

# YOUNG-FATHER INCLUSIVE SUPPORT COMMISSIONED BY THE COUNTY DURHAM FAMILY HUBS



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# HOW TO CITE THIS PAPER

Tarrant, A., Harle, E. and Ladlow, L. (2025) title, a Following Young Fathers Further Report

Following Young Fathers Further is funded by a UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship and led by Professor Anna Tarrant, Director of the Centre for Innovation in Fatherhood and Family Research, University of Lincoln



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings of a qualitative longitudinal evaluation exploring the impacts of a young-father support offer delivered by the North East Young Dads and Lads (NEYDL) in the County Durham region of the UK. NEYDL were commissioned by Durham County Council to provide specialised young-father support across the County Durham Family Hubs as part of the Best Start for Life programme.

The aim of the evaluation was to provide an in-depth, largely qualitative account of the nature and extent of engagement in the Family Hubs local programme by young men, aged 25 and under, with children in the early year period (aged between 0-2). The research captures and explores the extent to which young fathers have been supported in the County Durham Family Hubs since 2023, the key benefits of this support for young fathers and their families, and the barriers that provide scope for further intervention and service development.

## QUALITATIVE LONGITUDINAL EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

Data has been generated at two timepoints about service delivery to enable a qualitative longitudinal capture of the service and its evolving impacts. Replicating the first wave, the following methods were conducted for the second wave and were subject to analysis for this report:

- Qualitative in-depth interview and focus group data with young father beneficiaries, with NEYDL support and senior staff, and a service commissioner,
- Blob tree data from young father beneficiaries to develop a visual, non-verbal account of their current circumstances and their emotions in relation to service support.

Secondary analysis of self-report data collected by NEYDL is also integrated where appropriate to provide context to the findings.

Multi-perspective data were generated with young fathers, NEYDL staff and a service commissioner to capture the aims of the commissioned service, young father engagement across the County Durham Family Hub local programme, as well as views on the benefits of engagement and potential barriers.

## **KEY FINDINGS**

- There has been a sustained demand for support among young fathers in the County Durham Family Hubs. NEYDL has delivered a consistent service and has engaged in sustained outreach to ensure young fathers feel supported.
- The young fathers have benefitted in a multitude of ways:
  - The breadth of service options available to young fathers means that they can receive a mix of 1:1 support, and access to opportunities for leisure time, advocacy, and education and training. Opportunities for upskilling not only build confidence in parenting but also improve employability, opening up new pathways to employment that were previously out of reach.
  - Experiences of social isolation and loneliness have been reduced among the cohort engaged and mental ill-health has been improved. Peer support provides a route to friendship, belonging and stability, including options for young families to build communities beyond the Family Hub space.
- Father-inclusion across County Durham is more evidential since NEYDL was commissioned. Referral pathways between services have improved and NEYDL are better able to advocate the benefits of father-inclusion with multi-agency services in the region.
- Key barriers to be addressed include:
  - Exploring options to increase the representation of male workers in the Family Hubs, especially in care roles,
  - Engaging with fathers around their past experiences with the Family Hub buildings to affirm them as safe and welcoming spaces where they can parent effectively and sustain their relationships with their children,
  - Supporting young fathers with managing their confidence and capacity in communicating with their co-parents,
  - Those associated with the geographical location of the Hubs, the rurality of the County, and limited transport options that impact on service accessibility for young fathers across the region.

## **POLICY AND PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Continued investment in father-inclusive services is required to sustain the service and meet continued demand among young fathers for social and practical support in the region. The Government's First 1000 Days inquiry is an opportunity to promote the County Durham/NEYDL model as an example of best practice and to develop a case for consistent funding for father-inclusive support.
- Encourage further representation of fathers on the parent/carers panel to ensure fathers have a continued voice about local Family Hub delivery,
- Promote father-inclusive Family Hubs buildings and environments through displaying the Reframing Young Fatherhood poster campaign, ensuring services are accessible at times suited to men, and ensuring all staff are welcoming of fathers.
- Continued and proactive outreach to, as well as digital support for, those in rural areas of the County to ensure young fathers living outside of urban centres and communities also have options for receiving support.



# **1. INTRODUCTION**

This report presents evaluative findings from the second year of commissioned father-inclusive support for young fathers, aged 25 and under by the County Durham Family Hubs, as part of the Start for Life Programme. The County Durham Family Hubs commissioned specialist support service the North East Young Dads and Lads (hereafter NEYDL) to deliver father-inclusive support in the region.

A qualitative longitudinal evaluation has been conducted by the Centre for Innovation in Fatherhood and Family Research based at the University of Lincoln. Since the establishment of a NEYDL support offer delivered from the County Durham Family Hubs in 2023, the team has employed a mix of qualitative and creative methods to capture intervention progress and outcomes of the contracted service delivery in two stages, offering critical insights into its impacts on fathers and their families. An interim report was published in May 2024.

This report explores the extent to which engagement with young fathers in the County Durham region has been strengthened, alongside identifying effective strategies for engaging young fathers and embedding father-inclusion in local services. Rather than seeking to fully measure the programme's effectiveness, the focus is on evaluative reflections on progress and service development during the period from May 2024 to 2025.

Interviews and focus groups have been conducted with young dads/non-birthing people, complemented by 'blob tree' data that enabled the young fathers to visually express themselves and their emotions in relation to service support in a non-verbal way. In addition, data recorded by NEYDL as the service providers about young father engagement, along with interview and focus group data from professionals and stakeholders involved in the delivery process, are also reported on where pertinent. These provide context to what has worked and where more effective approaches might be further developed and implemented.

## **1.1. The commissioned service: North East Young Dads and Lads**

The North East Young Dads and Lads were commissioned by the County Durham Family Hubs in 2023 with an allocation of funding from their Start for Life programme. Established in 2015, North East Young Dads and Lads (NEYDL) is a regional charity that supports young men aged 25 and under who are fathers or expectant fathers living in Tyne and Wear. Since 2022, the service offer has expanded across the North East region, including areas of Teesside and County Durham. The North East region has high levels of deprivation and high rates of young parenthood (Hadley, 2017); the project therefore supports young men who are often multiply disadvantaged. NEYDL operates with professional support workers as well as peer-support workers and volunteers, typically young fathers who were previously beneficiaries of the service. Young men who are referred (or self-refer) receive tailored individual support and group-based peer support to help develop their self-esteem and resilience, to reduce isolation and build peer support networks, to enhance their parenting practices and improve relationships, and to help them develop employability skills. NEYDL has a broader aim of challenging negative perceptions of young fathers and campaigns for improved service provision and practice.

## **1.2. The County Durham Family Hubs**

Durham County Council have overarching responsibility for allocating resources for the Family Hub offers. A range of services are provided to men and dads across the County Durham Family Hubs, including the Durham Young Dads project, which is delivered by NEYDL. NEYDL were commissioned as part of a broader Durham County Council commitment to increasing and improving support for dads in the region, following earlier findings that while engagement with dads was generally positive their inclusion in targeted interventions was less developed.

Since the inception of the County Durham Family Hubs, there has been a sustained and proactive commitment to the delivery of father-inclusive support services that: 'effectively engage dads/male carers throughout their work, equally valuing them as co-parents, viewing them as part of the solution and an asset, sharing the importance of how dads/male carer's role directly impacts positively on outcomes for their children' (Durham County Council, National Family Hubs website).

Commissioning NEYDL was considered a proactive way of welcoming more fathers into Family Hubs local programmes and promoting the Family Hubs as a space to support fathers as well as mothers and children.

The NEYDL offer in County Durham includes:

- 1.Tailored 1-to-1 support for young fathers in the region provided by two NEYDL staff members as an intensive 16-week programme,
- 2.Thursday evening social peer support sessions,
- 3.Stay and Play sessions for young dads and their children,
- 4.Online peer support via WhatsApp groups,
- 5.Training courses and support to obtain certifications,
- 6.Wider development programmes aimed to encourage new hobbies such as cycling and beekeeping as part of the National Lottery funded project, Birds, Bees, Bikes, & Trees,
- 7.Opportunities to take part in advocacy work via joining the NEYDL AmbassaDADs advocacy group and/or the Family Hubs Parent/Carer Panels.

### **1.3. May 2024 interim findings in brief**

The FYFF team reported on the first year of the NEYDL commissioned services in May 2024. Notable findings in brief were that:

- Young fathers in County Durham are benefitting from the well-established ethos, identity and approach that NEYDL models in their work with young fathers and their families.
- Young fathers have benefitted from access to wider services and provision including football, gaming activities and representation on the Family Hub parent-carer panels.
- NEYDL as a charity have been able to increase their referral rate using Family Hub spaces as a base.
- Young father beneficiaries report improved mental health and community networks that have reduced social isolation in parenting.

## **2. QUALITATIVE LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH AND SERVICE DATA REPORTING**

To generate learning across the two-year programme, a qualitative longitudinal evaluation methodology (Lewis, 2007; Neale, 2020) has been employed to capture:

- the evolving delivery of NEYDL's support provision,
- change and continuities in support delivery and its impacts, and
- the extent to which the commissioned service continues to achieve its core aims of creating a father-inclusive environment of support across the local County Durham Family Hubs programme.

In this second report, we present findings from a second wave of interviews and visual data generated using blob trees with young father beneficiaries, service data collected by the charity, as well as interviews with the NEYDL staff team, senior support workers at the charity and a service commissioner. The study has ethical approval from the University of Lincoln.

Data has been generated at two timepoints about service delivery to enable a qualitative longitudinal capture of the service and its evolving impacts. Replicating the first wave, the following methods were conducted for the second wave and were subject to analysis for this report:

- Qualitative in-depth interview and focus group data with young father beneficiaries, with NEYDL support and senior staff, and a service commissioner,
- Blob tree data from young father beneficiaries to develop a visual, non-verbal account of their current circumstances and their emotions in relation to service support.

Secondary analysis of self-report data collected by NEYDL is also integrated where appropriate to provide context to the findings.

*Research Sample:* The sample comprised 4 NEYDL staff members (two who deliver directly from the County Durham Family Hubs (referred to as NEYDL staff 1 and 2) and two more established and senior staff members who deliver the NEYDL work across the North East region), 4 young father beneficiaries and a service commissioner to capture insights about NEYDL service delivery and impacts in the local County Durham Family Hub programme. The semi-structured interview data was produced between January – April 2025.

Table 1: Research participants

| Name        | Age at interview | Age when became a dad | Children                                                     | Research participation    |
|-------------|------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Young Dad 1 | 21               | 18                    | 2 children: 2022, 2024                                       | Interview                 |
| Young Dad 2 | 21               | 19                    | 2 children: 2023 (twins)                                     | Interview                 |
| Young Dad 3 | 23               | 19                    | 2 children: 2021 (no longer in his care), 2024 (in his care) | Interview and focus group |
| Young Dad 4 | 23               | 20                    | 3 children: 2021, 2023, 2024                                 | Focus group               |
| Young Dad 5 | 18               | 17                    | 1 child: 2024                                                | Focus group               |
| Young Dad 6 |                  |                       | 1 child                                                      | Interview                 |

Table 2: Staff member participants research participants

| Name                      | Organisation          | Role                                                    |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| NEYDL Staff Member 1      | NEYDL                 | Senior Young Dads Worker                                |
| NEYDL Staff Member 2      | NEYDL                 | Senior Young Dads Worker                                |
| NEYDL Peer Support Worker | NEYDL                 | Peer Support Worker (previously a beneficiary of NEYDL) |
| Service Commissioner      | County Durham Council |                                                         |
| NEYDL senior staff member | NEYDL                 |                                                         |
| NEYDL CEO                 | NEYDL                 |                                                         |

## **Blob trees**

The team asked the young father beneficiaries to complete 'Blob Trees' with staff support. 'Blob trees' are a creative method that offer insight into the lived experience and well-being of young men at any given time point, as well as an opportunity for them to explain how the Family Hubs has impacted on them. Four blob trees were completed in Summer 2024 and three additional ones were completed by new beneficiaries in Spring 2025.

Beneficiaries were first asked to circle which blob person represents how they feel currently and to explain their choice why that person represents how they feel. They were asked to make the connection to the Family Hubs and to describe the extent to which their Family Hub involvement had influenced their choice. They were then asked to circle the blob which represents how they would like to feel in future and why they choose this option (see Figures 3 and 4 below).

## ***NEYDL self-report data***

Throughout the report we supplement the qualitative data with secondary quantitative evaluative data collected by NEYDL. This is captured internally by the organisation to track extent of young father engagement in real time and to support evaluation of the service and its impacts on young fathers.



### **3. KEY FINDINGS**

The findings affirm that young fathers in the County Durham region benefit in a multitude of ways through accessing and engaging with the young father inclusive offer provided by NEYDL across the County Durham Family Hubs.

#### **3.1 Take up of support for young fathers in the region**

**Across the two-year commissioned programme there has been a clear and sustained demand for young father specific support in the County Durham region. Research elsewhere reports that men can be difficult to engage in service contexts, but the majority of referrals took up the offer of support.**

Take up of one-to-one support for young fathers in County Durham has remained consistently high since the service was commissioned. In 2024, almost all appointments offered were attended (see Table 2). From Jan 2024 to Dec 2025, one-to-one support take-up based on quarterly data returns has been consistently high. For a group that are often considered difficult to engage, this data is testament to the successful utilisation of referral pathways and cross-agency communication to provide support through proactive and timely outreach and engagement:

*Table 2: NEYDL self-report young father engagement data*

| Time period (2024) | Appointments offered | Appointments attended | Percentage |
|--------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|------------|
| January – March    | 193                  | 189/193               | 97.9%      |
| April – June       | 201                  | 198/201               | 98.5%      |
| July – September   | 147                  | 145/147               | 98.6%      |
| Oct – Dec          | 133                  | 133                   | 100%       |

The staff team report that all young fathers are engaged within a maximum 5 day waiting time between referral and initial outreach to arrange the first appointment. This proactive approach to outreach has been key to ensuring near universal engagement with the service from young fathers in County Durham. Figure 1 provides an overview of the fathers referred, as well as total contact hours. Young fathers in the region have invested significant time in peer mentoring and volunteering, as well as 1:1 support, especially face-to-face.

Figure 1: Impact Data, covering the period from 1st May 2023 to 30th April 2024.

| Reason for referral            | 2024       | 2023       | 2022      | 2021      | 2020      | 2019      |
|--------------------------------|------------|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Young father / expectant dad   | 139        | 105        | 68        | 63        | 46        | 61        |
| Non birthing people            | 10         | 10         | 4         | 2         | 1         | 1         |
| <b>Total:</b>                  | <b>149</b> | <b>115</b> | <b>72</b> | <b>65</b> | <b>47</b> | <b>62</b> |
| <b>Engagement by young men</b> |            |            |           |           |           |           |
| New referral                   | 111        | 48         | 25        | 33        | 25        | 53        |
| Ongoing support                | 38         | 67         | 47        | 32        | 22        | 9         |
| <b>Total:</b>                  | <b>149</b> | <b>115</b> | <b>72</b> | <b>65</b> | <b>47</b> | <b>62</b> |

| Individual contact time (hrs)                | 2024         | 2023         | 2022         | 2021         | 2020         | 2019         |
|----------------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Dads and Toddlers groups                     | 142          | 32           | 12           | 0            | 106          | 44           |
| 1:1 support (face to face)                   | 960          | 850          | 408          | 440          | 350          | 306          |
| 1:1 support (telephone & social media)       | 650          | 572          | 234          | 450          | 140          | 92           |
| Joint meetings with other professionals      | 370          | 350          | 460          | 250          | 190          | 119          |
| Peer supported group work                    | 586          | 480          | 202          | 850          | 959          | 912          |
| Training delivered to professionals          | 316          | 150          | 51           | 40           | 56           | 101          |
| Research activities                          | 265          | 400          | 451          | 254          | 134          | 420          |
| Campaigning, media, and film-work            | 453          | 350          | 257          | 428          | 142          | 238          |
| Community beekeeping                         | 252          | 268          | 196          | 131          | 250          | 98           |
| Peer mentoring & volunteering                | 3,086        | 2,625        | 1,491        | 280          | 230          | 216          |
| Other activities                             | 72           | 50           | 17           | 20           | 36           | 0            |
| <b>Total:</b>                                | <b>7,152</b> | <b>6,127</b> | <b>3,779</b> | <b>3,143</b> | <b>2,593</b> | <b>2,546</b> |
| <b>Average individual contact time (hrs)</b> | <b>48</b>    | <b>53</b>    | <b>52.5</b>  | <b>48</b>    | <b>55</b>    | <b>41</b>    |

### 3.2 Impacts of the offer on young dads in County Durham

- Our findings indicate that young fathers in the County Durham region continue to benefit from the bespoke young father-inclusive offer provided by NEYDL,
- The NEYDL model includes a variety of elements that enable a flexible, bespoke and community-based approach. This includes a mix of tailored one-to-one support, peer support, access to leisure activities and access to opportunities for education, gaining qualifications and advocacy work.
- Young dads in the region report improved confidence in their parenting but also benefit from access to education and training that improves their employability, peer support and community, and opportunities to influence service design and delivery in their roles as advocates and experts by experience.

### 3.2.1 Community, friendship and stability

Loneliness and isolation are commonly reported among young fathers (Hanna, 2018; Tarrant et al. 2020). The transition to parenthood often requires young men to withdraw from friendship groups and adjust to new responsibilities which can impact on social and informal networks at a time when they are needed the most.

Participants confirmed that the NEYDL offer in County Durham provides these young men community, friendship and a sense of stability, often in place of where that was missing in their own lives. Access to peer support and identifying aspects of shared experience mean that they then feel more confident in supporting their families:

*"Like I never knew about Lads and Dads, like the dads thing. When I found out it gave me a like kind of a more...kind of relief because then that means I wouldn't be alone if you get what I mean....Like so there's people who can be in the same boat as me or there's other people who are dads that I can actually make friends with" (Young Dad, 3)*

*"I drifted away from me mates, and I always say I don't blame them, it's nobody's fault. Like, they, I wouldn't expect them to stop doing, like, what a normal 18-year-old lad should do, to come and be a parent with me. It's not how it works. But seeing other young dads who were in the same boat as me and had the same responsibilities, I loved that, and then started going to, like, the drop-ins on a nighttime, like once a week, and then eventually moved on to, like, AmbassaDADs." (Young Dad, 2)*

The NEYDL staff based in County Durham also feel confident that they are making a difference:

*"I think both 'NEYDL staff member 1' and myself have had a positive impact on some of these socially isolated young men that's been struggling with issues around mental health, about being a parent, about how parenting looks, what makes a good parent, and the stigma involved in that, because there is still stigma out there". (NEYDL staff member, 2)*

Opportunities to meet with other young fathers in similar and sometimes quite challenging circumstances is powerful in enabling these young men to see that their own issues are not just individually experienced. They learn and observe that others like them value support, that there is no shame in accessing and receiving support, and that what they thought were private troubles are also experienced by others:

*"Knowing that I have a network of dads that are going through something similar means that if I'm having an issue I can reach out to another dad and say, 'look have you had this issue? Yeah I've had this issue, this is how we saw it. Our champion will try something along the same lines or like, 'look lads I'm struggling, anyone up for a chat?' 'Aye give us a ring in five minutes', you know what I mean?" Truthfully, it's quite grounding. Whatever I thought, like, how bad my life was or could get, everybody's in a different boat, and it, like, opened my eyes that I've been very, very lucky in life to be the only service I've ever had or needed was NEYDL. Obviously, like, we have, like, people coming from, like, care and stuff, so it made us realise, like, how lucky I was". (Young Dad, 1)*

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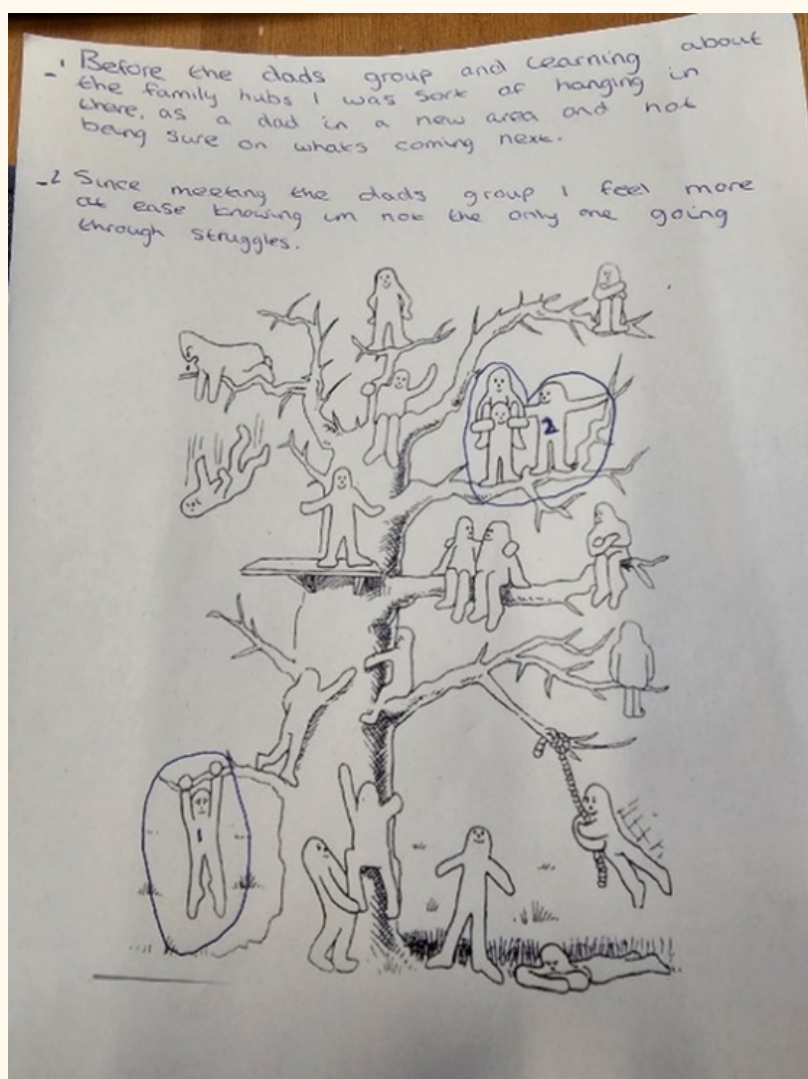
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Figure 2: Blob tree reporting on the impact of NEYDL



1

Before the dad's group and learning about the family hubs I was sort of hanging in there, as a dad in a new area and not being sure on what's coming next.

2

Since meeting the dads group I feel more at ease knowing I'm not the only one going through struggles.

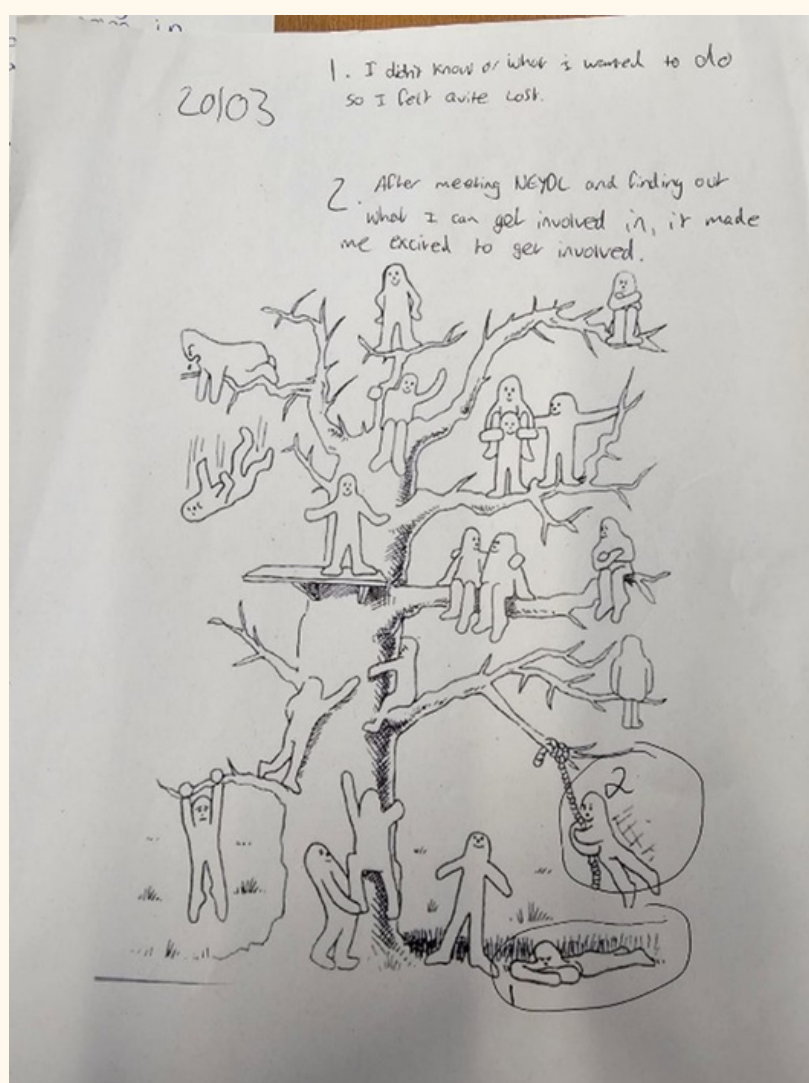
The NEYDL offer has generated a strong sense of community and facilitated young men in developing organic friendships and support networks based on their shared experiences of young fatherhood.

### 3.2.2 Peer support and social activities

- Young dads in the region are benefitting from access to a variety of activities that enable them to have fun as young people, and to access essential support from their peers. Spaces specifically for young men are valued.
- Some have established new relationships and community beyond the County Durham Family Hub support offer, spending time with other parents, including co-parents. There is an opportunity here for NEYDL to further develop their support offer by providing young fathers with space to explore their co-parenting relationships with the mothers of their children to help them to build confidence in communication and self-expression.
- Activities built around sports create opportunities for conversations around healthy masculinities, and the importance of physical and emotional health to parenting.

Both the commissioner and the young father beneficiaries noted that they benefited from the wide-ranging and responsive offer of support. For one beneficiary, the service gave them a sense of purpose when they were feeling lost and without direction (see Figure 3). Access to a variety of social activities including gaming, football and go-karting, are highly valued, enabling these young men to engage in fun activities and take some time out to care for themselves amid the challenges of parenting at a young age. Some of these activities are leisure based while others enable the young men to gain qualifications and accreditation, helping them to evidence their growing skill set, build their employability, and increase their knowledge:

Figure 3: Blob tree reporting on the impact of NEYDL in County Durham



1

I didn't know or what I wanted to do so I felt lost.

2

After meeting NEYDL and finding out what I can get involved in, it made me excited to get involved

Engaging young fathers in peer support is not always a straightforward process. Some need persuasion and more tailored support to engage and build confidence which the staff at NEYDL do effectively:

*"A young lad who hasn't been with us that long actually, but when we first met him, he was, he's, he's still in college, he's one of the younger ones we have right now. I think he's just turned 16. Just turned 16....And when I first met him he was convinced that he would just not want to meet other young dads. He just thinks it was a stupid idea, he thought it was ridiculous actually [laughs]. But not long after we'd met and talked about kind of what we have on offer, much like what we've talked about with you now, and I guess with us being there too, as opposed to just saying, 'Oh, that's on there, you go yourself.'...His confidence has risen quite a bit to the point where he's made friends within that group, and they talk outside of us as well...And that's why we do the peer support group sessions, that's why we get them together, because there's some dads that we've met that live in the same area and they've no idea that they've got other young dads next to them." (NEYDL staff 2)*

NEYDL staff provide tailored 1-1 support to help young men feel comfortable joining and participating in group sessions:

*"I think like the initial meeting with, like, the group leaders, like, like I say, I had an initial meeting before that night I went to the group and I mean I think that he told me basically a bit about the group and like what obviously they're about and obviously, like, it is about dads that are similar age and they're going through the same circumstances. Like, cause not like obviously the same but like different, like different stories or, like, they've been through stuff and wore the teacher that they can help you with. And I think that helped me really cause, like, like I've got anxiety wi' like meeting big groups and that and obviously that were a game changer for me, like knowing that people won't judge you, like, before you even get to, you know like judge you before you get through the door". (Young Dad, 5)*

Young dads understand the value of taking their children to socialise at places like playgroups, both for the benefit of their children and themselves, yet parenting spaces are often dominated by mothers, female carers and parents of an older age:

*"It's like taking the bairns obviously to the playgroups and the socialising part of it is like what, it's sort of what you need to do, but it's, I don't know, it just makes it that little bit easier to sort of get your mind round it being people, like, your own age and same circumstances, rather than just chuck you in the middle of a room with a bunch of strangers and saying, right, see yas" (Young Dad, 4)*

A space specifically for dads, where they have the opportunity to develop friendships and share experiences with other men is important and was valued by the participants who often had mixed experiences when attending parenting groups that were predominantly 'mum spaces',

*"I only go with the dads' group because it's more chilled and cause I'm actually not originally from here, so not knowing anyone, so I'd just rather stick with the dads' group because it's more chill and everybody's really nice and helps each other out if they ever struggle". (Young Dad, 1)*

*"I walk into the baby group and they all know me, like go, 'Oh, he's here again,' and I'm like, I'm like, 'Hiya,' and I just kinda sit in corner cause, like, they're all in like their little mum packs and stuff like that, and I'm just sat there like, yeah, I'll just sit over in this corner. Take a newspaper and then, like, have a read of newspaper while me other little boy's running, like, manic around the hub and that. So... that's why I like the idea of the dads' group, because I never heard of that before, like where the dads get to meet up" (Young Dad, 5)*

The wider activities on offer from across NEYDL also provide an opportunity for friendships and peer support beyond NEYDL support, including between the partners of beneficiaries:

*"It's, we're still best pals we talk to each other every day. We go to football with each other, we play for the same team twice a week Monday and Wednesday....We've been out for double dates with me and his partner and my partner, whatever" (NEYDL Peer Support Worker)*

These findings indicate that investments in young fathers have wider benefits for their families by creating opportunities to get to know one another and build community beyond the charity created spaces.

Working with young men around leisure activities helps to facilitate conversations and dialogues with the young men around their physical and emotional health:

*"Working with young men, young boys, fitness, a big one is the vaping and the smoking and maybe raising a bit more awareness around how it affects your body... Fitness has been a good one, request from them about, around football or, or we did, we're starting up some self-defence stuff, we've done some boxercise stuff, we've done just stuff to get them active. I think being, it's for their mental health as well". (NEYDL staff 2)*

### 3.2.3 The value of one-to-one, bespoke support

- Young dads in County Durham are reporting the importance of access to bespoke one-to-one support when they need it.
- The provision of relational and non-judgmental support beyond the family is crucial to young men when they are experiencing challenges.

As well as a sense of community and peer support, the young fathers benefit from the one-to-one, bespoke and flexible support offered by the two senior staff members who work from the hub spaces. They value being able to seek advice when needed, being signposted to more specialist support in the region, and the time, care and investment they receive:

*"I know fine well I can ring up any one of my workers and they'll sit and talk to me. They'll give us advice, they'll look up services for us.....they bend over backwards to help me, honestly.....as soon as I reach out they're on the phone, 'hi [name], how you doing?', 'Oh I'm champion, I just wondered if you've got anything on this week?' 'Oh yeah' or, 'oh no not this week but if you want we can meet up, go for a coffee, you know, have a catch up'. I know I can reach out to either of them and they'll both give us the time a' day no matter what. It's usually 'NEYDL staff member 1' as being my like main support, my, say my key worker." (Young Dad, 1)*

*"I think everything's spot on. Like, I've never felt support like I have from NEYDL. Like, I don't need to worry about asking silly questions or stuff, 'cause I'm gonna get support from it. Yeah. It's really good." (Young Dad, 2)*

Access to support from the senior management of NEYDL based in Gateshead was also noted as a core benefit

*"I really did look up to [staff], I still do. He was more of an actual father to us than me actual dad....my role model sorta thing. He's always been great wi' the kids. He's obviously been there for [partner] when she got allegations, when me ex made allegations. So they were the ones that sorted that out so they've always been there for me and me kids and me partner." (NEYDL peer support worker)*

The relational approach adopted by NEYDL was observed by the service commissioner as core to the success of the Family Hub offer for young fathers, supported by access to wider social activities including gaming and football (see also section 1.3):

*"It's very based on its relational practice-based approach. So they are working with these dads through things like video gaming and football. But actually, it's not just video gaming and football. It's building relationships. It's building trust. It's giving them a trusted adult who they can talk to if and when they need to, and and that'll be different for every dad that engages with them but is so important and critical to what they do, and they do it so well." (Service commissioner)*

*"I think it was how nice the staff were and how, like, non-judgemental everybody felt, or everybody was. Like, I felt like I could just be myself, like I didn't have, like especially in school, I felt like I had to be somebody, where there, I just felt like I could just be me and me would be good enough." (Young Dad, 2)*

This approach is also vital to ensuring the team are flexible and meet young fathers where they are at in their journeys and to be responsive to the particularities of their circumstances. Young dads present to the service at different stages in their parenting journey, sometimes when their partner is still pregnant:

*"Whenever we get a referral in, it's never at the same time, point in time for them. We could meet them prior to them becoming a dad, we could meet them after. I mean, it's up to two-year-old for us, it's like that perinatal period. But it's, they could be involved with social care proceedings or anything like that and we could be a part of that. There's so many different things that can happen. And for that particular young lad, you can, again he hasn't been with us for very long but I never thought he would actually want to do anything, but he has." (NEYDL staff member, 2)*

### **3.3 Access to wider development opportunities: training and advocacy work**

- Young dads in the region have gained new qualifications and access to a breadth of training and education, going some way towards helping them to repair previously disrupted education pathways, to upskill and gain new knowledge and confidence.
- Young dads have enhanced visibility and influence on the parent/carers panels because of the investment in NEYDL's work.

#### **3.3.1 Gaining qualifications and upskilling**

As well as the provision of social support that helps to address loneliness and isolation, NEYDL has expanded its offer of education and training to young fathers in County Durham, helping them to upskill and build employability skills. Young fathers often experience educational disruption (Neale and Tarrant, 2024) so the County Durham offer provides a space for young men to gain new knowledge and qualifications:

*"We say, 'oh well we're feeling this, we fancy being doing this for a while'. Or, 'well a couple of us are wanting to get our first aid done'. Or, 'there's this qualification that we've been looking at and we thought that NEYDL might be able to give us a hand.'" (Young Father, 1)*

*"I don't have any of my GCSEs. I have, like, media and computing and stuff, but none of the main ones like your maths and English, science. I'm in the process of doing my youth work level two....I've done, I think it's level three first aid outdoor and I'll be getting put through my forestry school leadership level three as well". (Young father, 2)*

*"I done me Youth Work Level 3. Mental health and depression, I done level 3 for that as well. Level 3 First Aid, Outdoor First Aid, Indoor First Aid, Child Safety Around the House. There's so much different stuff [laughs]...So I didn't need necessary all that but we got offered that and obviously I'm gonna take it, the more I get the better. So like the Youth level 2 we only need like a Level 2 to be working directly with people but I got Level 3." (NEYDL peer support worker)*

Another aspect that is beneficial is that the direction of activities and choice are led by the fathers themselves, providing them some autonomy and a sense of ownership over the activities on offer:

*"It's definitely young person led and that's what we actively encourage, that the young person identify or feel able to come to us and say, 'Oh, can we make a suggestion to do something?'" (NEYDL staff member 1)*

Of the senior staff team delivering in County Durham, one was a former beneficiary. Here he reflects on the longer-term benefits that NEYDL's investment in his learning and education has had on his career pathway:

*"I was a service beneficiary for a very long time, I volunteered where I could, more so after I'd finished that job, and then it just slowly got to the point where I was able to get, [NEYDL CEO] was able to offer me opportunities to upskill myself within that kind of work. So yes, I had a lot of transferable skills from other jobs that I had, but he specifically got me into sort of youth work qualifications." (NEYDL staff member 2)*

### **3.3.1 Advocacy work: young fathers as 'experts by experience'**

Also distinctive to the NEYDL offer is the opportunity for young fathers to act as advocates for themselves and others, as 'experts by experience' (Neale and Tarrant, 2024). NEYDL hosts a pioneering national advocacy group for young fathers called AmbassaDADS that 8 of the County Durham beneficiaries have engaged with. Within the context of the Family Hubs, the support offer has also created pathways to inclusion on the Family Hub parent/carer panels enabling the young dads to share their needs, have a voice in Family Hub strategy and build skills in working in a professional environment. The senior staff team reflect on the wider work that being commissioned by the Family Hubs in County Durham has created for their beneficiaries:

NEYDL staff 1: *"It's one question we're always asked, how do you get into what you do. A lot of the dads that we support wanna do what we do, and in a way they're already doing it because of the peer support."*

NEYDL staff 2: *"And the AmbassaDADS."*

NEYDL staff 1: *"And the AmbassaDADS and all the other opportunities that we've got presented to them. If they've got the capacity to do it, they wanna do it."*

NEYDL staff 2: *"We'll adapt to the needs of that individual as well. We're very proactive. And I do think we, I think we do both go that extra mile for...you've gotta be passionate about what you do to make a difference. And it's very evident that we've been very passionate about what we do in County Durham."*

*"There's been a real support for our work and a real championing of our work from the senior leadership team [in County Durham] and the real interest in involving young dads as experts by experience within the parent and carer panels too. You know, and that's, I think that's, that's super strong in Durham but it's also kinda strong elsewhere as well."* (NEYDL CEO)

NEYDL have played an active role in increasing the representation of dads on the County Durham parent/carer panel. Young Dad 2, for example, spent time both on the parent/carer panel and also became an active member of AmbassaDADs before moving into a paid role for NEYDL:

*"We were down on our dads. We just hadn't had a lot. We only had one dad apply, and we were down on our young dad. So we spoke to NEYDL and said, Right, have you got any dads who'd be interested in being part of this. And and they said, yes, so we had and it has changed who those are over the year.....They give us a different perspective on it, and and that can be about about all sorts that we were talking about breastfeeding messages before Christmas, and they came up with some really insightful stuff that. That that was like. Actually, this is what we think about it as dads, but also as young dads. So I think that's helped them feel part of the family hubs as well. And I think from a staff point of view, it's nice that they come and use the offices, because it reminds people of them just by virtue of their presence there."* (Service commissioner)

[on the parent/carer panel]: *"it's how I think that people have it worse than me, maybe it could be different for somebody else, that I have it worse than them, so sharing my story helps them in a certain way."* (Young Dad, 2)

It was noted by one of the service commissioners and corroborated by a senior NEYD staff member that father engagement on the parent/carer panel has led to real world changes in service design and delivery:

*"One of the things. Our parent carer panel picked us up on straight away in our start for life leaflet. Is that our design team? He'd put a silhouette of a pregnant person with a belly and a baby in their tummy, and they went, well, where's dad? That's not pregnant. So I went really good point. Thank you. So we now have a picture of a person thinking about a baby, which not only means it could be mum or dad, it could be any other partner, or it could be someone who's adopting."* (Service commissioner)

*"some a' the dads are on the parent/carer panel now so that's really influencing some a' the Family Hubs and how they work wi' dads and their spaces, what their spaces look like. So we're trying tae, trying tae influence the Family Hubs as much as possible tae be more young, you know, young dad friendly and just dad friendly but also family friendly as well. Cause a lot a' the, you know, we met a lot a' the, the partners a' the dads who mums who didn't want tae go tae some a' the support groups cause it was all older mums and they didn't feel comfortable. They felt maybe a little bit judged and looked at because, because a' their age. So there's that, that constant battle. So that's when, you know, we decided that we would start doing some young family 'Stay and Play' sessions."* (NEYDL senior staff member)

The advocacy work has also extended to wider regional engagements, enabling young fathers in the region to build their confidence and skills in sharing best practice with professionals:

NEYDL staff 2: "If we ever get invited to any big events or conferences. We had one in [County Durham area] .....and one of the dads came along with us to help support. You know, we had a stand there, a marketplace, and he was confidently, he's one of our AmbassaDADs as well, he confidently walked around and introduced himself and talked to other services at the time."

NEYDL staff 1: "And I think on the back of what you're saying about that day and when we concluded that day we were dropping him off, he did turn around and say he'd never done anything like that. He's never had an opportunity to do anything like that."

NEYDL staff 2: "He was, he was so, like..."

NEYDL staff 1: "Proud.....and again, I think that was an opportunity that they may never have had, never have had, to be, like, an advocate, I guess, for a charity that they've been involved in as a young dad, to then now be the face of that charity....I think that's been a massive, massive confidence booster for quite a lot of these young guys."

The blob tree data generated provides an elegant summary of how the young father beneficiaries view the transformations they have been through having engaged in with the service in Count Durham. Feeling self-fulfilment and part of a community were central to improve confidence in parenting and supporting their families (Figure 4):

Figure 4: Two blob tree responses



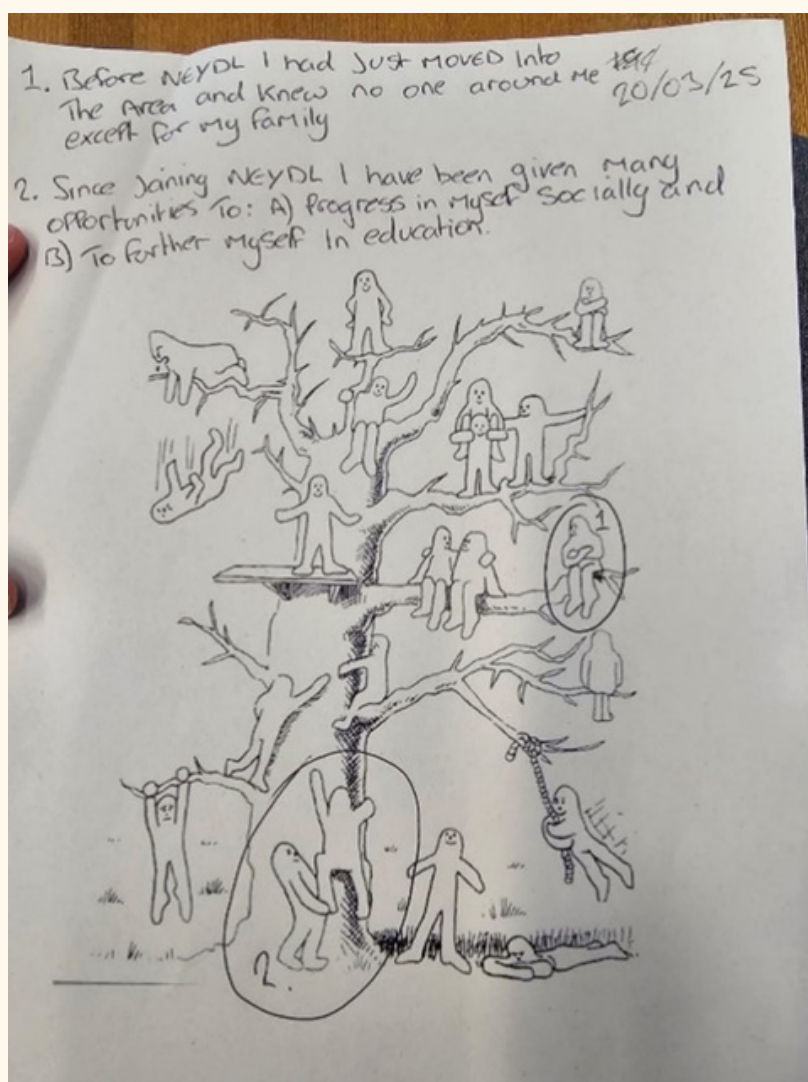
1

I chose this blob man because I am supporting my family as well as pursuing my own interests.

2

I am happy where I am, reaching my goals and am getting my financial situation under control.

Now I can focus on further supporting my family and helping them.



1

Before NEYDL I had just moved into the area and knew no one around me except for my family.

2

Since joining NEYDL I have been given many opportunities to: A) progress myself socially and B) to further myself in education.

### 3.4. Commitment to consistency in approach

Key to the success of these approaches is that NEYDL has not deviated from its core offer and approach, refined initially in the Gateshead area and since expanded to County Durham and other areas of the North East. Overall, the provision of a diverse set of activities and opportunities that are responsive to the needs of young dads is 'what works' in effectively supporting fathers in the County Durham region:

*"when we were commissioned by the Family Hubs, our model was basically the model that we run throughout the service. That intensive one-to-one support and then looking to work with those young men for sixteen weeks and then if those young men continued with the service it would be, you know, looking at those needs but then looking at them progressing into some of our peer support groups as well, which is exactly what's happened. A lot of the young men that are working in Durham also just access the peer support groups now and again cause, you know, their life isn't linear. Sometimes they need that a little bit of additional one to one support which we still offer. But what the young dads seem to do a lot is get a lot of peer support from each other using our social media work or our Whatsapp groups. Our Whatsapp groups are really, really active with young men chatting and supporting each other as well which is really good. So they have that, they have the support within the service over time but they also have access to that, that peer support group within the Whatsapp groups as well which is really positive."*

(NEYDL senior staff member)

These reflections indicate that an in person and digital support offer is valuable ensuring that support is both personalised and community based. This model already works well for NEYDL and is working effectively in its replication in the County Durham Family Hubs.



## **4. ESTABLISHING A FATHER-INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT IN THE FAMILY HUB BUILDINGS**

- The County Durham Family Hubs have committed to creating more inclusive buildings and environments that are welcoming to fathers based on best practice and advice from NEYDL.
- The Reframing Fatherhood campaign is an example of pioneering practice in which young dads have featured in a poster campaign that is now being featured across the North East region.

### **4.1 Creating father-inclusive Family Hub environments**

In addition to supporting young fathers via direct, relational work, the NEYDL commissioned offer has made a difference in terms of supporting the Family Hubs to promote best practice in father-inclusion by considering their accessibility for fathers. The dedicated staff team spent time working on raising their visibility around the region and encouraged father-inclusivity through attention to the Family Hub buildings and their environment:

NEYDL staff 1: *"We made it a point to go round all the hubs and introduce ourselves and tell them what we were about, who we were, contact information, where they, how they can contact us, and how they, how we could contact them as well.... it was the launch events that got us really, got us noticed, so we were there with our pull-up displays, flyers, like market stall, that type of set-up, so that really got us noticed and not just the family hubs but to their working partners as well."*

NEYDL staff 2: *"Yeah like we said before, they do have a lot more father inclusive content and material, all of the walls, and outside as well, if there's space for it....I suppose the other thing as well as that, if we wanted to, we can have access on a weekend."*

Despite making fathers feel more welcome, the ability to embed consistent practice across the hubs with father-inclusive imagery was raised as a challenge by the commissioner:

*"when it comes to things like having a dad's notice board in some buildings that's easier than others. And but we do have a Dad's kite mark in Durham. So part of the work that Craig's been involved with is, we have a dad's welcome here, so that logo should be displayed in all of our family homes, and they're working with businesses. And so things like do businesses have changed a role in Nappy changing in the women's toilets. And or are they in an accessible toilet where dad can access as well? So stuff like that. So I think those bits we're expecting a consistent standard. But it's sometimes a bit tricky to implement, because if you've only got one board in in the reception area and you've got our domestic abuse lead wanting something about that on. And our infant feed, lead, want something about that on. And our dad's lead wanting something about that on. It's how do you? How do you get all of this in?"*  
(Service commissioner)

#### **4.2. The reframing Young Fatherhood poster/photo campaign**

One way in which NEYDL has supported the Family Hubs to become more father-inclusive is through developing a poster and photo pack campaign that features beneficiaries from the charity and includes their partners and children. NEYDL staff member 2 explains:

*"The Reframing Fatherhood photo pack. They're all, like, very high-quality photos of the dads that we work with and their children in acts of everyday parenthood, I guess. You know, playing with their kids...Just all of the grounded stuff that you would...yeah, you probably see a lot of stuff in leaflets that are kind of generic, but these are, this is like a step up from that and we've distributed those around the hubs based on all the work that we've done with the AmbassaDADs".*  
(NEYDL staff member 2)

The photo packs are being used in the County Durham Family Hubs to support them in ensuring fathers are included in imagery, to address the stigma so often associated with young fathers and to promote important developmental activities that dads can do with their children:

*"Their reframing fatherhood pictures. We've just had permission from them to, you know, we're gonna see if we can use them in some of our general family hub stuff...We wanted pictures of parents reading to their kids. I was talking to our comms person this week and I said, 'Hang on a minute,' and under me desk at work, at home, I had a pack, and I was like, 'We've got some of these from NEYDL, '. So what we're hoping is that not only is that gonna, you know, normalise reading to your children, but they're pictures of dads and young dads, so we help to shift some of that narrative in terms of that young dads are in some way a negative thing."*  
(Service commissioner)

## **5. EMBEDDING A (YOUNG) FATHER-INCLUSIVE APPROACH ACROSS THE COUNTY DURHAM REGION**

- NEYDL has supported Durham County Council to respond to evidence that their existing regional engagements with dads could be developed. Before the Family Hubs were introduced in 2023, there was evidence that fathers were being engaged at points of intervention and crisis but less so in a preventative manner.
- At a time when there are still no clear policy drivers for embedding father-inclusion across early years and public health services, the Family Hubs Start for Life programme has created a significant platform for the promotion of the benefits of father involvement, not just regionally but also nationally.
- In providing a young father-inclusive support offer, there have been observable improvements in support for all fathers in the region through more focused strategic attention to support for fathers.

### **5.1 Responding to evidence**

The progressive benefits of the NEYDL commissioned service extend beyond the young men themselves. NEDYL were originally commissioned because the County Durham Council acknowledged that they needed to do more for dads in the early years and across the system and to be more father inclusive. Beyond improving support for young fathers, the contributions made by NEYDL and their visibility and respected support delivery from the County Durham Family Hubs has encouraged and improved father- inclusion in the region in observable ways. Here a service commissioner reflects on how the NEYDL offer has helped to address previous learning that more needed to be done in the region to engage dads in preventative, as well as interventionist ways:

*"So NEYDL came to our attention through one of our partners from the Integrated Care Board who was aware of the work that they were doing in Gateshead at the time.....and they were put forward. We're doing a lot of work in Durham about our work with dads, and that started Pre family hub. We did some research about how we engage better with fathers, and what we knew is that we were good at including them in assessment, but not very good, including them in intervention. So in the majority of our assessments, fathers or male carers were spoken to but actually, when it came to how we supported the family with what they were worried about that tended to be done with with mom or female carer in the family. We were already looking at our dad's focused approach and we have young parents programs that we run in Durham. But what we know is that again, that predominantly is mom. And some of that's around; mum gets maternity leave, dad doesn't so Dad goes back to work. And so what we wanted to look at was how we supported dads, and so they had an equitable offer of support, if you like, to what we were supporting with mums and so NEYDL were suggested."*

(Service commissioner)

The strength of the collaborative relationship between the commissioners and the senior leadership team of the charity has been key to the success of the partnership and its outcomes. Where commissioners understand, champion and promote the importance of father-inclusion regionally, it becomes more possible to deliver innovative solutions that have evidenced benefits for young fathers:

*"The senior leadership team have been really passionate about opening doors for NEYDL in pushing other professionals that historically we've not had necessarily great engagement from such as health, to really kinda think about young dads and refer young dads in and hold them accountable.....I think pre-Family Hubs we felt on the outside with a lot of statutory services.....we could ask for referrals but often young dads weren't on their agenda or a key focus. What the Family Hubs Start for Life programme has done for us in our region but also nationally is it's put dads right on the forefront of consideration in terms of support around families, which is quite a game changer for us 'cause there were no policy drivers for young dads work....to get inside and hold services accountable and open this up to those kinda new referral pathways has been a massive one."*  
(NEYDL CEO)

## 5.2 Improved regional referral pathways and multi-agency awareness

Another key change that NEYDL CEO highlights is how NEYDL's presence in the County Durham Family Hubs, including staff members and the poster/photo campaign, has improved relationships and multi-agency communication across the region. In a context where there a few to no policy drivers for father-inclusion, NEYDL report being better positioned to hold services to account and to advocate for the value of father-inclusive support in a more visible, meaningful and evidence-based way:

*"when you're looking at family health....systems are set up to support mum when we're looking at child health and child development. And what we're trying to do now is say, 'actually this is a parenting thing, not a mum thing and not a dad thing, it's a parenting thing'. It takes a long time for that change. You know, the staff and the people are changing but the system hasn't quite got there yet....And three years isn't enough. You know, I think the, the Sure Start was about ten years. I remember the, I was part of the evaluation of the Sure Start."*  
(NEYDL senior staff member)

Key to promoting the idea that dads require support as parents as well as mums, has been a commitment by the County Durham located staff to invest in building relationships with multi-agency professionals across the region. This more cohesive and partnership-based approach has started to repair some of the fragmentation of services across the region. NEYDL has been proactive in setting up 'Natter to NEYDL' sessions that provide a space for transparency, dialogue and service awareness and knowledge:

*"I think we have a really good, positive relationship with a lot of the professionals that come through the door and off the back of that, if any one of them wanna know a bit more information about what we do, maybe we might have more capacity at certain points of the year but we've set up a, every so often within the year we'll do like a natter with NEYDL where it invites professionals along to just talk about what we have on offer every so often. So there's plenty of opportunities to, to...showcase what we do."*  
(NEYDL staff 2)

## **6. ONGOING CONSIDERATIONS**

Key ongoing approaches to the effective support of young fathers, that will have wider application to any support service that engages with men as-fathers include:

- Increasing the visibility and presence of male workers across services,
- Understanding and supporting young fathers who may have had prior experience of the Family Hubs buildings as part of child protection processes and contact issues,
- The geography of County Durham. County Durham is a large geographic area and is very rural in parts with unreliable public transport. This can make getting to the hubs difficult. This is already mitigated against to some extent by NEYDL support workers going to meet dads in other, more accessible spaces for their one-to-one support.
- Ensuring opening times of the Family Hubs are accessible for working parents and dads. NEYDL offer some evening and weekend activities which have enhanced the accessibility of the buildings.

### **6.1 Increasing the visibility of male workers**

The programme commissioner reported that few male members of staff work in the Family Hub programme and continue to find it hard to recruit male staff:

*“We do have some men working in the Family Hubs, but not many, and we are predominantly female. What do we do about that? How do we attract more men into this line of work? And I do sometimes wonder if, until we do that, well, you know, is that part of why would men feel more comfortable if it was a male worker? I don't know.”*

(Service commissioner)

NEYDL have created a space for male staff to be more present as those employed in roles working directly with fathers and children but there are ongoing opportunities to explore how male workers can be attracted into youth and care support roles.

## 6.2 Spaces associated with child protection and surveillance

A barrier to father engagement identified in the Family Hubs was the multi-use of the Family Hub spaces. In the Sure Start years, the predecessor to the Family Hubs, the buildings were used as spaces for contact and child protection meetings, which meant they were associated with previous interactions involving child removal. A senior staff member from NEYDL notes:

*"what we were trying tae do as well is for the dads tae have ownership of the space. Not feel that it's somewhere that they have tae go. Cause I know one a' the things that Durham is doing is wi' the Family Hubs. **Cause a lot a' these centres, the old Sure Start centres, family centres were the centres that were used for contact sessions.** So if, if families had, you know, the child had been removed and it was a contact session. So we had some young dads who said, 'I used tae come here tae have my contact session with, with me mam or me dad'. **So then asking them tae go then think of that as a positive place just doesn't cause it's a negative place...Protection meetings and Child in Need plans were done in that space.** So that space is always seen as somewhere where I leave that I can be every upset because, you know, **things have happened and out of my control so why would I go back there as a place that's gonna be supportive and positive for me?** So, you know, and it's really good that Durham have said that they're not going to do those meetings in those spaces cause they, they recognise that that can be a barrier for some a' the community so that's really good. But it's, we're not there yet as in the family hub's been, you know, open and accessible for dads. And **part a' that is the system but part a' that is about how dads and young men see Family Hubs still very much as that's where mam goes...Not where dad goes.** So there's, there's, there's two, there's a couple a' things that need tae change. There's the societal change and there's an organisational kind of understanding and change of that as well which is, which is getting there."*  
(NEYDL senior staff member)

## 6.3 Activity timing

As for many dads, the timing of activities is crucial to service accessibility. NEYDL staff responded to beneficiary feedback to identify more appropriate times for activities to take place, which has taken a process of adjustment:

*"initially we planned to do the 'Stay-and-Play' sessions in the afternoon, early afternoon, just cause middle of the day, a little bit more accessible, but we had some feedback soon after that to say that it might be a better idea to try and have it at a time where the school runs are happening. So when they're dropping their kids off and they can just, or they may have some younger kids as well with them and they can just kinda drop in, I suppose...And I think the earlier times have been a lot better, but it has, it did take a little bit to adjust to trying to find that accurate time, that's all. Yeah, so, and the frequency has went up since last year as well. So last year we were doing it every other week, this year we've upped the frequency up to every week now, so that's a bit more consistent. Families are fully aware of us being present in those hubs at those designated times every week, so there's no confusion."*  
(NEYDL staff 1)

As the service commissioner also reflects, it is important to consider that dads have limited paternity leave and may require weekend support around employment. Understanding and providing for work patterns is key to a father-inclusive approach:

*"that's about it being accessible times and spaces which we know for dads is the thing, because, as I say, you know, dads don't get huge amounts of paternity leave even with the shared use of it. It's still 10, and it still tends to be mam who takes the majority of that. So I think NEYDLs approach of being able to do those in person meetup, and that virtual stuff, and you know bits that they do at a weekend as well."*  
(Service commissioner)

## 6.4 Geographic location and travel

County Durham is a large geographic area and is very rural in parts with unreliable public transport. This can make getting to the hubs difficult. This risks creating a postcode lottery (Neale and Tarrant, 2017) where the services on offer are only accessible and available to those in the urban centres where the Family Hubs are located:

*"Geographically. I don't know how where we rank somewhere like the 3rd like, we're a massive geographical footprint in County Durham. And so I think that is always a challenge, because alongside that, our public transport isn't brilliant. And so, you know we don't have the likes of the metro at Newcastle and Gateshead have that. We don't have that level of infrastructure in terms of public transport. It's a bus system, and that can be hit and miss, and isn't necessarily the routes that people would want to go. So I think in terms of the in the group stuff. That's always a challenge, just the practicality of getting someone there, whereas with the one-to-one stuff. NEYDL staff members travel so they will go to where they need to be. So they might meet them in a family hub, but they might meet them in a coffee shop, because it might be in a location where we don't have a family home."*  
(Service commissioner)

The County Durham located NEYDL staff team have sought to mitigate against this to some extent by being proactive about going to meet dads in other, more accessible spaces for their one-to-one support but this has resource implications in terms of staff time, requirements that staff members have access to a car and the financial costs associated with this kind of outreach and transport:

*"travel is a big, big issue, huge...A lot will try and travel independently, but it can take a while, but that's, that's connections and cause it's semi-rural, well most, most of the areas that we work in are...semi-rural. They're not like, you know, I think there's other parts of County Durham that are really out there and there's like the links maybe twice a day, two buses a day."*  
(NEYDL Staff 1)



## **7. POSSIBLE FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

The beneficiaries and staff of the County Durham Family Hubs were highly complementary of the offer and argued that they wanted to see it extend nationwide:

*"I feel like it's a, it's such a worldwide issue, it's not just a North East issue. But they're doing the right things to, to make it happen"*  
(Young Dad, 2)

*"But I don't see why we couldn't spread that out across nationwide. We'd have to have a bigger team. I think it would be absolutely lovely to have a bit more, well, a lot more behind what the AmbassaDADs are all about in different areas. 'cause even in County Durham where I'm working in specifically, that's a huge area. Massive.....I wanna see it blossom into something that can help a lot of people all across the UK really. I think everyone needs it. And like I say, there's plenty of stuff out there for the mother and there's, I don't see anything, even now I still don't see anything for dads."*  
(NEYDL staff 2)

A Health and Social Care Committee Inquiry on the First 1000 Days has recently been launched. The unique partnership working between NEYDL and County Durham is a pioneering example of what commissioners and support services for fathers can do nationally across the Start for Life programme to support young fathers and embed a more father-inclusive approach in their regions that has wider benefits for all fathers and male caregivers. This requires sustained and consistent government investment, recognition of the vital role fathers play in the lives of their children and their social, educational and cognitive development, and clear and coherent policy drivers that support service engagement with men as-fathers and caregivers (Tarrant, 2025).

## **8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Since its inception in 2023, the NEYDL support offer in the County Durham Family Hubs has had an observable and evidenced impact on young fathers in the region, while simultaneously enabling County Durham Council to respond proactively to prior evidence that they were effectively engaging young fathers but intervening less so.

Young dads in County Durham have continued to engage well with, and benefit from, the service and the expansion of NEYDLs unique approach to young father inclusive support. Evidence generated suggests that an increased number of young fathers have benefited from the offer with the majority reporting:

- improved mental health,
- reduced incidence of loneliness and social isolation,
- Increased confidence in parenting,
- Increased employability and gain in qualifications through improved access to training,
- Real world influence on father-inclusive service delivery through advocacy.

Key to this success is the combined strength of flexible, bespoke and community-based support, peer engagement and opportunities for further skills development and self-fulfilment through engagement in social activities like gaming and football and/or advocacy and systems change work (through AmbassaDADS or the parent/carer panels).

The sustained delivery from NEYDL to date has also notably enabled the County Durham Family Hubs to meet their aims of creating a more father-inclusive regional support offer that is both interventionist and preventative.

### **8.1 Recommendations**

The evidence presented suggests that continued investment in NEYDL's services in the region will support a wider cohort of young fathers, first as beneficiaries with potential for them to progress to more advanced community and advocacy-based roles where young fathers have interest in doing so.

NEYDL staff and beneficiaries hope that the service might be extended both to ensure service sustainability for young fathers who are already engaged and to ensure that a wider cohort of young fathers can access the vital community-based support they need, especially in the early years of parenting when support and engagement is perhaps most impactful.

As well as continued delivery of existing best practice while funding is in place, we recommend that:

- Continued investment in father-inclusive services in County Durham is sought to sustain the service and meet continued demand among young fathers for social and practical support.
- The governments First 1000 Days inquiry is an opportunity to promote the County Durham/NEYDL model as an example of best practice and to develop a case for consistent funding for father-inclusive support.
- Further representation of fathers on the parent/carer panel should be encouraged with men with diverse personal and individual circumstances to ensure fathers have a continued voice about local Family Hub delivery,
- NEYDL explores support for young fathers around building confidence and constructive communication with partners and co-parents,
- Father-inclusive Family Hubs buildings and environments are created and promoted through displaying the Reframing Young Fatherhood poster campaign, ensuring services are accessible at times suited to men, and ensuring all staff are welcoming of fathers.
- Continued and proactive outreach to, as well as digital support for, those in rural areas of the County to ensure young fathers living outside of urban centres and communities also have options for receiving support.

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