

# **Schools North East**

## **Response to the Boys' Education Commission Call for Evidence**

**Submitted September 2026**

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### **About Schools North East**

Schools North East is the only regional school-led network of its kind in England, representing all 1,150 schools in our region. We work across all twelve North East local authorities and bring together Head Teachers, trust CEOs, business professionals, and frontline practitioners.

Schools North East welcomes the Boys' Education Commission's focus on understanding the challenges facing boys in education. In June 2026, Schools North East convened stakeholders from across the North East, including schools and trusts, the region's universities, and Boys' Impact, to explore whether the North East should establish a Boys' Impact Hub.

Evidence from school leaders across the North East suggests that there is no single "boys' problem", nor should poorer outcomes be attributed simply to boys' attitudes, aspirations or masculinity. Boys' experiences are shaped by the interaction between gender and socioeconomic disadvantage, geography, SEND, family circumstances, access to services and the opportunities visible within their communities.

This reflects our wider policy work on disadvantaged white working-class pupils. 'Underperformance' amongst different groups of students is a complex, systemic and structural issue rooted in geography, long-term deprivation and institutional capacity, rather than low aspiration or school quality. While national averages can identify a gender gap, they risk obscuring substantial differences between boys growing up in different places and circumstances.

### **A structural divide in experiences and opportunities**

Feedback from schools in our region, through regular surveys and roundtables, suggests that the challenges facing boys often become mutually reinforcing. Academic attainment cannot be neatly separated from attendance, behaviour, SEND, wellbeing, belonging or progression. Difficulties beginning early in a child's life can accumulate through education, particularly where families and schools have limited access to the wider services required to intervene.

This is particularly important in the North East. Schools serve communities affected by persistent deprivation alongside uneven access to transport, employment, youth provision,

health and mental health services, specialist SEND support and post-16 opportunities. There is a clear **structural divide**: not a simple divide in school quality, but a divide in the infrastructure and opportunities available to children depending on where they grow up. Schools and trusts are increasingly expected to compensate for poverty, limited employment opportunities, reduced youth provision, stretched mental health services and a SEND system under significant pressure.

## Challenges facing boys in the North East

A recurring concern raised by school and trust leaders is **belonging and purpose**. For some boys, education can feel disconnected from their identity, community or expectations for adulthood. Where young people cannot see credible routes between education and meaningful employment, calls to “raise aspirations” are unlikely to be sufficient. We strongly caution against interpreting this as an absence of aspiration among boys or their families. The more important question is whether young people can see realistic opportunities through which those aspirations can be realised.

Relationships are consequently important. Trusted adults, positive male and female role models, mentoring, extracurricular activities, sport, youth provision and connections with employers can all help young people develop belonging and purpose. Peer culture and online influences also form an increasingly important part of the environment in which boys construct their identities. Schools need the capacity to help pupils navigate these influences, but responsibility cannot sit with schools and trusts alone.

SEND and additional needs are another important part of this picture. Behaviour, attendance and disengagement should not automatically be understood as isolated disciplinary issues. In some cases they can be manifestations of unmet need, difficulties with communication, mental health or a young person becoming progressively disconnected from education. Effective policy therefore needs to consider the relationship between SEND identification and support, behaviour, exclusions and attendance rather than addressing each through separate initiatives.

## What needs to change?

The Commission should resist searching for a single intervention capable of “fixing boys”. Schools North East’s evidence points instead towards a long-term, place-sensitive approach which strengthens both what happens within schools and the infrastructure surrounding them.

**First, intervention must begin earlier.** Investment in early years, speech and language, family support and timely identification of additional needs can prevent difficulties becoming entrenched. Integrated early-years and family support are important components of tackling educational disadvantage.

**Second, boys need stronger relationships, belonging and enrichment.** Schools require sustainable capacity for pastoral support, mentoring, enrichment, extracurricular activity and transition work. Community-anchored approaches which connect schools with health, youth and community services can strengthen engagement and belonging.

**Third, education must connect visibly with future opportunity.** High-quality careers education, meaningful employer encounters, FE and technical pathways and apprenticeships can help demonstrate the relevance of learning. These opportunities must be genuinely accessible. Transport is an education issue where young people cannot reach colleges, training, employment or enrichment opportunities.

**Fourth, policy must become more sensitive to the interaction between gender, disadvantage, and place.** National averages for boys conceal substantial variation. Government should routinely examine outcomes by gender alongside socioeconomic background, SEND, ethnicity and geography, including attainment, attendance, suspensions and exclusions, progression and destinations. Measures of disadvantage should also move beyond a binary FSM/non-FSM distinction where this fails to capture persistent or hidden deprivation.

**Finally, responsibility must extend beyond schools.** Schools North East advocates a model of **system-anchored localism**, in which national government provides sustained direction and resources, regional partnerships coordinate services and accountability, and local institutions have sufficient capacity to respond to their communities.

## **Conclusion**

The central lesson from the North East is therefore that boys' educational outcomes cannot be separated from the places in which boys grow up. Policy should maintain high expectations of boys and of schools, while recognising that opportunity is not distributed equally. Boys who experience poverty, unmet additional needs, weak transport connections, limited youth services and fewer visible routes into secure employment face a fundamentally different educational context from those surrounded by dense networks of support and opportunity.

The Commission has an opportunity to move the debate beyond explanations centred narrowly on boys' motivation or aspiration. Improving outcomes will require excellent teaching and high expectations, but also stronger early intervention, SEND and mental health support, enrichment, credible pathways into employment and investment in the civic infrastructure surrounding schools. Addressing this structural divide would benefit boys while strengthening educational opportunities for all children growing up in communities facing entrenched disadvantage.