



Finding Fathers: A Peer Research Project

BACKGROUND

During 2018-2019, nine young fathers from the North East Young Dads and Lads Project (NEYDL) conducted peer research to determine both the support needs of young men (aged under 25) facing fatherhood and existing provision in the North East Region (shown by the map below).



METHODOLOGY

Following receipt of bespoke training in conducting internet searching and interviews, the nine young men were supported by a researcher to design questionnaires suitable for use with young dads and key professional stakeholders.

Using a mix of environmental scanning (conducted through internet searching) and interviews with key stakeholders and other young fathers, the peer researchers mapped existing provision for young dads (the offer) against the support needs and aspirations of young men.

FINDINGS

MAPPING: Following an extensive internet search using a variety of search terms, key words and combinations, the peer researchers identified only limited meaningful provision for young fathers in the North East region. All identified services were

then contacted via email or phone, leading to a high non-response rate - perhaps confirming the lack of provision available.

Apart from NEYDL (operating from Gateshead into Sunderland and South Tyneside), the only other meaningful provision found for young fathers is provided by Barnardos in Newcastle upon Tyne.

Of the projects that once existed to support young fathers, the Family Gateway Trust's Lads & Dads project (which operated in North and South Tyneside) had provision until 2018, Sunderland Borough Council's B2B (Bumps to Babies) Project ended in 2009 and Children North East's Regional Resource Centre for Fatherhood lost their service some time ago. In addition, the future of Barnardos service for young fathers in Newcastle upon Tyne is now uncertain due to the loss of long-term project staff following prolonged funding uncertainty.

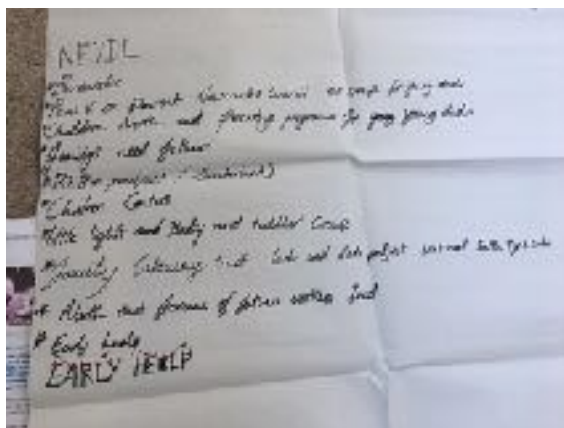


Figure 1 Findings from internet searches

To conclude, the environmental scanning activity found too few projects offering dedicated or specialist provision for young men who are fathers, exacerbated by the recent and gradual loss of once familiar North East provision.

INTERVIEWS: Peer researchers conducted 11 interviews with individual young fathers, 8 interviews with professional stakeholders (i.e. those working with young fathers or in related roles) and a focus group with 5 additional young fathers. All professional stakeholders and young men represented the North East region and a range of different views and experiences.

Professional stakeholders - consistently identified that young fathers had real and genuine support needs, whilst acknowledging a lack of dedicated funding or policies related to supporting them. Many of the young men they had encountered were isolated and lonely and had histories affected by drug use and violence (including domestic violence).

A number of professionals felt that the lack of specialist provision in the area was due to cyclical approaches to working with young men, demonstrating the challenges of sustainability for projects supporting young men - perhaps linked to the

perceived lack of policy agenda for this type of provision. The current political climate and cuts to public services were also seen as problematic.

“The service was set up to fail”

Reflecting on both the loss of statutory services for young fathers (e.g. the B2B Project in Sunderland) and dearth of other mainstream services for young fathers, a number of professionals suggested that there was a lack of strategic direction or management buy-in for this work, influenced by a bias within the social care system to view young men as a potential risk, rather than a resource. Continuing along this theme, some professionals felt that social workers were under pressure to complete and close cases within a specified time limit, leading to ‘box ticking’ in relation young men’s engagement.

“The powers that be don’t see young dads as important in childcare”

“Senior Management in Social Work need to take this agenda seriously. This work needs mainstream funding for dedicated project staff, training commitments and budget”

Young fathers - reported feeling isolated in their lives and expressed a strong desire to meet other young fathers. All young men were committed to their role as parents and wanted to be taken seriously by professionals.

“I love being a dad and want to be the best for my child”

Most of the young men reported that they currently get support from friends and families rather than accessing specific services for any help and support needs they might have. Some felt there were particular barriers about accessing services due to their age and the stigma which still exists around fatherhood at this age.

“I like being a dad but at times its hard to get help sometimes because of my age and what some people think about young dads”

The areas of support that young men felt they would like help and advice with were wide ranging, and included:

- Parenting skills and advice on caring for a child
- Opportunities for spending time with the children
- Learning paediatric first aid
- Help with gaining employment
- Help with returning to or completing education
- Housing
- Gaining independence (life skills)

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the peer research found that support services for young fathers in the North East are severely limited, with the continued loss of key provision overtime. Despite the lack of available opportunities for young men to access fatherhood support within the region, the perceived need for support by young men and professional stakeholders was viewed as being high. Professional stakeholders identified the political and financial context as restrictive of offering provision and projects for young men, as well as the lack of broader strategic buy-in for such work, and the mis-match between the priorities of statutory services as compared to the needs of young men. Young men identified a real need for support across a wide range of areas including parenting, education, employment and their independence. Isolation and loneliness was seen as common place for young men, and the opportunity to have some support and advice, as well as opportunities to meet other young fathers would have been welcome by those who currently do not, or are unable to access support and services. For young men who do attend a project or service that offers dedicated support to them, the opportunity for friendship with other young dads, and the ability to gain support around different aspects of their lives was seen as highly valuable.

Therefore, we conclude that there are simply not enough projects supporting young men in the North East region, despite young men saying they would like to be able to access support and gain help when needed and professional stakeholders being aware that there is a need among young fathers to be supported in ways that are meaningful to them.

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