A Churchill Fellowship report · Standalone executive summary

Mentoring Fatherless Boys

Global Insights and Lessons for the UK

Drawing together international fieldwork and UK evidence to identify how boys growing up without a consistent father figure can be better recognised and supported through policy, practice and early intervention.

The central question

"Why, across very different countries, cultures and policy traditions, are boys growing up without a consistent father figure so often recognised only once difficulties have emerged?"

Sonia Shaljean
Founder & Managing Director, Lads Need Dads CIC
Churchill Fellow 2025

Fieldwork · South Africa · United States · Australia
with further research and conversations across the United Kingdom

the CHURCHILL fellowship

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01 Why this summary exists

This is a short guide to a much larger piece of work: a Churchill Fellowship report combining two months of international fieldwork in South Africa, the United States and Australia with an extensive programme of UK interviews, two original surveys and over a decade of frontline practice at Lads Need Dads. It is written for policymakers, researchers, funders and practitioners who need the headline argument and the strongest evidence quickly, and who may then want to go to the full report for the detail, the case studies and the full evidence base behind each claim.

The Fellowship set out to find effective mentoring models for boys growing up without a consistent father figure. It ended up asking a bigger question:

Why does the system meant to support children so rarely notice these boys until something has already gone wrong?

That question, and what four countries' worth of evidence suggests about answering it, is the subject of the full report, and of what follows here.

The Fellowship at a glance

4 Countries examined	**3** Fieldwork countries	**59** Adult men surveyed	**69** Mothers surveyed
5 Headline findings	**23** Recommendations	**Yr 6-7** Prevention window	**2** Months of fieldwork

About the author and Lads Need Dads

Sonia Shaljean

Sonia Shaljean is the Founder and Managing Director of Lads Need Dads CIC. A mother of three sons, she has spent almost three decades working with women, men, children and families experiencing some of society's most complex challenges, across criminal justice, domestic abuse, substance misuse, homelessness and work with vulnerable families.

In 2015, Sonia founded Lads Need Dads in Essex, leading the development of one of the UK's few long-term early-intervention models designed specifically for boys aged 10-18 growing up without a consistent father figure, combining long-term mentoring with positive male role models, practical and emotional development, school-based intervention and support for mothers and carers.

Her work has received significant national recognition, including being named National Agent of Change at the She Inspires Global Awards (2025) and being included among the Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys' inaugural Top 100 Champions (2026). Sonia has contributed to national policy discussions through Parliamentary Select Committees and the APPG on Men and Boys. Her work with Lads Need Dads has also featured on BBC's *The One Show*, *Ross Kemp: Lost Boys, Deadly Men* and the 2026 BBC documentary *Gareth Southgate: Changing the Game for Young Men*. She is a long-serving trustee of the Association of Male Health and Wellbeing and sits on the Advisory Panel for the Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys.

About Lads Need Dads

Lads Need Dads CIC is a multi-award-winning early-intervention organisation and recipient of the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service (2020). Founded in Essex in 2015, its work has grown from direct frontline delivery into a model with wider relevance for schools, communities and policy. This Fellowship was undertaken to test how the lessons of that frontline experience compare with international practice, and to inform a stronger, earlier response to father absence across the UK.

Dissemination and next steps

The full report and this Executive Summary are intended for policy, research and practice audiences, including organisations working across boys' wellbeing, fatherhood, education, early intervention, mentoring, youth justice and family support. The learning will be shared through policy discussions, presentations, conferences, podcasts, media opportunities and professional networks, with a particular focus on bringing policymakers, researchers and practitioners into stronger conversation.

Read the full report
The full report, *Mentoring Fatherless Boys: Global Insights and Lessons for the UK*, contains the complete evidence base underpinning this summary, including detailed international case studies, two original surveys, 23 fully referenced recommendations and a complete reference list.

Full report: Available via the Churchill Fellowship website or Lads Need Dads website.
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This summary was prepared to accompany the Churchill Fellowship report and reflects its content as at September 2026. Views expressed are those of the author and not of the Churchill Fellowship or its partners.

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01 The question, the argument, the audience

Millions of boys around the world are growing up without a consistent father figure, yet few education, family support or justice systems recognise this as a potential developmental vulnerability in its own right. While many boys thrive because they are surrounded by loving mothers, extended family members and other protective relationships, for others the absence or loss of a father can leave a significant gap at a critical stage in their development, affecting their sense of identity, belonging and understanding of themselves as they grow into young men.

This Fellowship set out to understand how different countries support boys growing up without a consistent father figure, and what the United Kingdom could learn from international approaches to mentoring, early intervention and relational support. During the course of the Fellowship, that question evolved into the larger one that became the central theme of the full report:

Why are boys growing up without a consistent father figure so rarely recognised by the systems intended to support them?

Mentoring remained central to the fellowship but became part of a much larger picture as the evidence unfolded.

The central argument

We should not have to wait until a boy's distress becomes exclusion, poor mental health, violence, offending or crisis before the systems around him become interested in the relationships that helped shape his life. The opportunity is to recognise relational need earlier, respond safely and proportionately, and build sustained networks of support before difficulties become entrenched.

A crucial distinction

Father absence is not a diagnosis and does not determine a boy's future. Many boys thrive, supported by mothers, wider family and communities. Equally, the presence of a father in the household does not necessarily mean the relationship is safe, supportive or emotionally available. The relevant question is the quality, consistency and meaning of the relationships around the child.

Who this report is for

- **Funders and philanthropic bodies** deciding where to direct resources toward earlier, relationship-based intervention for boys and young men.
- **Policymakers and government departments** responsible for education, family support, safeguarding, youth justice and early intervention.
- **Researchers** examining father absence, boys' development, mentoring efficacy or relational approaches to prevention.
- **Practitioners and organisations** designing or delivering mentoring, family support or school-based provision for boys.

02 The case for action

In most UK schools and services, a simple question is rarely asked: how many boys are growing up without a consistent father figure? In most cases, the answer is unknown. Schools routinely identify pupils with special educational needs, those eligible for free school meals, children in care and young carers, but relatively few systematically identify boys growing up without a consistent father figure, or consider whether that absence may indicate a need for earlier support.

This creates a significant blind spot. If schools and services do not know which boys are growing up without a consistent father figure, they cannot consider what support may be needed until other difficulties become visible, often once a boy has already reached crisis.

What the evidence shows

- In 2022, Lads Need Dads surveyed **1,411** teaching, pastoral and leadership staff across Essex. Among 639 secondary-school respondents, **93%** believed there was a link between father absence and disruptive behaviour, **78%** with lower attainment and **66%** with poor attendance.
- A follow-up 2025 survey of **408** staff across ten Essex secondary schools found similarly strong results: **97.6%** believed there was a link with behavioural concerns, **92%** with mental health concerns, **90%** with attainment and **86.5%** with attendance.
- These are professional observations, not proof of causation, but the consistency of the findings across two surveys, three years apart, strengthens the case for schools to identify this group and consider whether earlier support is needed.

The national conversation has shifted while this Fellowship has been underway. The Centre for Social Justice's The Lost Boys brought sustained public and political attention to boys falling behind in education, employment and mental health. New Philanthropy Capital and Movember's The Invisible Field drew attention to how work supporting boys and young men is funded, or more often is not: their 2026 mapping found that only 1.99% of the 71,812 youth organisations examined focus explicitly on boys and young men, receiving just 1.09% of funding analysed. This report adds a distinct lens: it focuses specifically on boys growing up without a consistent father figure and asks why this particular vulnerability remains so poorly recognised.

03 Methodology

This Fellowship combined international fieldwork in South Africa, the United States and Australia with a substantial programme of UK-based learning, drawing on interviews with researchers, policymakers, practitioners and mentors, alongside published research, two original lived-experience surveys with adult men who grew up without a consistent father figure and mothers raising sons alone, and the author's own frontline experience leading Lads Need Dads.

The approach was practice-led and qualitative rather than a formal evaluation of any single country's national system; findings reflect the organisations, programmes, people and evidence encountered during the Fellowship and should be understood within that context.

International fieldwork took place over two months: South Africa and the United States were visited in August 2025, and Australia between April and May 2026, timed to coincide with the Fathering Project's National Conference and the Australian Fatherhood Research Consortium's annual research symposium. Running alongside this was a substantial programme of UK-based learning: interviews and meetings with researchers, policymakers, education leaders, public health professionals, government representatives

and voluntary-sector organisations, allowing findings from overseas to be tested against the realities of UK policy, research and frontline practice.

> **Limits and interpretation**
> This was a Fellowship enquiry, not a controlled comparative study. The countries visited are not direct comparators and the organisations observed do not represent all practice in their countries. The surveys were exploratory and self-selecting rather than representative. The value of the Fellowship lies in the convergence of themes across international fieldwork, UK conversations, wider research, frontline experience and lived experience, while retaining appropriate caution about causation and generalisation.

04 Five key findings

Drawing together the international fieldwork, conversations, research and the author's own frontline experience, five key findings emerged from this Fellowship.

1 Relationships are the mechanism of change, but they must be intentionally designed and sustained

Across the countries visited, the strongest interventions combined trusted adult relationships with carefully designed programmes that created emotional safety, belonging, appropriate challenge, identity development and opportunities for boys to practise new ways of thinking, feeling and behaving over time. It was not simply the presence of a mentor that mattered, but what happened within those relationships and the consistency with which they were sustained. The most effective approaches created wider relational networks around boys, combining mentors, peers, families and communities, so that support did not disappear when one relationship or programme ended.

2 Prevention needs to begin earlier, particularly around the transition to secondary school

Late primary school and the transition into secondary education emerged as an important window for prevention. Many services, however, are designed to respond only once difficulties are already visible: when attendance has deteriorated, behaviour has escalated, exclusion is being considered, mental health has declined or a young person has entered safeguarding or youth justice systems. The opportunity is not to predict which boys will experience difficulties (many will not) but to recognise unmet relational needs earlier and offer support before difficulties become entrenched.

3 Boys' distress is too often recognised only when it becomes behaviour

Boys' distress may become visible through anger, withdrawal, disengagement, risk-taking, bravado, poor attendance or challenging behaviour rather than through direct disclosure. Many services depend on children recognising emotional difficulties, finding the language to describe them and asking for help. When behaviour is treated only as a problem to be managed, rather than also considered as possible communication, opportunities for earlier intervention can be missed.

4 Father absence is often recognised by practitioners, but remains largely invisible within systems

Many practitioners and organisations understood the significance an absent or inconsistent father could have in a boy's life, even where father absence was not their primary focus. Far less evident was systematic recognition of father absence as a distinct relational or developmental factor within the wider systems surrounding children. Whether a father is absent through bereavement, separation,

imprisonment, estrangement or inconsistent involvement, the circumstances and meaning of that absence matter, yet these are rarely distinguished. This does not mean father absence determines outcomes; many boys thrive where other strong relationships are present. But where relational loss is affecting a boy, systems need to be capable of recognising it rather than waiting until its consequences appear elsewhere.

5 The greatest barrier is structural: a fragmented system built around response rather than prevention

Father absence and relational need sit across multiple policy and professional boundaries. Education, family support, safeguarding, youth justice, fatherhood and early intervention each hold part of the picture, but rarely the whole of it. Research, policy and frontline practice can also operate alongside one another rather than in sustained conversation, while short-term funding and commissioning can make the long-term relational work that appears most valuable difficult to sustain. The result is a system better equipped to respond when difficulties become visible than to recognise and address relational need earlier.

> **We should not have to wait until a boy's distress becomes exclusion, poor mental health, violence, offending or crisis before the systems around him become interested in the relationships that helped shape his life.**

05 What four countries show

South Africa, the United States and Australia are not direct comparators: their histories, economies and policy traditions differ too much for that. But strikingly similar underlying needs recurred everywhere: safe and consistent relationships, belonging, appropriate challenge, and adults willing to remain present over time. No country had developed a fully coordinated response; each illuminated a different part of the picture, and each offers a different lesson for Britain.

South Africa *Social fatherhood, named clearly*	The clearest recognition of social fathers and shared community responsibility for boys. Where formal systems respond too late, or are not trusted to respond at all, local men become protectors, churches provide vital community support, and mentoring is as much about keeping boys safe as helping them develop. The Character Company's small-group model (one mentor to up to five boys) offered a middle ground between one-to-one mentoring and larger circles. Delivery, however, leans almost entirely on charities and local leaders, with reach and funding limited. Principles that transfer directly: continuity of trusted adults, early timing (ages ten and eleven), and mentor credibility built through consistent behaviour rather than title, always alongside proper safeguarding, not in place of it.

America *Relational depth, legislating for male presence*	Circle-based mentoring built on brotherhood, emotional honesty and ritual gave boys a clear sense of transition towards adulthood. Trust developed through consistency and through seeing other boys speak honestly, creating permission for them to do the same. Recent federal proposals and new state commissions aim to increase male participation in teaching and mentoring, signalling growing recognition of the importance of positive male presence in boys' lives. There is still, however, no targeted pathway for boys without a consistent father figure. The lesson for the UK is not to reproduce American ritual, but to combine relational depth with the safeguarding, supervision and mentor preparation expected here.
Australia *A developed field, but not yet upstream*	Australia offered the broadest range of fatherhood and boys' research and practice encountered, including Menslink's mentoring and counselling, The Man Cave's preventative school-based work with boys, Arne Rubinstein's rites-of-passage approach to supporting boys' transition towards adulthood, The Fathering Project's work engaging fathers through schools, internationally recognised paternal mental-health research, and a new federal Special Envoy for Men's Health. Yet boys already growing up without a safe and consistent relationship with their father are generally absorbed within broader categories such as vulnerability, disengagement or risk, rather than recognised as a developmental consideration in their own right. As one Victorian youth-justice practitioner of more than forty years put it, fatherless issues among disadvantaged young people are simply *"not on the research, policy and program agenda."*
United Kingdom *Growing attention, no coherent architecture*	A first Men's Health Strategy, a Boys' Education Commission, a Labour Group for Men and Boys, a cross-party APPG on Men and Boys' Issues and a promised national summit show growing political attention, but no single framework connects education, health, family support, youth justice and fatherhood policy around this group of boys. Families and fathers cut across departments, and different services see different parts of a boy's life without anyone holding the whole relational picture.

I returned not with a single model for Britain to import, but with a clearer understanding of what we could learn from international practice and use to strengthen our own approach. What is needed is a more connected, earlier response.

06 The UK: architecture, not willingness

Across dozens of UK interviews and conversations with leading researchers in fatherhood and boys' development, government officials, policymakers, practitioners, funders and organisations working directly with boys and men, the same pattern recurred. The problem is not a shortage of concern among people working with boys. It is that responsibility, data, funding and services are organised in ways that make father absence structurally hard to see.

Referral and recording systems can make fathers invisible from the first point of contact with a service.

- No government department owns father inclusion, family stability or the needs of these boys: responsibility is split across education, health, justice and family policy.
- Discussions of father absence can be heard as criticism of single mothers, making organisations reluctant to name the issue directly, even though many mothers are themselves asking for more male involvement in their sons' lives.
- Relationship-based change takes longer to show results than political and evaluation cycles typically allow; funding often follows recognisable categories of risk rather than early relational need.

> **The UK's defining barrier**
> Systems that rarely see the whole of a boy's relational world until difficulties have become visible somewhere else.

The report's proposed remedy is deceptively simple: a standard practice question, **"Who is missing from this child's story, and why?"**, built into referral, assessment and school pastoral processes, paired with a genuine support offer once a need is identified.

07 What lived experience added

59 men looking back

A survey of 59 adult men who grew up without a consistent father figure added a longitudinal dimension the international fieldwork alone could not provide. It was exploratory and self-selecting, but the consistency of accounts across seven countries and a wide age range was striking.

68%	83%	66%	71%
Rated emotional impact 4 or 5 out of 5	Said adult relationships were shaped by it	Received no formal support growing up	Of fathers/stepfathers want to parent differently

Respondents described needs that closely matched themes found internationally: confidence and self-worth, positive male mentors, practical life skills, a safe space to talk and a consistent adult relationship over time. Their accounts also showed that becoming a father can be a significant developmental turning point, bringing both conscious determination to do things differently and unresolved questions back to the surface.

69 mothers raising sons alone

Mothers described carrying emotional, practical and financial responsibility while helping sons navigate grief, anger, adolescence, identity and unanswered questions. Some felt professionals responded to behaviour without asking enough about what sat beneath it; others described boys who appeared to be coping while masking anxiety, low confidence, grief or loneliness.

Many mothers valued safe, consistent male role models without seeing them as replacements for fathers or as criticism of their parenting. The survey also exposed unmet need among mothers themselves: most had never attended a group for mothers in similar circumstances, while a large majority said they would, or might, be interested in such support.

08 Cross-cutting findings

Beyond the five key findings, further themes recurred across the countries, organisations and conversations that made up this Fellowship. Together, they describe not a gap in commitment or knowledge, but a gap in how existing knowledge, practice and systems connect to one another.

- **Relationships are the mechanism, not the programme.** What changed outcomes was rarely the curriculum: it was the quality and consistency of relationships built around it.
- **Timing matters.** The move from primary to secondary school, particularly ages ten and eleven, is a critical window across otherwise unconnected settings.
- **Boys often communicate distress through behaviour.** Anger, withdrawal, risk-taking and shutdown are possible expressions of distress, not simply problems to manage.
- **Father absence is recorded, but rarely explored.** It is often noted as a family circumstance but far less often explored as a relational experience in its own right.
- **Fragmentation: everyone holds a piece of the puzzle.** Responsibility is divided across education, family support, safeguarding, youth justice and fatherhood services.
- **The data we collect, and the data we do not.** Extensive data exists on attendance, attainment and safeguarding; far less on the relationships that preceded difficulties.
- **The research, policy and practice triangle.** Each holds valuable knowledge, but the routes connecting them remain inconsistent.
- **Today's boys are tomorrow's fathers.** What boys learn about relationships, responsibility and care shapes the next generation of fathers.

> **The impact of father absence: support, not replacement**
> The role of Lads Need Dads has never been to find a substitute father or to suggest that a mentor can replace the relationship a boy has lost. We cannot replace a father, and we do not try to. The work is about helping boys understand and work through the impact that an absent, inconsistent or harmful father relationship may have had on their self-worth, confidence, resilience, sense of belonging, purpose and developing identity.

09 Voices from the fieldwork

Across the Fellowship, I heard directly from mentors, practitioners, policy leaders and people with lived experience. Their words capture, more directly than any statistic, why this Fellowship's findings matter.

"Everything that happened to me, that I didn't like while growing up, I'm now making sure it doesn't happen to the rest of these boys."

Boykie Tsosane, Community mentor, Orlando East, Soweto, South Africa

"During my career of over 40 years developing and managing programs in the Victorian youth justice, youth homelessness and child protection systems, I never came across a young person with an engaged and positive relationship with a father."

Mike Kelly, youth justice practitioner, Victoria, Australia

"Research tells us what has happened, policy tries to shape what comes next, and practice shows us what is actually working now"

Nick Isles, Director, Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys, UK

"I was academically bright but shied away from opportunities I really wanted. Something made me think I wasn't good enough."

Respondent, Lads Need Dads lived-experience survey

"The hardest thing I've ever done, and the best thing I've ever done."

Sinola Lakana, reflecting on completing The Character Company's Rite of Passage, South Africa

10 23 recommendations for policy, research and practice

This Fellowship makes 23 recommendations. They are intentionally connected: recognition without provision is insufficient; provision without evidence is difficult to sustain; and evidence without routes into policy and practice changes little. Full detail and supporting evidence for each is set out in the full report.

Seven priorities for policy

1. **Make father absence and disrupted father relationships visible**

   Recognise them explicitly within early-help, education, family-support and safeguarding frameworks, not as diagnosis or destiny, but as a routine part of understanding a child's relational world.

2. **Establish and test an identification-to-support pathway at the Year 6-7 transition**

   Fund independent evaluation and phased expansion of an established model (such as Reading Mentors and LadPods) rather than commissioning a new programme from scratch.

3. **Build sustained relational pathways rather than isolated interventions**

   Commission for continuity, transition and wider relational networks rather than short programmes or one occasional adult.

4. **Strengthen father involvement and prevent future father absence**

   Distinguish support for boys already experiencing absence from action that helps safe, committed fathers remain involved.

5. **Establish clear cross-government leadership and accountability**

   Turn emerging cross-government work on men and boys into a published, accountable strategy, not dependent on one minister or parliamentary term.

6. **Reform funding and commissioning to support prevention and responsible scaling**

   Fund infrastructure, quality assurance, independent evaluation and knowledge transfer, as well as frontline delivery.

7. **Connect research, policy, practice, funding and lived experience**

   Create permanent cross-sector mechanisms, including a national network and periodic international knowledge exchange.

Seven priorities for research and evidence

1. **Independently evaluate existing relational interventions**

   Fund longitudinal and economic evaluation of interventions designed specifically for this population, rather than assuming general youth-mentoring evidence transfers directly.

2. **Establish a national evidence baseline**

   Current data can show whether a child lives in a lone-parent household; it cannot show whether he has a consistent, supportive father figure. A representative study is overdue, particularly within youth custody.

3. **Research social fathering and wider relational networks**

   Examine how stepfathers, grandfathers, uncles, mentors, teachers, coaches and peers contribute at different stages.

4. **Examine the connection between boyhood and future fatherhood**

   Investigate whether sustained relational support in boyhood influences later relationships, parenting intentions and fatherhood.

5. **Research why fathers become absent, and what children are told**

   Differentiate bereavement, imprisonment, migration, addiction, mental ill health, domestic abuse and other pathways into absence.

6. **Prioritise implementation and scaling research**

   Study not only whether an intervention works, but how, for whom, and under what conditions it can be delivered safely elsewhere.

7. **Develop shared, proportionate, practitioner-informed outcome frameworks**

   Create usable measures that let practice-based evidence accumulate without overburdening smaller organisations.

Nine priorities for practice

1. **Design for relational continuity**

   Treat continuity as a core design feature, not an enhancement added only when funding permits.

2. **Combine trusted adults, peer support and wider community networks**

   One trusted adult is a powerful protective factor, but should not be expected to meet every need.

3. **Recruit, assess, train and supervise mentors carefully**

   Good intentions or lived experience are not enough; mentors need boundaries, reflection, safeguarding and supervision.

4. **Embed relational support within schools**

   Schools are among the few institutions with regular access to almost every child.

5. **Build identity, belonging, purpose and practical competence**

   Go beyond stopping harmful behaviour; create challenge, skills, contribution and a hopeful future.

6. **Become father-aware and learn to ask why**

   Understand the story behind absence or disruption before deciding what support is appropriate.

7. **Support the whole family, including mothers raising sons alone**

   Recognise mothers and carers as people requiring support in their own right.

8. **Prepare boys for adulthood, healthy relationships and possible future fatherhood**

   Develop support as boys move through adolescence into independence and adult responsibility.

9. **Build learning, evaluation and quality assurance into delivery**

   Use clear aims, proportionate outcome measures and external evaluation to strengthen, not merely promote, provision.

Strongest starting points, by audience

Policymakers	Make father absence visible in early-help and safeguarding frameworks; test an identification-to-support pathway at the Year 6-7 transition using established models; and turn emerging cross-government work on men and boys into a published, accountable strategy.
Researchers	Build a national evidence baseline that captures whether a child has access to a consistent father figure, not just household composition; and fund independent, longitudinal evaluation of existing relational interventions rather than assuming general mentoring evidence transfers directly.
Funders	Fund infrastructure and evaluation, not delivery alone: smaller specialist organisations face a circular problem where commissioners want evidence before investing, but organisations need investment to generate it. Recognise boys and young men as a fundable field in their own right.
Practitioners	Design for relational continuity, recruit and supervise mentors carefully, and become father-aware, learning to ask why a father is absent before deciding what support is appropriate.

11 From recommendations to action

Twenty-three recommendations can appear extensive, but they point towards a small number of practical shifts. The immediate task is not to launch everything at once. It is to build a credible route from recognition to evidence, provision and system change.

A practical first phase

- Convene a cross-sector group (government, schools, researchers, funders, specialist frontline organisations and lived experience) to map current work and agree shared priorities.
- Develop and ethically test a Year 6-7 identification-to-support pathway in a small number of settings, ensuring identification always connects to a meaningful response.
- Commission independent evaluation of relational interventions and begin building a stronger UK evidence baseline around father-related and wider relational need.
- Support schools and practitioners to become more father-aware and relationally curious.
- Reform commissioning so promising relational work can build infrastructure and implementation capacity, rather than being trapped in repeated short-term delivery cycles.

- Create stronger routes for learning to move between research, policy and frontline practice, including international exchange where useful.

> **What success would look like**
>
> Success would mean schools and services are better able to understand a child's relational world; boys with unmet need can access support before crisis; safe fathers and social fathers are included appropriately; mothers and carers are appropriately supported; relational interventions can be sustained and evaluated; and policy is informed by what research, practice and lived experience are learning together.

12 Final reflection

Across South Africa, the United States, Australia and the UK, this Fellowship met researchers, policymakers, practitioners, mentors, fathers, mothers and young people approaching the lives of boys from very different perspectives. What became clear was not that nobody cared about these boys, or that nothing was being done, quite the opposite. Committed people, strong practice and valuable research exist in every country visited. The problem was how rarely the different pieces joined up: research could tell us about outcomes without reaching those delivering support; practitioners could see patterns developing without a route for that knowledge to influence policy; and policymakers were often responding to problems that had already become visible, while those working directly with boys were asking what might have been possible years earlier.

This Fellowship began by asking how boys growing up without a consistent father figure could be better supported through mentoring. What it found was much bigger than mentoring. Boys need relationships that last, opportunities to belong, positive peers and adults, challenge, practical experience, people who notice when something has changed, and somewhere to make sense of what has happened in their lives.

This does not mean father absence explains every difficulty, or that every boy without a consistent father figure needs intervention; this Fellowship has made the author more careful, not less, about making those distinctions. What matters is the quality and consistency of the relationships around a child, what an absence or disruption means to him, and whether he has the support he needs to make sense of it. By the time the consequences are visible, we are no longer intervening early. If this Fellowship leaves one question behind, I hope it is this:

> **What might change if we noticed these boys sooner, and acted while there was still time to change the direction of their story?**

Next steps

Funders are invited to consider how their investment could support the earlier, sustained, relationally-designed models of practice described in this report. Policymakers are invited to consider the seven policy recommendations as a starting point for making father absence visible within early-intervention systems. Researchers are invited to help close the evidence gaps identified in the full report, particularly around national evidence baselines and independent evaluation of existing relational interventions. And practitioners are invited to draw on the lessons from South Africa, the United States and Australia in designing and strengthening their own work with boys.

For the detailed evidence, international case studies, lived-experience surveys, full recommendations and complete supporting references, readers are encouraged to consult the full report.