Researching inclusive support for (young) fathers

A community-led study

Recommendations for Services

A partnership between

North East Young Dads & Lads

Connected Voice
Connecting People Supporting Action

FUTURE men

University of Lincoln

FYFF
Following Young Fathers Further

UKRI UK Research and Innovation

Diverse Dads

'Diverse Dads' was funded by the UK Research and Innovation QR Strategic fund (University of Lincoln) and the North East Young Dads and Lads Project. Involving an innovative peer and community led approach to research, the project sought to address a community identified gap in knowledge about regional support for young fathers from minoritised communities in the North East of England. The aim of the project was to address inequalities associated with race, ethnicity, religion and culture by developing a better understanding of inclusive support and outreach for young fathers.

The project involved a collaboration between partners in the North East of England including the North East Young Dads and Lads Project, a community support group for young dads; Connected Voice, a voluntary sector support organisation for Newcastle and Gateshead, which champions equality, amplifies voices of individuals and organisations, and inspires positive and lasting change; the Following Young Fathers Further research study (University of Lincoln), and national partners Future Men, a multi-award-winning specialist charity that supports boys and men along the path to becoming dynamic future men. Foregrounding the voices and experiences of young fathers from diverse communities, alongside regional organisations in the North East, this report presents cutting edge findings that address the need to develop more inclusive support and outreach for young men who become fathers under the age of 25 years old.

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Executive Summary

- There is a common assumption among support professionals that young fathers, and especially those from minoritised communities, are either few in number or are 'hard-to-reach'. However, the reason for their lack of engagement with services is often assumed rather than understood.
- Mapping local and regional resources and building new partnerships with community leaders and across services are important steps in identifying young fathers and making services more accessible to them.
- Localities are also often described as lacking in diversity despite limited awareness of population characteristics.
- Understanding local demographics, mapping local and regional resources and building new partnerships with community leaders and across services are important steps in identifying young fathers and making services more accessible to them. Asking mums and female family members about dads may also be an important step in identifying and reaching out to them.
- Many young fathers are experiencing a complex set of challenges and have a diverse set of needs that may be a barrier to their participation in the lives of their children and with services.
- Understanding young men's needs and the barriers they may face can only be achieved by empowering young fathers and through the provision of individualised support that sees them as a resource rather than a risk.
- Some young fathers may be so unaccustomed to support services that as a first step to accessing mainstream services they may initially need a tailored approach or culturally relevant specific services, but always with the long-term aim of inclusion in wider services.
- Central to the effective provision of individualised support is the naming and demystifying of issues around diversity. Addressing these factors within organisations is an important part of the process of demystifying them.
- Listening actively to young fathers enables professionals to better understand young fathers and to develop a tailored and responsive approach that empowers them.
- Where fatherhood is a shared experience it can bring men together around a common identity, while also respecting difference and diversity. The need for more inclusive, rather than new, spaces of support for dads from all backgrounds is therefore essential.

Our recommendations for services: Inclusivity for all dads

Think dad! Ask about and talk with dads where possible

Many services often do not routinely engage with fathers meaning opportunities to improve outcomes for children, mothers and fathers may be lost. Research confirms that support is needed and valued by all men when they become fathers. Simply asking about dad and talking to him when possible can open up new opportunities for support.

Actively challenge stigma and pervasive negative stereotypes in practice and organisational approaches

Young, working-class and minoritised men are more likely than any other group of fathers to be subject to negative assumptions that they are feckless, risky and at worst, a danger to the children. Situated at the intersections of class, race and young age, their fathering is perhaps most subject to scrutiny and to assumptions of absence and irresponsibility. We encourage all professionals who engage with young fathers, to challenge these dominant policy and public stereotypes by engaging directly with young fathers with an ethos of support, care and redemption, rather than one of risk and fear (see Ladlow and Neale, 2016). This involves seeing fathers as a resource rather than a risk to their children.

Developing an awareness of external environmental issues that may be impacting on diverse young fathers

Many of the complex challenges that young fathers experience may also be linked to a wider set of external environmental inequalities that effect some minority groups. This includes institutional racism, poorer access to housing, education and/or employment and health inequalities. A combination of some, or all these wider issues, can be so crippling it can be difficult to engage fathers. It may only be by acknowledging and addressing these wider challenges that young fathers can be supported with their fathering and father identities.

Developing an understanding of local and regional demographics

There is a pervasive assumption among services that 'localities are not diverse'. This is often based on assumptions rather than awareness of the demographic makeup and history of a place. Developing an understanding of local and regional demographics and recording that information is one way that organisations can address and challenge this assumption. The Office for National Statistics, Public Health England and local government data are useful sources of information.

Developing confidence through cultural competency and anti-racist practice

Organisations are better able to identify and work with confidence with a diverse constituency of dads if they invest in training that involves encouraging anti-racist practice, developing cultural competencies and identifying unconscious biases in working with ethnic minority people and communities. This kind of training, engaged in both by organisational leaders and those who deliver support also has broader relevance for working across a wider range of diversity including disability, sexuality and a range of gender identities.

Being sensitive, culturally appropriate and assertive with outreach

Services that focus on why they might be 'hard-to-access' are more likely to work effectively with young fathers regardless of how they identify. Taking an individualised approach for each young man means seeing and understanding a young person for who they are while also working with them to understand the barriers they face. This involves being sensitive, responding in culturally appropriate ways (e.g., working through language barriers or nuances and seeking resources or wider support if necessary) and being assertive with outreach. Asking mums and female family members about fathers and demonstrating a clear offer for fathers on external service promotion is also another important route for identifying and reaching out to fathers who may require more support.

Prioritise research and consultation with young fathers in the locality

Local and national organisations are encouraged to prioritise continuing research and consultation with young parents, particularly with young minoritised fathers whose views and experiences continue to be marginalised. Understanding local contexts and individual needs means professionals are able to respond in an informed way.

"Fish in different ponds, rivers or streams": establishing partnerships with other organisations and community leaders

Referral routes are important. If social services are not referring young dads from diverse communities it may be possible to identify them elsewhere. Speaking to community leaders about support that is available for dads and telling them what support is in place may help to develop referral routes within regions before families reach crisis point, while also ensuring young fathers get the support they need. Perseverance on behalf of the organisation can be challenging and time consuming in a context of limited funding and high staff-turnover, but it is also essential. Alongside demographic mapping, this kind of work also helps to challenge the idea that localities are not diverse.

There is value in mapping and understanding local and regional support and how that is changing

Linked to the above and led by the young dads themselves, this project supported an understanding of what kinds of services are available in the local region. This helped to establish new partnerships and support signposting. However, because of piecemeal and short-term funding, and staff turnover, this landscape can change quite quickly. Keeping apace of these dynamics can be useful for increasing support for young fathers over time.

Create inclusive spaces, rather than new spaces

NEYDL Inclusion lead Chris Humba argues that young fathers should be supported to feel part of the wider community wherever possible. The provision of inclusive spaces for support in communities, alongside a tailored and culturally sensitive approach, is therefore not about creating new and separate spaces for dads based on their minoritised identity. Rather, services should strive to harness the power of the shared identity of fatherhood in bringing young fathers, in all their diversity, together. All support should be offered with the long-term aim of their inclusion in wider services.