

CCN

A n a l y s i s

**'Connected Young Fatherhood':
University Research Study
CCN SUMMARY REPORT**

July 2022



INTRODUCTION

In autumn 2021 the County Councils Network (CCN) was approached by Leeds Trinity University to join a coalition of organisations supporting a new piece of research looking at the experiences of young fathers during the Covid pandemic.¹ This research would follow up the influential 2020 report, *New Pathways for Young Fathers*.

CCN agreed to support this research given the importance of the topic. Research has shown that the involvement of fathers with their children has risen dramatically over the past 50 years² and there are now estimated to be around as many half a million fathers in the UK who act as primary caregiver for their children at least some of the time. Yet many services for children have still not evolved to provide the requisite support for these dads, with many still holding outdated assumptions about mums needing to stay at home and dads needing to go out to work.

This research is therefore timely. The evolution of the Government's Family Hub policy is at a crucial stage, with the most recent Spending Review investing £180m in their development. Furthermore, the present employment shortage across many sectors means it is vital that councils are able to optimise as many people as possible to join or re-join the labour market. Gender-neutral support for parents in public services means more families are able to arrange their lives in ways that allow both fathers *and* mothers to achieve the best balance between employment and family life.

Crucially this study is believed to be the first examining young fatherhood from a rural perspective since the pandemic. Previous research in this area has been highly urban-centric. In order to properly influence service development the specific needs of families living in rural and remote areas have to be understood – it cannot be assumed that county and county unitary authorities can just apply the same approaches to supporting fathers as those employed in metropolitan areas.

As such three CCN member councils from different parts of the country – Cornwall, Norfolk, and Nottinghamshire – participated in interviews during Spring 2022, designed to understand the experiences of professionals supporting young fathers during the pandemic.

The following report summarises some of the key findings from the research felt to be of particular pertinence to CCN Member Councils. The full study *Connected Young Fatherhood: Rural and Urban Experiences During The Pandemic* can be downloaded from the website of the organisation Daddilife (www.daddilife.com) which also hosts the prior report *New Pathways For Young Fathers*.

[1] N.B. – for the purposes of this research 'young fatherhood' was defined as those who became fathers, or experienced the first pregnancy, before the age of 25. By using this definition, a young man could be over the age of 25 to take part in the study if they met the definition above.

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/jun/15/fathers-spend-more-time-with-children-than-in-1970s>

REPORT SUMMARY

Experience of professionals and services by young fathers

For many young men, supportive professionals played a significant role in how they saw themselves as fathers and helped them to improve their confidence as parents. Furthermore, they provided much-needed acknowledgement of the significant role and contribution that the young dads made to their children's lives. Positive accounts of professional support could be seen across various service sectors in both urban and rural areas but dedicated young fathers' provision was particularly emphasised as important by the fathers themselves.

“I think they are brilliant, they do great. It’s nice to have other dads to talk to. And...you know, they, it’s really nice to have that group element. You know, I can’t, I can’t praise the professionals enough. Like they are brilliant at running it.”

(Theo, age 21)

The research heard positive accounts of professional support across the country and the vital role this had in the fathers' lives and for their well-being. Professionals were able to provide advice on parenting, childcare, relationship support (with the child's mother and child), financial support, and advice around health and well-being. Professional support was particularly important to fathers experiencing mental health issues as many felt the stigma of asking for help as a man. However, not all young fathers appeared to be confident in reaching out for support.

This was partly as some young fathers interviewed for the study highlighted how they had been made to feel ignored, side-lined, and discriminated against, by some of the professionals that they encountered. Services were also perceived to be female- and mother-focused. This was particularly reported about non-council services such as schools, health services and job centres, but aligning with existing research it was also noted that some council-led spaces linked to services with children, such as nurseries and Children's Centres, are often perceived as feminised, not only in their décor, but also due to a female dominated workforce.

“Young fathers feel like the system’s rigged against them.”

(Timothy, age 33)

For fathers who were unemployed (and there were various and sometimes complex reasons for their unemployment status), their increased involvement with childcare was often undervalued by professionals, who primarily stressed the breadwinner role based on strong assumptions around gender roles in the family. Young fathers also felt that professionals were overly critical of them in terms of their parenting capacity and skills, compared to how they treated mothers. Many professionals were not aware of, or sensitive to, the needs of men and fathers as potential and actual service users.

“I think that professional support is very hard to interact with as a father, especially if you’re going through a breakup or you’re a single father because when I was asking for support, I used to get the vibe often that they don’t agree with the son being with their father by themselves. I think they believe that this, the child should always be with their mother no matter what. . . You feel like you’re just going to get the same result from every professional.”

(Maxwell, age 20)

Accessing services

Given the importance of professional input in the lives of young men, the lack of funding and resourcing for young fatherhood within universal and specialist provision was seen as a concern by young fathers and professionals alike. Age caps on some of the available services was also seen as particularly problematic, as many fathers felt that support in their later years would be beneficial. Young fathers living in rural areas had the added difficulty of travelling long distances in order to get to meetings, with resulting time and financial costs incurred.

Professionals often relied on the young fathers to make the first move, but this can be difficult for the young men given the potential barriers around reaching out and asking for help. Some young fathers also felt that mental health issues were not taken seriously, even when young fathers were quite vocal about these concerns.

The move to online and telephone meetings during lockdown and their continuation post-lockdown was aired on numerous occasions when young fathers spoke about professional support. On the one hand, young fathers preferred meetings which were online or over the phone, as it was more convenient and cheaper to attend in this way. For others it was more difficult to build relationships with professionals.

Experiences of employment by fathers living in rural areas

Young fathers recalled the role of informal contacts and chance encounters in getting jobs at a particular organisation or setting, a view particularly voiced by those in rural areas. Rural based young fathers were also more likely to report their local job market was limited in choice, not just in terms of the number of jobs available but the types of sectors. Young fathers from urban areas reported that the local job market offered more entry level positions. Rural and coastal areas, on the other hand, were often characterised by seasonal work opportunities, which meant that finding work in the winter months was difficult and stable jobs were rare to find. Finding jobs in niche markets could also be more challenging in rural areas.

The remoteness of where the rural young men lived, coupled with the lack of travel infrastructure (and investment) in place, alongside the rise in fuel and public transport costs, meant that travelling for work purposes was problematic and expensive. Travelling further afield for work was also not a viable option for many, given the expenses incurred and potential disruptive impact on family life. Some rural fathers had

considered moving homes for work purposes, but the rental and housing market were deemed too expensive in their immediate area and neighbouring locations. There were also concerns about then being remote from family, including children.

Living in or near a popular tourist location was seen to affect the housing prices, as most properties were being sold as holiday homes and were too expensive for most locals. It was notable that many of the young fathers in both urban and rural areas did not drive, so public transportation was vital, meaning urban young fathers were better able to travel greater distances to seek employment. The cost of buying a car, taking out car insurance and rising petrol costs prevented many young fathers from owning their own car.

Professional views

Professionals in various locations provided a wide range of support based on the needs of the fathers that they were working with. Support needs included housing, family support, sexual health, poverty, homelessness, mental health, dealing with stigma, finances, and child access issues. Professionals also helped young fathers in terms of learning practical parenting skills (such as changing, bathing, and feeding), supporting identity changes that the young man may go through when becoming a father, and discussing coping strategies (including therapeutic approaches).

Some young fathers were not registered with a GP or struggled to access other facilities in the community such as libraries and museums. Those working directly with young fathers described how they supported them in accessing these services and becoming more involved in their local community. Many professionals pointed out that data on fathers is seldom collected which can hinder providers' attempts to reach out to young men. It was felt that the lack of data was due to the overarching focus on mothers and children within parent and child focused professions. Professionals described how a lack of records then creates a barrier to identifying and reaching out to young fathers.

“Traditionally services have been very focused on certain ways of working and things are not always recorded. So, you know, dad might not be recorded in the system because the primary reason why we’re working with that family is to sort out the fact that the child’s not attending the school or has got behavioural issues, or whatever they’re presenting with. So, I think the focus has been so much on the child and the mum and not necessarily including dad in that.”

(Families data analyst, rural location)

One feature of successfully engaging young fathers was finding a safe and suitable space where they would feel comfortable enough to share their feelings and experiences, while at the same time maintaining confidentiality. Outdoor spaces were seen as being particularly successful for engaging fathers - including allotments, woodland, and park spaces - as they offered neutrality. One service purchased bicycles for young fathers. This activity not only provided young fathers with a form of transport for everyday use, but also enabled the young men and their project worker to go on bike rides together with a neutral space to talk. The research noted that dedicated fathers' workers were the ones who referred to their success of

engaging dads through outdoor spaces, whereas other professionals did not mention their use – perhaps explaining some of different ways in which fathers could be specifically engaged which might not have been considered by services more familiar with catering to mothers.

“[Being] outdoors they can just get involved in any way they want to. You know, we’ve got a shed, they can sit down and drink tea and coffee and have a chat and have some biscuits. Or they can dig and there’s none of that expectation of eye contact and stuff. So, we find that space really handy to use.”

(Dedicated young fathers' worker, rural location)

Some of the professionals highlighted a need for more men within the workforce, and more specifically increasing the number of professionals who exclusively support dads. However, other participants felt that service programmes themselves needed to be specifically tailored to meet the needs of dads rather than just mothers. Expanding the remit of existing services to mothers and fathers was seen as a way of supporting young fathers without the need for introducing new services. To do so would require a cultural shift not only at ground level, but on a policy level too. However, one Children's Centre worker suggested that despite the work being done to promote parental equality, this is not always reflected in policy documents.

“But the irony is, the Government sends out the Best Start strategy and it’s all about mothers.”

(Children's centre worker, urban location)

Funding and resourcing.

Several professionals recalled how there had been an ebb and flow of policy interest with fathers over time and they described the impact this has had on funding and available provision. At times of increased policy interest, funding was available to provide a variety of services for fathers, such as dedicated fathers' workers, dads' groups, and dad-friendly resources. However, over the years, the policy focus on fathers has been inconsistent, and for some services the decline in funding has led to the reduction of provision, removal of dads' workers from their offer, limited services, and having to stretch funding that is in place to cover a wider demographic of fathers.

“We had dads' champions, we had dads' groups. We purchased resources that were dad friendly in Children's Centres. You know, we did all that and then it just went off the boil. So it's never ever been in strategy or policy to be able to sustain that.”

(Children's Centre worker, urban location)

It was felt that government funding has been continuously stripped back and the availability of youth services and support provision for young people has been in consistent decline. As seen in other research, limited funding has resulted in patchy service provision across the country with some areas offering extraordinarily little for young parents. Some professionals mentioned that they have been expected to do

more work with less local authority funding as a result.

“I think the only thing I'd say is where's the money gone? Where's the money? My entire professional career has always been - do more with less, do more with less.”

(Programme provider, rural location)

One dedicated young fathers' worker explained how they have resorted to finding alternative sources of funding from the private sector or charities to keep their service going. The process of finding alternative sources of funding and building up networks and relationships to secure such funding could be time consuming. Time spent on sourcing funding opportunities would then negatively impact upon the time that the professionals had to carry out their direct work with young fathers.

“What we want to be doing is be on the ground, doing the work.”

(Dedicated young fathers' worker, rural location)

Impact of the pandemic on services

The pandemic impacted on the ability of professionals to conduct face-to-face support with young fathers and their families, and many services turned to online and telephone methods of service delivery instead. Professionals found some surprising benefits to this, noting increased attendance and engagement by fathers due to easier access, the elimination of geographical barriers and familiarity and confidence with using online spaces.

“Since COVID, when we've moved online with a lot of our workshops, the engagement from dads and male carers, has improved greatly and that's been wonderful.”

(Parent advisor, rural location)

However, some professionals had experienced limitations to online service delivery. One of the dedicated fathers' workers noted that it did not suit everyone, leading him to deliver his mental health support group outside, so that it would still comply with COVID-19 guidance.

One difficulty was the inequality of access to the internet which left some fathers being unable to access services at all.³

“The whole country, the whole world came to realise that there is a poverty when it comes to having access to the internet.”

(Dedicated young fathers' worker, rural location)

The pandemic also increased the frequency and complexity of the support needs of families. Consequently,

[3] This echoes previous research by CCN highlighting the inequity of broadband access in rural areas compared to urban areas:

County APPG – Levelling Up Digital Connectivity in Counties: <http://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/download/3895/>

CCN Dialogues: BT – Closing The Digital Divide: <http://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/download/4130/>

some professionals experienced an increased workload. Despite the easing of the pandemic and related restrictions they felt this trend had continued.

“My caseloads have increased quite significantly and the complexity of cases that I have. Things are a lot more complex now and there’s more need.”

(Early help worker, rural location)

Contrast between rural and urban support

For those in rural areas, the most common difficulties in delivering services and engaging young fathers were related to transport. Poor public transport networks and infrequent services could make it difficult for fathers to attend appointments and support groups. In some areas, travel over long distances was required to get to services and this was considered time-consuming for both fathers and the service providers. Professionals felt this could reduce dads’ motivation for attending, as it took a large amount of time out of their day. For professionals, long journeys meant less time for home visits which reduced the number of young dads they were able to support and created disparity in the level of service that could be provided in different areas.

“If they don’t drive, those public transport links are really slow. You know, round the houses, hour and a half journey there, hour and a half back. Feels to them, is it worth it for [an] hour and a half of support. They’ve lost the best chunk of a day.”

(Dedicated young fathers’ worker, rural location)

“I can spend quite a lot of time travelling and not actually seeing people.”

(Early help worker, rural location)

One of the dedicated fathers’ workers made comparisons to the basic essentials, such as food and fuel, that could be bought in lieu of transport costs and would be a priority for young fathers. This is particularly pertinent in the current climate when many families are currently feeling the effects of the cost-of-living crisis. Another dedicated fathers’ worker had shared that some of the young men in the service could not afford food or fuel and were turning to food banks. In such a context, the professionals stated that transport costs to attend provision would add further strain to household finances.

“Food bank is a big issue, food poverty and fuel poverty. You know, some of the lads are talking about their gas and electric bills and just saying they can’t pay it. So yeah, within that, transport’s a kind of a biggie.”

(Dedicated young fathers’ worker, urban location)

Some fathers’ workers had tried to ameliorate this problem by reimbursing travel expenses either before or after attendance. However, this did not always mean attendance was guaranteed. The lack of financial

resources to draw on and rising living costs could mean some fathers had to use the travel money elsewhere to get by.

Professionals views on national policy

Professionals were asked about their knowledge and views of current Government policy agendas including Supporting Families, Levelling up, and Family Hubs. With regards to Supporting Families, some professionals had a limited knowledge and awareness of it, particularly where it was not within their funding remit.

Others had positive views – including that it was better named than its predecessor, i.e., 'Troubled Families,' where it was felt that the title had created a lot of unnecessary stigma. One professional suggested that the Supporting Families programme has the potential to deliver a better and more inclusive service to families as it promotes a whole family approach, a singular access point for families through Family Hubs, and easier information sharing among professionals.

Professionals expressed some optimism about Family Hubs, voicing that the whole family approach could promote the inclusion of fathers, and the offer of both face-to-face and virtual support within the Family Hub could make services more accessible to families. However, there was also concern that the limited availability of Family Hubs would affect professionals' ability to deliver their services.

“An integral part of the Family Hub is the hybrid model, so that families can access either virtually or face to face which is a real positive.”

(Children's centre worker, urban location)

“There's no point having things like 'Best Start in Life and the Beyond' paper that was written, saying we need to invest in really good services, if we can't deliver those services because there's no Family Hubs.”

(Health visitor, rural location)

Views on Levelling Up were mixed, with some professionals having some or very little knowledge about the agenda. Others had knowledge of it in terms of the North-South divide and schemes related to building infrastructure. In their experience so far, two of the professionals suggested that funding has not necessarily been given to the areas that need it most.

“There's still loads and loads of poverty, and it's still really disadvantaged in loads of areas. I think the levelling up stuff, there's loads of areas of the north that have got almost nothing.”

(Dedicated young fathers' worker, urban location)

One dedicated fathers' worker suggested that in his area, investment in infrastructure such as transport

would benefit few people. He considered that instead, investing that money in Children's Centres would be more beneficial for that community. Another professional also felt that there needs to be a focus on levelling up within the family unit.

“I think if we're really wanting to look at levelling up, it's got to be done on quite a long level if we really want to make equitable for fathers as well as mums.”

(Health visitor, rural location)

Suggestions for improving policy

Our research indicates that government policy around children and families is still heavily centred on mothers and children, with fathers often being excluded from the discussion. Professionals advocated for investment in policy and practice, and to promote dads as an asset to the family, whilst at the same time acknowledging the impact that fathers can have on improving outcomes for children.

They also cited a need to be understanding of the challenges faced by young dads and the role of policy interventions to help prevent and ameliorate some of these challenges. Consideration of fatherhood at policy level would then promote consideration at practice level. As noted by one of the professionals:

“Although we've got much more of a family focus, we've not always really considered to its fuller potential, the input that young fathers can have and the insight that they can provide. I think that's naturally because a lot of our commissioned services, a lot of the work that we do, and the public health work we do, is geared towards mothers.”

(Health Manager, urban location)

The lack of government policy was also remarked on by a Children's Centre worker:

“I think what's missing is that it's not in a strategic plan anywhere to include fathers, is it?”

(Children's centre worker, urban location)

Some professionals voiced the need for policy and funding to provide universal services for dads and equality of services for mothers and fathers. This does not necessarily mean introducing new services, as existing services could be adapted to support both mothers and fathers. Related to this, more focus is needed on engaging and working with fathers, but professionals felt that this needs to be the responsibility of all services and start from the beginning of pregnancy.

“We need to be engaging dads as soon as they know they're dads. You know as soon as that pregnancy test comes back positive. Just like how services are a set interaction for mums, we should have same systems and checking to make sure that that is being done.”

(Dedicated fathers' worker, rural location)

Several of the professionals highlighted the importance of early intervention explaining that it not only reduces the level of support needed potentially, but it can also be more cost-effective overall.

“Loads and loads of money and resources could be saved with better preventative work.”

(Specialist young parents' worker, urban location)

To put all these things in place, the availability of funding and dedicated focus on supporting fathers and young fathers needs to be consistent, rather than sporadic over time. There was some discussion that including paternity as a protected characteristic could help to emphasise the significant role of fathers. Such a move could also help remove some of the barriers that fathers face in fatherhood and family life in relation to employment.

A last point by professionals was that a better focus on young fathers and improved support as a result, would not only be beneficial for fathers, but it could also contribute to relieving some of the pressures and limitations on mothers around childcare, career progression by young people, and other aspects of family life. Therefore, by emphasising the support needs of young fathers, it could serve to benefit both parents and ultimately their children.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research CCN makes the following recommendations:

- 1) The needs of young fathers should be clearly and specifically incorporated within wider early help policy at national and local level.**
- 2) Public services for families and children – including early years, schools, and health services – must recognise their duty to meet the needs of fathers as well as mothers and gender stereotyping or discrimination must not be tolerated. Inclusion policies for these services must clearly outline how fathers' needs should be recognised and met.**
- 3) Data on fathers as well as mothers should be collected at the earliest opportunity by all services focused on peri-natal care and wider family support.**
- 4) Funding should be provided for all local authorities to offer dedicated services to support young fathers, both within money to support Children's Centres and Family Hubs as well as across wider pots of help for early help such as Supporting Families.**
- 5) The Government's Levelling Up strategy must 'level up' the experience of young fathers across the country, including ensuring that those living in rural areas have the same opportunities as those in urban areas, such as by improving transport links, employment and higher education opportunities.**

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In total, the 23 county councils and 13 unitary councils that make up the CCN represent 26 million residents, account for 39% of England's GVA, and deliver high-quality services that matter the most to local communities

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