

Report No. 5

CO-CREATING A FATHER-INCLUSIVE PRACTICE INTERVENTION:

**INSIGHTS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE FROM THE PROCESS
OF INSTIGATING THE GRIMSBY DADS COLLECTIVE**

HOW TO CITE THIS PAPER

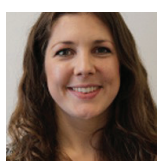
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FOREWORD

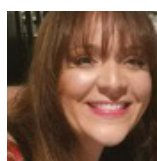
Through our work with young fathers, we have seen how they have been excluded from fulfilling their potential as fathers. Hidden barriers shut them out of receiving the support that can help all parents understand and grow into the role they play in raising their children. Our work in Grimsby has shown the need for support for fathers to recognise and take on their role in the way they want to and that benefits their children. The peer support group shows the benefits of bringing fathers together to share common experiences and help them to overcome challenges. The training programme gives professionals the time, space and prompts to really assess their practice and how they work with fathers – and most importantly to identify tangible changes they can make. Together these are the building blocks to make change on the systemic and individual levels that are needed to help fathers to thrive.



MEGAN JARVIE

Head of Coram Family and Childcare

The Grimsby Dads Collective recognises the importance of fathers in keeping children safe and has provided an opportunity to include men and dads in local conversations, both strategically and operationally. The credibility of the YDC, FYFF research, and its preceding studies have enabled us to advocate for a more equitable policy and practice environment. Since the project was launched, there has been a shift in the number and accessibility of advice, activities, and services for dads of all ages. The training for professionals, and the process of promoting and championing the project, have contributed to improvements in the strategic and operational environment in Grimsby that have had a positive impact on families' lives.



BERNADETTE TAYLOR

Development and Impact Manager
Together for Childhood, NSPCC

The work from this project has highlighted the professional anxieties and gaps in practice when we need to be engaging fathers. These gaps however result in fathers not being seen as parents with needs that are just as diverse as the needs of mothers. At best, this results in fathers not becoming the parents they, or their partners, would like them to become. At worst, some may not receive the support they need to avoid children and families being exposed to harmful situations. Whilst change is in its infancy, feedback from the 'Engaging Dads workshops' in Grimsby has been overwhelmingly positive. Attendees from many public service sectors in North East Lincolnshire acknowledge that services cannot sufficiently support families by only working with one parent, and that support for both mothers and father should be considered with the same compassion and openness. Mums, dads and, most importantly, children, will all benefit from professionals ensuring all aspects of a child's world is supported and understood. This work is therefore not just about dads, it is ultimately about helping families.



KRIS SAWMYNADEN

GDC Training Developer and Lead Trainer

With thanks to Kate Conway, Debbie Taylor and Ryan Jewitt at YMCA Humber for hosting this work.

KEY POINTS

- The Grimsby Dads Collective is the third iteration of a participatory model of effective father-inclusive practice called the Young Dads Collective.
- Instigated as a place-based model, the Young Dads Collective has proven to be flexible, adaptable, and transformative, with capacity to support young fathers in different localities and to create a space for the advocacy and promotion of father-inclusive practice and policy ecosystems.
- The Grimsby Dads Collective has evolved into a peer support group for dads of all ages in Grimsby, alongside a training offer around father-inclusion for local and regional multi-agency professionals.
- In raising the profile and visibility of dads in the locality more generally, the model is galvanising change in the locality as it garners increasing interest and recognition among local professionals and decision makers.
- The export and replication of the YDC model from London to Yorkshire, to Grimsby, has demonstrated the combined value of qualitative longitudinal and participatory modes of impact research (Neale, 2021).
- Key outcomes include evidence of the capacity of these methods to instigate father-inclusive practice and policy environments and to work collaboratively with marginalised communities and populations to address their complex challenges and needs.

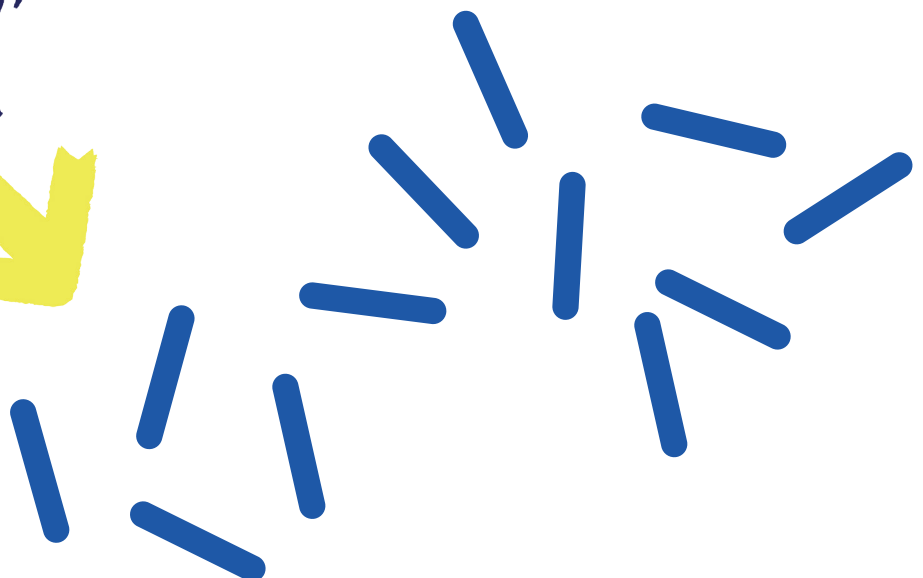


INTRODUCTION

This report presents insights and learning from the co-creation process, on which a team of academics and local and national organisations embarked in January 2020, to instigate a new father-inclusive model of practice called the Grimsby Dads Collective (also known colloquially as the GDC), facilitated by the [Following Young Fathers Further](#) study. Based on an existing model of father-inclusive practice called the Young Dads Collective (Colfer et al. 2015; Coram Family and ChildCare, 2023), the GDC was established in this small coastal town in the East Midlands of England, in response to a community identified need to better support fathers in all their diversity to flourish in the locality.

Now almost four years since this process began, the GDC offers an effective, locally adapted version of an existing model of good practice called the Young Dads Collective (YDC), which supports fathers of all ages who reside in Grimsby to come together as part of a unique peer support offer. The visibility of a bespoke model of support for fathers is also beginning to prompt system change in the locality and North East Lincolnshire region, including investments by local professionals and decision makers in making wider adaptations to local policy and practice, such that they are now beginning to reflect a renewed commitment to father-inclusive support.

In this report, we present insights from the process of instigating this new model of support for fathers, which in and of itself, was particularly informative. The co-creation process offered us opportunities for heightened ethical and methodological reflexivity around the instigation of a dynamic, locally adaptive father-inclusive intervention, that has been co-created to respond to the local needs and priorities of fathers and multi-agency professionals. Additional learning from the process includes insights about the value and challenges of replicating a social intervention in the current UK policy and practice climate, illustrating some of the enablers and barriers for the wider advocacy for father-inclusion across the community, practice and policy ecosystem of support at local, regional, and national scales. Our observations and analyses are revealing of 'what works' in instigating father-inclusive support offers, as well as what the key challenges and constraints might be.





THE GRIMSBY DADS COLLECTIVE: CO-CREATING A NEW YOUNG DADS COLLECTIVE HUB

We begin by providing an overview of the process of setting up the Grimsby Dads Collective, which we established based on previous learning from legacy models: the original [London-based model](#) and a second in Leeds called the [Young Dads Collective North](#), a new iteration supported through a qualitative impact study (Tarrant and Neale, [2017](#)). We do so to provide context to the key learning and insights we gained in relation to creating an impactful and purposeful model. Indeed, the process of establishing the model has been one of sustained empirical engagement and iteration over time. We conclude with recommendations for practice and policy based on the evidence captured.

The legacy models

The Grimsby Dads Collective is based on an existing model of good practice called the Young Dads Collective that we have sought to replicate in Leeds and Grimsby (Coram Family and ChildCare, 2023; Tarrant and Neale, 2017; Tarrant, 2023). In alignment with the legacy models, the aim of establishing a new Grimsby Dads Collective was to embed the principles of father-inclusion in the locality as part of a place-based offer. A key aim of the model was to facilitate a group of young fathers, aged 25 and under in Grimsby, to come together as a collective and to provide them with the tools, skills and opportunities necessary to share their experiences of parenting and their support needs, as well as their perceptions of engaging with support services and local professionals across their parenting journeys. The replication of the two models has involved national collaborations between the Young Dads Collective (YDC) in London, (established by Family and Childcare Trust, now rebranded as Coram Family and Childcare), and local professionals in Leeds and Grimsby who champion father-inclusion. The YDC model engages with young fathers to support them to participate in the training and education of multi-agency professionals. As 'experts by experience' they share accounts of being a young father and what their engagements with professionals have been like. At its core, the YDC is designed to effect change in practice by creating a space for professional curiosity about how services engage with young men.

The co-creation process in brief

As we outline in our interim two-year report (Way and Tarrant, 2022) and in brief here, we have worked in close partnership with young fathers in Grimsby, national childcare charity [Coram Family and Childcare](#), and Grimsby based charities [Together for Childhood \(NSPCC\)](#) and [YMCA Humber](#), to co-create the Grimsby Dads Collective (GDC) since January 2020. Employing a methodology with growing credentials in public health for the creation of beneficiary informed services (Greenhalgh et al. 2016), we have employed co-creation methodology to establish the GDC as a unique social intervention. As a participatory action research method, co-creation is defined by creative, inclusive, and democratic approaches and collaborations. These have the capacity to empower communities by valuing lived experience, challenging power dynamics, and addressing social injustices (Clark and Laing, 2018). The replication and co-creation of the YDC in different localities has involved a collaborative, grass roots approach to addressing research and community identified challenges around the social isolation of fathers and their exclusion from service contexts.

In this strand of the Following Young Fathers Further study, we have simultaneously co-created the Grimsby Dads Collective and generated interview data at key stages of the co-creation process with the key beneficiaries and partners to capture and evaluate the model replication process, and feed in insights from those the work has involved to ensure impact in real time. This has produced a model driven by evidence and supported the capture of what works (and what works less well) in instigating a father-inclusive model of support in an area where community members had identified that fathers were relatively invisible and under-served.

The GDC: a co-created model

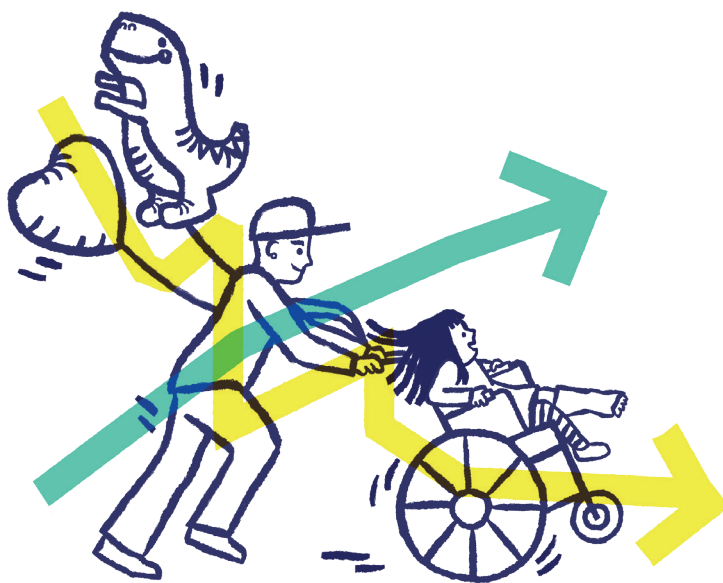
The Grimsby Dads Collective model that is in existence has similarities with the legacy models but has also necessarily shifted away from their designs in terms of its design and how it operates. Demonstrating the flexibility and adaptability of the original model, the iterative nature of the co-creative process and its local adaptation means that it has necessarily evolved over time. The shape and evolution of the Grimsby Dads Collective offer therefore reflects our understanding of, and responses to, local conditions and contexts.

Learning from the Leeds legacy model, we found that there is value in embedding a specialist offer in a local organisation which is already equipped to provide support to young fathers. As a youth and housing organisation, YMCA Humber was identified from the outset as a viable local host for the model. What have become the three core components of the GDC model, and which have been adopted by YMCA Humber to expand its support offer, include:

- A functioning peer support group for fathers with access to counselling, family activities, and peer support. 14 dads now regularly attend the peer support group, of whom, two are young fathers.
- A new early years' practitioner-led dads, babies and toddler group set up by YMCA Humber to enable fathers and their children free access to a safe environment, promoting father – inclusive practice,
- A training offer for professionals, now called 'Embedding Father Inclusive Practice', built upon the 'Ask a Dad' workshops of the legacy models. These have reached over 74 professionals/practitioners, with a cross section of representatives from statutory, health and third sector organisations. Feedback for these have been overwhelmingly positive suggesting professionals are feeling more supported to think more about local young fathers and how they can move cases forwards with fathers in the frame.

In summary, the GDC as a place-based intervention currently offers a space that brings father together in one place around a shared identity, as well as providing peer support in their locality. Additionally, the offer creates spaces for local practice development, where father inclusion is explored and promoted, for the benefit of the fathers involved and their children. Notably, this training has been adapted so that it reflects on the particularities of Grimsby as a locality so that it resonates with professionals locally by speaking directly to key challenges in the area.

In the remainder of this paper, we present initial insights about the process of co-creating the Grimsby Dads Collective and key learning about what it means to set up a father-inclusive intervention in a context characterised by unclear remits for professionals and services and limited resources (Neale and Davies, 2016). As our contributions from the co-creation team indicate in the Foreword of this report, there is encouraging evidence of regional shifts at practice and policy level that indicate that the instigation and visibility of a father-inclusive intervention is leading to wider transformative practice and policy changes.





KEY LEARNING FROM THE PROCESS

The co-creation of the Grimsby Dads Collective provided vital insights into the challenges of setting up a father-inclusive intervention at a time when policy and practice systems are ill-equipped at serving fathers. In iteratively building the intervention, we were able to assess 'what works' in real time, to consider key barriers and constraints and why these exist, and to react and respond to evidence generated in real time to ensure that the offer addressed our shared

aims and goals, as well as local needs and priorities. It is worth noting here that this has been a resource and time intensive process, and it has taken nearly four years to be in a place where a tangible, transformative offer has been built and can now be evidenced. Nevertheless, the process of building a face-to-face peer support offer for fathers and an accompanying training offer for professionals has been high yield.

An effective structure for the offer

The staffing structure of the GDC model was key to ensuring the effective instigation of a father-inclusive intervention and one that has the purpose of addressing how local fathers are viewed and responded to. The key roles that we invested in to attract young fathers, to develop a support offer and to embed the intervention in the locality included:

- A *local host organisation* committed to the father-inclusion agenda and with the space to support fathers to come together, either with or without their children,
- Being led and/or championed by one or more *local father champions* 'on the ground' who have or who establish relationships of trust with fathers. These individuals play an instrumental role because they provide an offer to local dads and persist in creating a space for them to come together for peer support. They can also provide
- support for any dads who become involved in the training provided for professionals, particularly in terms of supporting them to tell their stories in these training workshops,
- A *local lead trainer* to lead the development and delivery of training for professionals, particularly the workshops which bring together local professionals and practitioners to engage in critical reflection and set father-inclusive practice in local context,
- A *local broker* for policy and practice; someone who can help to navigate the local policy and practice system, who knows the model and the work, and is able to explain its broader value to existing services and service offers.

Partnership work and new relational dialogues

Like with the legacy models before it (Tarrant, 2023), the successful establishment of the Grimsby Dads Collective was only possible because of collaborative and partnership working between fathers and local and national professionals. In facilitating new relational dialogues among the key stakeholders, including those identified in the previous section, it has been more feasible to instigate and promote a new father-inclusive offer with and for local young fathers and professionals in Grimsby.

Throughout this process, the expertise and perspectives of all relevant stakeholders have influenced and shaped decision-making. The local representatives on the co-creation team also brokered insights into local knowledge through an established set of relationships with partners and organisations who were already demonstrating a commitment to working to support local men and fathers. Key learning in this regard was that the success of the model was contingent on effective communication with key support champions in the locality, as well as establishing 'buy in' from those who were initially reticent about the introduction of a new intervention.



Learning from the co-creation of a collective for fathers

As noted earlier, it has taken up to three years into the process to have a functioning support group for fathers in place. As well as navigating the COVID-19 pandemic unexpectedly in the early days of 2020, which required us to adapt to remote working, there were extensive challenges in attracting young fathers to engage initially with the Grimsby Dads Collective.

The importance of understanding place

Evidence capture during the process was insightful and supported the refinement of the model as we navigated local conditions. First, that even with local expertise in the co-creation group, we lacked a clear understanding of the local context, including the lived experiences and circumstances of local young fathers and of local services. We therefore built extended relationships with services across the locality and developed a survey to capture data about local fathers and their needs. This kind of outreach work simultaneously increased the visibility of the GDC among local fathers and professionals and supported the identification of fathers who may benefit from the intervention.

The importance of an offer before an ask

Second, we learned that our original 'offer' for young fathers was more of an 'ask' than an 'offer' and that whereas this had worked for the previous models, it was less effective in Grimsby. Early in the process, our 'offer' comprised inviting local young fathers to come forward as volunteers to be trained and subsequently co-deliver the 'Ask a Dad' workshops. This required young fathers to invest in and commit to delivering training to professionals before we had effectively built the relationships of trust needed to build their confidence in, and understanding of, the 'ask'. In an area like Grimsby, where there was no existing offer for fathers, this was too big of an ask and meant that the early purpose and marketing of the model lacked clarity and caused confusion locally. The establishment of a peer support group prior to such an 'offer' as above, was more pressing and proved more fruitful later down the line once a group had been built. Our challenges in this regard were that we were starting a father-inclusive offer from scratch, unlike in London and Leeds where offers already existed. We therefore had to adapt the process and invest in different elements of the model at different times across the process to ensure its appeal and value to Grimsby.

Responding to local needs and fatherhood experiences

We also learnt a great deal about the conditions for setting up a new father-inclusive intervention in an area of deprivation. In the early days of the co-creative process, engagement with the model was sporadic and it was apparent that some fathers were better equipped to engage than others. Those from lower resource backgrounds or whose parenting circumstances were especially pressured felt less able to remain involved in the process. These young men made a place-based identity in setting up and building a group.

We have also observed that dads have engaged in the model in different ways depending on their circumstances, level of confidence, their past experiences with services and level of intention to change the narrative about young fatherhood. Some only engaged with the peer support offer, whereas others were keen to be trained as experts by experience or be involved in both of those things. Where dads have been involved in the training offer to multi-agency professionals as 'experts by experience', they have typically been older, had more confidence and already possess experience in a professional role. This suggests that as a model, young fathers are more likely to benefit from an offer of support first, while the training offer is an addition and one that functions more effectively for those who already have the confidence to engage in that way. Our key learning here is that flexibility and an understanding of where dads are, are key in supporting their engagement with the model longer term. From a strengths-based and compassionate perspective, we came to an understanding that some dads may only wish to engage on a voluntary basis and infrequently and this is what we supported.

In sum, we identified and worked with young fathers in a fairly inconsistent way in the early years of the process, and it took a great deal of time for the local professionals delivering the work to do the relational work required to ensure that the beneficiaries trusted in the process and felt able to engage in the process of training professionals. However, persistence and responding to the research findings and community insights soon paid off as we adapted the model.

As a face-to-face support offer became a more viable option towards the end of the national and regional COVID-19 lockdowns (notably, that were extended for Grimsby because of continuously high rates of infection), dads began to express more interest in coming together to meet on common ground. This also coincided with the creation of a new post for the model; a local champion whose role was to engage in outreach and support to fathers. Thus, a peer support group for local dads was established. There are now 14 dads who attend the group, although we note that not all are aged 25 and under. In fact, only 2 of the 14 are. However, given the lack of support for fathers more generally in the locality it was determined appropriate to extend the offer out to a wider cohort.

RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON OUR LEARNING

There has been a wealth of learning from the process of co-creating the Grimsby Dads Collective. At times, we have questioned the potential for the success of the project. The iterative, flexible nature of the approach using cycles of action research to drive the process has been unsettling but reflects the need for pace, persistence and considered action in creating an effective offer of father-inclusive support.

These moments of challenge, as well as achievement, have also provided the basis for recommendations for practice and policy. For example, we learned that even though the idea for co-creating a father-inclusive intervention was community-led and despite having local experts on the co-creation team, we would have benefitted from initial research with fathers and local professionals to establish a clearer understanding of the local context. Indeed, we recommend that setting up any father-inclusive group and/or training offer should be founded on an evidenced picture of:

- *the local context*; e.g. socio-demographic profile, local cultures and identities,
- *the culture of local services*; including evolving challenges and constraints on their offers,
- *dads in context*; while we had access to a national evidence base about the needs of young fathers, we needed tangible evidence about the distinctive local challenges they experience.
- *Evolving local practice and policy challenges*; these may enable or hinder the acceptability of the model among the local professional workforce and decision-makers.

We also learned that there is value in securing and understanding the following from the outset:

- Establishing local 'buy-in' early in the process; in the early days the local community needed a clear understanding of what the Grimsby Dads Collective was, to establish trust that it would be beneficial to them and to local fathers.
- Having a clear offer and bringing local people on the journey of the model. Key considerations include clear marketing of the offer and capturing feedback and local insight to shape the model as it develops over time,
- Establishing a clear strategic vision for the project that everyone works towards from the outset will help to steer the direction of the model,
- Relational work with fathers is key to building relationships of trust in interventions like this. As we demonstrate in Report 6, fathers are more likely to participate in advocacy, training and research once they have benefited from an offer of support, have built confidence in the process and in the professionals who deliver it, and when they recognise the benefits of championing themselves and others,
- There is value in working flexibly, being adaptable and in an evidence-based way throughout the process to guide partnership working,
- Regular meetings to guide the process are key to understanding the time and resources people can bring to and commit to the process and to respond accordingly.

CONCLUSION

The co-creation of the Grimsby Dads Collective is a major innovation of the Following Young Fathers Further study. In the past four years, we have confirmed the value and impact of replicating this existing model of co-production and advocacy. To date, the process for each iteration has been time and resource intensive and geographically constrained to particular localities and regions but is proving to be a fruitful and transformative mechanism in these areas for raising the visibility of fathers and their support needs and for educating professionals to promote new visions of young fatherhood that are both rooted in evidence (Way and Tarrant, 2022) and translatable for multi-agency professional practice.

The utilisation and refinement of the real-time evaluation of the instigation process has also generated compelling evidence and insights about 'what works' in creating change for fathers and families by influencing and engaging policy makers and the professional workforce (ibid, 2022). Specifically, facilitating effective partnership working between researchers, professionals, and fathers, including those who are young or marginalised, is confirmed as a powerful mechanism for embedding father-inclusion across different levels of existing systems of support, while simultaneously enabling young fathers to co-create and disseminate knowledge about their experiences. Such processes upskill young fathers and enhance the education and training of professionals, who are galvanised to embed father-inclusive approaches in their practice to support young men to sustain their family lives and citizenship (The Diverse Dads Collective, 2021ab; Tarrant et al. 2022).

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