

# Ageless Man – Evaluation and Learning Report

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## Executive Summary

The *Ageless Man* programme was established through conversations facilitated by Caring Town in response to the continuing crisis in men’s mental health. Men remain significantly less likely to seek support, yet account for the majority of deaths by suicide in the UK. This pilot set out to create a practical, non-clinical alternative: a place where men could connect, build trust, and strengthen their wellbeing together.

Funded by The National Lottery Community Fund and delivered in partnership by Resilient Lives CIC and Greenwood Music CIC with input from Soundart Radio, the ten-week programme combined nature-based activity, shared food, guest speakers and group dialogue. It built on learning from the Dough Bro’s men’s wellbeing work and a year of local consultation.

### **Reach and impact**

Fourteen men took part and attended on average seven of the ten sessions. Wellbeing data collected immediately before the programme and again two weeks

after the final session showed improvements across all measures, with the largest increases in Social Networks and in Feelings of Trust and Hope. Participants described greater openness, stronger connections and more confidence in managing their wellbeing. Several reported practical changes such as reducing alcohol use, reconnecting with family and taking on community roles.

### **What enabled change**

Recruitment filled within days through local networks, and retention stayed high. Early sessions used food and practical tasks to reduce barriers. As trust grew, the group chose to spend more time in open conversation and less in structured activity. Sessions in nature supported reflection and cohesion, and the team identified the need for a light post-programme structure to sustain peer support.

### **Looking ahead**

Future cohorts will increase time outdoors, include a short transition phase toward peer leadership, and strengthen links with GPs, social prescribers and community connectors. A local GP who joined initially to observe chose to continue for his own wellbeing, underlining the programme's relevance to both community members and professionals.

## **A Crisis in Men's Mental Health**

Across the UK, men are facing a persistent mental health crisis. This issue is deeply rooted in cultural expectations and often goes unaddressed by mainstream support systems.

### **The Context**

Men are significantly more likely to suffer in silence. Societal messages around masculinity often promote stoicism, toughness, and self-reliance. These values discourage many men from reaching out for help when they need it most. The consequences of this silence are stark:

- 75% of all suicides in the UK are male, with peak vulnerability occurring in early adulthood and again in midlife.
- Men are three times less likely than women to access mental health support services.
- Only 36% of NHS therapy referrals are for men, highlighting a major gap in how services are accessed and used.
- When men do seek help, they often find services that are not designed with their needs in mind, leading to poor engagement and limited success.

## **The Symptoms**

This lack of tailored support shows up in various ways. Men frequently mask anxiety and depression through irritability, anger, or emotional withdrawal. They are more likely to push through stress without seeking help, often carrying on until they reach a crisis point. As they age, many men experience increased isolation, losing social connections that could otherwise act as protective factors.

In Devon, for example, 73% of the 1,779 suicides recorded over a recent period were men. This figure underscores how serious and widespread the issue is at a local level.

## **A Gap in Provision**

There is a clear absence of male-focused, early-intervention mental health support. Statutory services are often difficult to access, slow to respond, and intimidating to approach. For many men, the barrier is not just the availability of services but whether they feel welcome and understood. Too often, they disengage before they even begin.

## **Ageless Man: A programme rooted in connection**

The Ageless Man Programme was developed to address the clear gaps in mental health support for men. While male suicide rates remain high, many men find mainstream services inaccessible or unwelcoming. Peer support, emotional connection, and community engagement are often missing from traditional approaches.

This programme offers a different path. It creates a safe and supportive space where men can connect, share experiences, and strengthen their mental resilience. By combining nature-based activities, shared meals, creative expression, and expert input, Ageless Man provides an accessible and culturally sensitive model of support.

Shaped by over a year of consultation with more than one hundred men through Dough Bro's sessions, community events, and pilot activities, the programme was co-designed to reflect the needs and preferences of its participants.

Delivered in collaboration between Resilient Lives CIC and Greenwood Music CIC, the ten-week programme includes:

- Introductory sessions centered on food and open conversation
- A full-day Wellbeing in Nature experience
- Four group meetings with guest speakers on health and wellbeing
- A canoeing day with foraging and fireside discussion

- A residential weekend focused on bonding and nature-based reflection
- A final celebration event with participant podcasts and stories

Participants also stay connected through a WhatsApp group, encouraging ongoing peer support. The emphasis is on building trust, reducing stigma, and creating networks that outlast the programme itself.

Backed by The National Lottery Community Fund, this pilot builds on previous work with men's groups, mental health professionals, and community partners. It stands as a proactive, grounded response to a growing public health need.

## Aims of the Programme

The Ageless Man Programme was designed with six clear aims:

- Reduce isolation
- Promote emotional expression
- Support physical and mental wellbeing
- Challenge masculinity norms
- Build peer support networks
- Spark long-term change

all focused on addressing the unique barriers men face in looking after their mental health.

At its heart is the ambition to build a strong peer network. The programme brings men together to form a supportive community where they can continue to connect and offer mutual encouragement beyond the programme itself. This reduces the isolation that often underpins mental health struggles.

Another core aim is to promote resilience and wellbeing. Participants are introduced to practical tools and approaches that support mental, emotional, and physical health. These resources are shared in ways that feel accessible and culturally relevant, helping men develop healthier coping strategies.

The programme also seeks to foster real connections. By sharing food, taking part in creative and nature-based activities, and simply spending time together, participants build meaningful bonds. These connections form the foundation for trust, openness, and long-term engagement.

Breaking the silence around men's mental health is a key driver of this work. The programme creates safe spaces where men can speak openly about their challenges. This helps reduce stigma and supports earlier intervention, making it easier for men to ask for help when they need it.

Beyond the ten-week experience, Ageless Man aims to create lasting support. The goal is for participants to sustain a peer-led group that continues to meet and grow. This long-term vision includes connecting men to wider mental health networks and community-based resources.

Finally, the programme seeks to share its story. Through podcasts and other creative outputs, participants document their journeys. These stories serve not only as a reflection of personal growth, but also as a tool to inform future projects and expand support for men in Devon and beyond.

## Design of the Programme

The programme ran over ten sessions from May to July 2024, mixing weekday evenings with two immersive weekend experiences. Each session combined practical activity with focused discussion on wellbeing, resilience and emotional openness. Guest speakers contributed on fitness, nutrition, mental health and nature connection. Sessions alternated between indoor and outdoor settings to build trust through shared experience and to use reflective natural spaces to good effect. A WhatsApp group supported continuity between sessions.

Date	Session Title / Focus	Details / Guest Speaker
15 May	Intro, pizza-making & shelter-building	Welcome session in nature
21 May	What Man Do You Want to Be?	First full group session
11 June	Connection to Nature	Led by Benjamin Mee (The Wildman Project)
15 June	All-Day Wellbeing in the Woods	Connection and Nature Immersion Activities
18 June	Vitality, Nutrition and Fitness	Dr. Tom XYZ
25 June	Canoe Adventure on River Dart with Food and Fireside Reflections	Phil XYX
2 July	Dough Bro's Session: Emotional Openness	Mark Hamilton
9 July	Health and GP Talk	Dr. Andrew XYZ

13–14 July (Weekend )	Overnight Glamping Experience in Caradon Woods	Nature-based closing and bonding activities
16 July	Celebration and What Next?	Hosted at the Town Mill, Totnes

## Getting the Word Out

Recruitment was rapid and straightforward. A short call for participants opened and the cohort filled in four days. Interest was strong across ages and backgrounds, and the group size was capped once places were taken. Retention was high across the ten weeks, with only one early withdrawal linked to a family health issue.

Communication during delivery relied on simple, familiar channels, including a WhatsApp group that supported coordination and continued contact after the programme ended. The speed of sign-up and subsequent attendance suggest strong word-of-mouth resonance and a clear fit with local need.



## Key Quantitative Insights

Participants completed self-assessments immediately before the programme and again two weeks after the final session.

Wellbeing Area / Metric	Average Start	Average End	Net Change	% Improved
Managing Mental Health	6.15	6.85	+0.70	77%
Physical Health and Self Care	6.00	6.62	+0.62	62%

<b>Feelings of Trust and Hope</b>	5.77	6.92	+1.15	85%
<b>Social Networks</b>	4.62	6.23	+1.61	77%
<b>Relationships</b>	6.31	6.77	+0.46	62%
<b>Average Sessions Attended (of 10)</b>	-	-	7.0	-
<b>Participants Attending 7+ Sessions</b>	-	-	6 of 14	43%
<b>Rated 5/5 for Recommendation</b>	-	-	12 of 13	92%

## What the Numbers Tell Us

The largest gains were in Social Networks and in Feelings of Trust and Hope, which aligns with the programme’s emphasis on peer connection, honest dialogue and shared experience in nature. Several participants moved from very low baselines to mid-to-high end scores by follow-up, indicating meaningful change for individuals. Endline scores were more clustered, suggesting a levelling effect across the cohort. Attendance was consistently strong, with an average of seven sessions attended out of ten. Feedback asked for more time for deeper themes, structured follow-up and topic-specific inputs, which has informed the proposed future development.

## Participant Insight

The Ageless Man Programme has had a lasting and deeply personal impact on participants. Across surveys, podcast discussions, and open reflections, clear patterns emerged: of emotional growth, connection, and renewed wellbeing. What began as a ten-week initiative became, for many, the starting point of a longer journey toward more grounded, open, and connected ways of being.

### Growth in Wellbeing and Self-Awareness

Many participants reported tangible improvements in mental and physical wellbeing. The programme helped them build healthier habits, improve emotional regulation, and become more reflective about how they show up in their daily lives.

*“Learning that muscle health is just as important as heart health as I get older.”*

*“Getting out into the community more to help with my social anxiety.”*

From the podcast, these shifts were described not just as outcomes, but as lived experiences, small internal changes with big ripple effects.

*“When I’m walking, I don’t now walk with an intention of getting there. I just walk... I try to count my breaths.”*

These transformations were not theoretical, they were embodied and felt.

### **Authentic Connection and Group Trust**

The most resonant theme across all feedback was the sense of belonging. Participants often described the group as a rare space of non-judgemental male companionship, built through shared food, fire, and play.

*“Meeting men on a level of openness and compassion that hasn’t been the norm in my life.”*

*“Spending time with a great group of guys... just by listening and being there.”*

Moments of spontaneous joy - playing volleyball, laughing by the fire, singing together - proved just as impactful as the structured sessions.

*“It was the pinnacle of the whole thing.”*

These experiences helped dismantle isolation and built the trust needed for emotional openness.

### **Redefining Masculinity**

Through listening, reflection, and honest discussion, many participants found themselves challenging inherited models of masculinity. The group gave them language, permission, and a community in which to explore new ways of being.

*“It was the development of real, authentic relationships, with each other and ourselves.”*

*“Definitely improved my understanding of the behaviours we associate with masculinity and how these can negatively impact ourselves and those around us and trying to be less rigid in these.”*

This shift was often described as liberating, moving from performance to presence, from stoicism to shared humanity.

### **Structure, Facilitation and Continued Desire**

Participants consistently praised the programme’s design: well-paced, thoughtfully facilitated, and welcoming. The relaxed, “not woo-woo” tone made it accessible to men who might otherwise hesitate to engage.

*“Just some guys getting together - it felt real.”*

There were also strong calls for more: more time, more structured follow-up, and more thematic depth in future sessions.

*“More time to connect over deeper themes.”*  
*“A little more structure at the end, like fixed future meet-up dates.”*

Despite these suggestions, the overwhelming response was positive. Participants expressed gratitude, pride, and a strong desire to stay connected and support others.

### Case Study: Andrew – A GP’s Journey Through Ageless Man

Andrew joined the programme out of professional interest and led the session on 9 July. After that experience he chose to stay on as a participant because he found it supported his own wellbeing.

*“I was going through a tough time as well. It was super helpful for me... I was using it for me.”*

What he encountered was a space that allowed him to show up as a person rather than as a clinician. Conversations were grounded in everyday experience, and the group’s tone felt safe, open and mutual.

*“They were really asking me Andrew’s perspective on stuff rather than the doctor’s perspective.”*

He emphasised the value of flexible facilitation and the permission to follow what mattered in the moment. That flexibility, combined with the trust that built across the group, enabled deeper reflection and honest sharing.

*“If you hadn’t had the flexibility to allow the conversation to literally go anywhere, that would never have happened.”*

From a professional viewpoint, the experience highlighted the role of non-clinical, peer-based settings in reaching men who may not access formal services. From a personal viewpoint, it offered a rare chance to slow down, be heard, and contribute as a peer. Andrew has remained in contact with the group since the programme ended.



“Can we just not do the pizzas? Can we just do the talking?” - Participants reported by Simon:

Natural settings consistently supported honesty, reflection and cohesion, and the facilitation stayed light so that the group could shape the pace and depth of each meeting.

### **Continuity after the programme**

Participants organised their own meet-ups, which showed both appetite and potential for sustained peer support, even as momentum naturally ebbed without structured backing.

“They did self-organise to an extent in the first six months... and they did meet.” - Aydin

### **Practical learning for delivery**

- Start with practical activity to dissolve barriers and help men talk naturally
- Use food as an early ice breaker rather than a constant feature once trust is present
- Prioritise natural settings wherever possible to support reflection and connection
- Plan a short sustainability phase so the group can move into peer leadership with light support
- Keep a minimum viable structure of circle, outdoor activity and targeted expert input, and let content adapt to what emerges

“Most men are desperate for a sense of honest and authentic connection with other men.” - Simon

### **Synthesis**

This learning points to a model that is repeatable and adaptable. Begin with simple, shared doing. Shift toward longer conversation as trust grows. Use nature to hold the work. Facilitate lightly so the group can lead. Plan for continuity from day one.

### **Future Development**

Learning from the pilot points to three priorities for the next iteration: simplify delivery as trust builds, centre sessions in nature-rich settings, and bake in a light-touch sustainability phase.

### **Shift from food to deeper dialogue as the group settles**

Early sessions used shared food to lower barriers, but by weeks three to four men preferred extended conversation. As Simon reported, participants asked, “Can we just not do the pizzas? Can we just do the talking?” Future programmes will intentionally reduce time spent on food-based activities once rapport is established and create more space for dialogue.

### **Prioritise environment**

Sessions run outdoors supported more openness and focus. Future cohorts should locate a greater proportion of meetings in the woods or comparable settings, reserving indoor spaces only when necessary.

### **Plan continuity from day one**

Participants organised their own meet-ups after the programme. Aydin noted, “They did self-organize to an extent in the first six months, they met, they found a venue. And they did meet.” To sustain this momentum, future versions will include a short taper phase with scheduled peer-led meet-ups and minimal facilitation before full handover.

### **Retain the minimum viable structure**

The core scaffolding worked: a simple rhythm of Dough Bro’s-style circles, outdoor activities, and targeted expert inputs that could adapt to what emerged each week. The team’s reflection is to keep that flexibility while sequencing sessions so early “doing” leads naturally into later, longer conversations.

### **Resource for scale and inclusion**

Demand and retention indicate clear relevance. As Simon observed, “we filled it in about four days.” Future development will explore partnerships with GPs, social prescribers and community connectors to maintain reach across backgrounds, while considering the practical resource needed for delivery, follow-up, and alumni support.

## **Closing Comments**

The *Ageless Man* pilot has shown that men respond powerfully to environments that feel genuine, informal, and grounded in shared experience. Simple ingredients such as food, activity, nature and conversation combined to create conditions of trust in which meaningful change could occur.

The evaluation demonstrates both measurable impact and deep personal transformation. The learning from this pilot now offers a practical model that can be adapted and scaled while remaining rooted in the principles that made it effective: authenticity, flexibility and connection.

*Ageless Man* stands as evidence that when men are given space to speak and listen without judgement, they not only support themselves but also one another, building the kind of community capacity that formal services alone cannot create.

## Appendix 1 -