

Evaluation of the North East Young Dads and Lads project (NEYDL)



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Executive Summary

Introduction

This report presents findings of a two-year evaluation into the North East Young Dads and Lads Project (NEYDL). The project is a community-based service aiming to support young men who are fathers or fathers-to-be, with various aspects of their lives, including their relationships, skills, parenting, and their confidence. The project aims to find out more about the lives of young men who are fathers in the North East region through its work, to understand the issues young men may be facing in their parenting experiences. The evaluation was commissioned by the NEYDL project (as part of the YWOP) and they are funded by the Esmée Fairburn Foundation.

Approach

The evaluation has used a mixed methods approach to include both quantitative and qualitative assessments of the project. This includes a range of verbal, numerical and visual data. There have been four key areas of data collected and analysed:

1. Existing project monitoring data
2. Data generated from the young men-including survey data from questionnaires with the young men who use the service, visual methods tools and focus groups
3. Interviews with project staff
4. Stakeholder interviews

Key findings

Our evaluation has established that the NEYDL project is effective in meeting its aims of improving the lives of the young men who use its services. The data generated within this evaluation demonstrates how the project is improving the wellbeing, relationships and skills of the young men. Some of these key areas of changes within the young men are: Confidence, Self-Esteem, overcoming shyness, Parenting skills, improved relationships with mother of the child, developing new friendships, moving into employment or education. The project has seen success with young men gaining contact with their children and children coming off Child Protection Plans. The young men have learnt about bushcraft, beekeeping, gardening, bread making and bakery, completed courses in parenting skills, first aid and have been involved in speaking at workshops and events about their experiences of being young fathers. These positive changes are against the backdrop of the young men experiencing disadvantages including; poverty, homelessness, social isolation, low educational attainment, unemployment.

The project offers a safe space for the young men to seek support, to gain new friends and peer support from other young men who are fathers. The project workers have created a welcoming and non-judgemental environment in which the young men are accepted at the point they are in their lives and parenting journeys and every young man enters the project voluntarily. Many of the young men will have experienced negative assumptions about them within other services and the project works hard to challenge such views of the young men among other professionals and services. The one-to-one support that the project workers offer is on a variety of topics and is tailored around the young men's needs. Trust and the positive relationship between workers

and the young men is integral to the approach of the work and is valued by the young men and staff alike.

There is seen to be little improvements the project could make, having more activities and more time for the young men to spend together in the young dads' group is seen as the only change the young men would like to make. Funding and staff capacity are a concern within the project and these are the areas that need to be secured in the future in order for the work to continue in the manner it currently is delivered. Developing peer support models and thinking about how the young men can take further ownership and involvement within the project may be fruitful in the future and could help with both capacity and developing skills and experiences for the young men. There are other aspects the project could develop, including more formal education or career planning, and thinking through the relationship of NEYDL with other services may be beneficial in the next phase of the project.

Recommendations

1. The NEYDL project appears to offer a long-term support service for young men, thinking of the project in this manner and seeking future funding to facilitate this 'one stop shop' approach to supporting young men who are parents over the longer term appears fruitful
2. Keeping the relationship-based approach to working with young men appears to be central going forwards. Ensuring the project can deliver the service in the way it has begun, utilising an ethos of working *with* the young men appears to be a powerful mechanism for facilitating positive changes for the young men, will be central to continuing quality provision for this group of young people
3. Exploration of the Social Return on Investment (SROI) of the NEYDL project would be useful to document the financial impact of the project given the qualitative observations provided within the evaluation about the impact that the work is having
4. Sustainability of the project (in terms of funding but also staff capacity) would be a priority area for focusing on in the short to medium term for the project- building on the success of the project to reach more young men can only be achieved through input of the necessary resources. Formalised peer support work (see point 8) may also help with capacity issues in the longer term and with being able to undertake more activities or more time for the young dads group in the short term
5. Consideration of how more formal education (such as maths and English) could be integrated into and facilitated by the project would be useful. This could be part of longer term career planning with the young men. Utilising the future timelines visual method tool could help the project workers with this aspect of considering goals and aspirations about both work and family life
6. Work around relationships could usefully encompass family relationships as well as intimate partner relationships. Given the precarious nature of some of the young men's lives and the fragility of these relationships, work around communicating within the family group may be a useful consideration for the project to help support young men to stay in the family unit (where useful and possible for those young men)
7. Developing clear boundaries around work with other organisations may be useful for the project over the medium to longer term; how NEYDL works with, takes referrals from, offers services to other organisations may help with creating clarity about what work to be undertaken and managing capacity
8. Developing the peer support model further with the young men could offer positive opportunities for both the young men currently within the group, but also help the project with expanding to other localities in the North East. What a pathway of young men becoming peer support volunteers through to paid peer workers in the project could be explored
9. Undertaking consultation with the young men around 'exit strategies' for the project may be useful. Whilst the project appears to be moving to be a long-term support service for young men who have children, the upper age limit of 25 for the service does provide a useful boundary around potential need, how young men could transition from the service at this upper age point may need thinking through in the medium term before it becomes a pressing issue for current members/users of the service

10. Developing and utilising an evaluation framework that contains useful tools to evaluate the work of the project going forwards will be important in order to capture the learning and impact of the project on an ongoing basis. Monitoring data that allows capture of demographics, key issues young men enter the project with/support needs, and some form of tracking the key aims and objectives of the project would be a useful means for ensuring that project staff are able to evaluate the work on an ongoing basis.

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1. Background to the evaluation

1.1. Understanding the lives of young men who are fathers

Young age parenthood is defined as having a child or children before the age of 25. Historically the UK has had a high rate of teenage and young age parents, and this has been subject to much policy concern. Within these 'concerns', young men who are fathers have often faced the brunt of social stigma, with persistent stereotypes of the 'absent' or 'feckless' young man being conveyed (Lau Clayton, 2016). No official statistics are recorded about young men who become fathers, though estimates suggest 1 in every 10 babies born to a first-time father has a father aged under 25 (Burgess, 2009). Similarly, 'for babies born to teenage mothers, about a quarter of fathers are aged under 20, around a half are 20 to 25 and a further quarter aged over 25' (Reeves et al., 2009: 18). These figures are now dated, and regional variations around young age parenthood do also exist, with pockets of higher conception rates to under 25's often being seen to correlate to social issues and often to material deprivation.

Most young men become parents in unplanned ways (Neale and Lau Clayton, 2015), an absence of focused sexual education for young men being in part seen as a contributing factor to this (Shaw and Lohan, 2012; Hansom and Nur, 2010; Fatherhood Institute, 2013). Whilst news of a pregnancy is often a 'crisis' point for young men (Shirani, 2011; Shaw and Lohan, 2012) most young men intend to be involved in their children's lives although few young men will live with their child at the time of its birth (Fatherhood Institute, 2013) or subsequently (Shaw and Lohan, 2012). The relationships of young parents are often seen to be fragile, and the breakdown of intimate partnerships often results in difficulties around contact with children (Reeves et al., 2009; Moffit, 2002). Whilst establishing their identities as fathers is often challenging for young men, most desire to be caring and loving to their children (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004).

Despite wanting to be 'there' for their children, young men who are fathers have routinely been overlooked by services and therefore face barriers in trying to access the support that they may need (Neale and Davies, 2015; 2016). Whilst young age mothers have been viewed as in need of support, due to being seen as potentially 'vulnerable' (Duncan, 2007) young fathers are viewed as both 'troublesome' and 'troubling'. What Sherriff (2007) describes as 'deficit beliefs' are then used to shape the narratives around the lives of young fathers. Given that caring behaviours are still largely aligned as 'feminised', young men who are fathers face a double exclusion by virtue of their gender but also their youthful ages (Ferguson, 2016).

Young men who are fathers are often from backgrounds which could be described as disadvantaged and to have lower educational attainment (Florsheim and Ngu, 2003; Deslauriers, 2011; Kiselica, 2008). They are routinely seen as a 'risk' rather than resource for their children (Neale, Patrick and Lau Clayton, 2015), especially if they have previous experience of the criminal justice system, which evidence suggests many young men who have children may have experience of the criminal justice system, including custodial sentences (Neale and Ladlow, 2015; Fatherhood Institute, 2013). What such narratives overlook however, is that

young men themselves may be very vulnerable (Tarrant and Neale, 2017) and that they may be excluded from the very services and support they need as a result (Bellamy and Banman, 2014).

The limited services that have existed for young men who are fathers has often focused on one-to-one work or support (see Sherriff, 2007; Davies and Neale, 2015). Working with young men in group-based settings has been seen as offering potential for helping overcome the barriers and challenges that young men might face (see Sherriff, 2007; Hansom and Nur, 2010; Deslauriers et al., 2012). However, limited research until recently has been undertaken to look at how these groups may work and what the positives (or difficulties) of such provisions may be (See Hanna, 2018). It is within this landscape of limited provision for young men who are fathers, and of a small body of evidence around the value of a group aspect to supporting young men that this evaluation is situated.

1.2. The North East Young Dads and Lads Project

The North East Young Dads and Lads project (NEYDL) is a regional charity, that works to primarily support young men who are fathers/soon to be fathers. Emerging as an offshoot of the established Young Women's Outreach Project (YWOP) in Gateshead, this evaluation examines the progress and processes of the first two years of the NEYDL's work. Working out of Gateshead (though with a broader geographical scope) the project is supporting some of the most social marginalised young men in the region and working primarily in areas that would be described as experiencing multiple deprivation. The project aims to support young men to improve their skills (life skills, education, employment), relationships (with their children, mother of their child/children, others) and wellbeing (self-esteem, mood, social interaction). The work of the project is delivered by two dedicated workers (both of whom are men) as well as volunteers and the young men are supported in a variety of ways, both individually with specific aspects (such as helping to gain contact with their children, solving problems, career focused support) but also through peer to peer support within the young dads group that the project has created.

1.3. Evaluation approach

The evaluation of the NEYDL project is independent from the project and conducted and led by Dr Esmée Hanna (De Montfort University) and Susan Coan (Leeds Beckett University). Both are experienced evaluators and understand the importance of using approaches that fit the aims of the evaluation and ensure that the evaluation process is inclusive for those who may participate. The evaluation was conducted over two years from Summer of 2016 to Summer 2018, allowing for the evaluation to run alongside the formative stages of the project. Ethical approval for the evaluation was obtained from the Leeds Beckett University ethics committee prior to the evaluation commencing. Regular meetings and contact between the evaluation team and the project have occurred throughout the evaluation and through spending time with the young men, the evaluation has been rooted in a full understanding of the lives of the young men as well as the activities and experiences the project offers them.

1.4. Evaluation methodology

A mixed method approach was taken within the evaluation in order to allow a variety of data to be generated in order to assess different aspects of the project and ultimately provide a holistic overview of the work. The key data collection tools utilised are detailed below:

Participants-

In order to avoid over reliance on just verbal or written data (particularly if literacy may be an issue), a combination of survey data, interviews/focus groups and visual methods were used with the young men to understand the impact of the project on their lives.

1. **Questionnaire**- This tool explored wellbeing (WEMWEBS short version), relationships (using modified ENRICH questions), ability to solve problems and achieve goals, as well as their skills and qualifications. Questionnaires were administered to the participants on entry into the project, at 2-3 months of engagement, and then at 6 months after they began working in the project (a further follow up at one year was included if deemed appropriate/young men were still engaged within the project). The questionnaire was completed by the young men with support from project staff where required.
2. **Diagrammatic methods**- Drawing on previous work of using diagrams with young men (<http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/assets/files/methods-guides/timescapes-hanna-capturing-past-and-future.pdf>) a set of visual approaches to understanding relationships, skills and sense of self was utilised and administered at the same time points at the survey.
 - The young men completed past and future timelines on entry into the project (and then repeat future timelines at the same points as the survey was administered), these timelines helped to gather information about their skills, careers as well as more personal goals and goal setting.
 - Relational maps were used to enable participants to demonstrate changes (if any) in closeness with other people over time through detailing how near or far others are for them within the map.
 - Blob trees were the final visual tool. Featuring a tree with amorphous 'blobs' in different poses and moods, participants are asked to circle which one relates to their current feelings, offering a visual insight into confidence and self-esteem as well as mood.
3. **Focus groups**- Focus groups were conducted with young men to explore how they have found the project, exploring their feelings about what (if anything) they would identify as successful aspects of the project, as well as any changes they feel they can identify within themselves because of the project. Focus groups were conducted in groups of no more than 5 to ensure everyone's voices were heard. The lead researcher conducted all focus groups. In total 6 young men took part in two focus groups.

Piloting: The questionnaire was piloted with young fathers engaged in the project. Two young men, completed the survey and visual methods tools as well as providing feedback on the proposed focus group questions. This piloting gave a useful opportunity to ensure

that these tools would be fit for purpose and to make any changes as a result. The pilot group were satisfied that the tools were easy to understand and some questionnaire wording and formatting was altered as a result of their feedback to make it more user friendly.

Stakeholders:

Project workers: The projects workers were interviewed at two time points (during year 1 and then at the end of year 2) within the research to capture their 'on the ground' experience of the project and to examine their perspective of working within and evolving the project over time. Interview 1 was conducted jointly with the workers by the lead researcher and the second interviews were conducted individually over the phone by the research team.

The project workers also provided updates to the evaluation team during the course of the evaluation in the form of regular meetings and phone calls and provided relevant monitoring data regarding the use of the project which is included within this evaluation.

Key Stakeholders: Key persons related to the projects (other services who referred in, persons who worked with the young men who attended the project in other capacities, family members of the project participants) were interviewed via telephone or face-to-face. In total six interviews were conducted. The interviews aim to understand more about the views of external but interested persons about the project and to gather their perceptions of the impact of the project (if any) on the young people who are engaged with the project as well as the possible broader benefits of this type of support for young men who are fathers. Stakeholders were also asked about any concerns or challenges they saw with the project and how (if it could) the project could be improved.

1.5. Evaluation analysis

Survey

Young men attending the North East Young Dads and Lads project were invited to fill in a questionnaire including questions about their wellbeing, relationships, problem solving, skills and qualifications, and some demographic information. There were asked to complete the same questionnaire at four time points (using their initials as a unique identifying code to track responses): when they first attended the project (point 0), after 3 months (point 1), after 6 months (point 2), and after 1 year (point 3).

The questionnaires were completed on paper copies, with support from the group staff members where necessary, and then entered online by the group coordinator. Online responses were collected using SNAP survey software, the data were then downloaded and transferred to the statistical software package SPSS for analysis.

17 individuals completed the questionnaire when they joined the project, of which 9 completed the survey again at three months, 5 at six months and 4 at one year. As only 4 individuals completed questionnaires at baseline, one year and at least one time point in between, these data have been 'rehumanised' and reported as case studies showing change across the year that allows for fluctuations in the lives and circumstances of young men and their engagement in the project to be reflected in the statistics. For the 9 individuals who completed questionnaires at baseline and at the 3 month follow up point, these data have been summarised but numbers were too low to carry out any statistical analysis beyond descriptive statistics.

Visual methods

The visual methods tools were analysed for common themes from across the tools as well as for patterns (both qualitative and quantitative patterns). The visual tools were compared across time as well as between the young men, i.e. looking at similarities and differences between the data of the young men as well as how individual young men may have changed over the course of the project. Examples from some of the visual tools are included to illuminate the analysis.

Interviews/focus groups

The interviews and focus groups were analysed using a thematic approach based on the approach detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The transcripts were coded and key themes were generated from these. Identifying information, including names and localised place names have been removed from any quotations and participants assigned a code and number to reflect their role within the project, e.g. ST1 for Stakeholder 1, P1 for Participant 1, PW1 for Project worker 1 etc.

2. Findings

2.1. Monitoring data

In year one of the project, there were 65 referrals into the project, the majority of which (n=54) came from the Gateshead area. Of these, 31 were young men who were involved in Child Protection Plans or had come via similar statutory service routes. Of these young men who were referred to the project, 28 young men were actively engaged in the service during year 1.

In year one of the project, the young dads group (which began in October 2016) met 17 times. This involved 11 young men attending and the young men took part in a variety of activities, including courses and programmes around sexual health, parenting and fatherhood, learnt first aid skills as well as enjoying sport, cookery (baking project) and outdoor activities (allotment project and bushcraft activities). Some of the young men also attended conferences about young fathers and delivered workshops around supporting young fathers both locally (Northumbria University) and further afield (Bradford).

In year 2 the project received 48 referrals, 80% of these referrals were young men from Gateshead with the remaining 20% coming from Sunderland and Newcastle. The majority of the young men that the project worked with in year 2 (both new referrals and existing young men in the service) were aged 19-25 (45%). 13% of the young men the project worked with were under 16.

Most new referrals came from youth work charities (40%) in the locality, although social services and family nurse partnerships together accounted for 29% of the new referrals. Whilst a small number (8%) were self-referrals, this shows an important move towards young men reaching out to the project themselves. On average NEYDL project consultants provided over 40 hours of contact time and support each young person referred to/working with the project in years 1 and 2.

The biggest issue that the project supported young men with in year 2 was navigating child protection processes (44%), although the range of issues young men sought support for demonstrates the complexity and vulnerability within the lives of the young men working with the project. These issues included:

- Bereavement
- Homelessness
- Domestic abuse
- Parenting skills
- Accessing volunteering
- Mental and emotional wellbeing issues
- Addressing NEET status
- Social isolation and loneliness

2.2. Survey

Given the nature of the lives that the young men who were engaging with the project were leading (complex, variable, often rapidly changing and sometimes highly challenging), ensuring consistent completion of the surveys at all time points was difficult. Low response rates to the survey aspect does not reflect the number of young men that the project engaged, but rather that the often-transitory nature of the young men's lives means that young men come in and out of the project, utilising its services in relation to the needs they have within their own life circumstances. The results below detail the findings from 9 young men who provided data at baseline and then 3 months, followed by detailed case studies of four young men who completed all timepoints.

About the young men

The 9 young men were White British and aged between 15 and 25.

At baseline, 8 young men had one child and one was expecting a child. At 3 months, all 9 had one child.

At baseline, 6 of the 8 young men with children had access. At 3 months, 8 of the 9 had access, only one reported not having access.

The reasons for not being able to see their children were difficulties with social services being able to organise supervised visits and the mother of the child refusing to allow access. At 3 months, the individual without contact cited "issues with mother of my child" as the reason.

At 3 months, 89% of the respondents are working towards qualifications, compared to 56% at baseline. Qualifications include accountancy, animal care, construction, plumbing and GCSEs.

Relationships

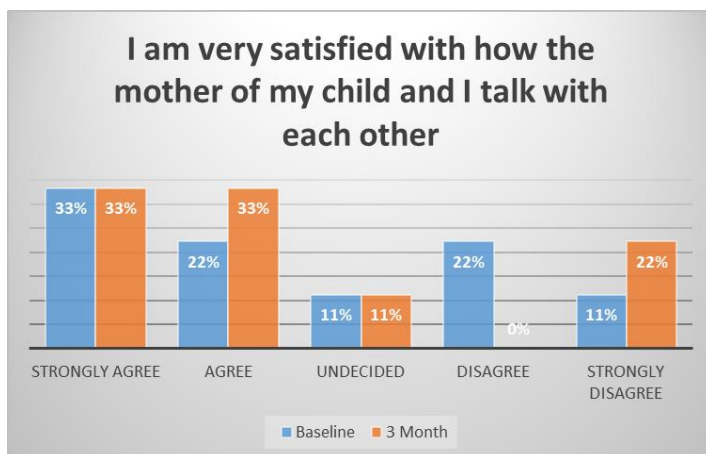
At baseline, three of the young men were in relationships, all of which were with the mother of their child.

At the three-month follow up, six young men were in relationships, three of which were with the mother of their child. Those in relationships expressed high levels of satisfaction with them, with no one selecting less than 7 out of 10, and the majority at 3 months selecting 10 (completely satisfied).

How satisfied are you with your current relationship?



I am very satisfied with how the mother of my child(ren) and I talk with each other



Overall, there was an increase in the young men’s satisfaction with how they communicate with the mother of their children, with 66% agreeing/strongly agreeing to this statement (55%as baseline) and 22% disagreeing/strongly disagreeing, as opposed to 33% at the point of joining the project.

Wellbeing

- I’ve been feeling optimistic about the future

Optimistic	Baseline	3 Months
All of the time	0%	33%
Often	56%	33%
Some of the time	22%	22%
Rarely	11%	0%
None of the time	11%	11%

There is an increase in the number of young men who feel optimistic about the future all of the time after being involved with the project for 3 months (from 0% to 33%).

- I've been feeling useful

Useful	Baseline	3 Months
All of the time	11%	44%
Often	33%	22%
Some of the time	44%	22%
Rarely	11%	0%
None of the time	0%	11%

After three months of attending the project, there is an increase in the young men who feel useful all of the time (11% to 44%).

- I've been feeling good about myself

Feeling good	Baseline	3 Months
All of the time	22%	33%
Often	44%	33%
Some of the time	11%	22%
Rarely	22%	11%
None of the time	0%	0%

There is a small shift towards feeling good about themselves, with a lower percentage selecting rarely and a higher proportion feeling good all of the time after engaging with the project for 3 months.

- I've been feeling close to other people

Feeling close	Baseline	3 Months
All of the time	22%	44%
Often	22%	33%
Some of the time	33%	22%
Rarely	22%	0%
None of the time	0%	0%

There is a clear increase in the young men feeling close to other people at the 3 month follow up point, with nobody selecting 'none of the time' or 'rarely' in favour of 'often' and 'all of the time.'

Solving problems and achieving goals

I have clear aims and goals for my future

Aims and goals	Baseline	3 Months
Strongly Agree	22%	56%
Agree	56%	33%
Undecided	0%	0%
Disagree	0%	0%
Strongly Disagree	0%	0%
No answer	22%	11%

All of the young men that responded agreed that they had clear aims and goals, with the majority selecting strongly agree (5) at the 3 month point as opposed to agree when they joined the project.

- It is easy for me to stick to my aims and goals

Sticking to aims	Baseline	3 Months
Strongly Agree	22%	22%
Agree	33%	56%
Undecided	11%	11%
Disagree	11%	0%
Strongly Disagree	0%	0%
No answer	22%	11%

There is an increase in the respondents agreeing that they can stick to their aims from baseline to 3 months from 33% to 56% (3 to 5).

- I can achieve the things I want to

Achieving	Baseline	3 Months
Strongly Agree	11%	33%
Agree	44%	44%
Undecided	22%	11%
Disagree	0%	0%
Strongly Disagree	0%	0%
No answer	22%	11%

None of the young men disagrees that they can achieve what they want to, although some are undecided/did not respond. At 3 months, there was an increase in the young men who strongly agreed with this statement.

- Parenting

In the last 2 weeks, how confident have you felt in your ability to parent your child effectively?

	Baseline	3 Months
No answer	22%	22%
6	11%	11%
7	11%	0%
8	0%	11%
9	11%	11%
10 (Completely)	44%	44%

Their confidence in their parenting skills is broadly static but this is only over a three month period.

- Employment

Employed	Baseline	3 months
No	56%	67%
Yes	44%	33%

There is a slight decrease in the number of the young men who are employed at 3 months, compared to baseline.

- Living arrangements

	Baseline	3 months
By myself	0%	11%
Grandparents	11%	33%
Parent(s)	78%	44%
Partner	11%	11%

There are a number of changes when it comes to where the young men live, with one living alone and a higher number living with grandparents 3 months after joining the project.

Case studies of statistics for 4 young men in the NEYDL project over a period of one year.

[The young men filled in a survey at points 0 (baseline, when they joined a project supporting young fathers), 1 (at 3 months), 2 (6 months) and 3 (one year)- the cases have been given pseudonyms to not identify the young men]

Leo

Leo was aged 16-18 during the year he was asked to complete the survey. He lives with his mother and is in a relationship with the mother of his child. He has one child and sees the child most days consistently across the time points. He rates his parenting as 10 for the first three time points, and 7 at the one year follow up.

He was working towards qualifications in construction when he started attending the project, but by six months, he is employed for 16 hours per week instead.

His responses to questions about his life and relationships showed that although he felt positively about his relationship with the mother of his child at the start and end of the year, they experienced difficulties at the 6 month point (where he rated his satisfaction with the relationship as 4, decreased from 9). The 6 month point saw his perceptions of many aspects of the relationship become more negative, for example, this is the only point where he agrees that “the mother of my child makes comments that put me down”, he felt she didn’t understand how he feels, and he strongly agrees that he “has trouble believing everything she says.” He is also undecided about how well they communicate. This negative period is reflected in it being the only point he disagrees that he has clear aims for the future and that it is easy to stick to them. Other responses around confidence, remaining calm, solving problems, achieving things and feeling comfortable with who he is are consistent and mainly positive.

Some areas showed clear improvement over the year. One key area where there is significant improvement is optimism about the future. When asked at the point he started to engage with the project, Leo rarely felt optimistic about what the future held, this increased to often at 3 and 6 months, and to ‘all of the time’ by the one year point. He also felt he was often able to think clearly as opposed to ‘some of the time’ when was first asked.

Other areas changed over time but at 1 year were the same as baseline, changes did not seem to correspond with the negative feelings related to his relationship with his child’s mother.

He felt useful and that he was dealing with problems well some of the time. He often felt good about himself and felt relaxed all of the time.

Across the year, Leo felt consistently that he often had energy to spare, was able to make up his mind and was interested in new things. The challenges he was facing in his relationship didn’t impact on these aspects of his wellbeing.

At the beginning of the year, Leo felt interested in other people all the time, which decreased to some of the time and then settled at often by the end of the year. Similarly, he felt close to other people and felt loved only some of the time by the end of the year, compared to often at the start.

There was a gradual decrease in feeling cheerful through the year, starting at all of the time, then often at 3 and 6 months, and down to some of the time at one year. Leo was feeling confident all of the time initially and then consistently often from 3 months follow up to 1 year.

Harry

Harry was aged 17-18 during the year he was asked to complete the survey. He was not in a relationship when he started to attend the project and by one year is in a relationship with someone who is not the mother of his child and completely satisfied (10) with how things are going. He lives with his mother and her partner. When he came to the project, he was working towards qualifications, but at one year he is instead employed for 16 hours per week.

Harry has daily contact with one child (increased from no contact when he joined the project and 1 hour per week at 3 and 6 months after that) and he rates his parenting as 7. He doesn't see his second child due to conflict between his and the mother's families.

During the year, he has never felt that the mother of his child understood how he felt, he was consistently unhappy with how they communicated and found it difficult to share negative feelings with her or ask her for what he wanted, although there was an improvement at one year where he agreed he could express his true feelings to her after selecting strongly disagree at the first three time points. In a slight contradiction to this, he felt strongly at one year that the mother often refuses to talk about problems, after strongly disagreeing with this at baseline, 3 and 6 months. At baseline and 1 year he felt the mother sometimes made comments that put him down, although there was improvement during the year.

He had clear goals and aims for his future across the period and although he initially found it hard to stick to them, at one year, he felt strongly that he could stick to them. When he started attending the project, he was not confident about dealing with unexpected events, and didn't feel he could stay calm or manage thoughts and feelings, but a year later he felt confident and able to face difficulties calmly and manage his emotions. He always felt he could find solutions to problems and went from undecided to agreeing that he could achieve what he wanted. At one year, he was still undecided if he was comfortable with who he was but that was an improvement on his initial negative answer.

Harry was already often optimistic about the future at the start of the year but this increased to all the time at the one year point. At that stage he was also often feeling useful (increased from some of the time) and always feeling relaxed and able to deal with problems well (increased from some of the time).

From rarely thinking clearly and feeling good about himself when he started attending the project, after one year this increased to often.

When Harry first came to the project he rarely felt loved, close to other people or confident but by the one year follow up, this had changed to all of the time and he was often feeling cheerful rather than just some of the time.

Harry feels he is always interested in new things, often has energy to spare and can make up his mind some of the time. These aspects of his wellbeing didn't change over the year.

The only area of wellbeing which declined over the year was that Harry went from being interested in other people all of the time to some of the time.

Kieran

Kieran was aged 17-19 during the year he was asked to complete the survey. Kieran wasn't in a relationship during the year his responses were collected and was living with his parents. He has been working towards qualifications for the whole period, completing NVQ level 2 in plumbing and working towards level 3 after one year.

He has one child. When he started attending the NEYDL project, he was seeing his child twice a week, but after 6 months, he was not seeing the child because the "mother of the child has prevented contact", at one year, the situation had been resolved and he was seeing his child once a week.

There is a lot of variation in Kieran's responses to the statements about his relationship with the mother of his child, with the relationship appearing to deteriorate as the year went on. His feelings about whether he could express his true feelings to the mother, ask for what he wanted, believe what she told him, and his satisfaction with how they communicate were more negative at one year than at the start, with some variation in between. There was an improvement in Kieran's perception of the mother's readiness to talk about problems and despite some variation through the year, at one year he felt she didn't say things to put him down. He is still undecided if she understands how he feels and if he can share negative feelings with her.

Kieran consistently agreed he has clear aims and goals for the future but always felt undecided about whether he finds it easy to stick to them. Initially he was not confident about dealing with unexpected events and staying calm when facing difficulties but at 6 months and one year he did feel confident. After one year, he also felt he could manage his thoughts and feelings and achieve what he wants, an improvement from undecided when he first engaged.

At one year, he was undecided if he is able to find ways forward when facing problems compared to 3 and 6 months when he felt he could.

Some areas showed improvement over the year. Kieran often felt optimistic at one year, as opposed to some of the time when he joined.

There was a big improvement in Kieran feeling interested in and close to other people – from rarely when he started with the project to all of the time at one year. He also felt he could make up his mind and felt cheerful all of the time at one year (up from often and some of the time respectively at point 0). At one year he was also feeling more loved, from rarely to some of the time.

Other areas changed over time but at 1 year were the same as when Kieran joined the project. Kieran often feels useful, relaxed, and interested in new things and believes he deals with problems well. He thinks he thinks clearly some of the time but still feels good about himself all of the time.

Kieran reported feeling confident all of the time at each of the four time points when he completed the survey.

One area of wellbeing that declined slightly was having energy to spare from all of the time initially, to rarely at 3 and 6 months and often at the one year follow up point.

Charlie (no data for 6m)

Charlie was aged 15-16 during the year he was asked to complete the survey. Charlie has one child who he has had regular weekly contact with throughout the period. He lives with his parents and is working towards GCSEs. He was not in a relationship at baseline and one year although was at 3 months.

There have been improvements in his relationship with the mother of his child when it comes to expressing his true feelings, including negative ones, talking about problems and trusting her, although he is undecided about how satisfied he is with their communication.

Charlie doesn't feel that the mother of his child makes comments to put him down but finds it hard to ask for what he wants and doesn't know if she understands how he feels about things.

Charlie has consistently felt that he has clear aims for future although when he joined the project, he was undecided if he could stick to them, at one year he felt he could. He was always confident he could deal with unexpected events.

During his one year attending the project, Charlie responses to key wellbeing statements changed from undecided to agree: and at one year he feels he can remain calm in difficult situations, achieve things he wants and he feels comfortable with who he is.

Charlie is, however, undecided if he has the skills to manage thoughts and feelings or think of ways forward when confronted with a problem.

There were small improvements in different aspects of Charlie's wellbeing, for example, he went from rarely having energy to spare and feeling good about himself to some of the time.

Other areas which improved from 'some of the time' to 'often' were how well Charlie deals with problems, how useful, cheerful, confident, able to make up his mind and close to others he felt.

The biggest increase was from rarely being interested in new things when he joined the group to often being interested at one year.

Charlie felt relaxed and that he could think clearly some of the time throughout the year, and often felt optimistic about the future and interested in other people.

Summary of the survey data

Overall, the survey data demonstrates positive improvements within the young men's lives during their time within the project. When examining the key areas (relationships, wellbeing, skills) the young men all show they have made positive gains in these areas. Of particular note are the increased number of young men from baseline to 3 months who are working towards a qualification and the increase of young men who have access to their children- both increased education and access to their children are likely to be factors which enable young men to develop and improve their lives. The case studies show that the lives of the young men are often complex and not linear trajectories, but rather can fluctuate. In spite of circumstances and events that can knock young men off course, the case studies show that overall positive improvements were to be found which is highly important and positive not just for the young men themselves but for their children too.

2.3. Visual methods

Visual methods are often used as elicitation tools (meaning they are aides for encouraging discussion, often in interview or focus group settings). They have been used with young men who are fathers previously in this manner (see Hanna and Lau Clayton, 2012). Within this evaluation, we used the tools as an opportunity to track the changes/progress within the young men's lives as they worked with the NEYDL project. Visual methods have not been used in this way with young men before, but we were keen to offer a non-verbal or written means for the young men to share and the findings from these tools are detailed below.

Number of visual methods entries (e.g. baseline =1, 2 entries= 2 time points etc)	Number of young men who have completed these
1 entry	8
2 entries	3
3 entries	2
4 entries	4

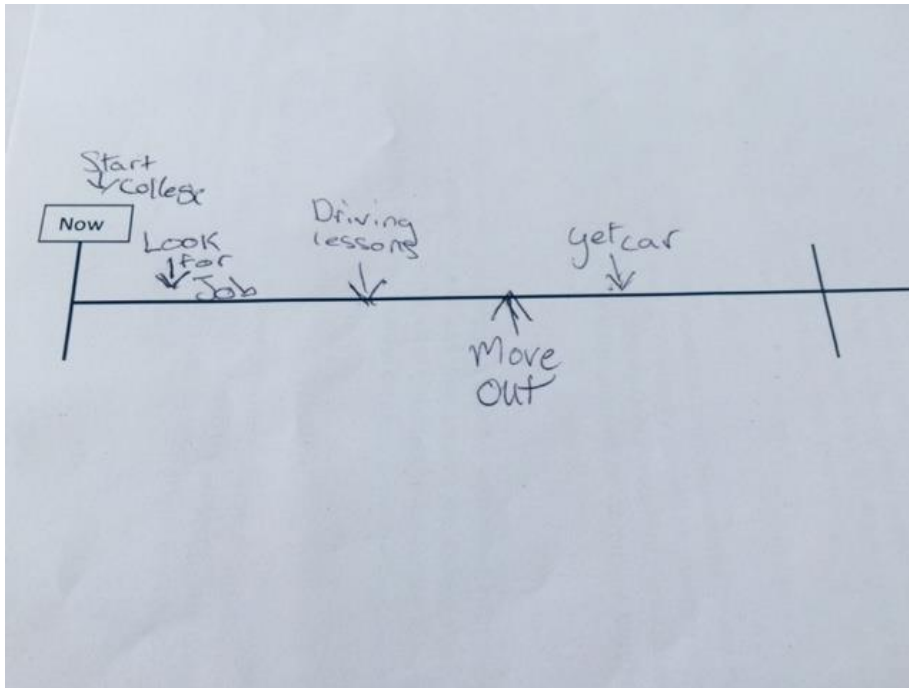
We therefore had 16 young men who had completed visual methods, totalling 32 pieces of data. Of these 8 had only completed the baseline, thus making it impossible to make any assessment of changes over time. The analysis therefore focuses on the remaining 8 young men and the 24 pieces of data they generated.

Key themes from the visuals

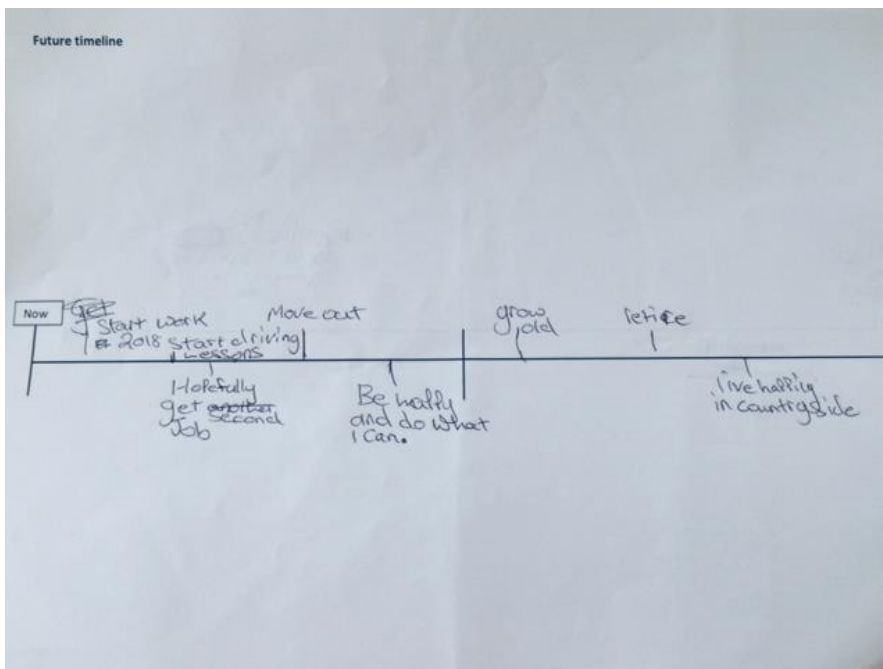
A number of key aspects were found in common across the visual methods data, these are; Commitment to traditional goals; The importance of the relationships within the project; Improvements in self.

Commitment to traditional goals

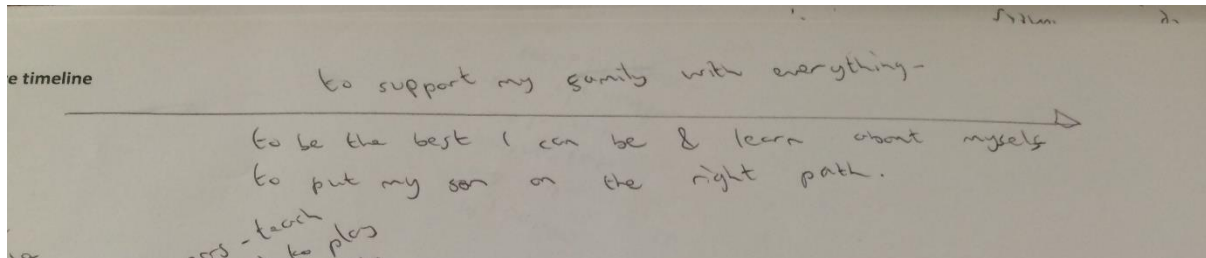
Within their future timelines, the young men often demonstrated a strong commitment to traditional life goals. Whilst occasional aspirations such as 'win the lottery' appeared, most of the content within the future timelines were focused around quite traditional goals. Learning to drive, employment, independent living including buying houses, getting married, having more children were all featured on the young men's future timelines. Over time, some of the young men were more able to attribute timings to some of these aspects, but for most it was seen as a project for the next 10-20 years.



The timeline below is from the fourth timepoint (a year after being in the project), more wellbeing focused ideals can be seen, such as ‘be happy and do what I can’ and ‘live happily in the countryside’. This shows a shift for some from the pragmatic or material goals (cars, jobs, houses) or relational goals (marriage, parenting) into considering desired states. This seems to fit with the way in which the young men showed improvements in their own sense of self through engaging with the project in our findings from the questionnaire data.



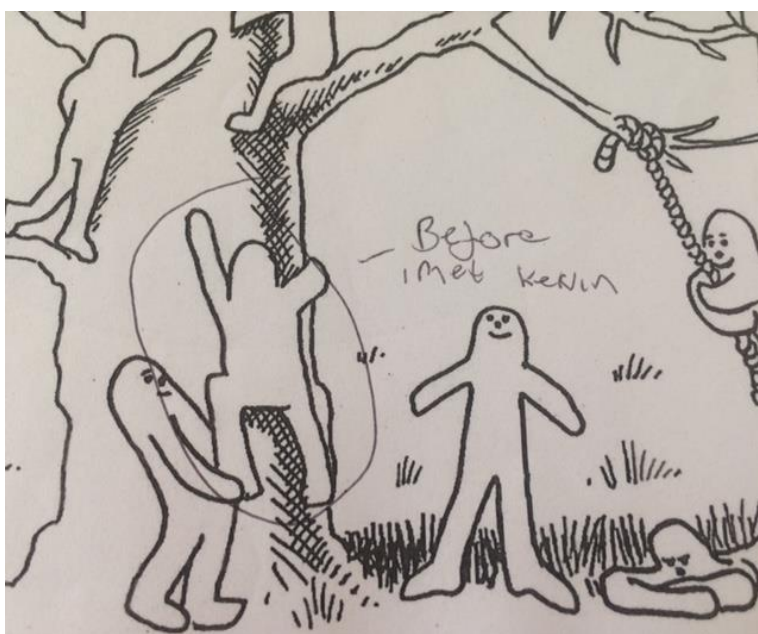
Whilst most young men filled in their timelines as in the examples above, some chose to provide an overarching goal for their lives that should guide the achievement of the more concrete aspirations they had. For example, the timeline below shows that a young man chose to include at the top of his timeline his 'bigger picture';



That the young men were committed to 'traditional' life goals also reinforces the importance of the key aspects that the NEYDL project is focusing on (skills, relationships, wellbeing) given that gaining employment, buying houses and having a couple relationship with children is central for these young men.

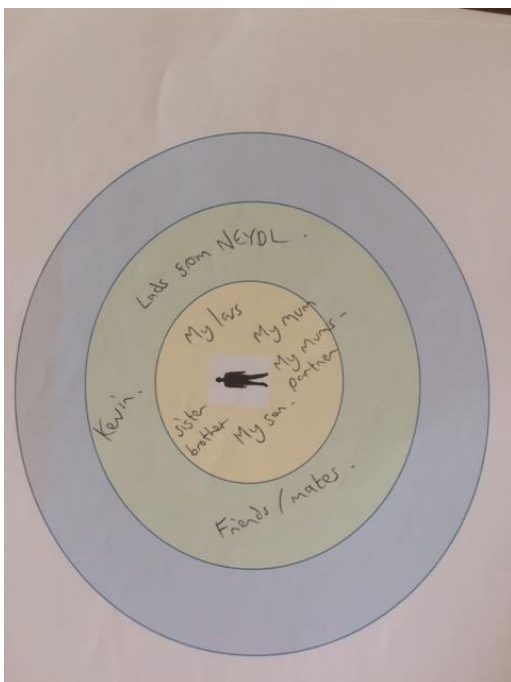
The importance of relationships within the project

Most of the young men included the project workers and/or the other young men they had met through NEYDL on their visual methods. Most commonly this was in the relational maps but the project also appeared on the 'Blob trees' and in the 'Timelines'. The project was therefore seen as highly important to the young men, and many detailed on their visual resources the direct before and after impact of the project. For example, in the two examples below young men demonstrated how their lives were different before they met the project worker at NEYDL (Kevin);





The group therefore was seen to create a new set of relationships and bonds within the lives of the young men. Whilst the project was keen to focus on the improvement of relationships for the young men, this was primarily focused around existing relationships and parenting relationships. The NEYDL project, and particularly the young dads group within that work, has however enabled young men to create new connections with others, both the project workers but also with other young men.



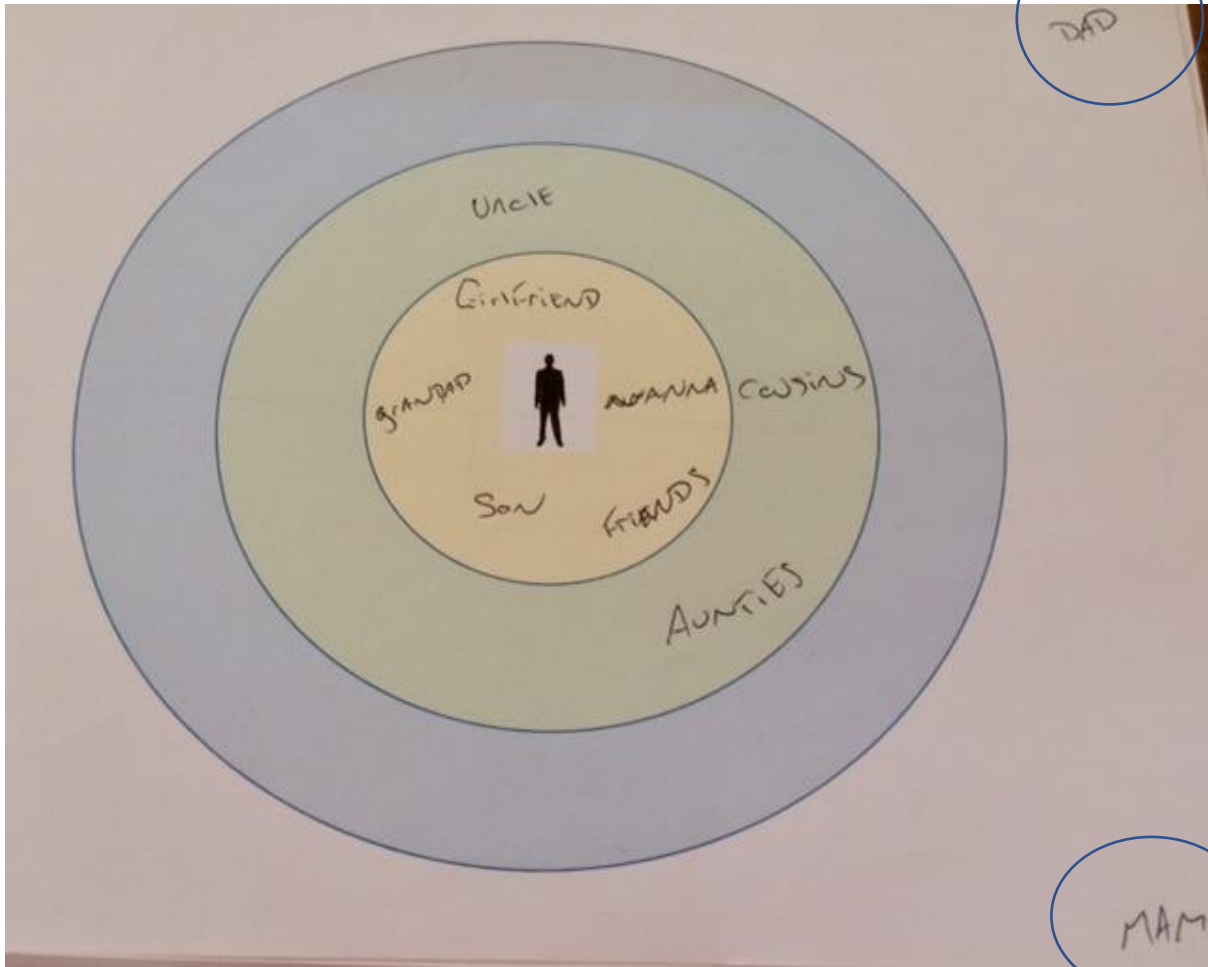
The project workers and the other young men were often assimilated quickly into the relational maps of the young men, often being seen to be as close as other existing friends.



The group was then seen for some as being 'like a family', creating closeness between the young men. Using the visual aspects allowed for this improvement/creation of relationships to be documented and demonstrates how the project has been important in facilitating positive changes in the lives of the young men by offering them new opportunities for social interaction (with their peers) and role modelling (with the project staff).

Other relationships outside the project were seen to be more fluctuating for the young men, which perhaps further highlighted the importance of the project as offering a stable place. For some young men their visuals shows that more people were included in their relational maps by the end of year 1, detailing that they perhaps feel more close to more people. For others, changes in other aspects of their lives, such as getting stable permanent work, meant that colleagues became a feature of the map where as they were absent at the outset of the young persons joining with the project.

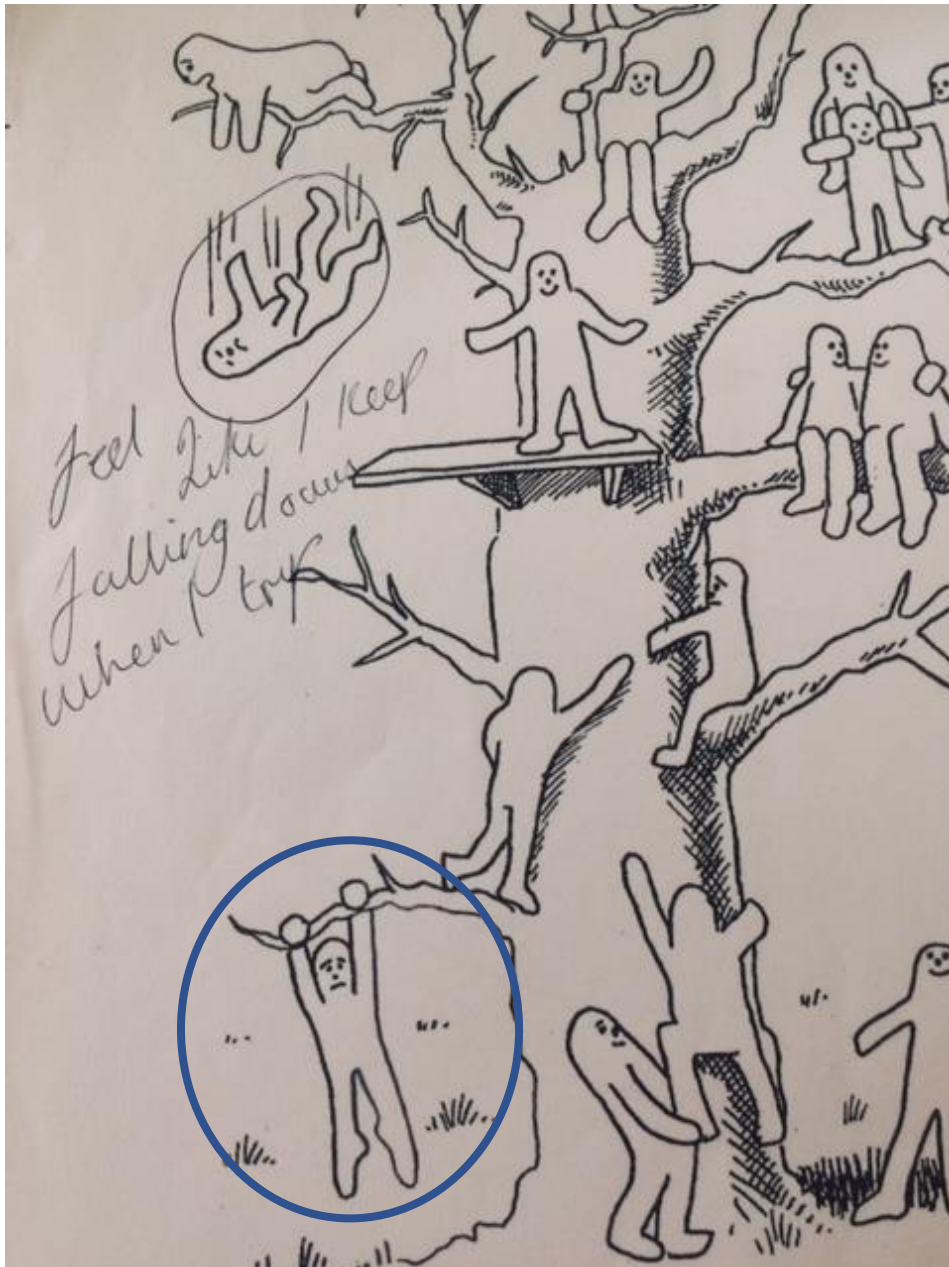
For others however, the relational maps particularly showed that they had ongoing issues with some relationships. The example below shows how problems with relationships can be depicted using the space of the map, where people are ostracised to the outer edges of not only the map, but the page (see highlighted circles). For this young person, their parents did feature more closely (in rings two and three) on the baseline relational map, but over time those relationships have perhaps deteriorated;



The project therefore provides a place that allows new relationships to flourish and supports young men to develop in their existing relationships or support them when such relationships face challenge or difficulties.

Improvements in self

The visual tools also provide insights into how the young men noted changes in their own wellbeing, self-esteem or confidence. These changes were not always dramatic, but could be seen to be important steps forward for the young men. The example below shows how one young man, in his baseline visuals, described feeling negative about life. Yet, by the second set of visuals he had selected the circled figure. Whilst the figure selected at point 2 is still overcoming challenges, there is a resilience to be found in 'hanging on'. Such improvements, from feeling like they are falling (and failing) to 'hanging in there', can be significant for these young men in the context of their lives which are often changeable and challenging.



Similarly, other young men talked about negative features of their lives that were ultimately seen to be improving over the course of their visual data pieces. In the example below, a young man talks in his baseline entry about 'not feeling like he has many friends' and depicts this with a sad faced character on the 'blob tree'. Yet by the follow up visuals, he had picked a much more positive character and his relational map details the closeness of friends (of different types/groups) who had been lacking from his maps at baseline.

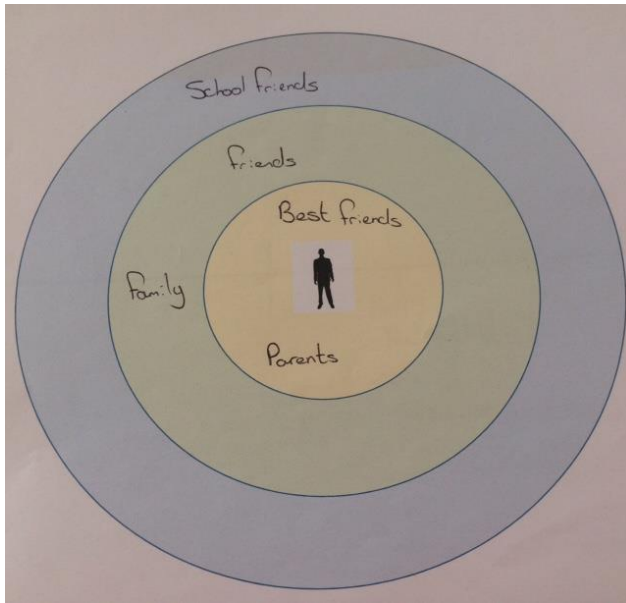
I dont feel like I have many friends at the moment -



Baseline



Follow up



The visuals therefore provide a useful means to understand how the young men may be feeling about themselves at various points in time. Positive changes were noted within the young men through the pieces of visual data, this was particularly notable around relationships as discussed within the section above, but also young men reported changes in their mood or feeling through the characters they selected in the Blob tree and the story that the visual components together detailed. Some of these changes could be perceived as being small. This is however relative, and as was detailed in the questionnaire case studies- the young men's lives often do not follow a linear progression, rather the contexts of their lives intersect, and this can create new conflicts or challenges. This is the context that the project is working in, and positive improvements should be resultantly viewed in relation to this.

Summary of the visual methods data

The visual methods data for this evaluation adds another layer to our understanding of the project and the impact it may have on the lives of the young people it works with. From the analysis of the 'Blob tree', Relational map and Timelines (past and future), some important changes in the young men since they joined the NEYDL project can be identified. Many of the young men have traditional ideal futures, wanting work, homes, families, intimate relationships. The projects focus on developing skills within the young men is therefore highly positive and coalesces with these aspirations. Work to improve both employment and education skills, but also 'softer' interpersonal skills (including around parenting and relationships) seems highly relevant to what the young men are aiming for. Some young men include 'desired states' in their ideal futures, showing that for some, thinking about happiness and contentment has been possible since they joined the project.

The visual tools have been particularly important in highlighting the positive changes to relationships that the young men have experienced since they joined the project. Many of the young men include the project staff and other young men from the young fathers group on their relational maps or chose to focus on their feelings in relation to since they joined the project in their 'Blob trees'. The group can be seen to have given many a sense of community

and family. How this will continue overtime remains to be seen; some young men have not included the project staff in later maps, perhaps demonstrating their reliance and need for support from that person has diminished. Relationships with other family members and friends can for the most part be seen to have improved for most of the young men in their visual tools. There are some exceptions, and this again reflects the lives of the young men. It is therefore important that the project continues to work around relationships and to offer support to young men who may be experiencing difficulties in relationships with their families and friends, particularly if this could lead to further vulnerability for the young men (e.g. homelessness).

The visuals have also provided insights into improvements in the overall wellbeing of the young men, with most showing positive steps (particularly on their Blob trees). Feeling good is more frequently cited as the reason for the selection of a positive character in the later (6 month- one year) timepoints for the visual data. This would correlate with the survey data detailed above, where improvements in the wellbeing of the young men could be seen overtime. For some young men, these changes may be incremental and appear as relatively small, but in the context of the issues they may be facing or the challenges they have overcome, such steps should still be seen as positive.

2.4 Interviews and focus groups

2.4.1. Participant Interviews: The young men's voices

The sections below detail the views of the young men who were part of the NEYDL project. Their focus group data has been broken down into key themes, and through these themes all aspects of the project has been examined.

Referrals and expectations of the project

Referrals

Young men came into the project through a variety of routes. Some were sign posted by other agencies (such as projects they were working with already, such as young carers groups or through school settings), others through individual workers (such as connections or family nurse partnership) who were already involved with the young men.

'I've got a connection worker and my son had just been born and I went to see my connection worker and asked if she could like find us a young dads group...and the connection worker said I've sent an email to the project workers and he's going to email back...then he came out to the house and like sat down and talked to me and me mam and we were there for an hour talking and he was explaining what they were doing and what he does and everything' (P2)

The quote from Participant 2 demonstrates how some young men were wondering if a project to support them as young fathers did exist, but only through support from workers were they able to link to the NEYDL project. Young men may therefore be wanting to engage with projects for young age fatherhood but for some finding out about them or finding a project in their locality may be a challenge. This does however reinforce the need for work such as NEYDL.

Existing projects, such as the Young women's Outreach Project (YWOP- which is NEYDL sister project) were also noted as means for connecting with the project, primarily through mother of the child being involved in YWOP already. Some young men also mentioned social services linking them to the project. Referrals into the project therefore came from a variety of sources, demonstrating the reach of the project even within the early phase of its work and the perceived need among a variety of workers and settings for supporting young men who have children in the Gateshead area.

Expectations of the project

Some of the young men reported being worried that the project would be similar to school and that it would be strict;

‘At first I thought it would be like strict and like school, but it’s not. They let you chill’ (P3)

‘Like the first time I met [project worker], like when he came round and met for the first time, I thought “oh, he’s going to be one of these teacher people. I was sitting there going, oh no” (P2)

Some young men reported being nervous about the other people they might meet, particularly in the young fathers group aspect of the project;

‘The people, I didn’t know what they were like’ (P6)

‘I just thought it was going to be like full of like old, older people, but it’s not’ (P4)

The young men were therefore a bit worried that the group may be comprised of people who they did not identify with (such as older dads), demonstrating the potential nerves that young people may feel about entering group settings for the first time.

Some young men had no expectations of what the project might be like but remained open minded to trying it and the first contact with the project worker was often reported as key to brokering any nervousness about entering the group setting or to accessing individual support.

Thoughts about project staff

The project staff were reported as key to the success of the project by the young men. Some found that they were able to find a positive role model within the project staff;

‘my dad hasn’t been there but the project worker has, so I look up to him as a dad’ (P2)

The project staff were viewed as being skilled at the work they do, and this was viewed positively by the young men;

‘he [project worker] definitely knows his stuff’ (P1)

‘he’s the man’ (P4)

Having someone to talk to was seen as an important part of the project, and the project workers were seen as playing a central role within this;

‘He’s [project worker] just there to talk to really, he’s just someone that if you need to get out of the house and talk, he’s there’ (P5)

Treading a fine line between friendship and support was seen to be achieved by the project workers, and the young men appreciated this;

‘He’s like I don’t know, he’s funny but he can also be reliable you know, if you want like and if you need help with something he’ll try find the help for you, he helps on the serious side as well’ (P4)

The project initially started with one worker, but a second worker joined the project in the first year and this was also deemed to be positive for the project;

‘I think when [project worker] like first came in, its just like, he’s really just fitted in straight away’ (P2)

The young men therefore only had positive things to say about the project staff, when asked about gender (given that both workers are male) the young men felt it was more about characteristics of the workers and ensuring that people were enthusiastic and approachable was seen as being the most important aspects. The project workers were seen to play a number of roles within the project, including as role models, confidantes, linking the young people with other services for help and advice, providing support and providing humour and friendship to the young men.

Positives of the project

The offer

NEYDL was seen as offering a variety of activities and support for the young men, which was viewed as positive. Young men reported getting help with their education;

‘I think [project worker] has been pushing my education along a bit because I’m not in school and he knows the person that’s like in charge of what I’m supposed to be doing and that and he’s been like bumping into her and he’s been, I think he’s been pushing things along’ (P5)

Others had received support with seeking or gaining employment;

‘They help you with your CVs and stuff, like say if you need help on your CV to help do that for you’ (P3)

The activities and support were seen as being well considered and the young men felt that they were included in the plans and ideas for things that may be being considered within the project;

‘There is always something going on...he plans in advance, he talks to us about everything first as well. That is important because we’ve also got a say in what happens’ (P1)

The young men had also been involved in activities that they would perhaps not ordinarily had opportunity to try out, for example doing baking;

‘We’ve had a bakery class’(P1)

‘We made bread...I gave me ma the bread’ (P2)

Learning skills was viewed as being positive as well as something the young men enjoyed and approached with humour;

‘you can learn stuff so like with the first aid you’re learning how to like save someone’s life and then with the cookery you’re learning how to save your own life by cooking’ (P3)

Even when they were not engaging in specific activities, the young men felt that the project was offering them something they would not have ordinarily in their lives;

‘...It’s nice to have a place to meet up, a secure place like this where we’ve got our own space’ (P1)

Positive changes as a result of the project

All of the young men were able to identify things that had changed in their lives since they became involved in the NEYDL project. For some these changes were seen to be quite substantial;

‘I’ve changed a lot. I just used to be all over the place all the time, I used to be fighting, drinking and everything, but now I stopped all that and ever since I’ve started here, I’d say I’ve completely changing. I don’t care about anything about me, al what I want is to look after me family and that. Because I was going round just looking after myself and looking after me pals and everything but now I look after my family more than anything else’ (P2)

Other young men also felt that the project had given them this positive focus on their identities as fathers and therefore on their family life;

‘I feel a lot more proud when I take my daughter out now’ (P4)

‘That’s what the group is for, to have other young fathers that you can just bond with and make friends’ (P3)

For some young men the changes they could identify were about what the project brought to their lives, the positive addition it had created for them;

‘I was going to work and coming home and doing nothing and plus my mates were like up and down the country doing uni and stuff like that so I didn’t really have honestly anyone to talk to...but when I found out about this it was like I took it as like a really good opportunity to meet new people and talk and that’s definitely help me because I’m not even exaggerating I was bad and I’m not really an emotional person really’ (P1)

Despite social isolation often being associated with older people, young men such as the participant above, are often isolated and lacking people to talk to. A number of the other young men felt that the positives of the project was around giving them other people to talk to and engage with;

'I've actually get out of the house' (P3)

'I was like shy at first but now I'm not' (P6)

'I've got more friends' (P4)

Some of the young men felt that their families could also identify positive changes in them as a result of engaging with the project, and this had positive impacts on their family lives as a whole;

'Me mas has, she's seen a change completely, me behaviour, the way I act and everything...Me Ma's more laid back now since I started coming here. She gives me more responsibility for myself, she's got confidence now since I came here' (P2)

Overall the young men felt the project had been a positive addition in their lives, and the the project, and specifically the young fathers group, was seen to be giving them new opportunities to build friendships, develop their social skills (including overcoming shyness) and to find new places and spaces to go to. The changes that had resulted were then seen to have improved the lives of the young men; 'I'm a lot happier' (P4).

Things they would like to change

Despite the young men feeling that the project had been positive for them in terms of improving their lives and linking them with the project workers who provided a number of forms of help, support and advice, they were able to identify areas which they felt could be improved or changed about the project. More activities was seen to be an area that they felt the project could improve on, offering them opportunities to do physical activity was for example a common request;

'More football. More sport' (P6)

'I'd like to do more exercise' (P4)

Being able to get outside more and spend time doing outdoor based pursuits was also highly requested by the young men;

'Yes being like, just outdoor activities. Because normally it's like we're stuck in here' (P3)

'I think there could be more of that like, going out a bit more...I think we do have plans coming up of what we want to do' (P1)

The young men did note that plans were underway for a camping trip and for a barbeque so some of these 'wishes' about activities were already in the pipeline at the time of the interview.

Early encounters with the project staff often involved playing pool with the young men, and a number of them requested the return of going out for games of pool;

'We used to go to pool' (P2)

'Like a snooker hall' (P1)

Some young men also felt that they would like more time at the project, particularly at the young fathers group;

'For me personally more than one day a week. Maybe just one extra day because the majority of the time I'm working' (P1)

Ideas around improvements therefore mostly focused on the idea of 'more', both in terms of time but also a greater number of activities and the opportunity for different experiences. Overall however, the project was not seen as needing any changes to the organisation, staffing or general ethos of the work. The young men were all very happy with the project and felt they were gaining a lot from it, as one young man describes; 'I'd give it eleven out of ten' (P2).

Summary- Young men's views

The young men came into the NEYDL project through a variety of referral routes and all praised their initial contact with the project, seeing the staff as welcoming and friendly. Many noted their nervousness about joining the group for the first time but were put at their ease by the staff and now felt that the group was a safe place for them. They enjoyed the friendships they had made with other young men as well as the activities they had been involved in during the group sessions. The project staff were seen to support the young men with a variety of avenues of their lives and having someone to talk to and to rely on was seen as hugely important for them. Some felt that the project workers had become role models for them and that the group was like a family to them now. Many could identify changes in themselves as a result of attending the project, with feeling more confident, less shy, having more friends all being important changes they shared within the focus groups. Some felt it had given them greater focus and that they were prouder of their fatherhood identity since joining the project. Aspects that they would like to change about the project were minimal, more time in the group and more activities being the key aspects they would like to see. Overall, their views were that it was highly positive project and was now an important part of their lives.

2.4.2. Views of the project workers

Reflections on Year One

The project workers identified that their core work was around supporting the young men one to one, with a variety of issues (such as child protection meetings, benefits, housing, parenting skills) as well as running a group for the young men to come together each week. The group was something the workers were initially a bit cautious about

‘I guess it was set up as a bit of a kind of peer support group really and I kind of, I was really careful, I was hesitant about setting up a group, partly because I was frightened about the idea of putting 8 young men in a room really, especially as it hadn’t been done in Gateshead’ (PW1)

Despite any concern about the group setting, the workers both felt that it had been a really successful part of the project and had proved to be a useful vehicle for offering courses and training for the young men as well as giving them chance for social and fun activities too. The group was seen as being an organic and evolving setting that the workers felt had been fruitful in creating new relationships for the young men;

‘What’s been lovely I think is some of the relationships that we’ve developed...we’ve got some really obscure friendships that we just didn’t see coming, they’ve found some common ground there really’ (PW1)

The workers felt the group was something that the young men really get a lot of value from for the relationships, the informal learning and the opportunity to have space together;

‘they turn up every week, there’s a real sense of ‘this is something that I’m getting something from’ even if it is that informal learning about those conversations around the pool table’ (PW2)

Trust between the workers and the young people was seen as vital for enabling the work to develop, there was a strong understanding that young men often are viewed negatively by others and feel judged by such perceptions, and that the project needed to work against that backdrop. The young men were also seen as role modelling with the workers, and both of the workers felt it was vital that the young men had positive role models through the project that were both male and female;

‘Positive male role models for men who may not have had positive role models that can challenge them positively I think is extremely important...but it is also important to introduce positive female role model’s as well to come in and do some bits of work because some of the young men’s idea of gender, how they see women can be quite skewed if they’ve had a very dominant masculine upbringing’ (PW2)

‘that lack of males in their lives and lack of father figures and I’m not sure we play that role as father figures but maybe in their eyes we do’ (PW1)

The project was viewed as having impacted positively on the young men the workers have engaged with during year one. Changes that the workers felt had occurred within the young

men were seen to be numerous. For example, young men had overcome anxiety issues in order to join the group setting, the group was also seen to have helped with the social isolation that is seen to exist for many of the young men.

[One young man] he's completely and utterly isolated, he's having very little social interaction with any kind of peer group, there might be parents or online but actually no face to face interaction so that is evident in the group that is really important to them' (PW2)

Some of the isolation was seen to emerge from the geographies of the young men's lives, in that many of the young men felt unsafe on the estates they lived on, and therefore chose to limit their time outside. The group was therefore seen by the workers as providing a safe space to overcome such isolation and develop new relationships. Through time working with the group, young men were now feeling more confident to take their children out which was viewed as a positive impact for both the young men and their children.

Time has been spent working with the young men to encourage and facilitate them being able to talk and express their feelings, through role modelling and creating a 'safe space' for the young men in the group, the opportunity for the young men to be able to share and express themselves has been seen to be created. Whilst the young men may often be at different points in their journeys to/in fatherhood, the project staff identified that the young men learning to share these different experiences was important to the peer support and bonding that could be achieved within the group setting because the young men were all working towards the same goal of being good fathers;

'there's quite a few of them in different places, what we're trying to do is encourage them to share where they are as well and share where they're at 'cause some of them were at different places in the journey, so I think they being able to talk about that and discuss that is really important' (PW2)

Often some of the most insightful conversations between staff and the young men were found to be when they were driving too and from activities (such as the allotment project or before and after the group). The allotment, through working shoulder to shoulder, also gave further opportunities to challenge the young men about their views (such as about negative aspects of masculinity), to talk with them and to encourage them. The opportunity for new conversations was therefore seen as something positive for the young men and was having an impact in terms of the views of the young men and what would be tolerated within the group;

'I think you get very different conversations and discussions and what's interesting is I think is actually I get by surprised by sometimes where the challenges come from in the group you know where there's sexism or racism or homophobia and sometimes its challenged within the group, there is a kind of modelling going on there and that ownership of the group' (PW1)

The activities the young men had been involved in during the year were also seen as being beneficial for the young men. Outdoor activities were seen as offering health benefits, social

benefits as well as offering new horizons and ideas to the young men about what they could do. The project also aspired to get the young men out more, doing more cultural activities, seeing new things and raising the aspirations of the young men, for themselves and for their children. Developing work that would enable the young men to bring their children to activities and events at the project was also seen as a desire for the project going forwards, but this was seen as something which would require careful handling and management given that not all the young men had contact with their children.

Reflections on Year Two

‘the young men want to be seen differently and they feel differently now’ (PW1)

Year 2 of the project was seen to involve key development of the working of the project and changes in the work and the young men was evident to the project workers. There was seen to be greater control being taken by the young men of what they were involved in. For example, at the AGM for the board of trustees, young men wanted to join the board. There were two young men on the board already, but three more want to now join. There is an understanding now that the young men see themselves as ‘stepping up’ and what to be seen differently and have new roles within the project. The project is therefore being very much driven by the young men, they are consulted, they say what they need and want and the project workers are facilitating that.

‘...we ask the young men what they want from the programme and what would benefit them in attending the group’ (PW2)

The model of the project remains different from other services in this regard, and the service NEYDL offers is very much voluntary, e.g. young men choose to engage and there is no consequences of not engaging or disengaging. The workers have resisted any attempts to make attendance part of formal statutory processes any of the young men have been involved in (e.g. child protection plans). The focus by NEYDL is in supporting the needs of the young men first and being user led and this is what the young men need. The young men appear to value the acceptance they get by the workers and the project itself. Other statutory services do not necessarily approach working with young men in the same way so there may be different expectations from other services around what NEYDL might do (i.e. that attendance will be part of statutory processes for example).

As part of this, the young men have been more involved with other services this year, for example training social work students, doing awareness raising work about being a young dad, and interacting with other work, such as Street Law or parenting programmes. This was seen by the project workers as being an important part of the young dads challenging and influencing services and of the impact that this work can have going forwards.

‘...we work closely with Northumbria uni and have a programme we do where we get the social work students to think about young fathers and we co-facilitate that with the young dads’ (PW2)

There was however some caution related to academic work where the young men had been involved in telling their stories to a number of projects, and workers question whether this

was about giving information out but something that the young men would not get much back from.

The young dads group has also worked with more professionals during year 2, with people coming in to deliver training and activities, which has been seen to be a model that really works for the project and is very different as a model from other youth projects, including the sister project, YWOP.

‘We’ve used a lot of professionals this year and I think that’s been a really helpful model for us...we’ve been the consistent face and the fun bit but we’ve had a lot of people come in and that’s been really good’ (PW1)

At the celebration event that NEYDL held in spring, professionals shared stories of their perceptions being challenged about who young dads are and that was seen to be powerful. Professionals can be fearful of working with the young men initially, but their views change and they begin to see a lot of value in the young men and working with them.

The core group who attend the young dads group were seen to still value the opportunity to meet on a weekly basis. The group has seen the same faces over the last year, so questions around whether that progresses into something different remains. More recently a few new young dads have joined the group and that was reported to be a good experience for the project staff. The young men were very respectful and welcomed the new young men, even when they were from a different area which could have caused some geographic tensions to emerge. The youth centre that has been the main venue for work over the project is seen to work well for the group, although pushing the young men out of their comfort zone and into new spaces is an aspiration. This is something that may happen organically through the work with Children’s centres in South Tyneside (running a young dads and kids club) that is planned in the Autumn. The group is very much seen to be part of the lives of the young men who continue to attend each week. It is seen to be like a family for those young men and there is a strong friendship group now that they all value.

Both of the project staff identified a multitude of impacts that the project has had on the young men they work with. Impacts include, increased Functional skills (e.g. maths and English through baking); peer support; parenting skills (Caring for Children level 1 from Gateshead Learning Skills Council); increased self-esteem; communication and public speaking (to Social Work students); reduced social isolation. The celebration event the project held in the Spring was seen as a highlight of the year, and the desire for the young men to achieve and be recognised was evident in that event. A lot of behaviour changes from where young men started has been noted, and again this is evident through the activities and events they are now engaging in (i.e. with professionals).

‘There has been a lot of stepping up, we’ve seen a lot of maturity... I think some of the behaviour has a changed a lot from where we started’ (PW1)

There was also seen to have been more sharing within the young dads group setting this year, with more self-disclosure and a natural peer support setting for having more challenging and personal conversations emerging as the young men have good relationships with each other

and feel safe in the group space. Building on this peer ethos has been done through the Peer Research project the young men are currently undertaking, and there has been good investment by the young men in doing that work.

The young men's lives remain challenging. Relationship breakdowns remain a big issue that impacts quickly on contact with children. It is evident that 'quick wins' are not going to happen for the workers with the young men they work with, repeat crises are common in the young men's lives. Housing is a big issue, poor local authority offer for young men who are homeless means there is sofa surfing as a norm, young men rely on food banks and are unable to navigate the universal credit system. Due to cuts the Citizens advice bureau is unable to support many of the young men now. These are all things that are hard for the service to fix. NEYDL has become 'a stable place to engage with services' (PW1) for many of these young men.

Concerns around the service is that NEYDL is a small charity competing for limited funding, despite the fact that there is no alternative support of this kind for these young men. There is a lot of pressure of the two workers in the project and there is a danger of burnout if more staffing is not able to be brought in to cope with the demand and intensity of the work. Having students on placements and volunteers has helped with capacity in recent months and will hopefully be part of the sustainability of the work. The project would like young men to become volunteers and paid workers in the future (if the young men want to do that) to help expand the service into other areas in the North East;

'we want to be able to increase our reach, but by increasing our reach we want to make sure that we support the young dads to be part of that process as well... the future lies with the young people that we provide the service for' (PW2)

Challenges around capacity also come in cases around when they say no to working with young men. Examples where young men have requested to re-engage with the service, then have failed to do so, present situations around having boundaries about who to work with and when to tell young people that it will not be possible to work with them further. Time and resource needs to be utilised wisely in this context. It is seen to be difficult for the workers to give the young men the one-to-one attention they would like when capacity is stretched and there is worries around whether they get the same opportunities to build relationships with new referrals as they did at the outset of the project.

Considering relationships with other services is also seen to be important at this point for the workers, in that social care are keen to pass young men onto them, and NEYDL have to stand firm about being voluntary and that social care do not pay them to deliver courses and programmes for them. Whether the NEYDL needs to become more independent of referrals from the YWOP, in order to create a neater boundary for the young men is also something for further consideration going forwards. There is also questions around when the work ends, it appears to be long term work rather than a short-term engagement with the young men, which is perhaps a bit different from the vision at the outset.

'We know the young men will hit crisis point at least once, and it is likely they will hit crisis point again and again. It's a service that cant be short term' (PW1)

The project workers felt that NEYDL is giving fathers the opportunity to have safe, happy contact with their children and that the young men are supported in education/employment/health. Being separate and independent of any other statutory services and having relationships with the young men was at the core of what the project does and both the workers felt that the benefits and successes of the work derived from these goals and values.

Summary- Project workers perspectives

The project workers felt that the project is moving in a positive direction. The young men are now taking ownership of aspects of the work and are looking to take more responsibility in the group. There is a greater desire to achieve and be recognised by the young men. Whilst setting up the group had been a source of concern early in the project, it has become a highly valuable piece of work for the project. The group has also allowed peer support to occur as well as offering a setting in which other professionals can work with the young men and where other opportunities can be delivered to the young men. The work of the project remains time intensive, but the value of working in a relationship-based model that puts the young men at the centre of the work cannot be underplayed for the project staff. Trust between the young men and staff was seen as vital and had helped to facilitate positive role modelling by the young men with the workers. Concerns for the future are around funding, staffing and the sustainability of the work. The complexities of the young men's lives needs resource intense support that is not time limited but this creates a challenge for funding and operating such a service. Positive changes have however been seen in all the young men and positive outcomes in relation to statutory services, education or employment has reinforced the value of the work of NEYDL for the workers.

2.4.3 Stakeholder Interviews

General perceptions and views of the project

The stakeholders all had a positive impression of the project and felt that it was something for which there was a real need within the community. NEYDL was seen by those outside but looking in, as a project which was working successfully to improve the lives of young men in the area.

There was viewed as being a need to work with young fathers, who were seen by the stakeholders as often being overlooked and unsupported by other services and society more broadly.

‘health services don't collect information on young fathers, it's all about the young woman. I think the young men are basically out there isolated, coping with adult complex problems and that's not fair'. (ST3)

Young men were often seen as being incorrectly or routinely labelled as 'violent' or problematic,

'I think it's really good 'cause you know they can get the raw end of the deal and to have something that is specifically for males and you know, young dads and young lads then I think it's a great idea' (ST4)

The project was seen as being held in high regard by the young men and this was viewed as highly positive for stakeholders;

'what I've seen so far the engagement that those young men have with that project speaks volumes about how successful it is in terms of outcomes because actually if nothing else those young men have got somewhere to go and someone to talk to at least once a week and I think that's really valuable. I think from what I've seen certainly none of the young men I've spoken to have ever spoken anything but highly of the project' (ST2)

The staff team was viewed by the stakeholders as being central to the positive approach and success of the project. The relationships between the young men and the staff was seen as vital and stakeholders felt it was important not to underplay this. The staff were viewed as being important role models and all of the stakeholders commented on the dedication of the staff who were working in the project. There was seen to be 'genuine care' (ST5) between the project staff and the young men and this was viewed as a central ethos within the work that underpinned the approach to other aspects.

'I would just say that obviously projects like that are only as good as the people in it... I do think it's important to say that you know [the staff] makes that project what it is, it's their hard work and commitment' (ST2)

The project workers were noted as being very supportive to the young men, but also firm around what is acceptable and not acceptable, and not being willing to collude with negative behaviours by the young men.

Stakeholders also felt that they had often got a lot out of working with or interacting with the young men within the project;

'I really like all of them, I find them interesting and I hope that comes across. I try to be myself and I always put my own values out there and we just have a discussion about it... so it's been useful to me. I've found it great working with them, I think they've enjoyed it and have actually learned an awful lot about it' (ST5)

For some, this had been their first time working with this age group (older teenagers/young adults) and there had been some nervousness about engaging with the young men at first, due to uncertainty and negative perceptions of young men in society more generally;

I was possibly put off, I was possibly put on caution shall we say by the fact that they, I was expecting them to be difficult and you know because they, I got the impression that a number of them have spent a bit of time being excluded at school, found learning difficult and found classroom situations difficult so that put me a little bit on edge but with the support from [project worker] and actually the lads themselves it was fine, I mean there were, they're an interesting bunch and I mean that in the nicest

possible way. And also they haven't for various reasons which I don't know obviously haven't had a good time in education and general life, life benefits and I mean there was, but a number of them are quite sharp, quite bright and I really can't understand how they've ended up where they've ended up and if I can do anything to help get them out of it then I'll be more than happy. (ST1)

The project was very much seen to be working with the young men, allowing the young men to express their views and opinions, one stakeholder commented on how positive it was for young men to be on the board of trustees for the project, which was seen as very rare in a project of this type. The stakeholders felt the project was inclusive and welcoming, even for those who may find involvement challenging due to past experiences, the work was therefore seen as highly focused on the young men;

'the whole project is not just about a top down thing, it is about empowering the young men, it is about listening to them, it is giving them an opportunity to shape how the project goes in itself and I also really didn't appreciate how difficult some of these young men's lives are' (ST5)

Benefits and impacts of the project

The stakeholders all felt that the project had a number of benefits, both to the young men as individuals but also to society more broadly, although one stakeholder felt it was difficult to measure all the positive impacts of this type of project due to the diverse outcomes and the relative nature of some of these for the young men involved. The young men were seen to benefit from growth in their confidence and self-esteem as a result of engaging with the project and all of the stakeholders commented on this aspect.

'I think what I see is young men who are getting qualifications, who are building their confidence, again quite difficult to measure but you can see it in their faces can't you, they look pleased with themselves, that they've achieved something and you know again if that doesn't show them what they can achieve as a parent and as an adult then I don't know what does'. (ST2)

Improved skills around parenting was also noted by many as a key benefit of the project and something which is of benefit to future generations as well as the young men and their young families in the immediacy. Some of the stakeholders had witnessed the improved confidence among some of the young men and remarked on this. That young men were gaining confidence to gain contact with their children through formal channels was also seen as a positive impact of the project, and something which was beneficial for the young men but also for the children having their fathers present within their lives.

Learning was seen as a central benefit within the project, both in formal and informal ways. The young men were being seen to be offered opportunities to be involved in activities and experiences that they would not have otherwise had and which often took them out of their comfort zone. The experience of the new was seen as an important learning experience in and of itself;

‘One of the other aspects of it is the fact that I think that the opportunity which [the project workers] started with them on showing them a different life out there is possible, (ST1)

‘[the project has been] making them more comfortable in nature so that they might bring their children out and be able to bring them out in a responsible way’ (ST5)

A different future, raising aspirations and creating new opportunities for the young men through their involvement in the project was therefore seen as a major impact and benefit of the work by the stakeholders.

NEYDL was seen as giving young men the opportunity to be listened to, find new role models, as well as giving them the chance to be part of something and have some responsibility;

‘they started believing in themselves you know, just little things, getting them to do little tasks and then bigger things, and I think they’ve done amazing to be quite honest’ (ST3)

The young men were seen to have learnt a variety of ‘soft skills’ even when doing practical tasks. For example, when doing bush craft skills, the young men learning about trust, safety, respect and sharing with others. Similarly, beekeeping was seen as a useful way that the young men learnt about responsibilities and caring. As well as qualifications and informal learning, the project, and particularly the group was seen as allowing the young men to ‘let off steam’ (ST2), to have fun and just ‘be’ with other dads. The strong relationships between the young men and the chance to share peer experiences was noted as being highly positive.

The stakeholders felt that young men were also being given greater opportunity to contribute to their communities, to be part of society and offer something to it, rather than being viewed as ‘takers from society’;

‘Then there’s the young men themselves and what I see are you know very intelligent clever young men who have used that cleverness probably in a lot of ways that maybe, may have in the past and probably still do now to kind of protect themselves and behave in a certain way to survive and to get through things but actually they’re given more tools to sort of be perhaps a more obvious part of their local communities and society’ (ST5)

‘this project gives them a real chance I think to succeed again’ (ST2)

Work such as the young men training social workers of the future was seen as part of this impact on wider society and was seen as positive for the young men too; the young men were no longer the subject of social work, but contributing to social work practice, thus flipping the narrative around young men and social work. A number of the stakeholders noted the powerful positive impact that the project has on the professionals who come into contact with the young men and NEYDL.

Concerns and challenges for the future

The stakeholders were all keen to reinforce that they felt the project was hugely successful and that the work being delivered was of great benefit to the young men. Nevertheless, they could also identify areas for consideration or improvement within the project for the future. Funding was the most commonly mentioned concern by stakeholders. All of those interviewed stressed that they wanted to see the work continue and that more funding, to secure more staff and more hours was a key requirement for the long term future of the project.

‘I can’t say anything negative about it at all. I think it’s a well worthwhile cause and you know, the more they can get known and the more that they can get funding and the more staff they can do the better it will be for them’. (ST4)

Being able to expand the provision was seen as needed in order to reach a wider audience of more young men, given that the need for this work was seen as being established, being able to support more young men further was seen as an important next step for the work. Although some questioned how other young men would be reached to include them in the project.

‘More staff, more hours. I think more projects within the project because I think they’re in danger of, I don’t know where you go with that group once you get to a certain point because of course it’s the same young men and I know that they’re really aware of that, that they want to make sure they can move it on but they can only do that with funding so it becomes a bit of a vicious circle then and you’ve got to be able to offer new stuff haven’t you and it’s very difficult to be innovative without any money to be innovative’ (ST2)

Financial sustainability for the future was therefore seen as being a pressing question, some stakeholders posited the idea of peer support work being a potentially useful model to enable the project to roll out into other areas. Through including existing young men within the service to become peer supporters for others, a greater reach would be enabled but also young men would have a trajectory within the project themselves (such as becoming volunteers or training to be youth workers and ultimately to work within the project).

Some stakeholders worried about whether the early success of the NEYDL work meant that the project was growing too quickly. A number of the stakeholders felt that the project staff were beginning to be overstretched, the type of in-depth work that is being offered by the project was not something that was seen to be something achievable in less time, so as numbers of referrals increase then a stretch being felt was a concern by many.

‘I just think you know I think my only concern I suppose is getting too big too quickly and losing the reason we’re doing this...It’s about knowing your limitations I suppose as well’ (ST3)

Some stakeholders also discussed the relationship between the NEYDL project and its sister project, YWOP and how that work would continue going forwards so that NEYDL remained a service for the young men but complimentary to YWOP. There were some concerns that work

with young dads could be seen as a 'novelty' and it was important to overcome this to make the project sustainable. Others posed questions around whether the project potentially was too insular through working in the silo of 'dads' and around whether the project got the full picture around the 'otherside' of dads lives (such as the perspective of their partners or families). Although it was noted that the young men having something of 'their own' was vital. Whether greater information sharing between the two sister projects could support this holistic working was raised. It was also suggested that NEYDL being connected with YWOP was important for getting both sides of the young parent experience so considerations around this was seen as relevant.

Some stakeholders offered some ideas around what they would like to see the project focusing on going forwards. For some this was around activities, such as seeing the young men develop more outdoors work. Others felt that more formal education in the project would be useful, with a number of interviewees discussing inclusion of maths and English qualifications as something that would be fruitful in the future. Although it was noted that more formal education would need to be handled carefully to avoid 'taking the fun out of things' (ST3) and so that the young mens passion for learning was reignited. Any formal education needed to be around one-to-one work, rather than following the formula of statutory education that many of the young men had struggled with or been excluded from before. Longer term career planning for the young men was also seen as something which could be positive for the project. There was also a linked question around what will happen to the young men when they reach the upper age limit of the project (i.e. 25) and that considerations of what the young men move on to, and how that will happen needs considering further.

'I think the key aspect is to try and find out more about where it can realistically go and what they would realistically like to do. Sitting at home, nobody gets paid for playing on an x box' (ST1)

A number of the stakeholders said they would like to support the project more directly themselves and contribute their own skills to the project.

Summary: Stakeholders

The stakeholders interviewed all felt that the project was highly positive for the young men, and for the landscape of support for young people in the Gateshead area. The stakeholders had variable involvement with the project so provide a range of views on the project. The positive perception of NEYDL was unanimous and its impacts and benefits were seen to be many and varied. The young men were seen as positive to work with, and some stakeholders had changed their views as a result of the project. Growing confidence, self-esteem, new relationships, role modelling, gaining skills and qualifications were all seen as benefits to the young men as a result of their engagement with the project. Wider benefits and impacts to the children, communities and society were also seen to emerge from the work that NEYDL are undertaking. Concerns for the project focused primarily about sustainability, in terms of finances, as well as about the growth and development of the project going forwards (having

enough staff, not growing too quickly, thinking through relationships with other organisations such as YWOP). Some of the stakeholders could identify aspects they would like to see the project focus on (such as offering formal maths and English qualifications for the young men, more outdoors work, more career and future planning) much of which reinforced how NEYDL was seen by stakeholders as a one stop shop for young men who are fathers in Gateshead.

3. Conclusions

This evaluation of the NEYDL project has utilised a variety of data from the project in order to assess whether the project is effectively meeting its aims and what the areas for consideration and improvement are (if any). Through examining the views of the young men, project workers, key stakeholders as well as survey and visual methods data from the young men and monitoring data from the project, we are able to provide a holistic overview of the project within our conclusions. The survey data shows that there have been positive quantitative improvements within key areas of relationships, wellbeing and skills for the young men across the time points examined. After three months within the project more of the young men are working towards qualifications and an increased number had contact with their children. Through the case studies of the survey data across a one-year time frame, we can see that the young men are more content with their lives, although their paths are not linear. Whilst positive improvements did occur for all the young men, there are often setbacks in their paths and the challenging nature of young men's lives, and the events and uncertainties they deal with must be taken into consideration of any quantitative assessment of their lives in relation to this or any other services. We would advocate this case study 're-humanisation' of the statistics in depicting young men's lives as it gives a better sense of how wellbeing/relationships or other key measures may fluctuate over time and the importance of positive changes within these contexts.

The visual methods data (timelines/relational maps/Blob trees) provide important insights into not only how the young men have changed or improved since they joined the project, but also into how the aims of the projects fit effectively with the desires of the young men for their lives. The timelines show that the young men desire traditional futures (work, cars, buying houses, getting married, having more children) thus the work the project is doing around relationships and skills will be important in helping the young men achieve their goals and aspirations. The young men show improved relationships for the most part through their relational maps; time in the project is impacting on relationships positively. Although some issues with friend and family relationships are still visible (see recommendations). The young men also show more positive visual representations through their 'Blob trees' as time in the project progresses, thus positive impacts on their own sense of self and wellbeing are being found. The visual data confirms the data from the survey, and in turn this matches with the interview data from the young men themselves, so we can be confident that the positive impact of the project on the young men is robust.

From interviews with the young men, we can see that the project is held in high regard by all the young men. The participants all felt the project had given them a lot of positive aspects in their lives, new friends, role models, new opportunities, and they could identify changes in themselves as a result of the project. Their suggested improvements for the project revolved around more time in the group setting and more activities. The young men who were interviewed in year 1 all still attend the group, and the led researcher (EH) has spent many

hours with the young men over the course of this evaluation and from this time observing the relationships and interactions, the importance of the project for those young men should not be underestimated. Change is a relative concept, but the project has for some of the young men been wholly transformative.

The stakeholders we interviewed were as positive about the project as the young men were. Some stakeholders were sceptical about working with the project initially as they were unsure about working with young men who are fathers, but the project is changing the perceptions of other professionals through its work and the positive impact of the work is seen to extend outwards to those who engage in the work as stakeholders too. The stakeholders interviewed all felt that the young men had grown in confidence, self-esteem, improved their parenting, developed new skills as a result of the project. This is echoed by the changes the young men themselves report, and by the types of changes the project workers identify. Again, it is worth reiterating the complexity of some of the lives of the young men, and how important these changes may be within that context for them. Stakeholders remained concerned about funding for the project to secure its sustainability in the future, and about the workload of the project staff. The project staff echoed these concerns. There were other suggestions about things the project could develop from the stakeholders, including more formal education provision (maths and English) and including careers planning within the work (see recommendations).

From the data it is evident that the work of the NEYDL project is effective in supporting the young men who engage with the service. By the end of the two year evaluation, many of the young men in the group aspect of the work had been with the project since the start of the work. The commitment of the young men to the project is itself testament to their views of a service which is designed for and focused on them. The service has worked with in excess of 100 young men in the last two years and the monitoring data demonstrates the successes that have been achieved within those cases. Over the two years the project has become clearer about what it can and cannot do, the importance of remaining voluntary and relationship based has become more centralised in the work, and the opportunities that the project offers the young men have become more sophisticated. The young men themselves are now starting to lead and take control of aspects of the projects future.

It is evident that NEYDL is a one stop shop for the young men who use the service. The offer to those young men is varied. Personalised support focuses on key aspects around housing, benefits, skills, education, employment, parenting, relationship skills, and many of these areas are echoed in the themes of the activities in the group. The monitoring data demonstrates the breadth of issues that young men present to the project with. The common theme is of young men being parents or parents to be even when the issues they face may be different. Such commonality between the young men is proving valuable for the peer support in the group setting, where the young men are increasingly drawing on their experiences to support each other through the challenges they face as young men who are parents. This peer support is also enabling positive inclusion of new young men into what is now a tight knit group.

The lives of the young men are complex and difficult, many live in poverty, many face homelessness, and issues around domestic violence allegations (with young men as alleged perpetrators and victims) and involvement of statutory services around child protection remain frequent in the lives of young men who are fathers. They therefore need dedicated support, and the improvements that the NEYDL project is having within their lives, to strengthen their skills, improve their wellbeing, to guide them in having positive relationships, demonstrates how effective dedicated support can be. By helping the young men into education and employment, through giving them skills and meaning in their lives, young men are able to be productive contributors within society. Through helping young families come off child protection plans and establishing stable contact between children and their fathers the project is helping establish better futures for children. These aspects also impact on other services positively through saving money in social care, reduction of benefits or generating money through payment of tax and national insurance. Understanding these impacts more concretely may be useful for the project (see recommendations).

In conclusion, the NEYDL project is helping young men improve their skills, relationships and wellbeing. In doing so, the project is enabling young men and their children to have more positive futures. The softer skills developed, and the social impacts of the project, are many. The challenges the project faces going forwards are around its financial future, its capacity to deliver the current standard of work to as many/more young men who need its services, and to untangle the relationships with other services and organisations in order that the project is sustainable in continuing to deliver around its core aims and vision. The young people say they would give the project 'eleven out of ten', and the data we have collected for this evaluation supports that the project is highly effective in achieving its aims around supporting the lives of young men who are fathers or fathers to be in the North East.

4. Recommendations

1. The NEYDL project appears to offer a long-term support service for young men, thinking of the project in this manner and seeking future funding to facilitate this 'one stop shop' approach to supporting young men who are parents over the longer term appears fruitful
2. Keeping the relationship-based approach to working with young men appears to be central going forwards. Ensuring the project can deliver the service in the way it has begun, utilising an ethos of working *with* the young men appears to be a powerful mechanism for facilitating positive changes for the young men, will be central to continuing quality provision for this group of young people
3. Exploration of the Social Return on Investment (SROI) of the NEYDL project would be useful to document the financial impact of the project given the qualitative observations provided within the evaluation about the impact that the work is having
4. Sustainability of the project (in terms of funding but also staff capacity) would be a priority area for focusing on in the short to medium term for the project- building on the success of the project to reach more young men can only be achieved through input of the necessary resources. Formalised peer support work (see point 8) may also help with capacity issues in the longer term and with being able to undertake more activities or more time for the young dads group in the short term
5. Consideration of how more formal education (such as maths and English) could be integrated into and facilitated by the project would be useful. This could be part of longer term career planning with the young men. Utilising the future timelines visual method tool could help the project workers with this aspect of considering goals and aspirations about both work and family life
6. Work around relationships could usefully encompass family relationships as well as intimate partner relationships. Given the precarious nature of some of the young men's lives and the fragility of these relationships, work around communicating within the family group may be a useful consideration for the project to help support young men to stay in the family unit (where useful and possible for those young men)
7. Developing clear boundaries around work with other organisations may be useful for the project over the medium to longer term; how NEYDL works with, takes referrals from, offers services to other organisations may help with creating clarity about what work to be undertaken and managing capacity
8. Developing the peer support model further with the young men could offer positive opportunities for both the young men currently within the group, but also help the

project with expanding to other localities in the North East. What a pathway of young men becoming peer support volunteers through to paid peer workers in the project could be explored

9. Undertaking consultation with the young men around 'exit strategies' for the project may be useful. Whilst the project appears to be moving to be a long term support service for young men who have children, the upper age limit of 25 for the service does provide a useful boundary around potential need, how young men could transition from the service at this upper age point may need thinking through in the medium term before it becomes a pressing issue for current members/users of the service
10. Developing and utilising an evaluation framework that contains useful tools to evaluate the work of the project going forwards will be important in order to capture the learning and impact of the project on an ongoing basis. Monitoring data that allows capture of demographics, key issues young men enter the project with/support needs, and some form of tracking the key aims and objectives of the project would be a useful means for ensuring that project staff are able to evaluate the work on an ongoing basis.

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