



EVALUATING DIGIDAD: ONE YEAR ON

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

In a broader context where there are very real barriers to the development and implementation of service support that is father-inclusive, there is compelling evidence that the current support landscape in the UK engages ineffectively with young fathers (Maxwell et al., 2012; Bond, 2019). Young fathers have either been overlooked or excluded by professional support services (Bateson et al., 2017) or subject to a risk-based approach that stereotypically treats them with suspicion and surveillance (Neale and Davies, 2015; Tarrant and Neale, 2023). Established in 2017 as a regional charity in Gateshead, the North East Young Dads and Lads (NEYDL) project has sought to address discernible gaps in existing provision by prioritising and supporting the informational requirements of young men who are either currently fathers or soon to be fathers. This would prepare them to play an active and meaningful role in the lives of their child(ren).

As part of an ambitious strategy and programme of support, NEYDL has pioneered **DigiDAD**, an e-learning parenting platform made by and for young fathers. First created during the COVID-19 pandemic, DigiDAD features pioneering, evidence-informed content designed to support the informational requirements of young fathers. The content comprises of bespoke advice and practical information for young fathers around parenting skills, relationships and support needs which they are likely to need as they navigate their parenting journeys.

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess whether DigiDAD, a year from its launch, is meeting its primary objectives, namely that:

1. More young fathers will have the confidence, skills, and opportunities to be a positive presence in their children's lives.
2. Statutory services recognise and value the role of young fathers.
3. The stigma of being a young father is reduced.

METHODOLOGY

The evaluation of DigiDAD was conducted by independent researchers from the University of Lincoln, between November 2022 and February 2023. This evaluation investigated the perceptions and experiences of those who have been involved either in supporting the process of co-creating DigiDAD or using its content. The overarching purpose of the evaluation was to highlight the strengths of DigiDAD and potential areas for development and strategic

direction in future. Data was generated by adopting a qualitative methodology comprised of individual interviews, paired interviews and a focus group. In total, twelve research participants were interviewed. They were recruited either because they were directly connected to its development, had experience of using the platform and/or were able to comment on its impact in a way that evidences its value and whether it is meeting its objectives.

KEY FINDINGS

The findings for this evaluation are thematically organised to demonstrate and assess the early progress being made by DigiDAD. The key findings presented include:

1. Co-creating DigiDAD: the value of shared expertise;
2. The views of young fathers and professionals about the necessity for DigiDAD; and
3. Future development and growth.

The analyses confirmed that DigiDAD is currently meeting its primary objectives with scope for further expansion and development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

NEYDL have identified and addressed an important gap in current service provision regarding the informational needs of young fathers through the creation of DigiDAD.

The recommendations, based on this evaluation, are as follows:

1. Pursue continued co-creation and partnership work;
2. Extend content development;
3. Increase visibility, interactivity and accessibility;
4. Increase reach, impact and data capture; and
5. Consider financial models and investments.





BACKGROUND

DIGIDAD: PIONEERING THE DIGITALISATION OF EDUCATION AND SUPPORT FOR YOUNG FATHERS

The evolution and establishment of DigiDAD, an e-learning platform made by and for young fathers, is novel in the broader landscape of learning and support for young fathers in the UK. The platform was established in 2020 and developed as part of the specialist support offer provided by the North East Young Dads and Lads (NEYDL). Currently offering free, accessible parenting advice and support for young fathers, DigiDAD is a timely intervention with potential as a pioneering digital intervention that offers something bespoke and needed within the current landscape of support for young parents. Here we set the establishment of DigiDAD in context of broader shifts in the provision of services for young fathers that acknowledge and promote them, and their potential, as important and positive influences on the lives of their child(ren) and partners.

YOUNG FATHERS AND THEIR SUPPORT NEEDS

Empirical research about the support needs of young fathers has burgeoned in the past five years, driven in part by the contributions to knowledge made by the Following Young Fathers research study (Neale and Davies, 2015, 2016; Neale et al. 2015; Davies, 2016), which is now being extended through the **Following Young Fathers Further** (FYFF) research study (Tarrant et al. 2020-24). This decade long qualitative longitudinal programme of research challenges stigmatising images and misrepresentations of young fathers that depict them as 'irresponsible' or 'uncaring', by demonstrating young fathers' intentions and capacity to 'be there' for their children for extended periods of time. It also highlights young fathers' own needs for care and support in a context where many are of a young age and dependent, vulnerable and/or disadvantaged themselves.

Given the timing of this research, which was initially conducted between 2012-15, it is worth noting that much of the literature on young fathers' support needs, focuses on young fathers' interactions and engagements with universal, multi-agency and/or specialist services before the pandemic. Evidence about how young fathers fared during the pandemic is now also beginning to emerge (Tarrant et al. 2023; Tarrant et al. 2022). This research indicates that there is huge untapped potential for new technologies to be used to support young fathers.

A common thread in the literature about young fathers is that family, youth and universal services have an essential role to play in supporting them to remain actively involved in the lives of their children. Yet, evidence about formal support for fathers indicates that ineffective engagement with fathers has long been an endemic feature (Maxwell et al. 2012; Bond, 2019). The 'mother-centric' culture of service delivery and focus and a largely female workforce have been cited as reasons for fathers' exclusion more generally from services and professional engagements (Bateson et al. 2017). Young fathers, who in policy terms refer to young men aged 25 and under when they become a father, are especially marginalised in these contexts because of their young age and the complexity of their needs, which may be associated with some of the disadvantages they experience and navigate across their parenting journeys. This may include anything from exclusion from education settings, chaotic family backgrounds, challenges securing stable and well-paid work, issues with housing, mental health issues and loneliness and isolation.

Linked to these complexities, young fathers are either overlooked by professionals, in a process of sidelining, or subject to a risk-based approach, that treats them with suspicion and surveillance (Neale and Davies, 2015; Tarrant and Neale, 2023). The importance of outreach to young fathers to encourage them into services, combined with the need to challenge stigmatising assumptions about young fathers, including that they are 'hard-to-reach' (Neale and Davies, 2015), have been identified as important possibilities for affecting change in professional cultures to facilitate father-inclusive approaches to practice and support (Tarrant and Neale, 2017). Davies (2016) has also argued that increasing young fathers' engagement with services requires the reshaping of service design and delivery to account for them.

THE PANDEMIC AND THE SHIFT TO DIGITAL AND REMOTE SUPPORT OFFERS

The COVID-19 pandemic was an important catalyst for many services to adjust their practices and (re) consider modes of delivery by shifting from face-to-face to remote models of support (Tarrant et al. 2022). In the early days of the pandemic there was limited time and space for services to explore how they might embed father-inclusion in their support offers. This was especially the case when men were routinely excluded from universal health services including appointments to support pregnancy and, in some cases, the birth of their child. More generally, the pandemic placed increasing constraints on the wide variety of specialist and generic, statutory and voluntary services that engage with young fathers. This created unique pressures for professionals and for the young men they support (Tarrant et al. 2021; 2023). The loss of face-to-face working and community-located spaces almost overnight also represented a significant loss to young fathers (ibid, 2021). For specialist support services like NEYDL, with a specific remit to sustain their relationships with the young fathers already known to them, and to maintain outreach and engagement activities with young fathers experiencing challenges, changing the support offer in this context was essential for continuing existing support and ensuring support for those whose needs increased at this time (Tarrant et al. 2021).

In forcing shifts towards remote, online offers the pandemic created new and unexpected opportunities for implementing alternative working practices using online spaces in combination with face-to-face support. Early evidence suggests that remote working is not a straightforward or even desirable replacement for face-to-face engagement with young fathers (Tarrant et al. 2021). However, lessons learned at this time of unprecedented crisis about how to work with and incorporate technology into service support in the post-pandemic context prompted considerations of new innovations in support offers that involve digital technology. More generally, there has also been a rise in online parenting programmes with proven effects on increasing positive parenting and encouragement (Nieuwboer et al. 2013; Spencer et al. 2019). While some have been developed internationally for fathers (e.g. Freeman, 2022; Hansen et al. 2022), few have been developed specifically for young fathers. DigiDAD is a pioneering example in this regard (see page 10 for further detail).

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF DIGIDAD

For NEYDL, the establishment of a platform like DigiDAD was initially part of the longer-term strategic plan for the charity. The pandemic prompted its more rapid development, facilitating its development during what was a time of unprecedented change. As well as responding to local need, it addresses an observation in international evidence that young fathers more generally, experience unmet informational needs and unequal access to resources, including parenting-related information (Mnizak et al. 2021).

NEYDL originally received 3-years of funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation to deliver a face-to-face peer support and education programme, but due to the challenges of working in lockdown and opportunities for further funding from The National Lottery - 'Coronavirus Community Support Fund' and 'Community Fund', and Lloyds Bank Foundation, the project evolved into DigiDAD (www.digidad.uk). DigiDAD features educational films, animations, podcasts, quizzes and certification, co-created with young dads. The resources focus on community identified needs and a range of topics including family law, social care, mental health, parenting.

While an ongoing and constantly evolving platform, DigiDAD was formally launched to an international audience of 80 professionals and young dads via a webinar event held on the 24th of February 2022. A recording of the webinar can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9UrGUxNJzo>

THE NORTH EAST YOUNG DADS AND LADS (NEYDL)

Established in 2017 as a regional charity in Gateshead, the North East Young Dads and Lads (NEYDL) sought “to find out what, if anything, could be done to support young dads (aged 25) who live, work or study in the North East of England”. By identifying a gap in existing provision, NEYDL have prioritised the requirements of young men who are either currently fathers or soon to be fathers. The inception of this charity was a response to the inadequacy of existing support services in reaching out to young men as they encountered and navigated parenthood. The overarching purpose of NEYDL has been to prepare and enable young men to play an active and meaningful role in the lives of their child(ren) and by supporting and connecting young

dads and influencing wider practice. More specifically, NEYDL has endeavoured to provide targeted support by aiding young men to improve their skills (education and employment), relationships (with the child(ren) or mother of the child(ren)) and general wellbeing. In 2022, they worked with 72 young men, spending on average 52.5 hours with each young man. In the current year ending 30th April 2023 they have already worked with 85 young men. This work is predominantly carried out by experienced youth workers and volunteers. Seven years into their service development and prompted by the pandemic, the charity has embarked on an ambitious new digital offer, which operates alongside its face-to-face regional offer. This is called DigiDAD.

WHAT IS DIGIDAD?

The DigiDAD e-learning platform is an extended part of NEYDL's support offer for young fathers. First created with and for young fathers during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has grown into an established website featuring content that is both evidence-informed, foregrounds lived experience and is designed to support young fathers. The content comprises bespoke advice and practical information for young fathers around parenting skills, relationships, and support needs, which they are likely to need as they navigate their parenting journeys. The presumed audience for the content is a wider, national cohort of young fathers as they enter and navigate parenthood with potential to expand to more tailored content for professionals that have a remit to support young fathers in the context of their own professional practice.

The substantive focus of current DigiDAD content is thematic and at the time of this evaluation includes courses designed for young fathers with a focus on the following:

- Parenting skills for babies and children in their early years (namely for parents of babies aged 0-6 months and 6-12 months),
- Coping with mental health and suicidal thoughts, and
- Negotiating social care proceedings and private family court proceedings.

The accessible content featured, has been verified by subject specialists and experts in father-inclusive practice, and co-created with young fathers who are service beneficiaries and employees of NEYDL. The professionals involved formed an advisory group who met regularly to comment on script and video development. Their role as advisors is to comment on script and video development to ensure that the content is accurate according to current evidence and also accessible to a diverse group of young fathers.

The development of DigiDAD is based on co-creation methodology. Co-creation is a methodology that aligns with the principles of participatory action research (or PAR). As a partnership approach to producing and sharing knowledge it brings together key stakeholders, including the communities involved, to co-produce practice-informed research and research-based practice (Neale, 2021b; Tarrant et al. 2021). A common principle is that it facilitates meaningful engagement between multi-users or actors including researchers, policymakers, practitioners and/or industry professionals, artists/creative agencies, and the public. In the co-creation process, partners work together to establish understandings about a social problem and in some cases to produce a specific solution to those problems. In the co-creation of DigiDAD, the young dads at NEYDL worked collaboratively with the Following Young Fathers Further research team, an advisory group of subject specialists and animation and film making providers MyPockets,

More Than Minutes and Three Motion Media, to create imaginative content that is evidence-based and accessible for young fathers and professionals alike.

Distinctive to the methodology is that the public also benefit from research processes and relationships, as much as from the findings and outputs. Impact and knowledge exchange are therefore integral to the research as it progresses. In co-creating DigiDAD, the young fathers, as beneficiaries and employees of NEYDL, have developed skills and expertise in communicating their experiences of young fatherhood and of working with professionals to develop new dialogues, which form the basis for new understanding. They have also engaged directly in processes of knowledge exchange with the Following Young Fathers Further research team, who have shared the existing evidence base to facilitate the development of accessible content and outputs with the young dads.

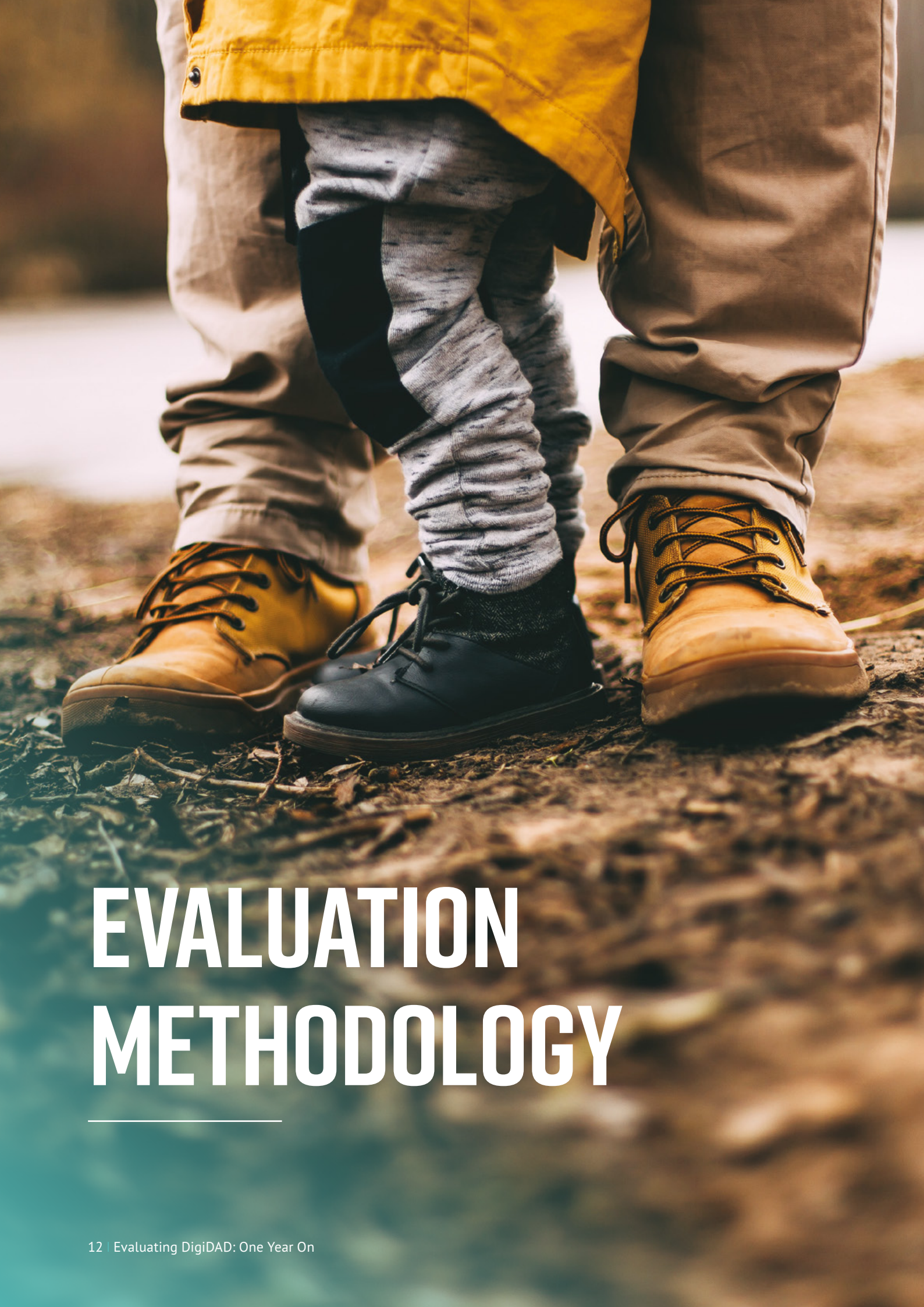
As noted, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated investment in DigiDAD, at a time when NEYDL were also pushed to explore how they might continue their support offer for young fathers whilst observing social distancing mandates (Tarrant et al., 2022). The pandemic also encouraged the charity to think more creatively about how they might improve access to their service and support young fathers to demonstrate their skills and capabilities as engaged fathers. The development of DigiDAD responded to an identification that there is a gap in the provision of accessible information for young parents around the social aspects of parenting at a young age. Much of the existing information available to parents is also highly medicalised in its language and presentation. DigiDAD was established with the aim of ensuring that “real voices and real emotions” were embedded, albeit in ways that are evidence-informed. Post-pandemic, DigiDAD continues as an important complement to the face-to-face service offer provided by NEYDL.

The primary objectives/ indicators guiding the development and promotion of DigiDAD are as follows:

TABLE 1: OBJECTIVES AND INDICATORS GUIDING THE SERVICE

OBJECTIVE	INDICATORS:
1 More young fathers will have the confidence, skills, and opportunities to be a positive presence in their children’s lives.	Number of young fathers engaging in support services, personal/ professional development and outcomes of child protection plans.
2 Statutory services recognise and value the role of young fathers	Training delivered and feedback. Contributions to research. Changes to policy and practice. Increased provision/ consideration for young fathers.
3 The stigma of being a young father is reduced.	Services are more inclusive. Professional perception and tone changes. Media tone changes with more positive content on young fathers.

The findings presented in this report assess and evaluate the extent to which the DigiDAD platform is currently addressing and meeting these outcomes.



EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

The evaluation of DigiDAD was conducted by independent researchers from the University of Lincoln, between November 2022 and February 2023. Fieldwork for the study was conducted by Dr Izram Chaudry and Dr Linzi Ladlow and overseen by Professor Anna Tarrant. Using a qualitative methodology, the evaluation investigated the perceptions and experiences of those who have been involved either in supporting the process of

co-creating DigiDAD or using its content. By examining the views of DigiDAD users, collaborators and content creators, the overarching current purpose of this evaluation has been to highlight the strengths of the platform, potential areas for development and strategic direction in future. Ethical approval for the evaluation was secured from the University of Lincoln ethics committee prior to its commencement.

QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodology was employed to capture and evaluate the current progress and impact of DigiDAD against its primary objectives. As Patton (2014) has argued, evaluation is about making judgements to assess what is meaningful. To explore and assess the extent to which DigiDAD is contributing value and meaning for its co-creators and users, and as a novel component of the existing landscape of support for young fathers, we conducted a mix of individual, paired and group interviews. The primary objective was to produce evidence about the extent to which DigiDAD delivers on NEYDL's existing aims of impacting the lives of young fathers and professional charities. DigiDAD was established in line with the charities objectives of supporting young fathers to have a positive influence on the lives of their children, to promote the value of the role of young fathers to statutory services and to address and reduce the stigma associated with young fatherhood.

Twelve research participants were interviewed, in total, to elicit their views about the rationale and process for implementing and co-creating DigiDAD, their views about its value as a tool for promoting more positive images of young fathers and increasing understanding about parenting and professional practice (see table 2).

The participants recruited were either directly connected to its development, had experience of using the platform, and/or were able to comment on its impact in a way that provides evidence about whether it is meeting its objectives and addressing a specific need. The research participants included: NEYDL staff, an appointed Peer Support and Education Officer, young fathers who were NEYDL beneficiaries and have now become employees (with varying roles as project workers, content creators and/or peer enablers), academics and other professionals (civil servants and charity workers) with knowledge of DigiDAD, and two young fathers who have used it.

The interviews were conducted between November and December 2022 using Microsoft Teams. The choice of interview type (e.g. individual, paired or as a focus group) was varied and dependant on numerous factors. These included participants' preferences, recommendations from the gatekeeper to participants, the requirements of the evaluation and for practical reasons. To support recruitment, contact details about prospective research participants were shared with the research team, by a gatekeeper at NEYDL with knowledge about who would be well placed to comment on the platform and its effectiveness.

TABLE 2 RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

PSEUDONYM	PARTICIPANTS PROFILES ROLE	EMPLOYED
Karl	NEYDL Project Worker	Individual Interview
David	Academic	Individual Interview
Danny	NEYDL Project Worker	Focus Group
Connor	Charity Worker	Focus Group
Richard	Peer Enabler	Focus Group
Jamie	Peer Enabler	Focus Group
Jason	NEYDL Project Worker	Individual Interview
Jessie	Academic	Paired Interview
Jacob	Charity Worker	Paired Interview
Emma	Civil Servant	Individual Interview
Rory	DigiDAD User/ Young Father	Individual Interview
Matt	DigiDAD User/ Young Father	Individual Interview

The interviews were video recorded and then transcribed verbatim. A thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2006), was conducted to develop the key themes presented in this report.

Three core themes were subsequently crafted and developed:

1. Co-Creating DigiDAD: The Value of Shared Expertise;
2. The Views' of Young Fathers and Professionals about the Necessity for DigiDAD; and
3. Future Development and Growth.



FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

The findings are thematically organised in this section to determine and assess the early impacts of DigiDAD, as a bespoke digital support offer. Firstly, this section explores the value and significance of the co-creation approach that has been adopted to develop DigiDAD to glean the expertise of young fathers and professionals in order to inform and enrich content. Secondly, the findings reveal the views of young fathers and professionals regarding the necessity of DigiDAD as a support offer. The third and final section provides some suggestions about how the DigiDAD platform can be developed further with acknowledgment of anticipated constraints and barriers.

The analyses confirm that DigiDAD is currently meeting its primary objectives of:

1. More young fathers having the confidence, skills and opportunities to be a positive presence in their child(ren)s lives;
2. Statutory services recognising and valuing the role of young fathers; and
3. Reducing the stigma of being a young father.



CO-CREATING DIGIDAD: THE VALUE OF SHARED EXPERTISE

The co-creation process was considered a unique selling point (USP) for DigiDAD, creating a space to produce something collaboratively that is designed with and for young fathers alongside subject specialists, professionals and academics who champion young fatherhood through their work and expertise. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of DigiDAD is that young fathers' voices and lived experiences are integral both to the content development and the creation and dissemination of information. This was universally deemed a unique and invaluable feature of the platform by both the co-creators, advisors and users of the platform. With the involvement of a team, comprising of young fathers, NEYDL staff, professionals from support services, animators and academics, DigiDAD features evidence-based content that shows positive images of young fathers and light, accessible scripts developed to convey expert material in the image of young fathers from the North East region. Voice-overs delivered by NEYDL beneficiaries also ensure that the content has a local identity:

"The main things that make DigiDAD really distinctive is that it's an entirely co-created platform, which means that there is nothing on there that hasn't been directly made by the young dads that we work with. So, I think what really sets it out from other platforms is the voice of the platform and the imagery in how it looks and feels. It is reflective of young fatherhood."

[JASON, PROJECT WORKER]

"It's quite a specific group that we're targeting, but also what I think is really lovely about the content on there is that it's made by them [young fathers] and with their families."

[EMMA, CIVIL SERVANT]

"I think what's distinctive is that the participants are very much involved in it."

[DAVID, ACADEMIC]

"I would say what I find impressive about it is that you get a strong sense that it's the young dads themselves who are behind everything and they are being supported to produce really high quality work. It's kind of bringing together high-quality work and the importance of young fathers' voices being heard."

[JACOB, CHARITY WORKER]

The prominent and meaningful role that the young fathers play in developing the content and the video design based on lived experience enhances its accessibility and inclusivity. Through the co-creation process, particular attention has been paid to the imagery, language and information presented to ensure that it reflects the specific needs of young fathers in a way that is non-judgemental and tailored to a wider cohort:

"So there were many elements that really stood out in the design phase. Mainly, it was the inclusive co-design part. It was the idea that it was really dads leading on the design. The look in the field, the language, the whole tone of it and inclusive design."

[CONNOR, CHARITY WORKER]

The sharing of professional and academic expertise in the co-creation of content for DigiDAD was also considered a notable strength and one that has enriched the quality of the content on the platform:

"There's sort of a range of collaborators that we have been fortunate enough to work with who have made the material and the stuff that's on there high quality because we're working with other professionals who are at the top of their game in terms of law professionals or sort of midwives, health visitors. That enables the content to be really concrete and that sort of sets it out from the rest."

[KARL, PROJECT WORKER]

"There's a range of participants involved in contributing to the content. So they've got a health perspective, social work perspective and a young dad's perspective. So you have got a range of different perspectives that enrich the platform. That's an approach they should definitely stick with."

[DAVID, ACADEMIC]

In sum, the participants' accounts indicate the value of there being a variety of perspectives involved in informing and enriching DigiDAD. This was considered an essential approach to be maintained to ensure a distinctive and bespoke offer. In recognising and valuing the role of young fathers and professionals in developing adequate and inclusive support provision, the co-creation process is key in supporting NEYDL to address their second and third objectives through the platform.

INCREASING THE ACCESSIBILITY OF SUPPORT AND EMBEDDING AN INCLUSIVE APPROACH

Attention to the development of an inclusive support offer throughout the DigiDAD co-creation process has ensured that NEYDL's support offer has not only expanded but become more attractive and accessible to a wider cohort of beneficiaries. The inclusivity of the platform relates to its identity, which combines a locally identifiable but friendly approach and the presentation of content in online formats.

Several users of the site that were not involved in its co-creation confirmed that the site is easy to use. The content was easy to find and helped these young men to manage their fears about becoming a parent through the provision of key information about parenting skills:

"It's always easy to find what you're looking for and if you struggle, you can see it right in front of your screen, you can see the options you need, what's important or is something you struggle on."

(RORY, DIGIDAD USER/ YOUNG FATHER)

"Basically, in the early stages of getting ready for the caesarean and stuff I was on there like every day trying to see how do I do a nappy, how am I meant to hold a baby? I mean, it was just literally me having a panic attack, meltdown, but the videos and things and the media really helped."

(MATT, DIGIDAD USER/ YOUNG FATHER)

The importance of developing an inclusive platform that dads can engage with at their own pace, is a key USP of DigiDAD. The nuances of co-producing content, with local young fathers, was considered especially important. The composition of the voices, language, accents and dialogue of North East young fathers are unique features intended to develop a sense of familiarity and belonging for other users in proximity of the North East, as Emma and Danny observe:

"What makes DigiDAD different is it's short and it's informative. But it's done with local dialect, with young men. So, it is actually young men that are talking and they talk in a Gateshead dialect. The last thing young men want to do is go on a forum where it's old women talking or somebody from down south. I think just having that personal connection from the Gateshead dialect which gives young fathers that instant connection."

(EMMA, CIVIL SERVANT)

"And then also the language that we use, we want to make sure the language was relatable to the young men that we are looking to work with, which is in the Northeast. So you'll see some of the jargon is very NE but every single young man that I've worked with enjoys that because they are able to automatically relate to it. So that was really important for us."

(DANNY, PROJECT WORKER)

The online hosting of the site also inherently extends the reach and accessibility of NEYDL's support offer. This was especially valued at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and by those with health vulnerabilities. DigiDAD created a unique opportunity for young fathers to develop their confidence, at their own pace, before reconnecting with others in-person:

"It has really helped people to get confident enough so that they could meet groups again. There were loads of vulnerabilities that COVID had, creating massive isolation problems for dads especially. And I think this online offer really helped lots of them to be able to engage with something online at their own pace, on their own terms, and then be able to feel confident enough to do more things and get more active."

(JASON, PROJECT WORKER)

The co-production process also facilitated considerations about how to accommodate the information consumption preferences of young fathers, referring to how young fathers typically access and consume information online. The creation of short YouTube clips was deemed most appropriate for sharing some of the materials:

“So every step of the way everything we did was led by what young men and young dads said to us about their information preferences. Like when they go to YouTube. Anything more than 2 1/2 minutes with an advert in the middle you flick away. So we thought we’re gonna keep our content short and sweet.”

[DANNY, PROJECT WORKER]

The accessibility of DigiDAD, noted by users of the platform, was also facilitated by its user-friendly design which has been developed to operate seamlessly on laptops, tablets or mobile phones, which many young fathers have access to:

“I think how easy it is to use, is one thing that I really like. It’s been built to be easily used on a phone, which is kind of it’s I think it’s 60%/40% at the moment, 40% on phones being used and 60% on a computer or tablet. So, it’s really accessible and it’s really easy to use, which is what I think is another great part of it.”

[JASON, PROJECT WORKER]

Danny also explained some of the techniques being employed to ensure the accessibility and interactivity of the platform, such as the use of QR codes:

“We’re gonna make it interesting. Gotta make it slightly, you know, a bit amusing to pull people in and also user friendly. And you know there have been some developments since DigiDAD’s inception and how we connect with dads and make it easier and one of the things that we looked at was creating a small card that has the QR code on it. So the young man can just QR code it and it takes them straight to the DigiDAD site instead of people saying, oh, you can search for this and search for that so we can give them a card and they can go straight there and it takes them straight to it.”

[DANNY, PROJECT WORKER]

Danny’s comments indicate great potential for considering how to increase the interactivity and creativity of the platform in future. It is important to be aware that those experiencing digital poverty may be more challenged in accessing a digital parenting programme so the charity should maintain its face-to-face offer alongside the online one.

THE VIEWS OF YOUNG FATHERS AND PROFESSIONALS ABOUT THE NECESSITY FOR DIGIDAD

The research participants were confident that DigiDAD was performing especially well in its efforts to challenge stereotypes and stigma relating to young fatherhood by normalising positive images and discourses about young fathers. Furthermore, the development of DigiDAD was deemed as instrumental for the personal and professional development of the young fathers who have been involved in the co-creation of content. Early findings also indicate the untapped potential for the content to be more tailored for professionals with the objective of transforming professional cultures through access to digital education and training.

POSITIVE AND DIVERSE REPRESENTATIONS OF YOUNG FATHERS

Attention to the accessibility and inclusivity of DigiDAD has strengthened its capacity to address the stigma associated with young fatherhood and misrepresentations of young fathers that assume them to be 'absent', 'irresponsible' and 'uncaring' (see Neale et al. 2015 for a counterbalance to these constructions). A noteworthy strength of DigiDAD and its content is that it congratulates young men upon entering parenthood rather than projecting a 'doom and gloom' picture about their forthcoming and present roles:

"It takes down the barriers and there's a little bit of humour attached to it so it's not too serious. It gives you that 'well done' feeling, you're a dad, welcome to the club. For me that is a positive message because I think a lot of young men at that age enter fatherhood with negative perceptions. This could be the first platform where somebody's actually said to them, congratulations, you're a dad. It makes you feel like, don't worry, this is normal. It's normal for you to feel like this, it's normal not to know how to hold the baby straight away. This information is provided in an informative way that makes it relatable with a bit of humour."

(EMMA, CIVIL SERVANT)

The authenticity of DigiDAD is also a key factor in its ability to normalise young parenthood in a way that is both attractive and relatable. Use of humour in the content is especially valued. Nevertheless, there is further scope for DigiDAD to accentuate positive images of young fatherhood:

"It could be stronger on spreading the positive image of being a young father. It should emphasise how a young dad has age, he's got strength and he has got time ahead of him. It could do with more about the strengths a young dad can bring to the table. So, I think it's just making it clear that being a young father is a positive thing."

(DAVID, ACADEMIC)

David identified that illuminating the benefits of young fatherhood is indispensable for challenging stereotypes. This could be done by highlighting factors such as young age and physical health (strength) as positive attributes rather than aspects of risk.

PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR YOUNG FATHERS

The co-creation process for the DigiDAD platform offered an opportunity for young fathers who were established service beneficiaries to acquire new skills and thus develop and grow both personally and professionally:

"I think it's benefited me immeasurably really in terms of it's not an area that I had had much experience in before and but through the two years of working on this platform, I've been able to really understand how to make creative opportunities possible for young men and young fathers and how to facilitate authentic and true voices through educational platforms and educational materials. Also, how to listen and adapt a sort of e-learning platform for an audience that is very different to something to your traditional NHS or your kind of other sort of platforms would have to sort of cater to."

(JASON, PROJECT WORKER)

As Jason observes, the charity, as a specialist service, is well placed for exploring innovation through DigiDAD and is less constrained than other, more tightly regulated services might be. Later in his interview, Jason notes that the young fathers involved with the development of DigiDAD are those who have since also become paid employees for NEYDL. The experiences that they gained from working on DigiDAD equipped them with the skill set to further collaborate with NEYDL on a multitude of other initiatives:

"Lots of the dads that we've worked with on the platform, it's no coincidence that they are now paid members of staff at NEYDL. They have worked as either script writers or content creators. We've now got three young dads working for the charity who are major contributors. There is a bit of a correlation between those who do some work or engage with DigiDAD and how they eventually go on to become a lot more involved with NEYDL."

(JASON, PROJECT WORKER)

DigiDAD is also proving instrumental in aiding a wider cohort of young fathers to develop the confidence to have a more independent relationship with their child. Jason reflects on an example, that is corroborated by a young father who has used the platform, that the current content is supporting him through access to informative content around how to deal with 'the basics' of raising a newborn, helping him to develop confidence around the practicalities of parenting:

"I think a really lovely example for me was when I was doing a group work with one young dad who'd kind of been out of this service for a while. And, you know, we were having a chat and he just mentioned that he just had a newborn and he was using DigiDAD to learn about the basics. It was around changing nappies and holding babies. He was saying how it developed his confidence and allowed him to have more of an independent relationship with his child. It gave him the confidence to be able to come back to NEYDL and re-engage with other young men."

(JASON, PROJECT WORKER)

"It gives me good examples, just like of every step. So, if like a baby's crying and all that stuff, how to carry it, then it would give me much experience to know how to do it. [It] also has some like courses as well to help me get as much information as possible and then try and learn all the things from the start and to now. The courses they did, they helped me very much and I got more active and got more, like, very comfortable with what I'm doing as a dad."

(RORY, DIGIDAD USER)

This young fathers' confidence was not only enhanced by having a more independent relationship with his child. The digital opportunities for re-connection and re-engagement with other young fathers at NEYDL reduced his sense of isolation as an alternative pathway to face-to-face support. Aligning with Objectives 1 and 3, DigiDAD is demonstrating early potential in its capacity to support young fathers to develop the skills and confidence they need to be a positive presence in their child's lives, to support the process of reducing loneliness and isolation, and provide an important first step towards making NEYDLs wider services easier to access.

CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR EXISTING SUPPORT PROVIDERS

Key to challenging stigma is increasing the accessibility of education and training for professionals. DigiDAD has potential to act as a continuing professional development (CPD) tool for professionals through the sharing of positive images of young fatherhood and reflections on father-inclusive practice and what that entails. To date, three short films have been developed for social workers to equip them with the skills and confidence to engage with young fathers:

"We are making three short films. Based on some interviews with young fathers who have experience of their child having a social worker, we are developing an intervention which is like a training programme for social workers. The overall aim of the programme is to improve social workers skills and confidence of engaging with young fathers and proving that they are not 'hard-to-reach'. And to make sure they are more systematic and equipped to deal with some of the encounters that they may have with young men."

(JACOB, CHARITY WORKER)

Currently DigiDAD is being utilised in an intermediary fashion to embed young fathers' perspectives and lived experiences into local support provision, suggesting the potential for extending the benefits beyond young fathers. DigiDAD is already thought to be prompting a shift among healthcare professionals and an increase in confidence around the signposting of young fathers to online information:

"They are reaching out through online and providing material that is accessible [...] We've seen a total reluctance from the healthcare professionals to use online, to go online. Now we've gone from being hesitant to go online, to being online all the time. It's a way of communicating with more people and really reaching out."

(DAVID, ACADEMIC)

Certainly, there is encouraging early evidence to suggest that there is a great deal of excitement about the potential of DigiDAD from professionals supporting young fathers across the country. As CEO Kevin Stoodley reports, in the NEYDL 2022 Annual Report, early conversations with workers, including the one presented below with a former Young Dads Worker based in South East London, are indicative of the quality and accessibility of the content for those beyond the North East:

Kev: "So, you think the dads you worked with in Lewisham would use DigiDAD?" I ask excitedly.
"Yeah of course. If I can understand it, so can they... and there's nothing your dads are saying that I wouldn't have said or felt myself, when I was younger."

"But what about differences in dialect, in accents, and slang?" I ask. "Would we not need to make changes to appeal to different communities of young dads?"


"No, I don't think so," he responds, standing up to stretch his legs and rest his hand on my shoulder. "Besides, everyone loves a Geordie!"


Despite indications of early enthusiasm about the potential for wider national interest in DigiDAD, any future development of the platform should involve reflection on the balance between the USP of local identity vs wider appeal. The co-creation of conversations between young fathers and professionals based on evidence-based practice in future content has potential to address gaps in existing CPD opportunities for professionals and could be the basis for commercialisation and the promotion of a training pathway that is delivered by the charity and young father beneficiaries.


SUMMARY OF OUTCOMES IN RELATION TO THE KEY OBJECTIVES

OUTCOME 1

MORE YOUNG FATHERS WILL HAVE THE CONFIDENCE, SKILLS, AND OPPORTUNITIES TO BE A POSITIVE PRESENCE IN THEIR CHILDREN'S LIVES.


 Evidence generated with two users of the platform suggests that the accessibility and creativity of the current content has supported them to develop their confidence around the practicalities of parenting. As the platform develops, further research and data capture on impacts on young fathers should be considered.


 Those supporting young father beneficiaries are also reporting an anecdotal increase in referrals from young fathers that have been made aware of the content.

 Both NEYDL beneficiaries and staff have been upskilled as peer researchers, content developers and creators, and voice-overs for the content. This has led to the employment of young fathers who were previously beneficiaries, creating new economic and social benefits for young fathers that may not otherwise have been available to them.

OUTCOME 2


STATUTORY SERVICES RECOGNISE AND VALUE THE ROLE OF YOUNG FATHERS.


 The content delivered foregrounds the voices, experiences, and images of young fathers, presenting positive visions of young fatherhood that are rarely accessible to professional audiences. In creating a safe, reflexive space for young fathers to share their worries, questions and concerns, professionals are better able to understand the challenges young men may be navigating, enhancing knowledge and understanding.

 The young fathers as co-creators have also benefited from engaging directly in knowledge exchange processes with professionals from a broad range of services and with academics who have supported in advisory roles.

OUTCOME 3

THE STIGMA OF BEING A YOUNG FATHER IS REDUCED.

 In showcasing young fathers' capabilities through the co-creation of e-content, which is also endorsed by academic researchers, the platform contributes to the reduction of stigma. Young fathers who use the platform see positive images of young fatherhood as well as content that normalises some of the challenges that they may be navigating in their own fatherhood journeys.

 Engaging both young fathers and professionals by addressing informational needs and by creating authentic, open and strengths-based conversations and content is proving appealing, including to those beyond the North East region. A combination of lived experience, evidence-informed content and some humour is proving a strong formula to date for reducing stigma and normalising the challenges of young parenthood/fatherhood.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH

On the basis of this largely positive reception, there are several possible avenues for the future development and growth of DigiDAD, as identified and supported by the views of the participants. Indicative strategies include retaining the co-creation methodology, increasing the visibility of the platform, continuing to develop inclusive content as the platform expands and extending the (inter)national reach of the platform. Key barriers for development and growth date that require consideration are also noted.

RETAINING CO-CREATION

The co-creation of the current DigiDAD content, has so far proven distinctive and an effective element that is likely to ensure its growth and development. Jacob identifies this approach as another USP of DigiDAD, suggesting that any deviation from this could be to its detriment:

“For me, the unique selling point is the co-production element and I think that’s what makes the content so powerful. I feel like there could be a danger in moving too far away from that model. People are trying to develop online resources for dads. There is a bit of a temptation to kind of try and develop something huge that answers all the questions for all fathers. I’m not sure anybody has cracked that yet. And I suspect there are probably lots of good reasons why they haven’t. What I would like to see happen with DigiDAD is that it retains that sort of

very close working with young, marginalised dads who face challenges in fatherhood. So as long as that element is retained, I feel like DigiDAD could develop organically in lots of different directions and continue to do great work. I feel like it’s important to keep that focus on co-producing with young fathers. As long as that model, the USP doesn’t get lost then I believe it will succeed and grow organically.”

(JACOB, CHARITY WORKER)

In only its first year since inception, DigiDAD is very much a work in progress. The early evidence suggests that there is potential in developing and expanding the platform further both in terms of its reach and the substantive focus of its content. Key to its strategic development includes increasing its visibility, maintaining its USP for developing and promoting inclusive content with a wider remit to support young fathers with older children and to professionals, and enhancing its accessibility.

INCREASING THE VISIBILITY OF DIGIDAD

Several of the participants noted the importance of increasing the visibility of DigiDAD for prospective users, to both young dads and professionals. At the time of the interviews, the platform had a positive and increasing reach and usage rate in terms of attracting interest on the various social media platforms that is promoted on (see Appendix 1) but there is plenty of scope for further expansion:

“One of the things we do need to improve is how can we get it out to more dads to so that they can use it. I think that it’s the real hurdle. We’ve built this thing which we think is really good and really easy to use, but it’s now that hurdle of getting every young dad that we encounter or young man that we work with or dad to sign up and feel free to use it.”

[JASON, PROJECT WORKER]

Jason moves on to suggest that the promotion of DigiDAD could be facilitated by employing a social media communication officer and/or platform ambassadors:

“I think it’s about turning DigiDAD into an active site where people can connect with one another on a much larger national scale. This could be done with the help of a social media comms officer or ambassadors for the platform to advertise it on a wider scale.”

[JASON, PROJECT WORKER]

Investment in other social media platforms also has a fundamental role to play in promoting the content on DigiDAD and to reach a wider, more diverse audience:

“You’ve got to keep things up-to-date. The youth don’t wanna engage with leaflets or read stuff. They want something easily accessible on the app and we have to move with the times. If they can get into the TikTok world then I think they will absolutely nail it. TikTok can grow awareness on a very large scale.”

[EMMA, CIVIL SERVANT]

More traditional approaches to advertising such as distributing leaflets were considered less likely to be effective in capturing the interest of younger generations. The use of TikTok and other contemporary social media platforms were observed as additional options for promotion.

Investment in a chat box is a useful step that has already been taken with potential to enable DigiDAD to evolve into an autonomous social media platform of its own and to encourage digital peer support. Further monitoring can be done in future to assess the value of introducing a chat box, including whether this aligns with the key objectives of bringing young fathers together by providing them with a space for online peer support. There is potential that this would facilitate the building of networks, relationships, and a community of peers along a wider cohort of young fathers in ways that supports them to

address pressing issues including isolation that may ensue following parenthood (Astuti et al., 2021). Considerations around staffing and resourcing will be key here, as well as clarity for beneficiaries around the availability of young fathers at NEYDL to chat with. This will help to manage expectations among young fathers who access the chat box around when they are likely to receive a response.

Referrals to young fathers by professionals including family nurses and social workers was also identified by the research participants as an effective method for promoting DigiDAD. Professionals external to the charity have suggested that they are drawing upon DigiDAD as both a resource and a source of knowledge, which in turn is enhancing their practice and is a useful aid they offer to young men they encounter who are entering and/or navigating through parenthood:

“What’s really nice is hearing about how professionals are using the platform and I know that there’s a couple of family nurses and social workers who go through DigiDAD with their referrals and it’s nice to know that the professionals feel confident enough to use that platform to be able to take to young dads to kind of show them how to do a parenting course or that there are other young men like them out there.”

[JASON, PROJECT WORKER]

Presenting the platform amongst professionals and students in training was also considered as being important for raising the profile and visibility of DigiDAD. Charity worker Jacob suggested that outreach via training and events had attracted them to the site, leading to a more established relationship and partnership with NEYDL as a charity. Jessie, a university lecturer suggested that they had shared it with students and encouraged their involvement in campaigning and promotion:

“I saw it online as part of events with Anna Tarrant where she brought in some dads from NEYDL and I became interested in finding out more about NEYDL as an organisation. It was a very engaging and positive online event and I just thought the work was really, really good. Since then, we at the institute have been in touch with NEYDL several times on various different issues. I’m now commissioning NEYDL to make a short film.”

[JACOB, CHARITY WORKER]

“I know I asked students to get involved with campaigning and raising awareness. So, like connections with universities and different organisations are important. I think widening the network and getting more people involved is important for building a bigger and collective voice about the platform.”

(JESSIE, ACADEMIC)

On the basis of this evidence, DigiDAD has an important role to play in enhancing pathways between services, complementing existing support offers while simultaneously promoting father-inclusive approaches. The platform has also facilitated new innovations, partnerships and opportunities for fundraising that are proving beneficial to NEYDL as a smaller charity.

DEVELOPING INCLUSIVE CONTENT AS DIGIDAD EXPANDS

Despite recognition that DigiDAD has been developed in a way that is attentive to inclusivity, the co-creators of the platform were aware of the need to maintain this approach in all future content development. Key suggestions for doing so included further attention to the use of language in scripts, consideration of the different learning styles young father audiences may have and exploration of content featuring young dads with different dialects:

“I think language is very important. So whether they could get translation and interpretation for other languages in terms of what is delivered that would make it more accessible on a wider front. It has to appreciate different learning styles and how people access information and their preferred modes of delivery. For example, by having subtitles or different options for the information.”

(JESSIE, ACADEMIC)

“It would be good to incorporate different dialects and different languages to include fathers who are English speaking and from different regions.”

(EMMA, CIVIL SERVANT)

The charity demonstrates its commitment to engaging with diverse cohorts of dads through its existing research and outreach work and expertise that is already shared on the platform that has real potential to increase and improve outreach for the face-to-face offer. While ethnicity is an important consideration (see The Diverse Dads Collective, 2021), so too are representations of ‘non-traditional’ families on the platform:

“I think with all of our content, we try to reflect the dads that that we work with and try to maintain an inclusive approach. We’ve done a diverse dads project which is on that platform which looks at kind of the lack of resources directly for diverse dads within the region.....We’re also looking a lot towards non-traditional family units and how we can get that representation within our films as well. So, I think as a platform is evolving, there’s a lot more sort of diversity and inclusivity within their platform as well.”

(JASON, PROJECT WORKER)

If committed to developing inclusive content, there are various directions that DigiDAD may be taken in future to ensure that young fathers from different backgrounds and living in different circumstances feel a sense of recognition and belonging with the platform. In addition to representations of young fathers and their families, there is scope to extend the focus of the content. Commensurate with timescales and funding constraints, to date, DigiDAD has predominantly featured content providing learning material about pregnancy and birth and the practicalities of having a newborn baby. There is an opportunity to expand the content that is more informative about older children, as one young father who uses the platform noted:

“Like parent topics and older parent skills, ‘cause I want to see that a lot so that it can help me understand and get good information from there.”

(RORY, YOUNG FATHER)

Work is currently underway to develop informative content around the toddler stage of childhood. However, there is also scope to explore issues around puberty and the transition that a child may make from primary to secondary education:

“Now we would love to be able to look at those next stages transitioning into primary school. Transition and with the dad and you know and all those different things moving up and that all depends on that is you know that’s our future where we want to go. But our main focus is on those early stages ‘cause the majority of the fathers we were working with had children that age and that was one of the most important things. What we wanted to be able to do, whilst not being able to physically do it, is to support them virtually.”

(DANNY, PROJECT WORKER)

A possible tension for the platform here in its development by and focus on young fathers, is that the co-creation of the bespoke content is limited to the experiences of young fathers only. A key strategic consideration in future could be to develop new sections of the platform that have broader appeal. One suggestion was DigiLad. To some extent, content focus may also be driven by funder agendas. Where possible, consultation with young fathers and professionals is recommended to ensure the content themes are driven by those with lived experience, as well as funder and policy priorities.

EXTENDING THE (INTER)NATIONAL REACH

Finally, longer-term a key strategic aim could be to develop the (inter)national reach of DigiDAD, as a central strand of its growth and development. Despite being regionally based in its current iteration, several of the co-creators recognise the potential for ensuring its wider benefit for young fathers from different countries. Indeed, usage data indicates that 40% of platform visits are already from non-UK countries, including the USA and Europe. DigiDAD’s national and international appeal may be assured by focusing on aspects of parenting that are acultural. In other words, there is no reason why information in relation to looking after the health and wellbeing of a child ought to be exclusive to any geographical region:

“But it also has some international reach because it’s online. I mean, for instance, if you’re looking at how to look after the baby, it’s international. With that, I mean it’s about how to feed the baby, for instance, how to be, how to be concerned about their movements when they walk and talk and that sort of stuff, you know. That sort of stuff has got to be valuable anywhere.”

(DAVID, ACADEMIC)

As noted earlier, a tension for the charity as they develop a longer-term strategy for DigiDAD is to consider the balance between maintaining the regional identity of the content alongside establishing content that has wider appeal to a national and international audience.

KEY BARRIERS FOR DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH

While there is real potential and ambition to further plans for DigiDAD, there are constraints that need consideration before embarking on its expansion and development. Perhaps unsurprisingly, lack of frequent and secure funding is likely to be a key obstacle to investment in, and the development of, the bespoke content on the platform, which is currently free to access and does not attract a sustainable revenue:

“One of them is money. It’s not cheap to do the films, especially the animation is quite expensive to produce the quality and with the kind of collaborative nature of how we do things, it means that it takes longer because you want as many ideas on the table as possible. We value the young fathers that we work with, we always want to reimburse them however we can and you know the sort of the online world and this sort of when you when we’re building this platform, the sort of tech and stuff we always want to reimburse them, however we can but, you know, the online world and when we’re building this platform, the tech and stuff we want to put into it, is expensive. To make it more alive and add some exciting elements to it is very expensive. The costs never go down.”

(JASON, PROJECT WORKER)

The utilisation of IT and technology to produce high quality animated content is also costly. There are also ethical considerations around the need to reimburse all collaborators for their input and expertise. A current obstacle to promoting the growth, development, and awareness of DigiDAD is the absence of expertise with regards to increasing its presence in the current landscape of support:

“I think another one is expertise, especially in terms of operating online and creating a social presence. My big thing would be to look at how we can employ someone with that expertise to do that but also with the understanding of the work that we do in youth work and how we can get it out to those specific groups.”

(JASON, PROJECT WORKER)

“So, if we had that funding and say we had some extra people with more knowledge, we could go like into the ages that you were seeing. So, like our children aren’t old enough to go in the secondary school yet. So, we don’t kind of have that knowledge, but if we do manage to get dads who do, you have that knowledge? The main thing is just the money.”

(RICHARD, PEER ENABLER)

Employing a member of staff to promote DigiDAD and develop its social media strategy would be indispensable for its longevity but also requires investment. A key strategic balance to be had here is developing consistently high-quality content in a climate where funding is scarce and the expertise required to develop bespoke content is time intensive and comes at an expense.





RECOMMENDATIONS

NEYDL have evidently identified and addressed an important gap in current service provision through the invention of DigiDAD. The co-creation process with young fathers as ‘experts by experience’, as well as advice from academic and professional champions for young fathers, lends this novel, digital support offer both authenticity and credibility with real potential for expansion and development. The co-creation team have identified fruitful opportunities for expansion and further development subject to securing and/or establishing a consistent funding stream to support the development of high quality, bespoke and tailored content.

Our recommendations on the basis of this evaluation process are as follows:

CONTINUED CO-CREATION AND PARTNERSHIP WORK

- The co-creation of content *with* and for young fathers is an important and established USP for the platform that should be continued. This approach ensures that the content continues to be reflective of young fathers’ perspectives, priorities and lived experiences, while also being evidence-informed. To continue meeting all service objectives, co-creation methods that prioritise young fathers as ‘experts by experience’ should continue to drive content strategy, development and creation.
- Collaboration with multi-agency professionals in the local region must be sustained (and expanded) to ensure that DigiDAD benefits from multiple perspectives and varied expertise. Continued partnership with professionals who champion father-inclusive practice and research will ensure the quality and accuracy of the bespoke content developed. NEYDL should consider a mapping exercise of regional services both to identify key services that engage with young fathers and to increase the breadth of content that has relevance to a wider group of service providers.
- Continued investment in DigiDAD and promotion of the service is likely to have wider benefits for NEYDLs face-to-face offer with potential to support fundraising through the establishment of new partnerships with wider services.

CONTENT DEVELOPMENT

- New content should continue to include imagery of young fathers from diverse backgrounds and circumstances to celebrate the diversity of young fatherhood and to address stigma (Objective 1).
- In the longer term, content could be developed that features young fathers with different dialects and languages to increase the appeal to young fathers beyond the North East of England. Care should be taken to revisit the balance of the local/regional identity vs making the content more accessible to an (inter)national audience of young fathers.
- As the platform develops, more content could be created as part of the parenting programme for young fathers about the latter stages of childhood to equip young fathers with older children to deal with other important phases of childhood, such as their child(ren) entering puberty and making the transition from primary to secondary school education.
- Thematically focused content should respond to and address the parental informational needs of young fathers. The charity should consider consulting with young fathers to tailor content to specific informational needs. Consultation with multi-agency services could explore current and predicted priority areas in policy and practice, as well as gaps in training provision for professionals that can be addressed via the platform.
- More content targeted at and featuring a variety of professional services, similar to the social care and criminal justice videos, could be developed to enhance knowledge and understanding between professionals and young fathers and to promote father-inclusive practice to a wider set of sectors and industries. Longer-term, these could underpin a face-to-face training offer delivered for professionals with young fathers. There is evidence nationally that this is an effective mode of delivery and training (see Tarrant and Neale, 2017).

VISIBILITY, INTERACTIVITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

- A targeted strategy for raising the visibility and profile of the platform should be considered. Options for promoting the platform include developing its presence on a wider variety of social media channels and advertising DigiDAD at conferences and training, perhaps with QR codes on small leaflets. Investment in a dedicated social media communication officer and/or identifying NEYDL beneficiaries as platform ambassadors is likely to be beneficial and to increase metrics (see Appendices).
- Investments in interactive components such as a chat box is likely to enhance the peer support offer provided by NEYDL through sustained communication and dialogue between young fathers and support workers. This may also constitute a new pathway for prospective beneficiaries locally, making NEYDL easier to access.

INCREASING REACH, IMPACT AND DATA CAPTURE

- Continued monitoring of the use of the platform, its usage and membership will be valuable for evidencing its reach and impact and for assessing a potential 'market' that can inform on strategies for developing a business case around a balance of free and paid content.
- An impact questionnaire should be built into the DigiDAD platform to encourage users to provide feedback on an ongoing basis about the impact that it has had on their parenting and/or practice. The questionnaire should assess against the core service ethos and objectives.
- Further research with DigiDAD users is recommended as the content is developed to assess its impact on young fathers and to enable a flexible and responsive strategy for developing content. Within GDPR guidelines, NEYDL could consider establishing a network including young fathers to enable communications about opportunities for young fathers to engage in research.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS AND INVESTMENTS

- The financial sustainability of DigiDAD should be explored to consider its viability as a longer-term proposition and to ensure its longevity. This may be addressed through the commercialisation of various elements of the platform and the implementation of a subscription/membership model for international and/or professional users to pay for their usage.
- Paid content that is developed to enhance professionals' training and CPD has potential to create a sustained funding stream that can be reinvested back into content development for the parenting programme and training resources in a more sustainable way.
- Interest in the platform might be leveraged to secure new partnerships for NEYDL that lead to wider fundraising opportunities.

In combination, these strategies for DigiDAD have great potential to further address and challenge the stigma young fathers experience and to change 'hearts and minds' both within professional services and among the wider public.

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RESEARCHER BIOGRAPHIES



DR IZRAM CHAUDRY

Izram is a Lecturer in Criminology and Sociology at the University of Bradford. His previous role was a Further Research Assistant for the Following Young Fathers Project at the University of Lincoln (2022-2023). He completed his PhD in Sociology at the University of Leeds (2019-2022).



PROFESSOR ANNA TARRANT

Anna is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Lincoln. She is also a UK Research & Innovation Future Leaders Fellow (2020-24), directing funded research study, Following Young Fathers Further. She is currently acting as a Trustee of the North East Young Dads and Lads.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I DIGIDAD TWITTER HANDLE METRICS

[CURRENT FOLLOWERS] 887

[AVERAGE MONTHLY IMPRESSIONS] 10K- 20K

APPENDIX 2

DIGIDAD YOUTUBE CHANNEL METRICS

[FIRST UPLOAD] 6TH APRIL 2021

[VIEWS] 27.5K

[WATCH TIME] 946.3 HOURS

[SUBSCRIBERS] 89

[IMPRESSIONS] 41.6K

GENDER

[MALE] 55.6%

[FEMALE] 44.4%

AGE

18-24 33%

25-34 40%

35-44 19.4%

44+ 7.6%

APPENDIX 3

DIGIDAD FACEBOOK PAGE METRICS

[TOTAL FOLLOWERS] 624

[LIKES] 549

[AVERAGE REACH PER PERIOD PER POST] 209

APPENDIX 4

DIGIDAD WEBSITE METRICS

[OFFICAL RELEASE] 24TH FEBRUARY 2022

[AVERAGE MONTHLY VIEWS] 250

[DIGIDAD MEMBERS] 36



EVALUATING DIGIDAD: ONE YEAR ON

Dr Izram Chaudry / University of Bradford and
Professor Anna Tarrant / University of Lincoln

In a broader context where there are very real barriers to the development and implementation of service support that is father-inclusive, there is compelling evidence that the current support landscape in the UK engages ineffectively with young fathers (Maxwell et al., 2012; Bond, 2019). Young fathers have either been overlooked or excluded by professional support services (Bateson et al., 2017) or subjected to a risk-based approach that stereotypically treats them with suspicion and surveillance (Neale and Davies, 2015; Tarrant and Neale, 2023). Established in 2017 as a regional charity in Gateshead, the North East Young Dads and Lads (NEYDL) project has sought to address discernible gaps in existing provision by prioritising and supporting the informational requirements of young men who are either currently fathers or soon to be fathers. This would prepare them to play an active and meaningful role in the lives of their child(ren).

As part of an ambitious strategy and programme of support, NEYDL has pioneered **DigiDAD**, an e-learning parenting platform made by and for young fathers. First created during the COVID-19 pandemic, DigiDAD features pioneering, evidence-informed content designed to support the informational requirements of young fathers. The content comprises of bespoke advice and practical information for young fathers around parenting skills, relationships and support needs which they are likely to need as they navigate their parenting journeys.

NEYDL have identified and addressed an important gap in current service provision through the invention of DigiDAD. The co-creation process with young fathers as 'experts by experience', as well as advice from academic and professional champions for young fathers, lends this novel, digital support offer both authenticity and credibility with real potential for expansion and development.

