

# New Conversations with Leaders

Pilot Evaluation  
2024-2025



**CUAN**

An Gníomhaireacht um Phoiregean Baile,  
Gnáéach agus Inscneáthuáth  
The Domestic, Sexual and  
Gender-Based Violence Agency



**Men's  
Development  
Network**

Better Lives for Men, Better Lives for All

### **Suggested citation for this report:**

Kirwan, J. (2025) New Conversations With Leaders Evaluation

### **Facilitation team of the pilot:**

Sara Moreno - Men's Leadership Training and Support Officer  
Lorcan Brennan - Training & Resource Development Manager  
Daniela Monza - White Ribbon Ireland Project Officer  
John Kilgarriff - Psychotherapist  
Cian Manning - Admin Support

Men's Development Network CLG  
Equality House  
49/50 O'Connell Street  
Waterford X91 E866

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## Foreword

I am delighted to present the findings of the evaluation of the New Conversations with Leaders programme which ran its initial pilot in 2024 and 2025. In running this programme, we sought to bring together men from diverse backgrounds on a cross-community basis to work and learn as a group and to build communities of practice and support which will last long beyond the duration of the programme itself.

We are grateful to all stakeholders who worked with us to make this happen including our funders and our staff. We are particularly grateful to the men who participated in these sessions and arrived with the spirit of openness and participation which was crucial to their smooth running. We are similarly grateful to our invited speakers who graciously shared with us and our participants the considerable wealth of their wisdom and experiences.

Our present time is one which is defined by speed, overstimulation and information overload. We live in a time of relentless news cycles which bombard us with stories that must constantly and interminably be engaged with. It is a time of instant reactions which too frequently become entrenched positions. These factors serve only to feed misunderstandings and divisions as people talk 'at' or 'past' each other rather than directly to each other.

In such a time, it is heartening to see a programme such as this one which is focused on slowing down, on gathering people together and taking the time to learn with each other and from one another in the spirit of inclusion and cooperation. Work such as this -and conversations such as these- are crucial. I am proud to work with an organisation that recognises the importance of this work and invests the time, effort and resources required to do it well.

Dr Kenny Doyle

Head of Programmes

Men's Development Network

# Executive Summary

This report presents the findings from the evaluation of New Conversations with Leaders, a pilot leadership development programme delivered by Men's Development Network (MDN). As the first initiative of its kind within the organisation, the programme aimed to test and refine an approach to leadership training that speaks directly to men working across diverse community contexts. It brought together participants from varied backgrounds through two residential weekends, four webinars and a series of facilitated group sessions. The evaluation is drawn upon data gathered by participant self-assessment questionnaires and qualitative interviews carried out six-months after the final session.

The coordination and delivery of the programme drew on the combined experience of a dedicated MDN team. The coordinator, supported by colleagues across the organisation, planned, developed and facilitated each stage of the training. This collective effort brought together diverse professional insights and practice backgrounds, including the presence of MDN's clinical counselling service within the facilitation team. Together, these contributions ensured that the programme was delivered within a contained and supportive environment that encouraged openness and reflection. As highlighted throughout this report, such a high level of staff commitment carries significant time and resource implications that warrant recognition in planning for future delivery.

The programme takes place over six months. It begins with a weekend residential training where participants get to know each other and familiarise themselves with foundational topics. Following this, a series of webinars with guest speakers and international guests (who are recognised advocates) allows participants to meet with different types of leadership examples. In the last formal phases of the programme, another residential weekend is held where participants put their learnings into action and get to explore how they want to implement them in their practice.

Grounded in MDN's counter-cultural ethos, New Conversations with Leaders sought to create a reflective space where men could explore leadership through the lenses of equality, empathy and inclusion. The programme's goals were to support men to connect with their lived experiences, build confidence in their leadership capacity and develop emotional intelligence and self-

awareness as foundations for sustainable practice. It also aimed to foster solidarity and collaboration between individuals and organisations working in community, advocacy and social change.

The programme combined structured learning with facilitated dialogue, drawing on MDN's methodologies such as the '7 Key Questions' and a strengths-based developmental approach. Participants engaged with topics including masculinity, diversity, self-care, accountability and leadership in practice. These were explored not as abstract ideas, but as lived realities within participants' personal and professional lives.

New Conversations with Leaders successfully met its primary aim: to create a safe, inclusive and reflective environment where men could develop as confident and empathetic leaders. Participants consistently reported meaningful personal and professional growth, stronger communication and facilitation skills, as well as a greater capacity to support others within their communities. Many highlighted the value of working in diverse groups where differences became opportunities for learning and connection rather than barriers.

**The following list outlines what the programme achieved, how these outcomes were reached and the key recommendations for sustaining and building upon this progress in future iterations of the programme:**

1. Strong *pre-programme* engagement and communication should remain a central feature of future delivery. Early contact built trust and helped participants arrive prepared, curious and ready to engage. In this regard, openness and respect are crucial aspects to the success of this programme.
2. The blend of residential and online sessions should be retained. This balance created continuity, strengthened relationships and allowed for sustained reflection between sessions.
3. Having clear and well-defined materials allows for participants to be prepared for the sessions and to arrive in a spirit of comfort and trust which is also crucial to the running of the programme.

4. Facilitation must continue to prioritise openness and respect. Sensitive and steady facilitation enabled trust within a diverse group and allowed difficult conversations to be held safely.
5. Programme design should remain flexible and responsive to participant needs. Adapting content to each cohort supported inclusion and ensured that all participants could engage meaningfully regardless of background or experience.
6. Diversity within the group is important (e.g. different voluntary or professional roles, sociocultural backgrounds, etc.). Exposure to different perspectives enhanced empathy and awareness which allowed participants recognise that leadership is not one-size-fits-all and that every man's experience holds value.
7. Participants reported gaining skills in leadership and confidence as well as developing practical tools and self-assurance which enables them in processes such as leading discussions, managing conflict and engaging others. This suggests that the focus on emotional intelligence and self-awareness should remain at the heart of leadership development. These were identified by both participants and facilitators as key drivers of personal and professional growth.
8. Self-care and well-being must continue to be emphasised as part of leadership practice. Participants reported that reflection, boundaries and rest were crucial to sustaining their work and avoiding burnout in the areas of leadership.
9. The programme's counter-cultural ethos should be maintained. Slowing down, creating reflective spaces and resisting target-driven approaches are what made this model distinct and effective.
10. Participants demonstrated strong motivation to apply their learning by initiating community projects and integrating insights and skills into professional practice. This shows that the programme has the potential to engender a multiplier effect as the knowledge and skills acquired can potentially cascade onwards via the practices of participants in their own work. Therefore, opportunities for participants to apply learning in community and professional settings should be expanded.

Sharing tools, resources and follow-up support can help translate leadership development into tangible community impact.

11. Future iterations should continue to evolve content and delivery based on feedback. Topics such as allyship, inclusion and gender-based violence should remain central while exploring new areas identified by participants, such as cultural competency and community well-being.

The facilitator's reflections reinforced these findings and recommendations. She emphasised the importance of creating space for difficult conversations and "showing people how to sit with things" rather than rushing past discomfort. From this perspective, transformation happens gradually: "as long as a seed is planted", growth continues beyond the programme itself. These insights highlight that leadership development is both relational and process-driven, requiring time, trust and openness.

Importantly, participants described outcomes that extended beyond personal change. Many reported increased confidence in engaging with institutions and representing their communities. As one participant summarised:

*"I came away from it feeling an awful lot more confident within myself... it did equip me with skills coming back out that I've been able to apply in my personal life and on a professional level as well".*

As a pilot, New Conversations with Leaders also generated valuable learning for future iterations. The evaluation identifies opportunities to expand content, further adapt delivery formats to participant needs and ensure sustainable resourcing as demand grows.

Ultimately, New Conversations with Leaders has established a strong foundation for MDN's future leadership work. It demonstrates that when men are given the opportunity to learn in inclusive, reflective and well-supported spaces, they can develop the confidence and compassion needed to lead not only effectively, but ethically for themselves and their communities that they help shape which has positive knock-on effects for broader society.

# Background and Rationale

## Our Approach in Changing Contexts

For over 25 years, Men's Development Network have been engaging with men across Ireland to be their best selves as individuals, partners, husbands, fathers, grandfathers, sons, friends and neighbours. Through this process, we have developed national and local programmes based around personal development, health and wellbeing, counselling, gender equality and ending gender-based violence, behavioural change programmes and client support services.

In the face of major social, political, cultural and economic upheavals, assumptions around gender roles are constantly changing. This means that there is a need to redefine the expectations society places on men and boys in ways that centre their capabilities and lived experiences. In times of change, some men seek to find meaning or a sense of identity which can sometimes lead to a return to more traditional and rigid models of masculinity that are harmful for men and boys, as well as for those around them and for society as a whole.

## Leadership is Needed Right Now

The programme "New Conversations with Leaders" engages men in leadership roles to support them in navigating the complexities of a fast-changing landscape. Leadership is a key pillar of Men's Development Network. It has grown out of men's groups where participants learn together in circles, share their experiences and support one another in open, respectful and encouraging spaces. The programme is aimed at supporting men to look at personal development and the role they can play in relation to other men and to broader society.

## Creating Safer and Braver Spaces

The rationale behind "New Conversations with Leaders" is that of bringing men together; men who are already engaged in their community and men who may be marginalised or at risk of marginalisation who would like to get involved more in community leadership. Our goal is to create a space where the group explores different topics in a peer-to-peer learning setting as well

as creating a community where participants can find support and keep growing together. At the foundation of our practice is creating a safer space, where participants can feel comfortable to express themselves; a space in which participants get to reflect on their practice and learn from others. In addition to this, we also want to create a brave space. At its most effective, a brave space invites participants to lean into discomfort, challenge assumptions and engage openly with diverse perspectives which are key conditions to encourage growth and change within the group setting. To make this practice truly impactful, the programme is designed to have participants from very diverse backgrounds, age groups, ethnicities and abilities. Many of the participants are active in some area of the social sector and this space is aimed at supporting them exchange and learn from each other's lived experiences. Our approach to this work lies in the understanding that transformation work is slow and that in order for it to be truly impactful it has to be small, local, incremental and sustainable.

## Programme Structure

The programme takes place over six months. It begins with a weekend residential training where participants get to know each other and familiarise themselves with foundational topics. Following this, a series of webinars with guest speakers and international guests (who are recognised advocates) allows participants to meet with different types of leadership examples. In the last formal phases of the programme, another residential weekend is held where participants put their learnings into action and get to explore how they want to implement them in their practice.

## Aims, Goals and Objectives

The main aim of the programme is to engage participants in new conversations. Rather than adhering to a monolithic understanding of leadership, we seek to offer them a space to get creative and explore themselves. To understand what their leadership style looks like and to explore what strategies and approaches they aim to implement in their line of work, volunteering and/or advocacy. The programme encourages the leadership skills of men, helps them feel empowered and provides the support network to sustain their engagement in their own communities.

**The goals of New Conversations with Leaders are the following:**

1. To facilitate conversation to support participants become more grounded in their lived experience, build confidence in their skills and identify where they need support in their practice.
2. To open a space for vulnerability and exchange, where participants can work on their skills around emotional intelligence. Thus, making men aware of the strengths of working in cooperation rather than isolation – asking for help, recognising limitations and taking accountability for themselves and their health.
3. To create a community of practice where participants can find like-minded others they can work with to develop their projects and put actions in place.
4. To create solidarity between different organisations and activists across the social and advocacy sector in Ireland to foster a more sustainable practice.

**The objectives of New Conversations with Leaders are as follows:**

1. To engage men over six months of workshops, lectures, seminars and group discussions from a strengths-based approach. This includes
  - a. Exploring foundational knowledge around topics that will help inform the concept of leadership, in accordance to what the group finds interesting for their communities. These include:
    - Masculinity, what does it mean to be a man nowadays?
    - Understanding discrimination, social justice and accountability.
    - Men's health, self-care and community care in practice.
- Racism, diversity, how to be an agent for justice, inclusion and intercultural dialogue.
- Understanding leadership, where it is needed nowadays and how it can be practiced in community and cooperation.

**b.** Bringing in speakers that showcase leadership from different communities and backgrounds as a source of inspiration for participants.

2. To support men, envision a different future based on care and accountability, help them connect with their vision for leadership and identify the actions they need to take to work towards that future.
3. To build practice around how participants can care for themselves in the process and stay healthy. This works in tandem with a community of support where participants can find nurture for their line of work, volunteering and/or advocacy.
4. To train participants in MDN's methodologies, such as MDN's 7 Key Questions, working developmentally, best practices for engaging men and boys.
5. To promote the vision and values of MDN in different communities with the possibility of new men's groups or other types of actions being started by participants upon completion of the programme. This is also a good opportunity to raise awareness of the services provided by MDN in general.

# Methodology

In evaluating the programme, a mixed-methods approach was used to capture a comprehensive understanding of its impact. Pre- and post-residential surveys, along with self-assessment tools, were designed by the coordinator/facilitator based on their knowledge of the content. These tools allowed for the monitoring of participants and helped assess changes in attitudes, self-awareness and other insights before and after the programme.

Interviews were conducted with five participants to get a sense of the programme's impact six months after its completion. An additional two interviews were conducted with the programme coordinator/facilitator to get a sense of the work that went into the programme and their hopes for the development of the programme following a successful pilot. Therefore, qualitative data were collected through seven in-depth interviews to explore varying experiences, expectations and observations.

## The Counter-Cultural Framing of New Conversations with Leaders:

### Contextual Roots

Leadership within the Men's Development Network is a relatively new concept in formal programme terms. However, its roots stretch back to the very first conversations that were ever-present in the early days of the organisation. From its inception, when small groups of men gathered in circles to ask how they could live better for themselves, for others and for their communities, the seeds of leadership were already being sown.

These early conversations created a foundation that continues to guide the organisation's understanding of what leadership truly means and how it looks in everyday life.

### Counter-Cultural Ethos and Methodologies

This framing of leadership is deliberately counter-cultural. In a world that often rewards speed over process, MDN's approach insists on slowing down, creating safe engaging spaces for learning in circles and focusing on quality over quantity. Leadership therefore is not based on metrics or a set of targets to be met. Rather, it is a process of transformation embedded in presence and attentiveness, which means resisting the pull to become purely outcomes focused. This approach chooses instead to cultivate an environment that encourages the reflective development of emotional and expressive intelligence, thus supporting real authentic growth for men.

The methodologies that underpin the more developmental work of MDN (e.g. men's circles and the 7 Key Questions), embody this ethos. Although they may seem simplistic, they provide an adequate scaffolding for enquiry by allowing men to check in with themselves and each other in ways that are both challenging and supportive. **The questions are as follows:**

1. How are things?
2. What's going well?
3. What's not going well?
4. Is there anything you need to do?
5. Are there any supports you need?
6. What's one step you might take?
7. What difference might it make?

The strength of the 7 Key Questions are clear to all who have used them as a tool for reflective conversations across the years. They focus on a wellness model of engagement – by inviting men to reflect on what's going well. They promote personal autonomy through supporting men to connect with and value their own personal experience. They support men to identify their

needs and the resources required at that time. They focus on incremental actions for well-being through enquiry as to what one action the man might do. They are solution based in so far as they invite men out of reflection towards incremental actions for positive change. Most importantly the questions focus proactively on normalising through conversation men's overall lives and experiences, their joys and their challenges.

Safety, gentleness and group agreements form the foundations of these methodological practices which then go some way to creating the conditions in which men can lower their guard share their perspectives honestly and reflect on their lived experiences. From this place of grounded safety, transformation becomes possible.

What sets this approach apart is the recognition that leadership is not about providing quick fixes or even standardised training. It is about creating spaces where men can encounter themselves and others more deeply. This is done through the aforementioned thoughtful methodological approaches and practices that include a combination of inclusive learning styles across the programme, providing spaces where prejudices and harmful belief systems can be named and reflected upon and new ways of being can begin to take shape. MDN, organisationally, holds to the principle that "people need time" and that "a seed planted and nurtured can unfold to its own rhythm and at its own pace".

This is why the New Conversations with Leaders programme today feels less like an imported model or concept and more like an organic product of the organisation's longstanding practice. More to the point, the programme purposefully reflects decades of working with men and resisting the "frantic and frenetic pace" of wider culture by embracing a commitment to reflective practice instead. Leadership, in this sense, is in more ways than one, a natural evolution of MDN's foundations.

## Implications for the Programme

In this model, successes and challenges, are considered vital parts of the learning process. By embedding reflective practice at the core of its identity, MDN models the very leadership it seeks to nurture in men. Thus, leadership is not merely understood in terms of role modelling or example-setting, but rather it is a grounded and transformative practice that is sustained primarily through 'presence', with ourselves, colleagues or our own community.

Rooted in conversations that began decades ago, New Conversations with Leaders should continue to stand as a deliberate counterpoint to dominant instrumental models of leadership or personal transformation by offering an approach to reflective learning that is slower, deeper and profoundly human.

# Pre-Programme Work: Programme Design and Participant Selection

The success of New Conversations with Leaders has been supported by the thorough pre-programme preparation undertaken by the coordinator/facilitator and the MDN team. With regards to the content of the programme, topics such as boundaries and self-care were particularly well-received by participants with many men highlighting the practical value of these discussions. These topics were included after the coordinator/facilitator and team carried out a review of previous iterations of the programme and examined which topics were well received as well as any topics that past participants expressed a desire to be included. For example, earlier groups had identified gaps around paternity and men's roles in caregiving, which were then incorporated into the most recent design.

The design process for programme content was never static. The coordinator/facilitator, supported by others within MDN, came into the role with a clear sense of what would work, while also recognising that this might need to be adapted to suit the cohort in front of them. In this regard, a strong emphasis was placed on working with groups who experience discrimination and marginalisation, not only to include their voices but to provide tools to understand how society structures inequality. This level of awareness (i.e. of self, of context and of participants) has been central to this pilot programme's success.

The coordinator's/facilitator's ability to hold space for difficult but necessary conversations was particularly evident around topics such as allyship with women. These are areas where men's learning is ongoing and often uncomfortable, yet without this grounding the programme would lose much of its transformative potential. The approach to remain honest about their own learning while also setting high expectations and belief of participants has modelled the very leadership skills the programme seeks to instil with participants.

Every topic introduced to the group was treated with this level of care. Nothing was included simply because it seemed like a natural or ready-made fit. Instead, each subject was weighed against the core values of New Conversations with Leaders

which set out to create a safer and braver space for men to reflect, challenge and grow. This required setting clear boundaries, for example: racism, personal attacks, or dismissive behaviour were not tolerated. At the same time, the environment was intentionally gentle. The coordinator/facilitator emphasised that learning and growth are only possible when participants feel supported, connected and cared for in a space that is accessible for the participants themselves. Careful planning created the conditions for this, which then allowed for conversations to take place in an atmosphere that was reliant on trust with one another.

One of her reflections captures this approach vividly:

*"So these things only happen — like this level of openness and comfort — only happens if there is careful planning around how it is received, how to respond when it's not received in a nice way, like how to be gentle in saying, I'm not sure about that now. Maybe let's think about it. Let's get back to it" (Coordinator/Facilitator).*

This approach also guided the design of the webinar series. Rather than treating them as stand-alone events, the coordinator/facilitator built directly from the themes explored in the first residential weekend. This ensured continuity and relevance which allowed for the online sessions to deepen the group's learning. Looking ahead, the coordinator/facilitator is clear that this level of attention and planning must continue. Each cohort brings its own needs, and every theme requires adaptation to remain significant. Future plans include further diversifying the speaker pool and strengthening the bridge between residential learning and online engagement.

The pre-programme design has been far more than logistics or scheduling. It has been an act of weaving together lived experience, feedback from participants, professional insight and an openness to learning. It is this blend that has allowed New Conversations with Leaders to become not just a programme, but the scaffolding for a genuine community of practice, support and growth where men can explore themselves and the society around them.

# Key Findings

## 1. Preparation and Engagement

Participants consistently highlighted that the programme materials and communication prior to arrival were effective in preparing them for the training. Communication before arrival was described as highly satisfactory, with participants feeling well-informed about the programme's objectives and schedule.

For some, preparation also took the form of self-reflection, as they began considering their own place within the programme even before arrival. As one participant explained:

*"I didn't see myself really as a leader... I was a group and personal support worker, so I didn't see myself as a leader, but... it got me thinking and yeah, I am a leader" (Participant).*

This illustrates how the programme's framing invited participants to enter the space with curiosity, openness and a willingness to reconsider their own leadership journey throughout the programme.

This is further emphasised by a number of participants who explained that their motivation for engagement primarily stemmed from wanting to contribute "to the development of society as a man" and to share experiences with others. In particular, one participant valued the opportunity to sit with peers, exchange perspectives and "discuss issues" openly with a diverse group of men:

*"As a man, we grow up to learn every day and also to be able to contribute our quarter, no matter how little it is for the development of the society... But the truth is the ability for you to discuss this issue with people and be able to share your experience, that is what actually made me interested" (Participant).*

This motivation for participation and engagement reflects the programme's successful outreach in engaging men who are already active in their communities but seeking tools to deepen dialogue and develop leadership skills. Moreover, this engagement was also shaped by a recognition of the unspoken challenges many men carry which reinforced the value of having a space where such issues could be voiced and explored openly.

## 2. Programme Structure and Facilitation

Feedback on the structure of the programme was overwhelmingly positive. Participants agreed that the residential sessions, workshops and webinars were well-balanced and that the content aligned with the stated objectives. The facilitation methods were consistently described as appropriate for the topics discussed, with participants feeling supported and comfortable in group settings. Group dynamics were a recurring highlight as participants appreciated the rapid formation of trust and cohesion, even within a diverse cohort which is reflected in this extract:

*"Proud and honoured to have interacted with over a handful of really inspiring men and building the start of a connection to explore further" (Participant).*

Many noted the programme created a safe space where they could express themselves without judgment which had positive knock-on effects when it came to encouraging openness and collaboration.

The importance of careful facilitation was further underlined in interview reflections. One participant described how the methods used (which included a strong emphasis on respect) shaped the experience:

*"The gelling of the group... was purposely facilitated... but [the facilitator] said to me he was pleasantly surprised how well the groups gelled and supported one another" (Participant).*

Another remarked on the atmosphere of mutual respect that further developed over time:

*"Respect among the group was fantastic. Every person in that group respected one another so well... that was a growing process because we were all strangers going in" (Participant).*

Facilitators were continuously credited with shaping this environment:

*"I'd have to compliment the facilitators... the experience and wisdom was given in such a wise way, not in your face, very stealth-like but lovely... and the energy brought by both added so much" (Participant).*

As reflected here, participants consistently highlighted that the programme's approach encouraged engagement and fostered a supportive group dynamic. The facilitation was often described as sensitive and respectful, particularly when addressing potentially triggering topics. Many participants noted the benefits of peer learning and the trust that developed within the group, which allowed them to share personal struggles and provide support to one another throughout the programme.

### **3. Leadership Confidence and Skills Development**

Self-assessment data indicates a notable increase in leadership confidence and skill acquisition over the course of the programme. Participants reported improvements in their perceived ability to lead activities, address difficult conversations and utilise tools to engage other men in community contexts. Evidence of their own inner belief with regards to their own leadership confidence and skills development is on a clear upward trajectory based on their engaged participation with each element of the programme.

Moreover, participants reported acquiring concrete leadership strategies, communication tips and facilitation techniques throughout the programme by picking up useful tips for facilitation, setting group rules, principles of self-care [and] aspects of other cultures. They also reflected on the benefit of observing and learning from peers with differing experiences and backgrounds to their own. Several participants highlighted increased confidence in their capacity to contribute meaningfully to group settings, with many taking pride in active engagement/participation and forming supportive relationships within the cohort with different backgrounds to their own.

During the interview stage, a participant highlighted how the programme enabled them to recognise and validate their own leadership style:

*“I learned some strengths from [the guest speakers]... my own style is direct but gentle and very person-centred... I was surprised how much that resonated with others” (Participant).*

In line with the above extract, participants regularly reflected that the programme gave them greater confidence in their own leadership strengths, while also broadening their understanding of what effective leadership could look like in practice. Many contrasted their past experiences of rigid, target-driven leadership with the more person-centred and supportive style modelled throughout the programme. One participant explained how his perspective had shifted, emphasising the importance of context and adaptability:

*“Leadership changes every day based on the environment you find yourself. The leadership you take from one place might not apply in another. But there’s one key factor... accessibility. When you allow people to access you, they will be free to discuss issues” (Participant).*

Others similarly described how the programme highlighted the value of accessibility, listening and shared problem-solving as core skills. As one participant noted:

*“But when I came here [to the programme], I discovered that you don’t need to do that. You can assist people to know what the problem is and resolve it with them” (Participant).*

Together, these reflections show how participants moved towards seeing leadership less as a top-down exercise of control and more as a relational, flexible and inclusive practice where you can lead from the back or even at the same level of others. In addition to this, one of the clearest impacts of the programme was the growth in personal confidence and the transferability of skills into everyday life. As one participant reflected:

*“I came away from it feeling an awful lot more confident within myself... it did equip me with skills coming back out that I’ve been able to apply in my personal life and on a professional level as well” (Participant).*

This increased confidence also translated into community action, with the same participant noting:

*“I probably wouldn’t have got to the point of starting my own men’s circle without this programme” (Participant).*

These insights highlight how the programme not only strengthened individual leadership capacity but also acted as a starting point for creating new spaces of support and dialogue within local communities.

#### **4. Understanding Masculinity, Diversity and Inclusion**

A key theme emerging from both self-assessment and qualitative feedback was enhanced understanding of masculinity, discrimination and diversity. Participants reflected on the societal stereotypes of masculinity and reported increased awareness of harmful behaviours, with greater confidence in addressing them, for instance one participant observed:

*“Men need and want emotional, non-judgement support. Most men dislike the stereotype and society view of ‘manly’” (Participant).*

In addition to identifying and challenging stereotypes surrounding masculinities, participants also noted the value of engaging with men from different backgrounds and perspectives, recognising shared challenges and appreciating diverse approaches to leadership. The programme appeared to strengthen participants' knowledge of structural inequalities, cultural differences and the importance of inclusive practices in leadership. As a result, exposure to diverse perspectives was reported as a catalyst for both personal reflection and professional growth, with many participants noting that they had learned how diversity can have a positive effect in community and leadership contexts.

However, this was something that needed to be teased out and worked through within the programme's structure by facilitators and participants alike. For example, some participants were initially sceptical about working in such a diverse cohort, but this perception often shifted as the programme progressed:

*“Because of the diversity, I didn’t really know how it would work, to be honest, I was a bit sceptical... but what I found was that because of the facilitation, it enabled that diversity and inclusion” (Participant).*

The same participant went on to note that in both a personal and professional sense:

*“It’s helped me invite people from different backgrounds, different perspectives into conversation. That’s a big, big learning” (Participant).*

This reflection captures a key aspect of the programme's impact. It not only promotes inclusion within the learning space, but it also builds participants' capacity to bring that inclusivity into their own work and communities. In this way, the programme acts as a catalyst for greater collaboration and connection with diversity at the forefront. These are outcomes that extend well beyond the programme-specific sessions themselves.

#### **5. Self-Care and Personal Growth**

Many participants were surprised by how central the theme of self-care became during the programme, realising not only how much they needed it, but also how often they had ignored it in their personal and professional lives.

One described how the focus on self-care stood out as central to their learning:

*“What really struck me is the relaxed attitude... they were focusing a lot on self-care as leaders. And self-care is a big, big thing for me” (Participant).*

This attention to self-care not only supported participants' leadership journeys but also reshaped their personal outlooks on how it can be incorporated to ensure they can sustain their work.

*“The machine needs maintenance ... if you don’t put those boundaries in, people are going to take advantage of that” (Participant).*

As suggested in this section, a major personal shift for many participants was recognising the importance of self-care. Several reflected that they had previously pushed themselves constantly, but now understand that maintaining their own well-being is essential to being effective leaders. One participant explained:

*“Initially I was having this mindset as a man, you just have to keep going... But I’ve come to realise we also need to take care of ourselves. It is when we take care of ourselves that we have the capacity to take care of issues” (Participant).*

As mentioned, these insights were often applied in both professional and personal contexts. One participant described encouraging colleagues to prioritise balance and manage stress:

*“I told him, it’s better you work slowly to live long than for you to work six days and not be able to take care of yourself. Needs will keep coming... but focus on yourself and balance everything” (Participant).*

Beyond individual reflections, participants consistently highlighted that the programme helped them develop practical strategies for managing stress, maintaining overall well-being and creating safe and supportive environments for others. For some, this involved recognising their own achievements and taking pride in personal milestones, such as maintaining sobriety during the residential or giving themselves permission to pause for self-reflection. For others, growth was marked by developing greater resilience when faced with challenging situations in their work and personal lives.

Self-care was also closely tied to the sense of community that emerged within the group. Participants noted that the supportive networks formed during the programme would play a key role in sustaining their well-being and in applying these skills beyond the training. Taken together, these reflections demonstrate how the programme’s focus on self-care allowed for both personal growth and more empathetic, balanced approaches to leadership in their daily lives.

## 6. Application and Future Learning

A recurring theme across the feedback was participants’ motivation to bring their learning beyond the programme and into their communities. Participants explained how the lessons had already begun shaping their own facilitation practice:

*“It has helped me in my personal life and my outlook... it’s something I bring back to the group in conversations” (Participant).*

*“Facilitation is finding a way of doing it and still being you. It’s not a front or a performance...a great teacher leads someone to the doors of their own understanding” (Participant).*

For many, this practical application was underpinned by a broader principle of openness and inclusion that came as a result of the programme:

*“My takeaway is always be open-minded... you can bring so many different people together” (Participant).*

Another participant reflected on the lasting impact of the connections formed throughout the programme, describing how the sense of solidarity had created a network that can sustain their leadership work:

*“The leadership programme has given me a tribe already... I feel there’s a foundation built off the back of it that we’re going to continue to have” (Participant).*

Building on these reflections, participants identified concrete ways to apply their learning, including facilitating community training sessions, supporting other men in leadership contexts, implementing new techniques and promoting safe, inclusive discussions. They also highlighted the value of using programme materials in wider community settings for education and advocacy. To support this, some participants suggested providing digital (soft-copy) materials for broader sharing of content for the benefit of their communities. While not directly linked to future learning and application within the programme, some participants did recommend addressing logistical challenges, such as travel for participants in rural areas and adding content on stress management and financial management, which were identified as critical issues for men in their communities.

Looking ahead, participants expressed a strong appetite for further learning opportunities. Suggestions for future iterations included modules on laws regarding gender-based violence, additional strategies for navigating difficult leadership scenarios and training that deepens cultural competency. Participants also recommended, where feasible, to invite a wider range of webinar speakers, particularly those with lived experience in areas such as community development to provide diverse perspectives and practical insights. In this regard, a participant suggested that it might be worthwhile to speak with the participants to see if they had any recommendations for speakers based on people in their areas of work (either in a professional or voluntary sense).

# Conclusion, Final Thoughts and Future Priorities

The New Conversations with Leaders programme is moving from its early pilot stage toward a clearer and more established model. The pilot has already demonstrated what works well and where adjustments are needed, particularly in relation to which cohorts are most engaged and which organisations are best positioned to support participants' sustained involvement. This reflective approach, i.e. learning from what has been effective and where drop-off has occurred, will continue to inform participant selection and programme design.

As an example of this, one clear priority is to deepen the focus on allyship with women. This area has already proven both vital and challenging as it requires men to acknowledge their roles in addressing inequality and gender-based violence. Future versions of the programme will look to build on this by developing clearer descriptions of what allyship looks like in practice which can ensure that participants leave with a stronger understanding of their responsibilities in both private and public spheres.

Another emerging focus is political and community engagement. While the programme has centred on leadership in personal and relational spaces, there is recognition that men also need tools to participate in activist-based ventures and to support those in their communities more effectively. Future iterations will introduce content that links leadership development with wider social and political action which can potentially provide a pathway for men to become active contributors to change in more politically aligned areas.

Sustainability is another core priority. The coordinator/facilitator envisions developing "communities within communities", for example, migrant men's groups or fatherhood circles that can continue within and beyond the six-month cycle. To support this, micro-grants are being explored as a way to empower participants to launch their own projects and initiatives. This would provide practical resources alongside training and peer support.

There is also a strong appetite for building infrastructure around community management. In an ideal scenario, a dedicated role could be introduced to oversee check-ins, share newsletters and highlight opportunities for training and education. This would provide a level of continuity in which participants can remain connected and supported long after the formal programme ends.

Content-wise, future plans include expanding topics in line with both coordinator/facilitator expertise and participant interest. Areas such as safety in dating, emotional literacy and other themes that reflect the evolving realities of men's lives are under consideration. Importantly, these will not simply be added on but co-created with participants who are encouraged to identify the knowledge and skills most relevant to their stage of life and community work.

Lastly, the programme's structure as a 'six-month incubator' will remain as it provides a balance of depth and flexibility. The time frame allows participants to reflect, test new ideas and return with insights, while still being manageable alongside work, family and community commitments. What will change is the clarity of description: while the first cycle was necessarily vague as a pilot, future iterations will set out a more defined structure while still leaving space to adapt to each cohort.

Overall, the vision for New Conversations with Leaders is to move from piloting toward permanence. In this regard, this pilot programme is well on its way to becoming a well-resourced, sustainable and adaptable programme that equips diverse men with the skills, awareness and community support needed to become leaders in their own right.

## Notes





**Find out more about the  
programme here**



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