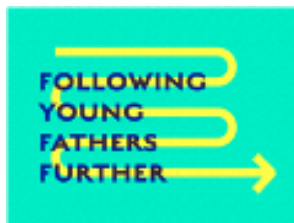




The National Lottery Community Fund

**‘Dad2Dad Peer Support Project’
ID: 20180100**

Year 2 independent evaluation report
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University of Lincoln
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Introduction

This second interim evaluation report presents qualitative findings generated with support staff and service beneficiaries of the North East Young Dads and Lads (hereafter NEYDL) with particular focus on those who deliver or receive support from the National Lottery funded Dad2Dad peer support programme.

The Dad2Dad project commenced in May 2022, delivered by two peer enablers; Archie, a father himself with prior charity sector experience and Liam, a previous young father beneficiary of the NEYDL who was employed to deliver support funded by the Dad2Dad funding. A key aim of the project is to reach and support disadvantaged young men in Tyne and Wear and Teesside, including young fathers who fall outside the threshold of 'teenage fatherhood', namely aged 25 and under, or who live in geographic areas of greatest need. On the ground, the Dad2Dad Peer Support project provides direct and intensive 1:1 support and peer supported group work opportunities for young fathers/expectant fathers living in these regions. The peer enabler team has since changed. Archie is no longer directly working on the Dad2Dad project, although remains at the charity in a more senior role. The Dad2Dad project is now distinctively delivered by two peer enablers; Liam continues in his role and has been joined by Nick, another young father, also a previous beneficiary of NEYDL's services. Both are employed full time with NEYDL, of which 14 hours per week is funded by the National Lottery Dad2Dad Project fund and the remainder supported by match funding.

Conducted by the Following Young Fathers Further team at the University of Lincoln, the evaluation has been designed to capture and evaluate the progress and value of the programme over time in line with five key objectives designed to support young fathers, aged 25 and under, and enhance their lives and well-being. Following on a year after the first interim report was published in May 2022 (Ladlow and Tarrant, 2022), this report starts to establish a longer-term picture of the programme and its impacts using a qualitative longitudinal methodology (Neale, 2020).

Dad2Dad Peer Support Objectives

The objectives of the Dad2Dad programme are as follows:

1. **Helping young dads to recognise their potential** and establish **positive support networks**
2. **Improving parenting skills and relationships** leading to safer and more resilient families
3. **Addressing social, health, and financial** issues to break the cycle of poverty and overcome inequalities
4. **Enabling dads to attend & navigate complex** and stressful private family court & child protection proceedings, leading to safer families and more stable child contact arrangements for dads and their children
5. Providing practical support to develop **employability skills**

Previous findings in brief

Using qualitative methods with a small sample of beneficiary young fathers and the peer enabler team, the first interim report concluded that in the first year of the project:

- The Dad2Dad support offer had made good progress in engaging an increased number of beneficiaries; a total of 26 young fathers in the first year, 9 in Tyne and Wear and 17 in Teesside.
- Place-based support offers were being delivered that had been adapted to the specific needs of local young fathers and that utilised existing available resources in each area. In Tyne and Wear, the young fathers valued the support received from a peer enabler who had lived experience of young fatherhood. In Teesside, the young fathers benefited from enhanced access to multi-agency support.
- Support for young fathers ranged from a combination of 1-2-1 support (including communication via text messages and/or phone calls), weekly drop-ins, peer support, engagement in a range of activities, and access to leisure and other well-being facilities.
- The beneficiaries benefitted from strong relationships of trust developed with their peer support worker, demonstrating the vital role of relational work in helping young fathers to grow their confidence as parents and with benefit for their wider lives e.g. via developing employability skills.
- Activities on offer both in Teesside and Tyne and Wear were drawing young men into the service, providing them with unique opportunities to develop their social networks and reduce social isolation.
- As part of a holistic support offer, the young father beneficiaries were receiving essential support and guidance around managing finances and finding and securing employment. A small support worker team facilitated access to numerous resources designed to address poverty and hardship. These included: employment support, local networks to support around issues with housing, a discretionary hardship fund, a range of donated items such as baby products, clothes, toiletries and foodbank vouchers, and a Welfare Rights Team.

This report examines how the Dad2dad programme has evolved, the extent to which it has sustained its effective offer of support to young father beneficiaries, and the broader value of expanding its peer enabler pathway.

Research Methodology

To generate learning across the three-year programme, a qualitative longitudinal methodology (Neale, 2020) is being employed to capture the delivery of support provision, change and continuities in support delivery and impacts, and to evaluate the extent to which Dad2Dad Peer Support project continues to achieve its vision and core aims. Qualitative longitudinal research has been used elsewhere to support service evaluation, including process and outcomes (Lewis, 2007) and to explore and understand the parenting journeys and support needs of young fathers as they interact with services and wider support agencies (Neale and Tarrant, 2024).

In this second report, we present findings from a second wave of interviews with young father beneficiaries, the current peer enabler team, and more senior support workers at the charity. This represents an expanded sample, although we have also followed up with previous participants to establish a longitudinal picture. The study has ethical approval from the University of Lincoln.

Research Sample: The sample comprised 4 staff members and 4 beneficiaries with insights to provide on Dad2Dad delivery and outcomes. Data was generated between January – April 2024, via semi-structured

interviews or a short survey containing the same, qualitative, open-ended questions. Difference in methods reflects the need to adapt to young fathers in how they preferred to participate in the study.

Young fathers

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Children	Wave 1 interview
Tommy	22	1 daughter	
Callum	22	1 daughter	
Harry	22	1 daughter	Yes
Keiron	22	1 daughter	Yes

Support workers

Name (Pseudonym)	Location	Role
Liam	Tyne and Wear	Peer Enabler
Nick	Gateshead/Middlesbrough/Newcastle	Peer Enabler
Archie	Teesside	Previous Peer Enabler
David	Gateshead/Newcastle	NEYDL Senior Manager

1. The evolution of the Dad2Dad project since 2021

Between May 2023 to April 2024, the two peer enablers have supported 40 young dads, expectant fathers and non-birthing people, in an expanded geographic region across the North East since the previous year. This represents continued support for 26 young fathers from the start of the project and an increase of 14 new beneficiaries since May 2022. Their support offer continues to predominantly focus on Tyne and Wear and Middlesbrough, but now with some individual support provided to young dads in County Durham and the Tees Valley areas of Stockton, Redcar and Cleveland and Hartlepool (see Fig. 1).

Geographic area	City/town	Beneficiaries supported
Tees Valley	Middlesbrough	13
	Stockton	2
	Redcar and Cleveland	1
	Hartlepool	1
Tyne & Wear	Sunderland	6
	North Tyneside	4
	South Tyneside	2
	Gateshead	8
	Newcastle upon Tyne	2
County Durham		1

Figure 1: Number of beneficiaries supported through Dad2Dad by geographic region

Expanded support to these areas aligns with the charities ambitions to do outreach to new areas. Most notably, demand for the Tyne and Wear service has increased significantly in Newcastle upon Tyne for NEYDL more generally. This increase is assumed to be associated with local service changes, including those made by other parties. Barnardos, for example, has moved from a direct support service to a referral and signposting service for all dads, rather than just young dads. Support for young dads in Sunderland, Gateshead and Middlesbrough has also increased sharply with the implementation of NEYDL's service offer to the Family Hubs in these localities and associated improvements to referral pathways from health and social care.

Success in securing service commissions for the delivery of young father specific support services from Family Hub and Start for Life providers representing Middlesbrough, County Durham (excluding Darlington), Gateshead and Sunderland, has enabled the charity to develop and deliver a more comprehensive programme of 1:1 and peer support, including through the Dad2Dad project. Significantly, if Dad2DAD had not existed to pilot new work in Middlesbrough in Year 1, it is unlikely that Middlesbrough Council would have commissioned NEYDL as part of the Middlesbrough Family Hub offer, highlighting the projects' continued importance, visibility and success in enabling sustainability.

While not captured in the timeframes of this study, the charity has introduced clinical supervision for its peer enablers, as an additional measure of support for when young fathers transition to the role of Peer Enabler. These are conducted monthly in the form of a group discussion with a qualified clinical supervisor. Other changes are likely to impact on the delivery and success of Dad2Dad in future. A new Minoritised Young Dads Worker who will be in post for the next 3 years, has been appointed via external grant funding from The Paul Hamlyn Foundation (see Appendix 1). He has a regional remit and has started to establish new referral pathways, leading already to the identification of 6 young dads/expectant dads who are minoritised, providing both individualised 1:1 support and peer supported group work opportunities for diverse communities. This role has been developed to ensure close work with other members of the staff team (including the Dad2Dad peer enablers) with the aim of increasing the cultural competencies of the staff team, as well as increasing representation by more diverse communities, who in time, will be offered opportunities to progress into new roles as volunteers, trustees, AmbassaDADs¹ and peer enablers. Notably, peer enabler Liam was one of the co-creators of the Diverse Dads project (The Diverse Dads Collaborative, 2021) which led to the creation of the Minoritised Young Dads Worker role. While too early to capture the impacts of this role for the Dad2Dad project this year, there is potential to explore its influence in future.

2. The benefits of peer support for current beneficiaries through the Dad2Dad programme

2.1. Benefits of engagement for current young father beneficiaries of Dad2Dad

In line with **objectives 1,2, 3 and 5**, the young father beneficiaries of Dad2Dad confirmed further progression having engaged through the programme. Keiron, who reported various *social, employment* and *family* related challenges in 2023 is now flourishing. Where this time last year, he needed more

¹ AmbassaDADs is a unique community leaders programme set up by NEYDL, that supports young fathers by providing a space of peer support and opportunities to act as advocates on behalf of themselves and others through external campaigning, training, activity and outreach work.

intensive 1-1 support from senior staff, he now reports having secured employment and a more settled family life. Perhaps the most significant progression for Keiron is in his confidence and ability to build relationships with other young father beneficiaries:

Keiron: It's good like getting on with other lads....there's encouragement, like seeing other dads like me own age. Like having a laugh and having a good chat about just anything really and how things have been.....I learned it from all a' them really. Like obviously the other dads, I've learned it from [senior workers at NEYDL], Keiron, age 22.

His progression has also been confirmed by his support worker:

Archie: I can see a bit of potential with Keiron. You know, he attended the activity afternoon at [organisation] and his personality was great for that initial meeting with everyone, because he was going around everyone... he brought everyone together and he's funny and it was just, having him there on that Friday afternoon was a massive help for me and [female support worker] because he created the little, small talk.

The young fathers also described a broad set of benefits for their parenting and relationship skills and wider employability and skills development. They place high value on staff who share something of themselves based on their own experience of parenting and family, essentially acting as role models, and respond well to bespoke and responsive engagement (*obj. 2, 4*):

Keiron: Like obviously...how to change a nappy. How, like routines, like [previous peer enabler] did, 'cause obviously [daughter] did get out a routine at bedtime. And obviously with him having like a thirteen-year-old he was just like 'well this is what I used to do with [son]. I used to do this, I used to do that'. And like it sort of helped me sort of get [daughter] into a routine sort of thing.

Camden: My child likes to be around me playing with her and having laughs with hugs etc....Helping me how to look after my child and to bond as much as I can so she will know who I am. The [peer enablers] helped me very much nearly every week when I need help for something.

Several of the young father beneficiaries also receive holistic and individualised support, or as one of the peer enablers explains: a bit of everything around parenting, a bit a' courts, a bit a finance and stuff and a bit a' job stuff'. For young fathers who continue to receive support, (and in the words of one beneficiary 'love', from the service), holistic support is especially welcome:

Callum: Helping about CVs and supporting me what will happen in the future when a child grows up with different signs and when do I see them all that stuff.

Camden: I understand more of the reasons of how things work with court and how to gain access when possible.

Keiron: I think he did one...like helped me wi' my CV and how to write a cover letter and applications and all that....like with me having like a, a learning difficulty as well it was hard, like

'cause I never really succeeded in college. So the help was like, he helped me write a cover letter 'cause I wouldn't even know what to do.

Via the Dad2Dad project, NEYDL address what have become national gaps in provision around support for young fathers in relation to engaging with the courts and in improving employability (**obj 4, 5**).

There is also evidence that the young parents are building new relationships and networks of support through the peer engagement offer. The activities put on by the charity help the young father beneficiaries to socialise and develop friendships with positive implications for their well-being:

Tommy: [senior staff member, previous beneficiary] has been very good with helping me settle down, helping me progress with NEYDL and put myself out there to meeting new people and making new friends as well as going out of his way to helping us with our house, allowing us to feel comfortable within our own home.... NEYDL allows me to get out the house, socialise and enjoy myself a lot more. I'm typically sat in the house watching time pass however, when I get out the house and do some activities or just be around friends like me, makes me happier which in turn makes my relationship happy.

It is especially positive to observe that some of the young father beneficiaries are investing in friendships with other young parents that they have met at the charity, beyond the activities laid on by the charity with positive benefits from them and their co-parents. They were supporting one another with childcare and making meals, forming new kinds of mutually beneficial community support (**obj 1, 2**):

Archie: when we popped to see Jason and Casey [young parent couple, pseudonyms], Camden and Claire were there. And they'd actually stayed over at each other's house and Casey had made a, like a Sunday dinner on a Thursday afternoon and they'd all had a, they'd all been well fed and Casey and Jason were doing some babysitting so Claire could have, you know, they live 20 minutes walk from each other, so it's absolutely fine, but they were minding the baby for the afternoon and Claire and Camden could, he's got to do some job seeking with the Job Centre, so he could go off and do that and they were looking after the baby....there's massive, massive weight in how important those friendships and the peer support is. I mean, I've noticed a massive change in Camden. Since he started the friendship with Jason and Casey, like Camden would always have a baseball cap on or he'd always have his hood up, and he looked, like, tired and he looked quite poorly and, you know, he looked like he was just kind of giving up, to be honest, when we first met up, whereas now, you know, we drove past him on the street and we pulled over and he's beaming. He's just so, he's such, he's in a much happier place.

Overall, the Dad2Dad project has enabled continued and extended support for young father beneficiaries for the charity, through the provision of a holistic and individualised response to those young men as their parenting journeys have progressed. In line with the core objectives for the project, there is continued evidence that the project is supporting young dads to establish new support networks that they would otherwise struggle to. They also continue to receive tailored support to address the broad set of social, health, and financial issues they may experience. Such support is also having demonstrably wider benefits for their partners/co-parents and their children.

2.2. Support from peer enabler young dads

The Dad2Dad project is distinctive in the provision of simultaneous support for young father beneficiaries that are currently engaging with the service, as well as support for the peer enablers who were previous beneficiaries themselves, through the creation of a novel and unique employment pathway. Whereas this time last year, one young father beneficiary had been supported into a peer enabler role, there are now two peer enablers providing a vital service to new young father beneficiaries to NEYDL. It is worth noting that beyond the scope of Dad2DAD, NEYDL also employs a further 2 former beneficiaries, with one individual having progressed to a more senior role as Young Dads Support Worker. The peer enablers demonstrate a clear understanding of their remit, offering holistic support that meet the objectives of the Dad2Dad project (**obj 2, 3, 4**):

Liam: The other lad I'm still currently supporting through courts....I had courts for about three year meself.

Nick: We support young dads, like in any sort of aspect they feel like they need, so if they need some social help, you know, any, even court, finances, anything like that. Anything we can help them out with, we can.....it also gives a really strong sort of non-judgemental sort of character about myself so I can, like, we can listen. It's not just me, I know it's all the lads. We can listen to sort of any story and just not be judgemental on the situation, we've just got to think about how that person's feeling at the time, and I think that's quite a really good trait to learn in this role.

They demonstrate themselves to be adaptable to the work and recognise the diversity of circumstances that young fathers experience and navigate, not least because they have lived experience themselves of the kinds of issues that attract young fathers to the service:

Nick: So in certain areas, you know, they've got quite a lot of the new homes, they've got, you know, there's things in place where they can go, but we also have, you know, some dads that live in some areas where there's just nothing. There's nothing around for miles and it's just not, it's difficult for them. So yeah, area is a big thing. You know, I've got a dad who's really keen to get involved with a lot of things but there's just nothing around him and it's not financially sort of stable for him to be getting taxis and buses to go to playgroups, 'cause it costs so much to get there because they're so far away. So he's missing out on them sort of, like them activities and stuff, purely because there's nothing around where he lives.....he does the gaming and he comes out with us quite a lot. He brings his little girl. Yeah, and he's a great lad, you know, he wants to be involved in a lot of things but like I say, there's just not much around him where he can go out, so I think the service has been a really great help for him in that aspect, that we can sort of, you know, provide travel or we can take activities to him, type of thing, or bring him to the activities. He's really grateful for that and yeah, it's doing him wonders.

The senior workers in the team observe that the peer enabler team offer added value in the sense that they can provide elements of support that were enhanced by lived experience, e.g. being both a young father, and a young person of relative age. There is agreement on this by several of the senior support staff working for the charity, who note that the peer enablers act as role models for newer beneficiaries:

David: for me it has been a two-way thing. You know, we are giving them a knowledge and learning experience but actually watching how they engage wi' those young dads either face to face or, or digitally has been really good for us as workers who've been in the field for quite a while. You know when they're talking about like their gaming and things that they watch on tv or music they like. I don't pretend to understand it, but I know how that engages that young dad in a much more positive way. So that's been, that's been really beneficial. And I think the peer enablers really enjoy that as well 'cause I think it makes them feel good 'cause, you know, look at where I am now! You know, I know it's gone on in the background, there's still a lot going on. But for them they're gonna say, you know, 'you could be where I could, where I am now if you want it'. And it's really interesting 'cause there's a couple of young men that the lads are working with and, you know, both, well [senior support worker, previous beneficiary] and Nick have already said to me, 'oh I think there's a couple a' lads that I'm working with who could be the next peer enabler'

Archie: let's say Keiron got the opportunity to do that to the other dads, [current beneficiary]'s not, you know, he's not, he's not shy in sharing his story and where, you know, the experiences that he's been through, and he's a massive advocate for North East Dads and Lads 'cause he'll tell them openly that, you know, we helped him move house, we helped him get a job, we helped his partner get a job, we helped to get his, you know, his baby girl into nursery. And the journey that he's been on, you know, we supported him with his, you know, gambling issues, we supported him, supported him with, like, relationship issues and mental health stuff. Because as you know, life's ups and downs and it's a struggle for people who aren't in the social care environment, so it's a massive, it was a massive struggle for Keiron back when he was first referred, and he's kind of gone that journey of working with social care and now to not being in that kind of environment at all. And to be honest, totally thriving. So I think it instils, and I think it does already, when Keiron's there, it instils that belief that what we're trying to do and the support that NEYDL gives the other dads works, kind of thing. It's like a tried, tested way of helping people.

Both David and Archie make the point here that having made the transition from beneficiary to peer enabler, Liam, Nick and other senior staff in the team are better able to observe growth, potential and capability in other beneficiaries of the charity who may also make a successful transition to such a role **(obj 1, 5)**.

The peer enablers confirm that the shared identity and lived experience as a young dad encourages beneficiaries to open up more about their challenges, enhancing the wider support offer that the charity provides:

Nick: it's helped loads with my work because we're working with young dads, you know, with different little babies, and a lot of them, with them being so young, they're quite scared to ask these questions to other people. They know we're there, non-judgmental, we're just here to support them and if they've got any questions, there's no such thing as a stupid question, like in my eyes. And I can, I'm able to pass that information on to them.

Liam: I haven't actually had any problems to be honest getting a young dad to speak with. I think it's 'cause I'm still technically a young dad meself, twenty four, wi' four kids.

3. Supporting the transition from young father beneficiary to peer enabler and supporter

Beyond the provision of support to current beneficiaries, the Dad2Dad programme is pioneering a nationally distinctive approach to supporting select young fathers in their journeys from service beneficiary to volunteers and then employees of the service itself. Since the last interim evaluation in May 2023, the charity now employs 5 young dads and 1 young mother. Three of the former service beneficiaries that are now employed with the charity have progressed from part time to full time employment with NEYDL in the past year, with 1 of the 4 former service beneficiaries having secured a promotion from the role of Peer Enabler to Young Dads Support Worker. This promotion came with associated changes to salary, role and responsibilities, reflecting the skills and expertise he has acquired and demonstrated.

Following the successful support and progression of this beneficiary, who is now managing more complex cases, Dad2Dad has since enabled the personal development and support of two further young fathers as peer enablers. These young men, one of whom was interviewed last year, each have their own caseloads of young father beneficiaries to support. Both peer enablers were initially managed by a senior manager for the charity. Here he explains the process of support provided and the kinds of journeys and pathways that NEYDL has created:

David: as beneficiaries and then moving through the service as volunteers and then being board members and then being paid members a' staff. And also us supporting them through doing their, you know, their youth work training as well and their safeguarding. So making sure that we're equipping them wi' the skills that they needed. 'Cause they only had those engagement skills. It was just that this was their first kinda proper job in this field.

We know from our interviews that both peer enablers have histories of trauma in their childhoods, disrupted educational trajectories that have left them with little by way of qualifications, past issues with mental health and substance use, and limited evidence of their skill sets, including those that employers might consider essential to secure employment. Prior to being employed by NEYDL, Nick was unemployed because he was struggling to manage anxiety and mental health concerns. Liam has a history of neglect from his own parents, homelessness and protracted processes of seeking contact for his eldest daughter, an issue that NEYDL supported him with and help him to navigate (obj. 4). The beneficiary-to-peer enabler pathway of the Dad2Dad programme, has therefore provided an alternative route to employability beyond what might be considered the traditional or normative pathways of young men of comparable ages, as well as a safe, compassionate yet managed environment in which to build a skill set, gain confidence and feel empowered.

Notably, the pathway has also opened the young men to careers beyond those that they might typically be expected to follow. Peer enabling, for example, has encouraged a healthy and inclusive attitude towards youth and care work such that they feel more empowered as a male care worker in an otherwise women dominated sphere:

Nick: nothing wrong with a male being on a childcare course or a health and social care course. Yeah, so, like, typically female dominated but I think that needs to change. I think more people need to be a bit more open-minded on sort of the areas that childcare and social care can cover. I wouldn't be where I am today if it really wasn't for that as well, so yeah, I'd like to hope that one

day, you know, it's a bit more even, 50/50, you know, bit more...you know, more equal for this role, job role.

A particular benefit to the peer enablers was the steady, paced transition between roles. When these evolve incrementally it enables the dads to adapt at their own pace and ensure they have the building blocks they need in place to step into and adjust to employment. Here Nick comments on his own trajectory, while senior manager David describes the support offered to the Young Fathers Senior Support Worker, another previous beneficiary of the charity:

Nick: It was a bit unexpected as well. It wasn't like I had that planned, to become an employee, it was something that sort of came in time. I used to think to myself that would be, you know, it would be a good job, you know, a rewarding job. I never really thought I'd do it, to be fair. But yeah, when I was sort of doing the voluntary work and stuff, it was, I felt like part of the team already. You know, so it was a really swift sort of transition from a volunteer into the paid employee. So that was sort of, it was a really easy transition. And going from a beneficiary to a volunteer, I would say it was kind of the same, because I already, I knew everybody and, you know, I got on with everybody. I know what I was doing was sort of going and just lending a hand, you know, being an extra body there, you know, for the cycling, like keeping people in check, making sure, like, the bikes were okay and stuff, so it was, yeah, it was, I done that when I was a beneficiary you know, I was, I got quite involved, so it was, yeah, a swift transition.

David: I know [senior support worker] now has moved on from a peer enabler to, you know, he's a project worker but [senior support worker] came in, came through the same kind of route as well. But...has just flown in, just, you know, done a brilliant job and really, really kinda flourished in that work. 'cause when [Young Fathers Senior Support Worker] first came in as the, as the peer enabler, we offered him a full-time post but he wasn't confident enough in his own abilities. So he said, 'oh I can only do it part time'. And we knew, you know, myself and, and...knew that he had the skills, he just didn't have the confidence. And it was about building up this confidence to become a full-time member a' staff. And then, you know, move on way, way beyond the peer enabler to a support worker.

As these extended insights from Nick and the senior support worker demonstrate, the beneficiary to peer enabler transition has various benefits for these young men on their pathways to employment. They feel supported to build their confidence and to invest in skills. Nick, for example, is an avid BMX-er and now leads the popular 'Wheelie Good Dads' cycling initiative for the charity. Key to the success in sustaining these young men through the process has been the perseverance of NEYDL, pacing their development as volunteers and employees, and being open to trialling new activities that both benefit the peer enablers and new beneficiaries.

4. Experiences of senior staff in supporting dads into the Dad2Dad peer support role

The interviews captured how senior staff at NEYDL perceived the Dad2Dad project and its capacity to support young fathers in their transition from beneficiaries to employed peer enablers (*obj 1, 5*). They consider the contributions of the peer enabler team to be highly beneficial to the wider offer of the charity,

helping to develop its breadth and scope around the delivery of key activities, and in supporting beneficiaries, by bringing their own specialist skills and enthusiasm:

David, senior manager: Nick came back as a different person cause he was a dad now. He was a dad to be when we first got in contact with him and then he came back to us as a dad and was just, just really keen to get involved in all aspects a' the service. Whether that was just, you know, the peer support groups, one tae one work....we just quickly seen that he had that real knack to engage wi' other dads when we were doing group work....he's a really shy young man but he's really confident when he's talking to other young dads. And we thought, 'oh that's, that's a really, you know, he's really good at that kinda thing'. And also talking to other professionals about being involved wi' the service. And, of course, he had a passion for bike riding and we had the bike project that was just up and running and we had employed someone to do that, the Wheelie Good Dads Bike Project...unfortunately the person we employed, after a couple a' months left cause they'd got full time employment....so we had this gap for someone tae co-ordinate the bike project and do training so we offered Nick to do the cycle co-ordinator training with a number of other young dads, which he was more than happy to do and he was more than capable to do actually. He just ran wi' that....doing all the rides and going out. And then he became more involved with volunteering and again getting involved with the AmbassaDADS.

It's worth noting that both Liam and Nick, as Dad2Dad peer enablers, are active members of AmbassaDADS, a new community leader programme for young fathers that has been established by NEYDL. Six other young dads, who are also AmbassaDADS, have received direct support from the Dad2Dad project and peer enablers.

Another identified benefit of investing in previous beneficiaries of the charity was that their knowledge and understanding of the ethos and culture of the charity. The peer enablers are therefore already equipped with key insights and able to champion the work of the charity, while also ensuring that it meets its key objectives in transforming the lives of incoming young fathers. David reflects:

They [peer enablers] understand the charity, they understand what our ethos is and what our plans are. Cause they've been part a' that process. They've been part of developing the service and making the service what it is. So they've already got that kind of knowledge and understanding that helps them know who we are as a charity and where we're going but also use those skills. And a lot a' the skills that the peer enablers have is life experience skills rather than work experience skills. And that's the next part, is giving them those work experience skills and knowledge to move onto the next stage.

Moving the peer enabler team on to the next stage requires careful and considerate support. While largely positive about supporting the transition of the peer enablers, from beneficiaries, to volunteers, to employees, for example, the process has nevertheless required changes and adjustment in terms of balancing both management and support. For young fathers, the shift into employment comes with greater responsibilities and expectations that not all may yet be ready to manage. This includes representing the charity and its reputation to external partners and stakeholders, as well as learning new skills for managing the key administrative and delivery aspects of the role. For the senior team, the shift from them being 'one of the lads' to a colleague has involved a process of redefining relationships and

managing renewed sets of expectations. The Dad2Dad project, has since benefitted from the expansion of the wider staff team, such that a new staff member, with existing experience of working in the charity sector, has taken over management duties and established clear sets of boundaries:

David: I think one a' the struggles for me, and I still do it, you know, I still call them my lads, not my colleagues. And that, I suppose that's been really hard. And sometimes I think that's sometimes how they still see me as well. Now what's been really good is [new senior support worker] has come into the service as the senior worker and he now is taking line management for Liam and Nick...he only knows them as employees. He knows the background, but he knows them as employees. So it's been a lot [laughs] easier for him to go, 'this is your, let me see your diary. This is what we're doing, this is what you're doing, and this is where you should be' because sometimes I still click into support mode for those young men, even though they're employees. So, the level of support that I've had to give those peer enablers is much, much higher than it would be for, you know, a project worker or a senior worker based on their experience.

Another issue that the senior staff team have become alert too is that the peer enablers still have challenging home lives. Despite the transition to more secure and supported employment, the wider structural and personal challenges that are typically reported by young fathers (Neale and Tarrant, 2024) do not readily change or disappear just because they are now employed. Given his background, one has continued struggles with his mental health, and the other is having issues with housing including the threat of homelessness following a withdrawal of housing support from a private landlord.

Liam: This year started off with a broken boiler, a, two broken washers and a drier on fire. So [laughs] this year's rough and then also hospital appointments all over the shop and diagnosed with autism and ADHD. So this year's rough, very rough for now. So as far as 2024, I didn't wanna see it anymore. I wanna gan to 2025, I've had enough already! I still meet with, out of the eleven dads that I work with, I speak to all eleven....whether that's a text, phone call, whatever. So I talk with every single one a' them every week regardless. In terms of meeting, I'm being really honest, the last two weeks I haven't actually met a young dad face to face but that's 'cause I've had other commitments going on...But I am meeting one a' me dads tomorrow actually to do so obviously I still do me regular meets, still talking every week.

These aspects of their wider lives impact on their work performance and mean that they require more support from senior NEYDL staff than perhaps those who already have experience of this kind of work. There are therefore limitations in terms of how and to what the extent the peer enabler team were initially supported. As noted earlier, hiring a more experienced senior worker who didn't know them as a beneficiaries, has proven an effective strategy for enforcing boundaries around young fatherhood, support and employment.

Despite the many benefits of the beneficiary to peer enabler transition, it has been far from a straightforward process. The dads themselves, continue to be challenged as they adapt to the broad dimensions of the role and gain the skills required to sustain employment:

Nick: I was quite a bright, like bright kid.... I wasn't top sets. But yeah, having dyslexia, it was a challenge. And even today, you know, it's a challenge that you overcome on a daily basis, you

know, reading emails and replying back to people. It kinda, you're reading things 20 times over before you think you can send it and it sounds alright.

Senior staff at the charity, confirm that the work of supporting the peer enablers is time and resource intensive:

David: But the level of support that they've had is completely and utterly different to if you have some, a senior worker or someone who's coming in who's worked within the charity sector before or worked with, you know, worked with people. And it's something that we didn't factor in when we were looking at the peer support work. I suppose there's two bits of it. About the amount of support that those young men need as peer enablers and also looking at kind of how their role is completely different from say my role as an older worker or more senior worker and how that can impact on, on those young men as well with their relationships.... But if I go back to the first part about the level of support that's needed for those peer enablers compared to other staff members, wow it's a lot more! It's, it's [laughs] a heck of a lot more, you didn't realise. I think part of it is they're still, they're still young dads. They're still in, you know, new relationships having a young family and also trying 'tae juggle being in new work and understanding what that is.

It is worth noting that despite challenges with creating boundaries around employment for the peer enablers, the senior team consider the benefits of the process of supporting the peer enablers into employment to far outweigh the challenges. They explained that their own practice was enriched by observing how lived experience and shared identities could enhance the building of trust and rapport with newer beneficiaries. They valued seeing alternative approaches to peer support and felt a sense of accomplishment in seeing the peer enablers grow in confidence as they became male role models to young father beneficiaries who look up to them.

5. Concluding comments

The Dad2Dad project has gone from strength-to strength in the past year, growing from a relatively localised offer of support to one that has expanded and increased in terms of its reach and scope. Dad2Dad has proven to enhance the offers of NEYDL as a charity more generally, while simultaneously enhanced by the expansion of the staff team at NEYDL. The evolution of the model has ensured continued impacts and outcomes against the original objectives of the project, supporting young fathers both as beneficiaries and as employees with enhanced prospects and life chances in a way that is nationally distinctive.

The insights provided by the young father beneficiaries and delivery staff for the Dad2Dad project, offers compelling evidence that NEYDL continues to deliver against its core objectives and outcomes in terms of support for young father beneficiaries who are relatively new to the service and at the stage of receiving support. Indeed, the project goes above and beyond both in terms of providing continued support to new beneficiaries in the existing geographical locations, while also creating new volunteer and employment pathways for those beneficiaries deemed most capable of benefitting from this kind of support. Emerging evidence of the expanded geographical reach of the Dad2Dad offer to an increased range of regions in the North East indicates continued demand for support among young fathers and the potential to deliver on the projects' objectives more widely than was possible in the first year.

In terms of young father beneficiaries, the breadth of holistic support provided in terms of **helping young dads to recognise their potential** and establish **positive support networks; improve parenting skills and relationships; address social, health, and financial** issues; to **attend & navigate complex** and stressful private family court & child protection proceedings; and develop **employability skills**, have not gone unnoticed among these beneficiaries. This remains a sustainable aspect of the project and its delivery. Most notably, the Dad2Dad programme continues to equip young fathers in a multitude of ways, developing their confidence, creating spaces for them to forge new relationships and reduce isolation, and upskilling them through relational and employability skills.

An important evolution in the project, and one that is delivering innovatively on objectives 1 and 5, is the expansion of roles for the two peer enablers, both of whom are building their confidence over time and benefitting from a flexible yet effectively managed approach in their transition to employment. A key observation we would make is that the strength and clarity of the overall ethos of NEYDL as a specialist organisation has been key to the relative success of the Dad2Dad project in relation to the funded delivery of support from young men who have lived experience of young fatherhood. Constructive learning around adjusting to new styles of support and management notwithstanding, the senior staff team at NEYDL have been effective in creating and embedding a broader culture of strengths-based and compassionate support for the peer enabler team, and in ways that have elevated the lives and competencies of young fathers. This ethos and culture are embedded right across the service, producing local and regional benefits. Finally, core to the realisation of the added value of the Dad2Dad programme is that it has not simply been tacked on to the existing support offer. Rather it has been integrated as complementary to a much wider system of support that has been strategically created by the management team. The approaches adopted have therefore have not only enhanced the Dad2Dad offer but also produced mutual benefits for the wider programme of support on offer by the charity.

6. Recommendations

- We encourage NEYDL to do exit and follow up interviews with young father beneficiaries where possible to capture and understand the length of time young fathers are benefitting from the service, to explore why young fathers might choose to end their journey, and what longer-term impacts their service engagement has had. Some of these young men may well re-engage, as Nick and Liam did and be supported into peer enabler roles.
- NEYDL should seek to explore funding opportunities to formalise the model where young father beneficiaries have the option to train and upskill as peer enablers. While employment in such a role does not completely alleviate wider social and welfare related issues around housing insecurity, secure yet flexible and compassionate employment through the charity provides an alternative pathway to self-confidence and motivation for more established young fathers, some economic security and a safe space to learn, a process that young father beneficiaries also benefit from observing,
- A great deal of time, care and investment and a careful model of management is necessary to effectively support young fathers in their transitions from beneficiary to peer enabler and enable them to flourish. These young men require some flexibility and adaptation from the senior staff team as they adjust to the demands and pressures of employment against a backdrop of continued disadvantage. The creation of a peer enabler pathway is proving beneficial, but these young men continue to require

a flexible and understanding approach that enables them to flourish individually, while also learning about boundaries and the requirements and expectations of employers.

- The Dad2Dad project has potential to expand its offer to the new geographic areas where there is growing evidence of a need for support for young fathers. The Minoritised Young Dads Worker may also enhance outreach and support to minoritised young fathers, enabling a more diverse population of young fathers to benefit from the core objectives of the Dad2Dad project.
- The distinctiveness of the Dad2Dad programme in the national context means there are opportunities for NEYDL to position themselves as leading experts in the support of young fathers both as parents and employees. In capturing and sharing this learning nationally as an exemplar of best practice, the charity is well positioned to influence national practice and policy and to promote a distinctive model of father-inclusion that has young fathers as ‘experts by experience’ at its heart.

7. References

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Neale, B (2020) *The Craft of Qualitative Longitudinal Research*, London: Sage.

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Appendix 1: Outreach advert created to support engagement with minoritised young fathers.



- Are you a Minoritised young dad or dad to be (aged 25 and under)?
- Worried about becoming a young dad?
- Sometimes feel that your thoughts and feelings are overlooked?
- Looking for opportunities to meet other Minoritised young dads in a safe, supportive and welcoming space?
- Want to learn new skills and gain confidence as a parent?
- Want to get out of the house more and be more active?
- Looking for fun and free places to go with your child/children?
- Need support to understand your rights as a parent?
- Need help to complete or read paperwork and to attend meetings about your child/children?
- Need help to get into work, training or education?
- Worried about your sexual, physical, or mental health?

We offer free and confidential one to one support and organised group activities for all Minoritised young dads.



Paul Hamlyn
Foundation

DigiDAD
by dads For dads



Front page matter

Who we can support: This service is offered to any Minoritised young men (aged 25 and under) including non-birthing people. By Minoritised we refer to young men from racial and ethnic groups that are in a minority in the population. By non-birthing partners we refer to cisgendered, non-binary people, and those on the LGBTQIA+ spectrum who may be fathers. As an inclusive platform and community, all individuals who identify as fathers are welcome to join.



FIND OUT MORE...

To find out more or get involved, please contact Fred Suadwa by Telephone or Text (Mobile: 07387 780827) or email: info@neydl.uk (general enquiries) or info@secure-mail-neydl.uk (secure email to make a referral).

About North East Young Dads and Lads (NEYDL):

Established in 2017, we are an award-winning parenting support charity that works with marginalised and disadvantaged young dads and expectant fathers (aged 25 and under) in the North East region of England. Our vision is for young dads to be valued and supported in their role as parents. Our mission is to enable young dads to play a safe, active and meaningful role in their children's lives, by **supporting** and **connecting** young dads and **influencing** wider practice.

Paul Hamlyn
Foundation

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