

21ST CENTURY MAN



A CONSULTATION ON MALE IDENTITY WITH THE MEN OF LEEDS

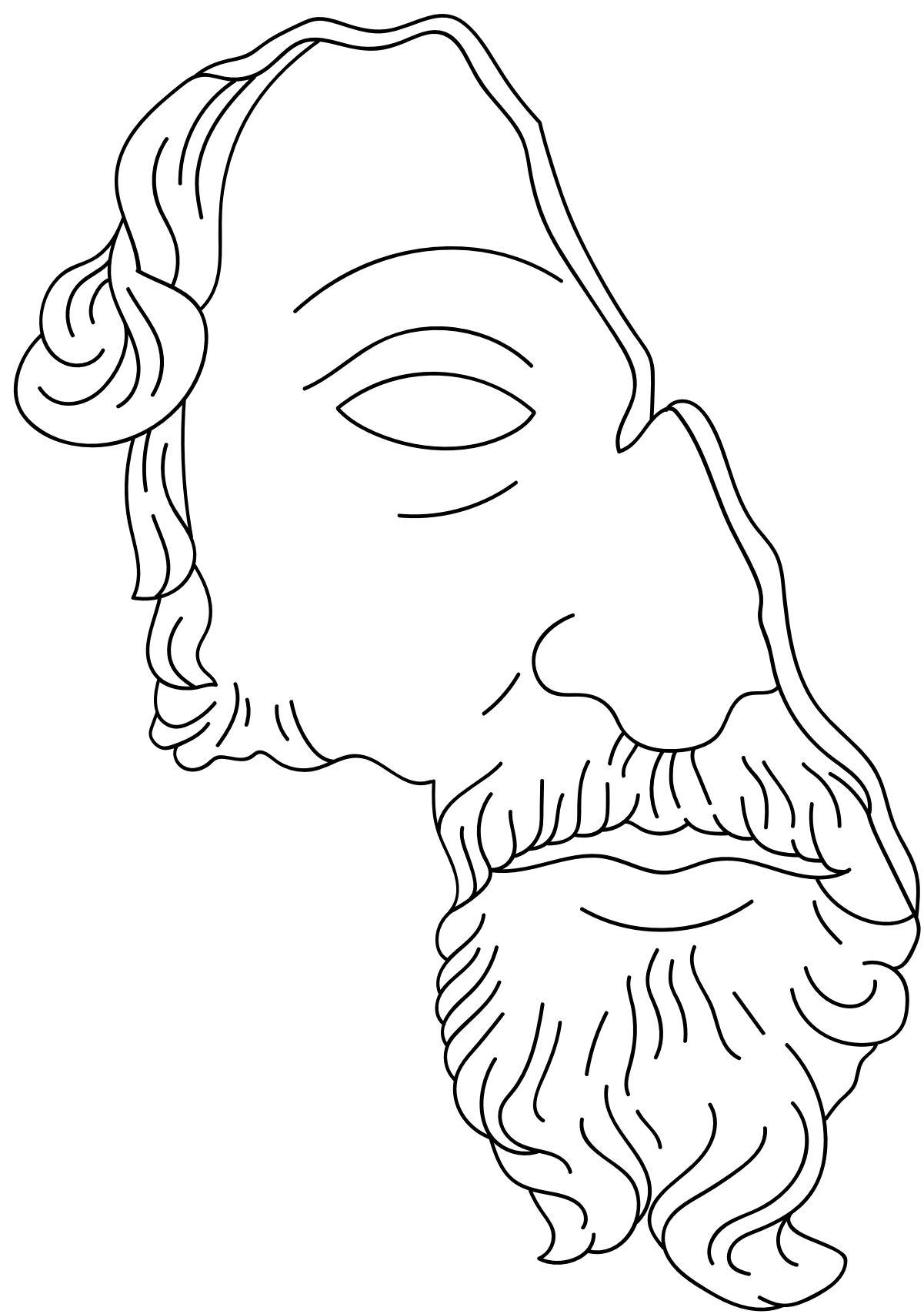


Engaging
People
Inspiring
Communities.



SUMMARY

- During 2022-23 Touchstone and Humans Being consulted 737 men from a wide range of backgrounds
- We did this through interactive street stalls and more in depth conversation based workshops
- We asked them questions about positive masculinity, modern masculine identity and what they found challenging about being a man



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- In summary, we found these broad theme's came up in the responses.
 - That a variety of male identities are valid. Being a man is about being yourself and that there is no one way of being a man.
 - Positive masculine themes around being a provider, putting others first such as family, being sociable, light-hearted, being in it together.
 - Virtues such as, Honesty, Reliability, Care, Kindness and Compassion.
 - Challenges around showing and understanding emotions, societal expectations and pressures.

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For a guide to running your own 21st century man workshop please see accompanying teaching pack.

BACKGROUND

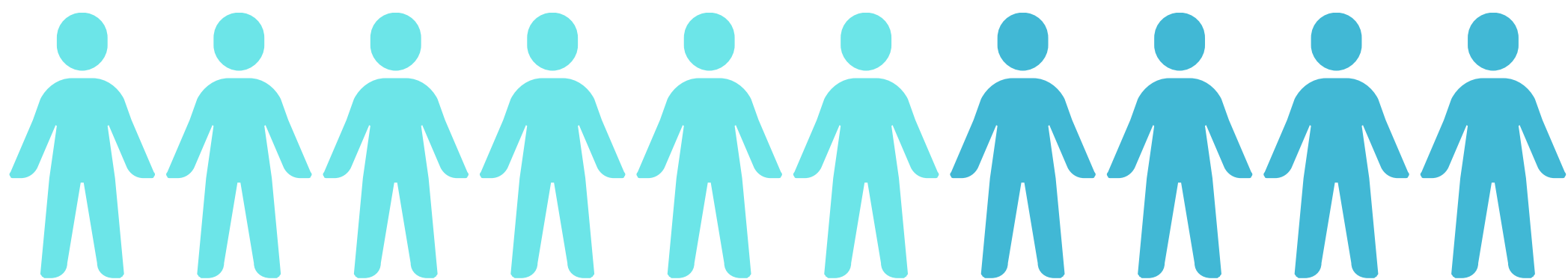
Over the past year Simon, Duncan and Joe have been asking the men of Leeds a series of questions such as **“What is good about being a man?”** & **“What is positive masculinity?”**. **“What does being man mean to you?”** We’ve been to a variety of places and spoken to all kinds of men of different races, religions, ages & sexualities and found there to be a rich variety of answers, all valid and all very interesting. We have stuck by the mantra that no answer is a wrong answer, we want to know what men really think!

Our aim is to help the men of Leeds to feel proud of and to build on those positive qualities that they bring to the city. We want to help men to understand that they have a hand in shaping the discourse around 21st century masculinity.



This project is ultimately about positivity. We aim to tease out an aspirational view of modern men. Some of our core principles are to 'champion positive developments in men and boys' identity and health' and 'to be a voice for men and boys'. **Why is this?**

Men, masculinity and maleness can often be defined in society along the lines of 'How men need to change' or such phrases or ideas as 'Toxic Masculinity', we believe that whilst some of this may be valid it is also important to look at masculinity from a positive perspective... What do men bring to the world? What are we good at? Through this positive lens we can help support growth and learning and celebrate and recognise the importance masculine traits and maleness brings to the world.



21st Century Man is part of a National Lottery funded project called 'Men's Health Unlocked'. The project is run by a consortium of third sector organisations in Leeds and is headed up by Forum Central. The project is primarily a network that brings together the Men's projects in the area with the purpose of - Being a voice for men, being a voice for the sector and to learn, share and promote good practice in men's health.

More information can be found here - forumcentral.org.uk/mhu/



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STREET STALLS

We enlisted the help of local artist Oliver Nielson to create some initial images of men. We used these paintings and displayed them on the street. Alongside this we had a board with a question on it. These are the questions we asked to the men on the street...



- ***“Name a man you look up to and list three qualities you admire about him?”***
- ***“What is positive about Masculinity?” or “What does positive masculinity mean to you?”***
- ***“What is challenging about being a man?”***
- ***“As a man what do you do to keep yourself well?”***
- ***“What qualities do you think define a good man?”***

We engaged directly with men that were passing in the street and invited them to respond to the question. We found that some men would approach the stall of their own volition and at other times we had to be quite proactive in creating the engagement. The men we asked would often take a little while to ponder their answers, and at times we were met with blank faces as it became clear to us that many men had never considered these questions before.

The responses would often lead to a broader discussion and most men wanted to expand on their answers with more detail. Sometimes we had to use different lines of questioning or coax the answers out too. **In a lot of cases these conversations resulted in self-reflection and also opened the opportunity for us to provide some support & signposting for men that were struggling.**

We took this stall to a total of 26 places, and we spoke to 586 men in total. It all felt very positive and like a healthy exercise to engage in. We learned a lot from this approach, and **we were told by many men that they had found the interaction valuable on several levels.**



The street stall was a perfect opportunity to promote the wider **Men's Health Unlocked** network and offer. This evolved as time went on and as we improved our knowledge around relevant subjects, one such area was prostate cancer. Simon and Joe attended some training with the charity Orchid early on in the project, from this point on we were able to provide information and leaflets about prostate cancer.

WORKSHOPS

“When talking to men about masculinity, I often feel I am trying to talk to fish about water” -Grayson Perry

Grayson is certainly right that most men haven't spent much time thinking about masculinity but in our experience once you give them the opportunity, it's hard to stop them talking about it.

The 21st Century Man Workshop was developed by **Humans Being CIC**, a small Leeds organisation that specialises in training around mental wellbeing and gender. The workshop was designed to create a format for a stimulating, interesting conversation that would leave men feeling clearer and more positive about what masculinity means to them.

We were clear from the start that it wouldn't be about promoting a particular kind of masculinity or discouraging others - it's for men to define what they think is healthy for them and others.

Less heat, more light

Masculinity can be a divisive topic and it often feels as though we're being asked to pick sides, with the most aggressive voices on each side stereotyping and denigrating the other. It can be a damaging cultural environment for male identity, fuelling defensiveness, conflict, confusion and low self-esteem. In our experience most men don't fit into a particular 'side' - their identities are nuanced, complex and tethered firmly to universal ideas about how we care about ourselves and others rather than anything you'd find in newspaper columns or social media.


Whereas the stalls grabbed men where they were and planted some interesting seeds in their heads, the workshops gave us time to delve deeper and think about how a clearer, healthier way of looking at masculinity could actually improve our own wellbeing. We tried to create a format that freed the conversation from the heat of the culture wars and threw light on the personal and universal quest for healthier and happier lives for all. When men see that masculinity is an idea and are invited to talk about what it means to them, they have the power to reject, reclaim and redefine it for themselves.

21ST CENTURY MAN




WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A MAN IN THE 21ST CENTURY?
WHAT COULD A HEALTHY MASCULINITY LOOK LIKE?
WHAT DO YOU LIKE ABOUT BEING A MAN?

We'd love to come and listen to the views of Leeds men in your community or workplace. We can come to you or meet online for a stimulating and fun 1 - 2 hour session. Your views will help us create a report and a piece of public art and we can connect participants to wellbeing, learning and creative opportunities as part of our Men's Health Unlocked project.



"INSPIRING. JUST TO THINK ABOUT ALL THE POSITIVE THINGS WE MEN CAN BE MADE ME SEE THINGS IN A DIFFERENT WAY."



There is no charge for sessions. Get in touch with Duncan Millard to book yours. duncan@humansbeing.org.uk

"It's food for thought. Thinking about positive masculinity helps you get to grips with who you are"

Who we ran it with

We ran the workshop 22 times with 133 men - brewery staff, self-described geeks at an ICT project, elderly Jewish men in sheltered accommodation, mental health support groups, HIV positive men, a black and Asian men's group, healthcare workers and asylum seekers.

Exploring stereotypes of masculinity

The sessions started with a look at what the internet thinks masculinity looks, i.e. the first ten photos that came up when we typed 'real man' into Google. The narrow stereotype of grim-faced muscular men that the photos showed was both alienating and hilarious to the groups:

"It's just about physical strength and muscles."

"It's all physical attributes - suited and booted or muscles and tattoos."

"It doesn't mean anything to us."

"It's become more commercial - now men have to spend time and money to look 'right' like women always have had to."

"It doesn't make sense to me"

"It's not about my culture"

"It's not normal, it doesn't represent real people."

We then explored the pressure of the stereotype, **what it means to be told to 'man up' or to 'act like a real man', creating an 'act like a man box'**. Most things the groups put in the box were negative, particularly around men not being able to be vulnerable, show emotions or fit into a certain stereotype:

"You get policed and judged if you don't fit into it - even the way you walk or sit."

"Hiding your emotions."

"There's an implicit criticism of women."

"It's about aggression and violence."

"Anger and entitlement."

"Not respecting women."

"Men don't cry."

"You have to be the provider, head of the family, have babies - not everyone can do that."

"It's utter horse shit."

"'Man up' suggests women lack courage, it's sexist."

"It's being scared to show emotions."

"Keep your emotions to yourself."

"Be a man - of the past."

But there were things in the stereotype that some men valued:

"Being more assertive".

"Being stoical, controlling your emotions."

"Being able to fight adversity."

"It's about having pride in how you look."



Defining healthy masculinity

The next activity was to **create a ‘healthy masculinity box’** by asking the group what healthy or positive masculinity was to them.

Although each group was different, there were recurring themes: being yourself, looking after your mental and physical health and caring for others. This word cloud combines all the contributions from our groups:



Putting it into practice

We didn't want participants just to talk and think - we wanted them to think about how their ideas about masculinity could be put into practice. We asked them to choose 3 - 5 of aspects of healthy masculinity from the list we made in the previous activity that meant the most to them. Then they chose one way they could put those values into practice in their lives.

Many participants found it fairly easy to find practical ways to put their ideas about healthy masculinity into practice. These included:

Getting in touch with friends they hadn't spoken to for a long time.

Making an effort to be more appreciative of their wife/partner.

Physical activity - going for a walk, gym, football.

Improving diet, cooking healthy meals.

Other participants took away more general ideas:

'I'm going to make an effort to be kinder to myself - life can be tough and you have to be compassionate.'

'There is no one way of being a man - 'you are enough'.

'I'm going to remember that it's okay to ask for help'.

Learning from participants and evolving our approach

The first few workshops included the question 'What do you like about being a man?' After a lot of blank looks and the inevitable comments about 'Being able to pee standing up' the participants tended to talk about what they like about not being a woman - not worrying about their appearance as much, feeling safer on the streets and so on.

Although this says a lot about how aware men generally are of their own privilege, it didn't feel like a very positive or empowering discussion so we decided to remove that question and give the space to putting ideas about healthy masculinity into practice. Feedback from participants was much more positive after this.

Run your own workshop!

A guide to running your own 21st Century man session can be found in the accompanying teaching pack. We've included links to slides and handouts as well as a session plan and detailed teaching notes. It's an engaging and inspiring couple of hours for any group of men so we encourage you to do it for yourself - with colleagues, clients or friends.



RESPONSES

The responses have been wide-ranging, with discussions about being a father, being a son, friendship, violence against women, mental health, film and TV, childhood, physical health, relationships, stoicism, sexism, creativity and lots of laughter.

After we spoke to a wide variety of men, we started to collate the responses. We took each session and laid out the responses, we looked for any themes and similarities, and then we started to group them accordingly.

For the main bulk of responses, we have grouped them into some broad categories, each one will represent many individual responses of a similar ilk. We hope that by reading through these it will give you an insight into what a lot of men are thinking.



We also looked at any responses that stood out, some men had quite unique and insightful ideas on the topic. Some of these particularly interesting responses are found further below. (Often these are paraphrased)

Positive masculinity is...

Not just about power, dominance and muscles
Physicality is important , enjoying your strength through sport or work
Not being trapped in the straitjacket of traditional masculinity
Just being yourself - there's no one way of being a man
It's just about being a good human being
Being honest and reliable
Being a true gentleman
Being aware of women's experiences and aware of how we can help women's
safety and aware of amplifying others views and voices.
Being a hero
Showing care, kindness and compassion
Being open and flexible
Being able to show emotions
Being able to ask for help

Being a man is anything you want it to be...

Media images of masculinity are quite narrow
The variety of male identities are valid - "There is no one way of being a
man"
Care kindness and compassion,
A selflessness to being a man, being a provider. The importance of Family.
Being able to show emotions
It's about being yourself
It's about being a good human being / it's not about gender sometimes
The difference in ideas coming from LGBTQ community about masculinity...

What things do men bring to the world that are positive...

Men can show positive leadership and stability in situations
Putting family first
Being selfless, being a provider

Looking after yourself...

*Banter, going to the pub, humour, making light of things, being in it together.
Men need women around them to help look after their wellbeing.
Supporting each other, being in it together.*

What's Challenging about being a man...

*Society sometimes doesn't understand men
Being strong isn't being a rock
Showing vulnerability, dealing with and understanding emotions*



Stand out responses

“When men show up as their true self everyone is moved. It takes courage to be a man”

“Gender doesn’t matter, Gender stereotypes are harmful to both men and women”

“Being able to protect the people you love”

“ Men should be able to express sadness, love for each other, not hiding feelings, Men take off your masks “

“Confidence, Not being adverse to challenges, Having big balls”

*“Positive role model, being supportive, protective. Being a father, provider
Being a hero”*

“Some men don’t know how to show their positive masculinity”

“There is no one way of being a man”

“Fixing problems. Being able to get stuff done and work hard”

“Expectations, silent expectation to know everything, body image pressure, to always be mentally resilient. Social expectations, to work hard, to be successful”

“The lack of Fraternity, women have a sense of sisterhood, but men don’t have brotherhood, The atmosphere of competition, (One up manship)”

“Lots of responses talked about emotions. And the difficulty of knowing how to deal with them”

“Uncertainties about the rights and wrongs of behaving around women”

“A man can bring order and stability, stabilise emotions , bringing a calmness“

“Caring, Intelligent, Trustworthy, Calmness, Peacemaker, Tenacity, strength, giving back, adversity, reliance, charisma, mentorship, Kindness.”

“Getting with the times and being respectful towards people that are less fortunate than yourself. Basic manners , Not swearing, Living by some rules”

“There's no need to define it - we should just be humans”

“Thinking about your own bias”

“Willing to be able to grow and learn”

“A masculinity based on emotional control as damaging for men, for example in terms of loneliness and suicide.”

“The idea of 'emotional labour' - something that men don't often take their fair share of.”

“Dealing with your own anger and moods in a positive way”

“I've really liked thinking about men from the past and looking to the future - men being more open, emotional, listening more, being less cock-sure and hopefully making a better, less violent future for the survival of humanity”.

“It's made me feel connected, I'm not alone and you can always see solutions to problems if you look”.

“It's really good to feel listened to”.

“I feel a damn sight better now than I did when I walked through the door. Talking just lifts you”.

INSIGHTS & LEARNING

In the majority of places, we found men were ready and willing to talk about quite deep and sensitive subjects. We deducted from this that if you provide a space and opportunity for men to talk about these things then men are willing to engage. We hope this approach can be used more in the future to engage men in public spaces and established groups.

The key to the success of the street stall was the intrigue around the art pieces and the interactive nature of the exercise. Having the responses on post-it notes allowed people to learn about what others were thinking. Many people would approach just to read the responses and then decide to engage with the exercise.

Whilst we spent time collecting the responses it became clear to us that the exercise itself was of a great benefit to the men. It provided us with an excellent opportunity to provide additional 'Outreach Support' which included some signposting and some light support for several of the men that were struggling. Many of the men on the street and in the group sessions commented on how the process had given them some time and space to consider their identity and their health.

The benefits of the group sessions were in allowing the space for some of the men to go on a journey and change the way that they thought about themselves and others. Some individuals came away from the sessions having thought about themselves in a reflective way for the first time. Participants benefited from the wider network offer and were referred into other useful men's support based projects too.

To summarise our main conclusions are:

- This project has developed empowering and inspiring methods of engaging men about positive masculinity that could be replicated in many different settings
- It is intrinsically useful to develop spaces for men to talk about identity. And the space for reflection can result in growth and learning .Asking men about identity is a gateway into creating a conversation
- By using a positive approach and focusing on good nature discussion men will open up.
- Holding these kinds of sessions allow us to offer tailored signposting to individuals. This approach is a gateway into providing support for men
- The use of art is highly beneficial in engaging men in public spaces.
- By conducting a study and asking men about their genuine opinions it creates a good level of buy-in from men in the process and produces numerous added benefits for the participants.
- Creating safe spaces for men to talk about sensitive subjects is important. Feelings of vulnerability and the struggle to understand and deal with emotions came up several times.
- There is a high level of understanding & awareness around male suicide and isolation. But a lack of knowledge around how to help.
- A great level of openness and willingness from organisations to engage in these kinds of conversations.
- We have been told that the spaces and conversations we are stimulating have value. It is useful for us to be a hub of information and expertise in this field, every single session we are linking men up with activities or services.
- A lot of men don't find more standard therapeutic practises useful.
- The conversations are always driven by what the men say during the sessions
- Some men don't participate as much in the sessions, but this is fine, they are there, listening and learning.
- There is a feeling that we have we lost some spaces for men to socialise and make friends.

THE USE OF ART

We enlisted the help of two artists to help us achieve our aims within this project. We felt that this would elicit more engagement and it would help us to communicate our findings back to the city in a creative and emotive way.



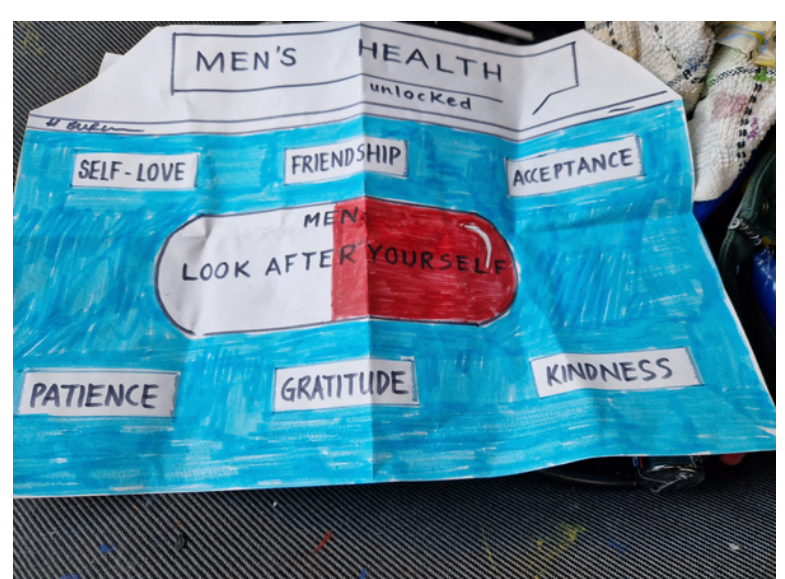
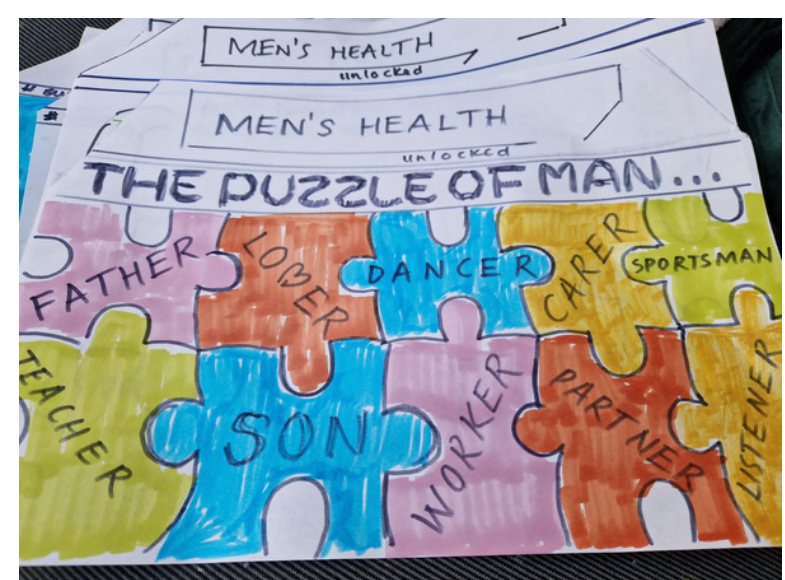
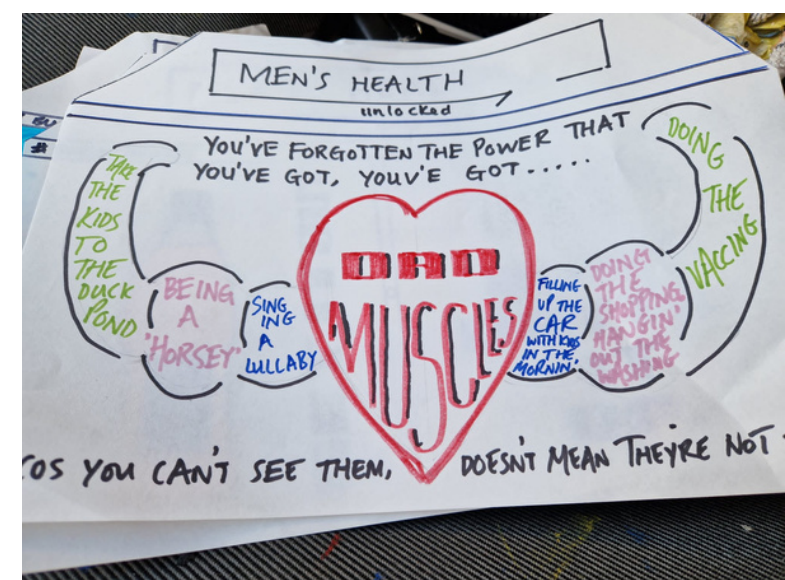
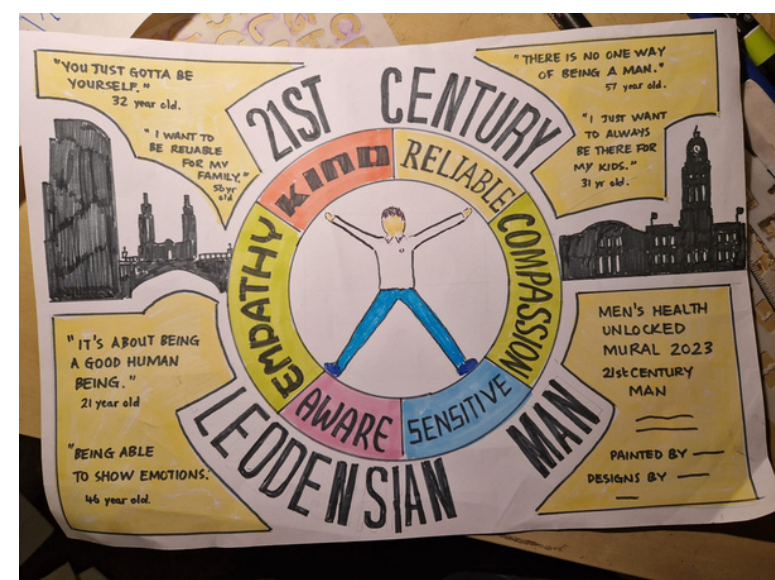
Firstly Oliver Neilson provided ongoing art work for our street stalls, initially he worked to the brief of representing 21st century men / masculinity. After a few sessions we provided Oliver with a selection of responses to use as inspiration for the follow up pieces, in this way we created an ongoing cyclical process.



[instagram.com/oliverneilsonart](https://www.instagram.com/oliverneilsonart)

Popular local artist 'Burley Banksy' then helped us represent the responses to the public. We recruited 10 volunteers to help us create some designs based on the responses and during four developmental sessions we explored the ideas with the men. We then chose several of the best ideas for further development.

These pieces were then painted on several telecommunication boxes in the city centre as well as creating a central mural located inside Leeds market. We wanted to use art as a vehicle to communicate these positive and interesting ideas of 21st Century Masculinity back to the people of Leeds, provoking further conversations and reflection.



RUN YOUR OWN STREET STALL

Approach:

Running a stall should be fun for everyone involved. We took a mixed approach when engaging with people. Sometimes it was better to let men come up and look at the stall of their own volition and at other times we would actively be in the street asking men and groups of people to answer our question for the day. We did this with a smile and created a positive atmosphere around the stall.

Once you have established with people that you are not selling something and that you are doing a study and offering helpful information most people are willing to engage.

Questions:

We carefully considered the wording of our questions but a lot of the time we would need to open up a broader conversation with recipients to help them to start thinking about their opinions on the matter. In most cases people took a few minutes to think before responding.

A useful way of running this is by having a board with post-it notes to write the responses on, this has a few positive effects. People come over to see what other people have said, and it can help as a starting point for others responses if they are stumped by the question.

Art:

We found that by having some kind of visual element on the street, in our case some superb art by a local artist helped to drive much of the engagement.

Support:

Once we had engaged with an individual we would often find they were wanting to get a few things off their chest. This was a brilliant opportunity to help them firstly by listening, then by offering some signposting. We had a collection of leaflets for local services on our table and as part of our project we would offer out our support phoneline card.

**Written by Joe Kemp - Touchstone & Duncan Millard - Humans Being
September 2023**