

Policy Briefing 3

# **MODELS OF GOOD PRACTICE FOR WORK WITH YOUNG FATHERS**

The Grimsby Dads Collective Case Study

2021

## ABOUT

**Following Young Fathers Further** (2020–2027) is a seven-year qualitative longitudinal research study, funded via the prestigious UK Research & Innovation Future Leaders Fellowship scheme (grant number: MR/S031723/1). A major aim of the research is to generate an extended evidence base about the lived experiences and support needs of young men who become fathers or experience a pregnancy aged 25 and under. In productive partnership with young fathers and the professionals who support them, the study is also implementing innovative methodologies to produce both practice-informed research and research-based practice (Neale, 2021) through the generation of in-depth, longitudinal, and international evidence about young fatherhood. Facilitated by co-creation methodology, a form of participatory action research, that directly involves young fathers and national multi-agency support services in creating and promoting new service approaches, the study is also driving social transformation through the implementation of a support and policy environment in the UK that is both compassionate and participatory.

Underpinned by methods of coproduction and co-creation, a major objective of 'Following Young Fathers Further' is to address the marginalisation of young fathers in support contexts. This involves working directly with them and the professionals who support them, to promote and implement a practice and policy environment that recognises the importance of involved fathers both for (young) fathers, mothers, children with wider societal benefits. The establishment of the Grimsby Dads Collective is central to the development of this work.



A collaboration between



## KEY FINDINGS

- As a new iteration of the Young Dads Collective, the Grimsby Dads Collective evidences that young fathers are capable agents of transformation, change and knowledge exchange.
- The Young Dads Collective model is premised on a participatory approach which treats young fathers as 'experts by experience', who promote ideas for authentic forms of engagement to professionals. This is premised on a father-inclusive approach, that has the capacity to bring about service and systems change.
- The benefits of co-creating effective models of father-inclusive practice are wide-ranging with broad implications for the well-being of young fathers, families, the professional workforce, and wider society.
- Collaborative knowledge generation between researchers, professionals, and communities/citizens, via co-creation, is a powerful methodology for aligning and harnessing research knowledge for the purposes of service development.
- While challenging, co-creation can facilitate new cultures of continual improvement for services. Research is not seen as a threat but as a joint venture involving the creation of know-how knowledge for services (Neale, 2021).

## THE GRIMSBY DADS COLLECTIVE

Since January 2020, we have been working 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 and establish the Grimsby Dads Collective. Co-creation is a participatory and action research method that is underpinned by creative, inclusive, and democratic approaches and collaborations, that have the aim of empowering communities by valuing lived experience, challenging power dynamics, and addressing social injustices. The process occurs when citizens are active participants in the design, delivery, provision or implementation of a certain policy or service they receive (Pestoff, 2011; Brandsen et al. 2018). Co-creation is also built upon an interactive and dynamic relationship between academics and key stakeholders (Greenhalgh et al. 2016), where value is created through direct participation mechanisms that support public institutions to benefit from the combined knowledge and 'experience of individuals, groups, associations or other institutions' (Zuniga et al. 2021: 4).

Premised on an evidence-based, gender transformative model called the [Young Dads Collective](#) (established by Coram Family and Childcare), select young fathers are trained as 'experts by experience,' who advocate on behalf of themselves and others about the value of gender transformative approaches to parenting and support. Professionals from mainstream and specialist services are the main audience and are encouraged to reflect on, and make positive changes to their practices, influenced by the voices and experiences of young fathers. An effective and successful model in London, we have since implemented two new hubs in England, one in Leeds, called the [Young Dads Collective North](#), and a new iteration in Grimsby that is being funded by the Fellowship. Drawing on the expertise of the London group to facilitate the process, the aim of implementing the Young Dads Collective North in Leeds was to explore whether and

how this model might operate in a statutory council setting offering generic family support but with a clear commitment to support for young fathers (Tarrant and Neale, 2017). There is currently no existing statutory council offering for young fathers in Grimsby, but local organisations and services expressed an interest in improving the local support offer for fathers in Grimsby and are committed to the project.

Drawing on the research expertise of the FYFF team, the expertise of the London based team who developed the model, and local knowledge and resource in Grimsby, we are working in partnership to co-create and test the new model and drive gender-based transformation in how local services in Grimsby engage with fathers. The FYFF team are researching and capturing the implementation process (including what works and what doesn't work using qualitative methods) and are generating data with all partners, including the young fathers, the local professional workforce and the professionals delivering the model, to capture the process and assess the generalisability and sustainability of this approach.

**“ There is currently no existing statutory council offering for young fathers in Grimsby**



## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY CO-CREATION?

Co-creation is premised on an inclusive and democratic approach to research, practice development, and policy making. Simply defined, it is a methodology and 'a form of collaborative creativity that is initiated to enable innovation with rather than for the involved stakeholders.' (ACCOMPLISH, 2018).

It also aligns with the principles of *Participatory action research (or PAR)*. Our work involves a form of partnership research with the communities involved to produce practice-informed research and research-based practice (Neale, 2021b).

As with any concept or idea the language of co-creation is often used interchangeably, and its definition varies according to perspective, disciplinary orientation and project. However, a common principle is that it enables meaningful engagement between multi users or actors. This may include any combination of researchers, policymakers, practitioners and/or industry professionals, artists/creative agencies and the public (e.g., 'service users', residents, communities, whoever they may be). They work together to 'co-create' new understandings about a social problem and in some cases to produce a specific solution to those problems. Distinctive to the methodology is that the public benefit from research processes and relationships, as much as from findings and outputs. Impact and knowledge exchange are therefore integral to the research as it progresses.

The establishment of the Grimsby Dads Collective is an exemplar of co-creation because it is a form of collaborative innovation that involves young fathers, national organisations and researchers (the FYFF team) working together to create a new model of father-inclusive practice that addresses a specific community identified problem. In co-creating the Grimsby Dads Collective, the aim is to transform how young fathers are seen more broadly, informed by community (in this case young fathers) and practice-based knowledge and expertise (local and national), while also developing an iteration of an existing model of good practice in a way that is flexible and responsive to local community needs.

## KEY PROGRESS TO DATE

The benefits of co-creating effective models of father-inclusive practice for more discussion around father-inclusive approaches are wide-ranging and have broad implications for young fathers, the professional workforce and wider society (see Policy Briefing One).

The Grimsby Dads Collective is establishing an important new platform for young men in Grimsby to share their stories and experiences about fatherhood with local multi-agency professionals. Research confirms that young fathers want to be heard and have a voice (Neale and Davies, 2015) and that they benefit when they are supported in how to do this effectively and with impact. Via the YDC model, young fathers receive training about how to engage effectively with local practitioners working in a variety of professional settings. The training enables them to test and hone their skills and develop their confidence. For the purposes of the Grimsby Dads Collective, which has been implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, the young fathers have been filmed delivering their stories about their parenting and support needs and are also presenting them to multi-agency professionals at training events called 'Ask a Dad' workshops and other local events.

The young men who are supported to engage in these ways develop new skills and accreditation via engagement with professionals who are given the space and time to listen and engage authentically with the young men and their explanations of their experiences. For the young men, another benefit is understanding that there are other young fathers experiencing comparable challenges which helps them to manage the stigma they experience and recognise that what they think are personal troubles, are being experienced because they are linked to wider structural and systems challenges that they may have a role in transforming.

The YDC model is fundamentally about creating systems change through authentic engagement with young fathers. This involves seeing them as 'experts by experience' with the capacity to bring about service and systems change with wider societal benefits. Knowledge produced in partnership with professionals already implementing effective father-inclusive practice, becomes a useful benchmark for moving forward and creating 'know-how' knowledge for evolving services as a joint venture (Neale, 2021).

Evidence is also being generated to capture its efficacy in promoting change in professional practice and local policy approaches. The work is ongoing at the time of writing (Jan 2022) but you can follow the progress of the model via our project website and social media channels.

We conclude, that while small organisational changes and adaptations in practice can make a big difference, in isolation they are less likely to be sustained. Wider systems change, that embeds a commitment to father-inclusive practice and gender equality, is sorely needed in order to be sustainable. While it is possible to do this at the level of service design and through the promotion of positive messages with young fathers, father-inclusive practices also need to be coordinated and driven via a national policy strategy. We echo the recommendations of the recent Independent Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel in England (2021) that there is need for a greater government commitment to exploring what works, for who and why. The Grimsby Dads Collective is an important example of how father-inclusive practice can be implemented in ways that are sensitive to local needs and cultures and driven by local actors including young fathers themselves.





## POLICY RELEVANCE

1. Collaborative knowledge generation between researchers, professionals, and communities/citizens, through methods of co-creation, is a useful way of aligning and harnessing research knowledge for the purposes of service development. The strength of this approach is the generation and implementation of practice-informed research and research-based practice.
2. The Young Dads Collective North and Grimsby Dads Collective are examples of 'dynamic, locally adaptive community-academic partnerships' (Greenhalgh et al. 2016: 392), that have the capacity to drive social change and impact through the promotion of father-inclusive practice and policy.
3. The generation of local knowledge is not enough to affect wider, national systems change. Evidence-based, effective practice implemented on the ground by professionals, must also be supported by a cohesive national policy strategy and framework that is embedded in post pandemic recovery plans.

### VIEWS OF YOUNG FATHERS AND PROFESSIONALS

“ I want more understanding of everyone else's experience and what they've gone through. And I just want for there to be more support for dads, like to be, feel more involved instead of just...being the bit on the side.

GDC, young father

“ Buzzing, love being listened to. It's not just the work with the professionals, it's about meeting up with other dads when we do the planning. We all want other dads to have a better experience.

YDC North, young father

“ ...creating change within services that are supporting young dads [...] raising awareness that young dads are often left out and that they may need additional support. For the volunteers themselves to develop confidence and go on to support other dads and feel that they can do whatever they want to do [...] mostly I see the aim as service change but...there are huge other outcomes associated with that.

“ ...all the benefits that come with dads being more involved in their children's lives equate to benefits of families more broadly. I think any sort of project that promotes like a level of equality for particular groups is beneficial to everyone, not just the group that it's supporting.

Coram Family and Childcare, YDC manager





## REFERENCES

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## POLICY BRIEFINGS IN THIS SERIES

→ Policy briefing 1: Key principles of father-inclusive practice

→ Policy briefing 2: Models of good practice for work with fathers: co-creating knowledge about inclusive and intersectional approaches in the 'Diverse Dads' project

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