

Report No. 6

CO-CREATING FATHER- INCLUSIVE PRACTICE WITH YOUNG FATHERS:

**THE INNOVATIVE AND SPECIALIST SUPPORT OF
THE NORTH EAST YOUNG DADS AND LADS**

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HOW TO CITE THIS PAPER

Tarrant, A., Oughton, R., Stoodley, K., Laidlaw, D., Way, L. and Ladlow, L. (2023) Co-creating father-inclusive practice: the innovative and specialist support of the North East Young Dads and Lads, FYFF Findings and Innovation Series 2020–24, Report 6, <https://fyff.co.uk/files/ab500aa7a0075ac2e724645906012969a9d2f683.pdf>.



Following Young Fathers Further is funded by a UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship and led by Professor Anna Tarrant, Director of the Centre for Innovation in Fatherhood and Family Research, University of Lincoln.

KEY POINTS

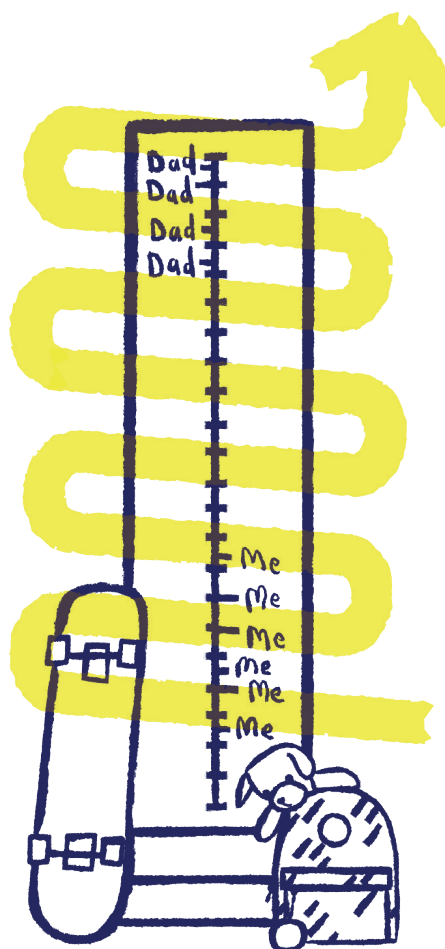
- Specialist organisations who support young fathers can offer unique spaces where they feel empowered to invest in their own futures and aspirations.
- For young fathers, they can play a vital role in promoting their comprehensive social participation, empowering them to engage with more confidence in their familial and social lives, as well as in research. They also create a space for brokering the key material, emotional and socio-economic resources they need as they transition to independence in adult- and parenthood.
- In a context where mainstream services are constrained in their efforts to innovate in, and embed, father-inclusive approaches, specialist services are uniquely pioneering new evidence about 'what works' in terms of engaging fathers in all their diversity,
- Here we present the ways in which the North East Young Dads and Lads, who are based in Gateshead but work regionally, are uniquely invested in creating father-inclusive practice and research approaches and are trail blazing pioneering processes of support for young fathers built around research and advocacy,
- Presenting three activities that have been co-created with and for young fathers with support from the charity, these findings suggest that longer-term, consistent support for the development of father-inclusive practice are high yield, especially in terms of supporting fathers in all their diversity to flourish.

INTRODUCTION

This report presents the pioneering activities of the North East Young Dads and Lads (hereafter NEYDL) in Gateshead as a case study of innovation in how specialist provisions can effectively empower young fathers and influence debates about 'what works' in the promotion and instigation of father-inclusive practice. Where the co-creation process for establishing the Grimsby Dads Collective (see Report 5) has been insightful in terms of identifying and navigating some of the challenges of establishing a new place-based, father-inclusive service and support offer, NEYDL have been pioneering in their own right as only one of a handful of specialist support services nationally that have dedicated themselves to the support and empowerment of young fathers.

As the second case study in this series, this report documents our ongoing and productive partnership work with NEYDL. Our participatory work with the charity has enabled us to further capture 'what works' in creating father-inclusive services and to shape those processes in line with the evidence base.

Here we demonstrate how an organisation that has been committed to challenging deficit views about young fathers from the outset by working within a *social engagement* framework (see Report 2), are diversifying their model towards one that supports the *comprehensive social participation* of young fathers. By this we mean that not only are the young dads supported in relation to their needs as engaged fathers, but they are also provided opportunities to develop from service beneficiaries who began by receiving support, to volunteers and employees of the charity. These opportunities are upskilling these young men, supporting them to invest in their social citizenship and to develop the skills and resources they need to secure their future ambitions. Following a brief overview of the charity and its core aims and objectives, we outline just three of the major innovations conducted in partnership with the [Following Young Father Further](#) team – Diverse Dads, DigiDAD and AmbassaDADs.



NEYDL: THE NORTH EAST YOUNG DADS AND LADS

Founded in 2017, the North East Young Dads and Lads (NEYDL) is an award winning and community-based charity working to improve the lives of disadvantaged young fathers and expectant dads (aged 25 and under), many of whom have been overlooked or sidelined by mainstream services due to their age, gender, and past or present difficulties. NEYDL's work evolved from a project by the Young Women's Outreach Project (YWOP), a charity specialising in young women and mums, piloted in 2015 by the founder of NEYDL. The charity has been proactive in addressing a discernible gap in existing service provision for young fathers both locally and nationally.

Since its inception, NEYDL has provided dedicated spaces of support for young fathers locally and has recently expanded their work by prioritising and supporting the informational requirements of young men nationally who are either currently fathers or soon to be fathers. The charity currently works throughout Tyne and Wear and into some areas of Middlesbrough, County Durham and Northumbria, reaching over 150 young dads a year and spending on average over 50 hours with each beneficiary annually.

As an exemplar of father-inclusion in action, the core ethos of NEYDL is dedicated to supporting young fathers in a way that is steered by the ideas and energy of the young dads who are supported. A recently created additional service is DigiDAD, a digital platform offering accredited e-learning courses and videos, podcasts and blogs with information and advice for over 30,500 young dads, professionals, and families per year.

The core vision, mission, and strategic objectives of the charity, as reported in their Annual Report (2022) are underpinned by a father-inclusive ethos and are as follows:



VISION:

For young dads to be valued and supported in their role as parents.

MISSION:

To enable young dads to play a safe, active, and meaningful role in their children's lives, by supporting and connecting young dads and influencing wider practice.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES:

- 1. To provide individual support to young dads to address their issues and achieve personal outcomes.
- 2. To enable young dads to engage in activities:
 - I. where they can share experiences and support with other young dads and
 - II. where they can spend time with Mam and Child (as appropriate).
- 3. To provide opportunities to improve young dads' knowledge, skills, confidence and self-esteem through training and information resources (including DigiDAD).
- 4. To influence policy and practice to be more inclusive and supportive of young dads (to include further development of the charity's Regional Young Dads Council).
- 5. To ensure that NEYDL has the resources required to achieve the above objectives, maintaining high quality, authenticity.



The charity has created new voluntary opportunities for young fathers and has engaged 105 young men per year (115 including non-birthing people) who act as peer educators, peer researchers and focus group participants in idea-generation teams. 30% of the board of trustees are young dads and 33% of the staff team are former service beneficiaries. Each of these activities create opportunities and investments in skill-building and training for young dads.

NEYDL also nurtures the research skills of young fathers and has linked them to universities including Newcastle University and Northumbria University. As a core partner with the charity, the Following Young Fathers Further team continue to work with young fathers to spear-head new studies around the demographics, experiences, and needs of young fathers.

Through partnership working with universities, young fathers have been trained in various research skills and successfully completed numerous activities resulting in working papers, published guidance and video resources around Diversity and Inclusion for young dads (Diverse Dads study, 2021ab),

the impact of COVID-19 on young fathers (initial findings from Following Young Fathers Further study, 2020–24) and the mapping of local services in the North East of England (Finding Fathers study, 2019 and Lads, Dads & Loneliness study, 2019).

Notably, these projects have been and are underpinned by the co-creation methodology that the Following Young Fathers Further team have refined with the charity and others nationally. Via the following activities, we have worked collectively to support young fathers as we seek to challenge deficit narratives about young fatherhood and to advocate for father-inclusion. We now turn to three major innovations NEYDL have conducted in partnership with the Following Young Father Further team, beginning with the Diverse Dads project.

DIVERSE DADS: PEER RESEARCH WITH YOUNG FATHERS

The first research project carried out in collaboration with NEYDL was Diverse Dads (2020–2021). As an exemplar of father-inclusive research, a peer research methodology was utilised to enable beneficiaries of NEYDL to explore the possibilities of improved outreach and support for minority ethnic and young fathers. The Following Young Fathers Further team trained a peer research team comprising 2 young fathers and a support worker on the ethics and practicalities of qualitative research, subsequently then supporting them throughout the research process.

In partnership, the peer researchers carried out several research activities – they mapped out existing provisions for minority ethnic communities and young fathers in the Tyne and Wear region, conducted a small survey with regional practitioners about inclusive and culturally competent practice, interviewed young minoritised fathers concerning their experiences and support needs, and interviewed professionals regionally who were pioneering inclusive work. This created a small, yet powerful evidence base that the peer research team developed into training films and presented at a [webinar](#). The team also worked together to co-author two reports and a peer reviewed journal article presenting the work (The Diverse Dads Collective, 2021ab; Way et al. [2022](#)).

The findings from the study challenge common assumptions that young fathers are 'hard-to-reach' and that localities are lacking in diversity. The peer research team found that understanding local demographics, mapping local and regional resources, and building new partnerships with community leaders and across services are important steps in ensuring services are more accessible to all young fathers, especially those that are minoritised. When professionals listen actively to young fathers, they can better understand them and develop a tailored and responsive approach that empowers them.

Overall, the study created new substantive and practice-based insights about inclusive support for young and minority ethnic fathers and simultaneously demonstrated the capabilities of young fathers in conducting peer research.

Read our final reports here: <https://followingyoungfathersfurther.org/projects/diverse-dads>





CO-CREATING DIGIDAD WITH AND FOR YOUNG FATHERS AND MULTI-AGENCY PROFESSIONALS

A pioneering aspect of the specialist support offer provided by NEYDL is DigiDAD, an e-learning platform made *by and for* young fathers. First established during the COVID-19 pandemic, DigiDAD features evidence-informed creative content that is designed to provide young fathers with more easily accessible information about parenting. While initially developed to respond to local need, the online capability of DigiDAD means that it also uniquely responds to international evidence that young fathers report unmet informational needs, as well as unequal access to resources, including parenting-related information (Mniszak et al. 2021).

DigiDAD features educational films, animations, podcasts, quizzes, and certification that has been co-created with young dads. These focus on numerous themes that respond to community identified needs and a range of topics including family law, social care, mental health, parenting and first aid. Each series of films and accredited courses provide bespoke advice and practical information for young fathers around parenting skills, relationships, and other support information that they are likely to need as they navigate their parenting journeys.

Throughout the co-creation process, accessible content has been developed with, and verified by, professionals and experts in father-inclusive practice in relation to core thematic areas that are relevant to the early pregnancy and parenting journeys of young fathers. Scripts for the films, which are a variety of animations and spoken pieces to camera, have then been turned into accessible scripts with young fathers who are service beneficiaries and employees of NEYDL to ensure the appeal of the content to a wider audience of young fathers. The professionals involved in the process have also formed an impressive advisory group comprising academics and multi-agency professionals who regularly review and comment on script and video development to ensure that it is accurate according to current evidence.

The young fathers involved, as beneficiaries and employees of NEYDL, have developed their skills and expertise around communicating their experiences of young fatherhood to develop new dialogues, which form the basis for new understanding. They have worked with multi-agency professionals and researchers to develop and present the content engaged directly in knowledge exchange with the Following Young Fathers Further research team (Tarrant, 2020–24), to translate the evidence base for a younger audience with lived experience.

The co-creation process has been described as a unique selling point (USP) for DigiDAD (Chaudry and Tarrant, 2021). The most distinctive feature is that young fathers' voices and lived experiences are also integral, both to the content development and creation, and the dissemination of information. Despite its regional identity, the site is already being accessed by young fathers globally.

While an ongoing and constantly evolving platform, DigiDAD was formally launched to an international audience of 80 professionals and young dads on the 24th February 2022. Register on the DigiDAD website: <https://www.digidad.uk/>

AMBASSADADS

In 2020, NEYDL established a Young Dads Council comprising young father beneficiaries already effectively supported by the service. Following their first collective project, the Equal Play exhibition supported by Dr Michael Richardson and BALTIC (NEYDL Annual report 2022), the group has since developed into a lived experience member group that is being supported to actively engage in social and political participation activities with the shared goal of advocating for all young fathers. Starting out as a smaller group of six members, nineteen young fathers from Gateshead, North Tyneside, Middlesbrough and County Durham have come together under the collective name 'AmbassaDADS'. The group is working as a new collective to influence social, policy and practice change in a way that improves the lives of young fathers.

With continued support from NEYDL and from the Following Young Fathers Further team, the group have been working together to establish an identity as a unique collective. This has involved establishing a brand and an identity, and the co-production of their own narratives about young fatherhood that are designed to counter negative stereotypes and promote father-inclusion in policy and practice.

The group have already led and delivered on a number of collaborative advocacy projects in the past year that have been co-created with and for young fathers. These activities have been designed to influence public and practice perceptions of young fathers and include:

- Father Unknown: A theatre piece inspired by and co-created with the AmbassaDADS, former trustee Dr Michael Richardson, and former employee Jonah York. The play features as a permanent recording on the [DigiDAD](#) website.
- The co-creation of the [Think Dad! Father Inclusive Practice Toolkit](#): AmbassaDADS members co-created a professional development toolkit following extensive peer research with other young dads and professionals. Launched via a webinar event attended by 165 professionals on 20th February 2023, this resource has been made freely accessibly via the [DigiDAD](#) website.
- Think Dad! also included [a poster and e-zine](#) exploring young dads' fatherhood journeys and future aspirations created by the AmbassaDADS in 2021 in response to the BALTIC's 'Equal Play' exhibition created by international artist Albert Potrony.
- BBC Radio 1 Newsbeat: Four AmbassaDADS recently featured in a piece by BBC Radio 1's news programme Newsbeat.

Longer term aims and ambitions for the group include helping NEYDL to define realistic aims in relation to its policy and campaigning; ensuring that young fathers input to, and are heard by, the Board of Trustees; expanding an associate membership of young fathers; and delivering on new peer research and campaign projects. In future, the members of the group also plan to expand the membership of AmbassaDADS and do more work together to change the narrative and challenge negative stereotypes of young fatherhood. As previous beneficiary and staff member Robert says: 'The AmbassaDADS have assembled... watch this space!'

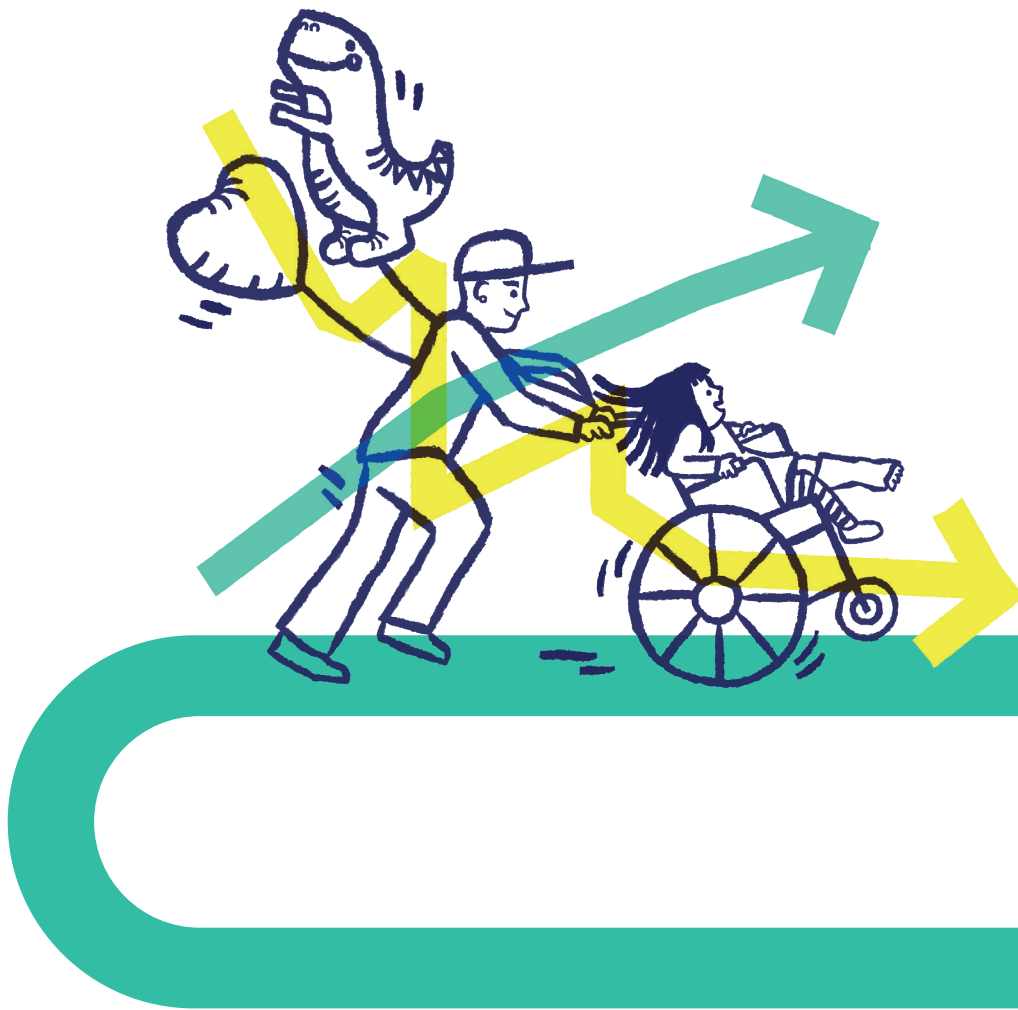
¹ | The Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art based in Gateshead, <https://baltic.art/>

CONCLUSION

The pioneering work of the North East Young Dads and Lads demonstrates the capabilities of young fathers to engage in a range of activities that underpin their more comprehensive social participation not only in their family lives, but also in the community, as part of national conversations and debate, and in research.

Specialist organisations like these can play an essential role, not only in providing support to young fathers where mainstream services are constrained in doing so, but also for promoting father-inclusive approaches. This includes the proactive creation of new opportunities for those whose pathways to adulthood have been disrupted by a range of challenges and/or where they have experienced social disadvantage and stigma associated with their experience of becoming a parent at a young age.

Concerningly, services like these remain a postcode lottery (Tarrant and Neale, 2017), meaning that they are not accessible to all. While digital technology offers exciting potential for increasing access to information for all young fathers, as DigiDAD seeks to achieve, it remains the case that young fathers' ability to access appropriate support varies by locality. As part of a father-inclusive ecosystem, there is a need for a stronger policy directive and investment in specialist support for fathers to ensure that the value of father-inclusion might be realised.



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