

Women and Equalities Committee

House of Commons

London

SW1A 0AA

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Pro Bono Economics

South Bank Technopark

90 London Rd

London SE1 6LN

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Pro Bono Economics response to House of Commons Women and Equalities Select Committee Inquiry – Mental Health of Men and Boys

1) Executive Summary

Pro Bono Economics welcomes the present inquiry from the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee into the mental health of men and boys. Lord Gus O'Donnell – former Cabinet Secretary and Pro Bono Economics Chairman – has recently spoken of the potential emergence of a “troubled generation”¹ in the UK considering worryingly high levels of poor mental health here. This observation is given credence by the findings of the NHS Digital Survey on the prevalence of mental health disorders among children and young people, released November 22nd 2018². It shows that 12.2% of boys between the ages of 5 and 10 are now likely to have a mental health disorder, 14.3% of boys between the ages of 11 to 16, and 10.3% between the ages of 17 and 19.

As part of our core mission³ helping charities understand and improve their social impact, Pro Bono Economics shares insights from our work to enrich the quality and understanding of public debates in which our partner charities are active. These are: i) education; ii) employment; iii) poverty; and most importantly for the purposes of this inquiry iv) mental health. The common theme that unites all our work is wellbeing. To this end we hosted a roundtable together with children's mental health charity Place2Be last December (2018) to examine the worrying findings of the NHS Digital survey. The main discussion points from that event form the basis of this response and can be summarised thus:

- **Further research is needed to identify the key determinants of poor mental health in young boys and men** – We stand ready to assist the Committee and Government wherever feasible in any activities they plan to undertake and have – for illustrative purposes – shared the pertinent findings of some of our past work in this area below; and
- **A more holistic focus on the value in and drivers of wellbeing – at an early age – can help increase resilience⁴ in adulthood** – This should include but not be limited to, exploring new ways to measure performance in education and ensuring teachers are best trained on the importance of wellbeing.

¹ The Guardian (2018) Exam stress creating 'troubled generation', says ex-civil service chief -

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/dec/27/exam-stress-creating-troubled-generation-ex-civil-service-chief-gus-odonnell>

² NHS Digital (2018) Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2017 - <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2017/2017>

³ Pro Bono Economics' work – see [here](#) – helps charities to instil good data and impact management processes into their operating practices so that they can not only understand the value of their service but use the tools and methods we give them to improve it by leveraging the expertise of skilled volunteer economists.

⁴ During our Mental Health roundtable, it was mentioned that “buoyancy” is potentially a more preferable term than “resilience” when it comes to describing what it is we should be trying to build in young people and adults to maintain levels of wellbeing in the face of adversity. This given the former could be misinterpreted as complimenting a stoic approach to life's challenges. Yet, as the latter is more

2) Further research is needed to identify the key determinants of poor mental health in young boys and men.

Despite ample evidence showing widespread mental health issues among young boys and men, the main drivers remain somewhat unclear. For example, a 2017 survey from the mental health charity Mind found that men were twice as likely as women to have mental health problems due to their job compared to problems outside of work⁵. These findings – drawn from a robust sample size – represent a valuable contribution to the debate around men’s mental health. Yet, it remains difficult to infer from them that one of the main causes of poor men’s mental can be attributed to problems at work, or whether the problems at work manifested themselves in response to other determinants/triggers in an individual’s life.

To give another example, NHS Digital Survey highlights that daily social media use is more common in children with disorders of both sexes, but there is no consensus around causality and the exact nature of the relationship between the two. While some suggest that social media is to blame for the rise in mental health issues among young men [and women], others have suggested that social media platforms are also used to access mental health support, guidance or external resources.

Beyond social media, other possible determinants include sexuality, poverty, exclusion and drug and alcohol abuse. These are all potentially very significant factors contributing towards higher levels of mental ill-health across society, but data still largely suggests correlation rather than causation. It is therefore only with a more thoroughgoing understanding of the latter that more effective policy solutions can be reached to arrest the alarming trends currently witnessed.

Pro Bono Economics harnesses the tools of economics to help charities understand and improve their social impact in the field of wellbeing; many of these tools (and our past findings) can be applied to provide insights in the policymaking world too. For that reason, we are very keen for this submission to represent the opening of a dialogue with key policymakers active in this space in Parliament and Government.

3) An increased emphasis on wellbeing at an early age can help develop mental resilience⁶ in boys and young men

Our work in delivering and managing placements for skilled economics volunteers with charities helps those charities to quantify the value of interventions which may appear unquantifiable at first sight.

By way of example, in April of 2018, Pro Bono Economics published a report on behalf of children’s mental health charity, Place2Be, which revealed the monetary benefits of providing in-school support and expert training to improve the emotional wellbeing of pupils⁷. The study examined the activities of Place2Be’s counselling services in primary schools throughout 2016/17, revealing that for every £1 spent on Place2Be’s services, a societal return (in the form of higher earnings for the individual and a lower cost to the tax payer) of £6.20 was delivered. Improved outcomes resulting from access to counselling services included: reduced rates of depression, truancy, exclusion, and higher rates of employment and wages.

We therefore welcome last year’s follow-up to the Government’s December 2017 Green Paper in this regard: “Transforming children and young people’s mental health provision,”⁸ which emphasises the need to improve children’s access to mental health support through the introduction of mental health support teams and reducing youth waiting times (the NHS Digital Survey revealed around one in five children with a disorder reported waiting over six months for contact with a mental health specialist). We also echo the Government’s view as articulated

well known in debates on mental health we have continued with its use here but wish to register the terminological challenges in this regard all the same.

⁵ Mind (2017) Mind survey finds men more likely to experience work-related mental health problems - <https://www.mind.org.uk/news-campaigns/news/mind-survey-finds-men-more-likely-to-experience-work-related-mental-health-problems/#.XFm3a1z7Q2w>

⁶ See note 4

⁷ Pro Bono Economics (2018) Economic evaluation of Place2Be’s Counselling Service in Primary Schools - <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/sites/default/files/files/Economic%20Evaluation%20of%20Place2Be%E2%80%99s%20Counselling%20Service%20in%20Primary%20Schools.pdf>

⁸ Department of Health and Social Care and Department for Education (2018) - https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/728892/government-response-to-consultation-on-transforming-children-and-young-peoples-mental-health.pdf. P.5.

in this Consultation surrounding the need to think carefully about how to ensure the core proposals do not place undue strain on teachers (who, in many cases, are already over-strained and working above capacity).

Pro Bono Economics also sees value in examining the way in which our education system is organised and evaluated with potential benefits from giving greater prominence to the enhancement of wellbeing at an early age. Between the 2004 NHS Digital report⁹, and the 2017 report, several changes have been made to the school curriculum, including the introduction of new tests. We would encourage the Government to further investigate the impact that the education system is having on teacher and child mental health, and to consider adopting a more holistic approach to measuring performance in educational institutions; an approach that incorporates a child's "wellbeing".

Ofsted's launch of a consultation on proposals for changes to the education inspection framework to take effect in September 2019 therefore represent a step in the right direction.¹⁰ Several of these relate to the integrity of the learning environment and encourage a shift in inspection focus away from results towards how these results are achieved (see Clause 23). Pro Bono Economics would encourage Ofsted and the Department of Education to take this opportunity to develop frameworks that foster "wellbeing" in students and help to get teachers on board as key stakeholders in the process.

Beyond the educational system, the NHS Digital Survey referenced above also shows that one in ten boys suffering from a mental health disorder have been excluded from school (compared with only 2.4% of girls suffering from a mental disorder). Excluded young people suffering from mental health difficulties are less likely to seek help, and more likely to commit a crime (one in three people who offend have an unmet mental health need¹¹). The benefit, therefore, of removing the barrier between disadvantaged young people and the services they need also seems clear¹².

We have worked previously with MAC-UK, a charity which provides mental health support directly to young people, where and when they need it and often involves bringing clinical services onto the streets. Their activities highlight the advantages inherent within such an innovative approach to delivering mental health support to the excluded young. Specifically, our economic report revealed that the £3000 spent on MAC-UK's Music & Change project which operated in Camden from 2008-2015 could be justified following four months in full-time employment or one month free from depression and anxiety on the part of the individual.

The analyses cited here are not definitive, but their findings signal how interventions in the mental health space can make financial sense, in pursuit of the betterment of mental health levels in this country. We would be happy to elaborate on these further to the Committee.

4) An evidence-based approach can prevent the emergence of a troubled generation

Mental health issues continue to become more prevalent, while the causes remain uncertain. As advocates of evidence-based policymaking, we know that turning the tide on this deterioration is possible only if we continue to learn more about mental health in young men; from root causes through to prevalence and best practice

For that reason it is our hope that Pro Bono Economics can serve as a useful resource to the Committee as it continues with its valuable work moving forward.

Should you require further information on any of the points raised here please contact Simon Burns, Director, Public Affairs at Pro Bono Economics (simon.burns@probonoeconomics.com) in the first instance.

⁹ NHS Digital (2005) Mental health of children and young people in Great Britain, 2004 - <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-great-britain/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-great-britain-2004>

¹⁰ Ofsted (2019) Education inspection framework 2019: inspecting the substance of education <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ofsted-launches-a-consultation-on-proposals-for-changes-to-the-education-inspection-framework>.

¹¹ Pro Bono Economics (2017) Exploring the Economic Impact of MAC-UK's Music & Change Project in Camden - <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/sites/default/files/files/Exploring%20the%20economic%20impact%20of%20Music%20%26%20Change.pdf>

¹² MAC-UK is an example of one charity that is working to help make mental health services and support more accessible to excluded young people, through leisure activities and the provision of support "on the streets".