



# FYFF

Following Young Fathers Further

Briefing Paper Three: Supporting at a distance



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## Supporting at a distance: the challenges and opportunities of supporting young fathers through the COVID-19 pandemic

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### Briefing Context

The data presented in this briefing paper were generated for wave one of our extended qualitative longitudinal study. This wave of interviews was specifically designed to understand the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown on the parenting journeys and support needs of young fathers and the professionals that support them. Here we present insights from interviews conducted with seventeen professionals working for the voluntary sector and other generic and specialist family support services who have a remit to engage and support young fathers across their parenting journeys.

### Key Findings

- The COVID-19 pandemic has had major impacts on the wide variety of specialist and generic, statutory and voluntary services that engage with young fathers, creating unique pressures for them and the young men they support;
- Many services who were working actively in face-to-face settings with young fathers had to rapidly adjust to remote working and tailor their support offer accordingly. They did this while simultaneously managing change in their own work lives and increased demand for support;

- Online and remote support made relationship building and maintenance between professionals and young fathers more challenging to establish and sustain. Yet these relationships remained a vital source of connection and interaction for young fathers in a context of enforced distancing and isolation;
- The complete loss of face-to-face working and community-located spaces are considered a significant loss for young fathers, rolling back progress in tackling the loneliness and isolation that young men experience. Indeed, while the pandemic has created opportunities to rapidly develop a digital service offer, its accessibility is hampered when young fathers have poor access to IT resources.
- Nevertheless, the pandemic forced the shift towards improved digital offers and created new opportunities for implementing alternative working practices. While many services were aware of the need to change working practices before the pandemic, this was often hampered by organisational cultures and limited resources.
- Early intervention work and progress in engaging young fathers early on in their parenting journeys was stalled in the early days of the lockdown. Organisations have responded flexibly to those experiencing crisis, although often at the expense of preventative approaches.
- However, remote working improved communication between voluntary and statutory services, enabling the identification of families who required support. This improved communication should be maintained and built on post-pandemic.
- Our research illustrates that remote working is not a straightforward replacement, highlighting that in the post-pandemic context, young fathers will benefit from a combination of face-to-face and digital support.

## Introduction

Even before the pandemic, family support services had an essential role to play in enabling young fathers to remain actively involved in the lives of their children across their parenting journeys. Given the wider, positive societal implications of father involvement, attention to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown on the family support landscape is vital. However, engagement with family support services is sometimes hampered by the widespread perception that young fathers are 'hard-to-reach' (Neale and Davies, 2015; Davies, 2016). Turning this notion on its head, Neale and Davies (2015) propose that services might instead consider how they can become more accessible to young fathers. The accessibility of services for young fathers is therefore of paramount importance if they are to be well supported to be involved in their children's lives.

As Davies (2016) notes however, increasing young fathers' engagement with services requires detailed understanding of their complex needs and a reshaping of service design and delivery to account for them. Yet the COVID-19 crisis has placed additional and unique pressures on local services, which have become increasingly constrained in how they are able to operate. This was linked in part to the requirements for many services to adapt to remote working, compounded by devastating financial impacts (King et al, 2020) and increased demand for services as more families have been pushed into crisis (National Voices, 2020). Our findings provide evidence of the important work that family and welfare support services have continued to do in support of young fathers, as well as how they have necessarily adapted to the increased pressures produced by the pandemic.



### ***Researching with professionals***

Two participant groups were interviewed for the Following Young Fathers Further study; young fathers, who in policy terms, are defined as those who have their first child or experience a first pregnancy when they were aged 25 and under, and professionals with a remit to provide support to young fathers and their families. Findings from the young fathers are published elsewhere and are referred to where relevant (Tarrant et al, 2020a, b).

This paper presents insights from interviews conducted with seventeen professionals working for the voluntary sector and other generic and specialist family support services. The organisations had a wide remit to support a range of complex needs and were operating locally in the key study sites; namely Grimsby, Gateshead, London and Leeds. Reflecting the diverse character of voluntary sector support for young fathers, we interviewed managers and those delivering front line support, from several organisations including:

- a supported housing organisation,
- a specialist community-based dads' group for young fathers,
- a national childcare charity and a national child protection charity,
- an independent charity providing support programs for young people and families,
- youth services (homelessness charity),
- local government delivered family support for low-income families.

## Key findings

Our findings are arranged around four key themes: the impacts of remote working on interpersonal relationships between service providers and young fathers; the challenges of addressing social isolation in a context of social distancing; impacts on the delivery of support for young fathers; and adjustments to a new family support landscape. We elaborate each in what follows.

### ***The impacts of remote working on interpersonal relations***

The young men in our study were already engaged with a wide variety of specialist and generic, statutory and voluntary agencies prior to the pandemic, accessing them for different purposes and at different times in their parenting journeys. Indeed, the complex needs that many young and teenage fathers experience mean that they often navigate and come into the orbit of a range of services and agencies when they become a parent (Neale and Davies, 2015). Perhaps the most profound change that support professionals experienced was the need to adapt to restrictions resulting from the requirement for social distancing and home working. Our research demonstrates that this affected services in different ways, but predominantly affected the delivery, timing, and perceived quality of support.

For those organisations where home and remote working was enforced, the biggest change for professionals was in *how* they were able to engage with the dads, as opposed to *how often*. Sustained, one-to-one, multi-faceted support, based on warm, friendly relationships between practitioners and young fathers, have a profound influence on the lives of young men and fathers (Neale and Davies, 2015; Ward et al, 2017). However, this was more challenging to achieve, with implications for the quality of support the professionals felt they were able to provide. Establishing relationships with new referrals and with young men with whom relationships of trust were not already established was especially challenging. The pandemic therefore placed broader constraints on flexible, tailored interactions like simply being there with an open door, or the process of reaching out to people in their local communities to maintain visibility and actively offer support.

The experience of providing support while physically separated also emphasised the significance of the more subtle and less visible aspects of support like tactility and observing body language to read emotional cues. One of the project workers for a young dads' organisation and 'local champion' (Davies, 2016) for young fathers in his locality explained that the time-intensive nature of the work had remained relatively similar. A major challenge is the loss of more subtle interactions that are enabled when support is co-present:

I haven't had a decrease in the amount of contact time with the young men. It's just how I've contacted them and talking to them has, has changed. You know for me it's really hard. I'm a very tactile person right. If the lads are alright, I give them a cuddle. And, you know, I'll shake their hand and walk alongside them. So for me that's been really hard not to go, 'hello mate, how you doing?', you know [laughs]

His observation was shared by a specialist learning mentor for a local council in another local authority. She highlighted the limitations that remote support places on reading body language:

And me being able to understand their body language of how they were feeling 'cause they don't always articulate to you, as you know, the way that they're feeling and the emotions that they're going through and the stress that they're under but you can read it through the body language. And then that leads to better conversations cause then you can explore things.

These more understated aspects of support work are especially important for young men who often lack the confidence and capacity to make disclosures about the problems they are navigating, while also being bound to gendered norms which require men to act tough, to be stoic, and self-reliant to avoid stigma (e.g., Ruxton and Burrell, 2020).



## ***Addressing loneliness and isolation in a context of enforced distancing***

Remote working has also created a barrier for services with a remit to address the loneliness and isolation that many young fathers experience (see Tarrant et al, 2020b). Early in the first lockdown, the need to adapt quickly to remote working meant that addressing isolation necessarily became less of a priority for services:

I think that's been the main priority for us, is changing what we're doing so that we're delivering in a way that fits the context...I think the isolation is one that we would be doing less of because it's so hard to actually do that, do that well. You know, we're doing what we can do on it - Policy Manager, national childcare charity.

The challenges of addressing young fathers' isolation and loneliness were also observed by a specialist community support group for young fathers. Before the pandemic, community support groups for young fathers were established to create and enable a space of belonging for young fathers. Dads' groups support young men to build confidence, access peer support, and feel a sense of belonging in contexts where family and other services may marginalise them (Hanna, 2018).

Local champions for young fathers were concerned that they were less able to provide these spaces and to address their complex needs. Support for repairing relationships with the mothers of their children was also more difficult to provide (see also Tarrant et al. 2020a):



I'm not sure our current service offer, addresses all of the young dad's issues around isolation and loneliness and actually, you know, what's been a strength of the [young dads] project beforehand has been the fact that we do have these groups where young men can come together. They can eat together, they can have a game of pool, have a chat, have a laugh and some of the young dads have said it's what they look forward to every week is that, is that, that one day or that one night off. And for those that are involved heavily in the children's life it's a break for them. And for those that aren't it's a chance to connect with another young man – Local champion, Gateshead

A lot of our support feels like it's been about, you know, young men who are dealing with that loneliness issue, that isolation. That kinda loss of contact with their children, that uncertainty. It feels like it's certainly exacerbated some of the conflict with some of the mums – Local champion, Gateshead

More broadly, the professionals we interviewed suggested that remote working had created new barriers in terms of the accessibility of services. This was especially problematic for the young people they were working with who required flexible, tailored support for a range of complex needs:

Young people haven't been able to access the office, so that's been an issue 'cause normally people would just come in, 'cause we have like a drop-in there between one and four too, so people could come in and maybe do a universal, sorry, a job search for the Universal Credit, or they could just come in and get a meal and things like that, so those things have gone - Support worker, homelessness charity.

...it's difficult for some of them cause obviously if there's any problems with our families they would automatically just come to us. But obviously they, they need to phone or, or Whatsapp just so I can ring them if they haven't got any credit - Families Manager and Delivery Officer, independent family support charity.



While opportunities for more informal, physically present engagements with community services were certainly reduced, a Families Manager and Delivery Officer for an independent charity providing family support programmes identified an upside of remote contact for some as the pandemic progressed. While work/life boundaries for professionals were undoubtedly impacted, the shift to remote support meant that contact with families outside of traditional work hours increased, suggesting professionals were perceived to be more accessible and reachable:

I think it's, it's eased people to be able to send them messages at, at odd random times during the day, during the weekend and things that they normally probably wouldn't send, if I'm honest.

The accessibility of services operating remotely was compounded by the social disadvantages of those young fathers with limited access to phone data or technology. Digital exclusion, as well as varying levels of digital literacy among young fathers were identified as a real concern by the professionals meaning that some, (indeed, those who need it most), were missing out on essential support:

I think the, the idea that all these families that are gonna be able to manage at home with wifi and iPads or laptops or phones is just not realistic - young fathers local champion, Leeds.

...what's been really hard is that there's this automatic assumption that all young people have access to digital media and smart phones and internet connection, they've got, you know data on their phones and they haven't [...] And some a' the young men that I have worked with haven't got that capacity, haven't got that. I've got one a' the young men who [laughs], who borrows his granny's smart phone so we can have a conversation! [...] the young men that are involved with children's social care are very tech savvy using Teams because that's what some a' the children's social care services are using to make contact and have meetings. So usually the young men that are referred to us where children's social care are involved are more Zoom and Teams savvy than young men who are not involved with any other services – young fathers local champion, Gateshead.

A Policy Manager of a major national childcare charity observed that while it was perhaps more possible to support those already known to the charity via an existing parent champion scheme, reaching out to those families who were pushed into crisis because of the pandemic and lockdown was difficult:

we're doing what we feel we can, I think. So a lot of the parent champions had networks of parents in their area anyway that they've met, that they work with, and so are aware of which parents are likely to be more hit by lockdown, by isolation, and so are trying to, are being supported to check-in with them regularly. What we're missing is all the people who weren't already known to services, who are quite hard to find, and that feels like a really big, unmet need, that I don't have an answer for.

These findings suggest that while the shift to remote work created new opportunities for flexible support, increased pressures on services and on the relationships between young fathers and professionals made it much harder for them to implement support that addresses isolation.

### ***Impacts on the delivery of support for young fathers and families***

As noted, before the pandemic there were concerns that young fathers were not always being engaged early enough in their parenting journeys. Indeed, some of the young fathers we interviewed were impacted by hospital restrictions and one was unable to attend the birth of his child (Tarrant et al, 2020a). Early support in young men's parenting journeys enables their longer-term engagement with their families (Maxwell et al, 2009) and encourages care and support for the mother of their children throughout pregnancy and early parenthood (Ferguson and Gates, 2015). The ability for services to engage with young men early, however, was heavily impacted. Preventative work was de-centred in a context of needing to be responsive to those experiencing crisis, while also adapting to a new and rapidly changing policy landscape:

Anything that was considered non-essential, so not supporting children and families in the immediate term, stopped completely at the beginning, and certainly for the first five or six weeks ...nobody had the time or the head space to talk about prevention, because we're in the here and now and we need to do something immediately. So any funding, any resource, any capacity that had initially been given to prevention, that all got pulled immediately because it was all hands-on deck, we need to go and deal with this because we're at crisis, this is an emergency. And it's been really difficult to claw that support back [...] just because we are in the middle of a crisis, that doesn't mean that we should stop putting emphasis on the prevention of future harm, because we still have something really valuable to offer - Development and Impact manager, Child Protection Charity.



Despite reduced attention to prevention work early on, as the pandemic progressed the shift to remote support was identified as beneficial for enabling preventative work longer-term and for signposting among other non-specialist services and statutory agencies, discussed in the next section. Services felt better equipped to conduct this work over the phone in ways they had not before:



...the referrals in to preventative and early help services have been really, really early doors. So, you know, a dad will come on the phone and have a chat and we'll end up referring him into a mental health service, which we wouldn't have done had we not made that preventative call - Community engagement and marketing lead for a young person's charity.

Changing practices within workplaces created opportunities for new ways of working that had hitherto been difficult to implement before the pandemic because of the entrenched nature of organisational cultures within services. The need to adapt a digital offer quickly meant that services were pushed to incorporate digital technologies and platforms in service approaches in ways that will benefit services and young fathers in the longer term. One support group for young fathers, for example, were prompted to bring their plans for a digital offer forward. They produced training videos and an online parenting programme that was designed by, and featured the voices of, young fathers themselves.

Our interviews confirmed that this also created unanticipated opportunities for more collaborative work and creative change in working practices between agencies. This resulted in the expansion of their remit of work and the need to adjust priorities. A family support officer working for local government, for example, noted:

...we've done a lot more referrals for food parcels and things like that so the actual remit of the work has changed and the other thing that happened as a result of that, because of the referrals that were coming in for just COVID-related crises shall we say, the council set up a front door as a COVID hub. So there was a phone number where families could actually just ring directly the COVID hub and be dealt with immediately.

This observation was also made in an online webinar held with project partners and professionals working in one of the localities where our research is being conducted (Way and Tarrant, 2020). Not only does this highlight how rapidly services adapted to change but also how they were able to respond at a time of disruption and rapid change and in ways that illustrated the benefits of alternative ways of working. These findings also further reinforce the value of flexible and creative provision that is responsive to change, that can take stock and find new modes of working in response to changing conditions.



## ***An altered family service landscape***

Overall, the altered policy environment of the pandemic also produced major changes in local support for families, creating some fragmentation. These changes not only produced wider concerns about what kinds of support for young fathers were lost but also about the implications of higher workloads for services who had reduced capacity to step in and provide more holistic support.

Joined up working between different organisations and agencies was reduced early on, meaning services were less able to provide the same level of tailored and specialist support:

we usually get quite a lot of support from social workers through care workers. A big agency we work with that I forgot to mention was Youth Offending, and because they were unable to do face to face contact it was all done over the phone. When issues arose, there wasn't the support you'd usually have. They weren't, people who'd had the relationship with some of these young people for years and years weren't able to come in and support them as they normally would, so we were in this kind of holding pattern where we were trying to be all things to all men essentially – Team leader at a youth accommodation site, Grimsby.

I'm supporting a young lad at the moment who's got an issue with alcohol and I've been supporting him with [drug, alcohol and mental health support] locally and they've got an art group there that we go to which is brilliant, and he's been kind of missing out on that – Young fathers local champion, Grimsby.

This was not universally experienced, however. The pandemic produced unexpected opportunities for improved communication between voluntary and statutory services, a finding confirmed by other research about the impact of the pandemic on services (Edmiston et al, 2021). Recognising that organisations often work alongside and in conjunction with external organisations and services, our research

suggests that while there was greater potential for some families to be missed, there was also an opportunity for more multi-agency work and communication. Statutory services were identified as an important safety net, for example, for ensuring those most likely to fall out of the orbit of services were still supported:

We've done a lot more work with the actual social worker because they are still making their statutory visits and going in. So that's been a new way of working which has been a real positive because then prior to this we worked far more in isolation and obviously shared information but now as an example, we've got quite a few cases where it's an assessment of neglect, so my worker may not be able to go in the home, but they can work with the parent on the phone. The social worker will go and do their call, their regular call to visit the children, my worker will, before the visit, say right, can we look at home conditions this week, the social worker will go in, do an assessment, look at the things and then come back and they'll work together to do the assessment tool. And we've never worked like that before, so there's been quite a lot of bridges built, which I don't know if they'd have come about in any other way. So yeah, that's been a big change – Family Support Officer, Local Government.

Overall, it is apparent that the altered family support environment produced new challenges but also new opportunities for multi-agency working. Significantly, it became more difficult for voluntary and local organisations to support young fathers with some of the more specialised and complex needs that they faced. Unexpectedly, this changed organisational cultures but also facilitated new and more holistic ways of working across sectors.



## Conclusions and practice recommendations

- The COVID-19 pandemic and policy of lockdown has inevitably impacted on those who provide support for young fathers and for men more generally,
- The findings of this research confirm the vital, continued work of family support services during the pandemic for young fathers and the need to ensure that young men continue to receive longer term support, starting as early as possible in their parenting journeys,
- Remote working is not a replacement for the kind of support young fathers respond well to, although it may be useful as an addition in future for increasing preventative work, including signposting, among non-specialist and statutory services,
- Opportunities for young fathers to engage with professionals flexibly and at varied hours because of remote working were valued. Services should consider greater flexibility in their support offers, although with due consideration to the work/life balance of professionals.
- Creativity in the development of digital offers, which might include the creation of young father informed training videos and parenting programmes, might be usefully built into the support offer to complement face-to-face approaches and provide flexibility,
- Remote working also improved communication between voluntary and statutory services and we recommend that this should be maintained and built on post-pandemic,
- The shift to remote working has illustrated the unique role that specialist, community and locality-based support groups play in addressing the isolation and loneliness young fathers experience. These groups help young fathers to remain engaged in their children's lives, to build confidence, and to flourish as part of a local community,
- However, the availability of these groups remains a postcode lottery because of fragmented and time-limited funding and inadequate policy support. Sustainable funding for community and locality-based groups as a norm is needed now more than ever if young fathers are to be effectively supported to reach their full potential,



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