomes for young men who are eligible for free school meals. Built around 16 regional hubs across the UK this initiative brings together leaders across the education and community sectors to develop initiatives and actions based on the TBS principles of relational education (<https://www.boysimpact.com/principles>).

Masculinities and Educational Engagement

While there are many ways of expressing masculinity these are not always viewed as equal. Often a particular idealised type of masculinity comes to the fore shaped by broader social norms and cultural expectations which many boys measure themselves against. Boys experience contradictory pressures: expected to be strong, brave, and competent, while simultaneously feeling vulnerable, judged, or powerless. Evidence from TBS shows that gender-consciousness is increased when educators have opportunities to reflect on gender socialisation and develop intentional approaches which affirm and challenge aspects of masculinities in their work with boys. In order to operationalise this positive engagement policies must be gender-conscious, non-deficit, and strengths-based, broadening educational pathways to support positive identity formation (Morgan and Harland, 2009).

Policy Implications

The body of TBS evidence identifies that policy responses to boys educational underachievement needs to:

- Shift away from individual deficits towards systemic reform to address the structural inequalities and approaches in education that exacerbate attainment inequalities
- Move from instrumental approaches to relational and empowering practice to embed relational competencies alongside curriculum delivery
- Adopt ecosystem approaches rather than top-down policies and interventions so that effective partnerships with boys, educators, and communities can be established and sustained.

Prior to attending the roundtable participations were provided with an evidence brief (Morgan et al, 2026) which included a set of policy recommendations:

1. *Embed Relational Education*

- Embed relational education and TBS principles into all schools, curriculum, examination and inspection bodies as a recognised quality indicator.
- Develop a Relational Education Charter across Initial Teacher Education, Continued Professional Development, curriculum, and inspection.
- Embed measurement tools such as the TBS Empowering Boys Questionnaire to capture core indicators of relational education.

2. *Invest in Collaborative Training and CPD*

- Invest in CPD and short courses for teachers, lecturers, youth workers, and classroom assistants focusing on relational approaches, empowering practices, and critical engagement with masculinities. These could be funded collaboratively, leveraging existing education and youth work infrastructure.

3. *Strengthen the Educational Ecosystem*

- Support Boys Impact and the localised Boys Impact Hubs through the provision of multi-year funding (minimum five years) for coordination roles.
- Incentivise partnerships between schools and youth services, recognising their complementary yet distinctive roles in addressing poverty and building social and cultural capital.
- Expand access to diverse vocational, academic, hybrid, and experiential educational pathways.

4. *Implement Strategies for tackling Compounded Educational Disadvantage*

- Invest in youth services within local communities that build the social and cultural capital and leadership skills of young people.
- Align education and youth policy with poverty reduction, wellbeing, and community capacity building backed by public and private sector investment.

5. *Reframe masculinities*

- Establish a regional Empowering Boys Programme integrating formal and informal learning and cross-sector provision (the 'SistersIN' initiative offers a good example of this in work with girls and young women).
- Shift discourse from deficit to strengths-based framing.
- Promote identity exploration, critical engagement with masculinities, and creative learning across all types and stages of education.

6. *Realign Measurement and Reward Systems*

- Shift measurement beyond academic attainment by developing and implementing metrics that value relational and social development, embedding the Boys' & Young Men's Quadrant as a quality indicator.

7. *Develop a Long-Term, Cross-Departmental Strategy*

- Develop a sustainable long term policy framework linking TBS evidence with wider research on men's health and wellbeing and socio-economic outcomes.

Policy Roundtable

Participants heard a short presentation on the key messages from the TBS work, including the ambition that it supports the development of contexts where boys and young men thrive. TBS largely consists of two major interventions spanning more than two decades with the current phase funded by Ulster University. Key strengths of the evidence base is the longevity of the work and the unique participatory approach employed throughout. Participants heard how TBS is strongly aligned to a number of Northern Ireland government policy priorities including ending violence against women and girls, educational attainment, upskilling, and addressing economic inactivity. A key message was that those in the room had the gift to translate this robust evidence into actions.

Chair of the Education Committee, Nick Mathison MLA provided additional policy context and looked at how the principles and outworking of TBS could help address some of the most persistent policy challenges. He noted how TBS work went beyond analysing the challenges and illustrated how the positive results provide a clear set of principles that can inform future policy and, importantly, that these are principles around which political parties can coalesce. He reflected a concern that previous interventions had often not progressed beyond pilots. While mainstreaming positive interventions has been challenging, the way in which TBS highlights the underpinning systemic causes of low attainment provides further evidence of the need to achieve consistency in approach across schools. The adoption and implementation of the TBS principles would be good for *all* children and young people. It was acknowledged that not everything can be addressed in the classroom but the lessons from TBS are clear about how the approach can be fundamental to transformation of learning experiences and outcomes which have value beyond attainment.

Dr Hamilton drew participants' attention to some of the recommendations in the briefing they had received (see Morgan et al., 2026): the value of an accredited model based on TBS principles and the budget to support the roll out and sustainability of the work; the importance of collaborative training; the need to broaden educational pathways; and, the importance of recognising how the work can support a positive reframing of masculinities. He noted how research and policies and strategies have talked of the transformative role of youth work. This should not be taken for granted but needs to be protected; while NI has a stronger base than other parts of the UK there are significant funding challenges. Finally, he noted the critical importance of a long-term departmental strategy which would outlive individual ministers and governments.

Participants then took part in group discussions on what they had heard, sharing and drawing on their professional and sectoral experiences.

Feedback and Discussion

Consensus on challenges

While participants at the roundtable came from a range of sectors and organisations there was strong endorsement of the challenges facing boys and young men which had been described in the briefing paper and outlined at the start of the roundtable. Participants also agreed that these challenges had to be understood as complex and as a result of structural and social factors. There was also agreement that negative messages about masculinity were being reinforced, that boys need to see positive versions of themselves and that success in tackling these challenges had to go beyond ensuring better educational attainment in terms of exam results. They were united in the view that progress would require systemic change but were keen and optimistic that opportunities could be taken, based on the evidence from TBS, to ensure that schools are safe and nurturing spaces.

Principles and values

There was a strong consensus on the importance of a common mission or set of values based on TBS principles across the education system. Participants had heard about the strong evidence from TBS about the positive impact of relational learning and this clearly resonated with many saying that there should be room in the education system for relationship building – between teachers and the boys/young men and peer to peer relationships. This was seen as integral to building trust and to boys feeling valued. The point was made that this needed to start earlier than post primary, that it would have to address what can be a negative and damaging narrative regarding what success looks like at primary level and tackle entrenched perceptions of academic worth being linked to attendance at a secondary or grammar school.

Flexible/alternative pathways

The need for different/alternative educational pathways and more flexibility around how boys learn was a strong theme in discussions. It was suggested that this could be facilitated through more collaboration and sharing between schools to make maximum use of expertise and resources. Linked to this was concern that there should be a rethink about the main indicator of success being pass rates in GCSEs. A key factor in achieving this was cited as schools and teachers having the necessary flexibility to be adaptive to specific circumstances and needs, plus a broader acceptance of a more holistic approach to education and learning.

Youth work approach

A number of participants commented on the need for greater collaboration between youth work and schools, with some calling for youth workers to be embedded in schools. Participants attached value to youth work approaches as pivotal to strengthening peer to peer relationships, encouraging coproduction, and a more holistic approach to education.

It was generally agreed that embedding the principles and model of TBS in schools would require these to be included in teacher training and in continuing professional development. It was felt that this should include some elements of collaborative learning between teachers and youth workers to reflect recognition that we need formal and informal education working together. There was a call for more *systematic* ways of sharing best practice; the point was made that people quite often work in a very siloed way while grappling with similar challenges.

Accreditation

Importance was attached to the value an *accredited model* of working with boys and young men as something which would demonstrate rigour and worth and be more likely to achieve some consistency in values and approach across schools. It was argued that this should be a part of the ETI inspection framework. Accreditation was also discussed as a way of achieving a positive and holistic curriculum (which would benefit all learners) – with one participant describing this as a ‘preventative’ curriculum challenging negative stereotypes and reframing masculinity. There was a recognition of the structural factors impacting on boys’ educational experiences and attainment, including negative and damaging early childhood experiences which required significant psychologist support in schools and a much stronger focus on trauma informed practice in CPD.

Leadership in policy and practice

While participants felt there was a strong body of evidence about the impact of TBS, more widespread impact required strong leadership at policy level, within management, delivery and inspection bodies and in school leadership. It was suggested by several participants that policy makers needed to see this work as part of a more holistic policy agenda around health and wellbeing, economic participation and tackling violence against women and girls.

Collaboration

Collaboration was a strong theme running throughout the discussions. This included: collaboration between government departments - recognition of the range of factors contributing to the compounded educational disadvantage; collaboration between schools and between education and youth services; collaboration between schools and local communities; and, collaboration with the boys in a way they can see that engagement is meaningful and has impact.

Participants took part in a 'gift exchange', writing down and sharing with others the gift they could contribute to addressing the challenges. This draws on a core concept of appreciative inquiry in TBS where everyone is invited to acknowledge and contribute what is in their power and control to make a positive difference for boys facing compounded educational disadvantage. The gift exchange reinforced the value of an active educational ecosystem working collaboratively to transform policy, pedagogy, and practice. Many participants pledged advocacy, commitment, and time to the TBS model and to challenging the stereotypes around boys' educational attainment. Some said they could share information on TBS across networks (policy and school) and build praxis within their own organisations. There were examples of steps that could be taken such as; implement male role model schemes within organisations; within initial teacher training and through CPD demonstrate how to use evidence to address educational disadvantage with a strong focus on relational restorative approaches aligned with the TBS principles; use networks to build collaborations between stakeholders. Also mentioned was that opportunity would be taken to highlight the connection between the values and principles of TBS and the EAWWG strategy and between TBS evidence, vocational training and career advice. Reflecting the business perspective there was a commitment to help to draw support from business through using the evidence to inform discussions about what young men can bring to the workplace.

Conclusion

The discussion at the roundtable showed an appreciation of the TBS evidence and strong support for many of the recommendations that had been outlined. There was agreement that transformative change was needed, but it was stressed by some that intensive support would be important. This would require policy and practice champions, a political commitment to sustained and sustainable policy actions, and a long-term funding commitment. It was noted that it is important not just to consider positive outcomes in terms of educational achievement but the potential to impact health and wellbeing, substance use, labour market participation, and stronger and safer communities.

To conclude the day Joanne Bunting MLA, who is also Junior Minister in the Executive Office emphasised the importance of ensuring the longevity and sustainability of the *Taking Boys Seriously* agenda, recognising its significant real-world relevance and the need for a long-term commitment to supporting boys and young men. She highlighted that the issues facing boys are complex and influenced by a range of interconnected factors, cautioning against simplistic explanations or one-dimensional narratives. Reflecting on the report's call for "champions" to advance this work, the Minister noted that there were already many committed individuals and organisations in the room capable of driving meaningful change. She welcomed the research for challenging reductive narratives around toxic masculinity and stressed that adopting a gender-conscious approach should not equate to treating boys as a problem to be solved. Instead, she emphasised the importance of providing boys with positive role models and opportunities to develop healthy, respectful relationships, reinforcing the value of relational education as a key element of effective policy and practice. Concluding her contribution, the Minister argued that future policy responses must reflect the complexity of boys' lived experiences and be grounded in evidence-informed, strengths-based approaches that enable boys to flourish.

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