



Connected Young Fatherhood:

Rural and Urban Experiences
During the Pandemic

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Executive Summary

'Connected Young Fatherhood' is a collaborative study between Leeds Trinity University, DaddiLife, the County Councils Network and Leeds City Council. Funded by Research England, we explored young fathers' employment experiences since the outbreak of COVID-19 in both rural and urban areas. In doing so, we drew upon our previous study -New Pathways for Young Fathers¹- which highlighted the significance of obtaining paid employment for young fathers (alongside emotional caregiving), and the multiple barriers that can arise. Given that 'New Pathways for Young Fathers' ended just before the first UK lockdown in March 2020, the subsequent impact of the pandemic on the lives and employment opportunities of young fathers warranted further exploration, particularly within the context of the Government's Levelling Up agenda.

We spoke to professionals in the family and fathers' sector, employers, and young fathers, using online or telephone interviews to gather a range of insights on young fatherhood and employment issues. These interviews provided a rich and diverse set of accounts which in combination, have highlighted complexities related to parenting and paid work, and the knock-on effects for young fathers' well-being and family lives.



Key Findings

Young fathers have shown us that they are fully committed to their children, and that they enjoy being fathers. Employment was stressed as being important for the young men, but the value and significance of work was not purely finance driven and the fathers saw themselves as more than just breadwinners. Working was valuable for several reasons, such as gaining status, recognition among peers, positive well-being, personal growth, and a sense of fulfilment. Interestingly, the impact of the pandemic had encouraged some of the fathers to be more reflective of their work and home commitments, with the aim of achieving a better balance.

Although the young fathers reported numerous benefits of being employed, the process of finding work, staying in work, and managing home and work life could be a challenge for most. The pandemic had negatively impacted upon some of the young fathers, particularly for those in casual, low-paid roles. Some young fathers had also reported instances of discrimination, unfair treatment, and threats of dismissal, when trying to juggle home and work demands (such as taking time off work for unforeseeable childcare issues or attending pregnancy scans). The importance of paid work for practical purposes, particularly in the current climate of rising living costs, meant that some of the young fathers felt vulnerable to workplace exploitation for fear of losing their jobs.

The interviews demonstrated that young fathers wished for more understanding and flexibility from employers, with managers being considerate of their health, well-being, and family lives. Other issues such as fair pay, being treated in a respectful and equal manner, time off when needed (e.g., attending pregnancy scans), encouragement or opportunities to progress in the workplace, and support for employees more generally, were all factors that could significantly impact upon working conditions, employee satisfaction and young men's mental health. Such views were expressed by fathers regardless of age, where they lived, and other background differences.

We found that supportive employers and effective formal support could make a real difference in helping the young fathers negotiate any tensions in the home and workplace. Flexible ways of working and family-friendly workplaces were particularly beneficial in managing and juggling the various responsibilities that the young men faced. When speaking to employers, they also saw the benefits of parental policies, flexible working arrangements, and inclusive practice in the workplace. But their ability to implement these policies was varied and impacted by cost and resourcing issues.

We also heard positive accounts of professional support across the country and the vital role this had in the fathers' lives and particularly for their well-being. Young fathers expressed their gratitude and heart-felt appreciation of professionals who had supported them in respectful, empathetic, and honest ways. For many of these young men, supportive professionals also played a significant role in how the young men saw themselves as fathers and helped them to improve their confidence as parents. Furthermore, the professionals provided the young men with the much needed acknowledgment of the significant role and contribution that they made to their children's lives.

Positive accounts of professional support could be seen across various service sectors in both urban and rural areas but dedicated young fathers'/fathers' provision was particularly emphasised by the young men. Given the importance of professional input in the lives of young dads, the lack of funding and resourcing for young fatherhood within both universal and specialist provision, was seen as a concern by young fathers and professionals alike. Age caps on some of the available services was also seen as particularly problematic, as many fathers felt that support in their later years would be beneficial. However, it was noted that several young fathers were made to feel ignored, side-lined, and discriminated against, by some of the professionals that they encountered. For fathers who were unemployed (and there were various

and sometimes complex reasons for their unemployment status), their increased involvement with childcare was often undervalued by professionals, who primarily stressed the breadwinner position based on strong assumptions around gender roles in the family. Young fathers who were the child's primary carer would also often experience negative attitudes from friends, family, and others because of their stay-at-home status. Again, leaving the young fathers feeling unappreciated for the dedicated childcare that they provided.

If we are to truly make a difference to the lives of young men who are juggling both parenthood and employment, or for those seeking work, we must firstly listen to, and acknowledge, the young fathers' accounts. At the same time, professionals, employers, and other key stakeholders must work together to respond appropriately to the issues that young men have raised. Our findings show that there are many lessons to be learned from the young fathers' experiences. We hope that this report goes some way in shedding a light on these pressing matters and the next steps needed.



Recommendations

Based on the findings of this report, we have provided key recommendations for national and local policy makers, professionals and services who support young fathers, and employers:

- 1) Data on fathers as well as mothers should be collected at the earliest opportunity by all services focused on peri-natal care and wider family support.
- 2) The needs of young fathers should be clearly and specifically incorporated within wider early help policy at national and local level.
- 3) Public services for families and children – including early years, schools, and health services – must recognise their duty to meet the needs of fathers as well as mothers. Gender stereotyping or discrimination must not be tolerated. Inclusion policies for these services must clearly outline how young fathers' needs should be recognised and met.
- 4) How professionals engage with and respond to young fathers is significant. Young fathers appreciate and respond well to flexible, genuine, empathetic, considerate, and respectful professional support.
- 5) Mental health issues expressed by young fathers must be taken seriously. Professionals should also be mindful that young fathers' may not necessarily disclose their mental health concerns in an immediate or obvious way.
- 6) Funding should be provided for all local authorities to offer dedicated services to support young fathers, through Children's Centres and Family Hubs.
- 7) There is a need to continue to offer support to young fathers beyond the age of 25. This research demonstrated that young fathers who moved into their thirties and above were shown to still need and benefit from access to professional support.
- 8) The Government's Levelling Up agenda should be used as an opportunity to address the needs of both urban and rural young fathers.
- 9) There needs to be additional protection for young fathers within the workplace through employment policy or other formal and informal mechanisms. Young fathers often felt discriminated against and frequently reported unfair treatment in the workplace compared to other employees.
- 10) Giving fathers more flexibility, choice and support around paternity leave, including the length of their paternity leave can enable fathers to better support their families and to promote their involvement as fathers.
- 11) Making parenthood and caring a protected characteristic would promote the inclusion of all parents and provide protection when discrimination or unfair treatment occurs.
- 12) Provide greater parity for young fathers within the workplace in all areas – such as flexible working, time off for children, parental leave, and fair pay.
- 13) There is a need for more joined-up working between professionals, employers and other key stakeholders, to ensure that young fathers can engage with, trust, and benefit from, relevant policy, programmes or initiatives.

Introduction

The wider context of the 'Connected Young Fatherhood' study was based upon the following observations:

- The Government aims to acknowledge the role of fathers and engage them within services, to reduce inequalities and improve young parents' future outcomes², but research momentum and policy focus around young fatherhood remains limited in the UK.
- Existing COVID research suggests that young people have been adversely affected by the pandemic particularly in relation to employment opportunities³, but this has not been explored in-depth with young fathers specifically, who are also more likely to come from disadvantaged and vulnerable backgrounds compared to their peers⁴.
- The available research on young fatherhood has predominately been conducted in urban areas and although such findings provide important insights, it cannot be assumed that urban and rural young fathers will face the same employment experiences and constraints⁵. It is vital that young fathers who are from diverse backgrounds and geographical locations are included in research, to enable a more inclusive voice to be fed into policy and practice debates, particularly with the Levelling Up agenda⁶ in mind.

By speaking to professionals from the family and fathers' sector, a selected group of employers, and young fathers, we explored the following questions:

- 1) *What influences young fathers' choices around employment pathways and how has the pandemic shaped these journeys?*
- 2) *How has the pandemic impacted upon professional support services and their ability to support young fathers' employment needs?*
- 3) *In what ways has the pandemic impacted upon young fathers as employees and how have employers responded to, and adapted, during this time in terms of family-friendly policies and other related measures?*
- 4) *What differences and similarities can be seen between rural and urban young fatherhood in terms of employment trajectories and use of professional support services?*

Through 'Connected Young Fatherhood,' we aimed to understand the wider effects of the Coronavirus outbreak for young fathers, in terms of employment opportunities, journeys, and challenges, with the view of informing new policy and practice initiatives in a post-pandemic world.





Participant Information and Methods

Given the focus of our research, we sought the views of young fathers, professionals, and employers to understand young fathers' employment experiences and professional support needs. In total, 25 young fathers, 15 professionals from various sectors, and 6 employers took part in our study. The sample size was kept small to acquire an in-depth and rich account of participants' experiences and opinions⁷.

Participants were invited to take part in either an online or telephone interview, and these were qualitative in approach and semi-structured. We felt that qualitative interviews were advantageous in allowing interviewees to tell their own stories, on their own terms, and using their own words, which can also be especially young person friendly⁷. Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) mediated technologies allow for real-time interaction between the interviewer and participant whilst being online, which can replicate features of face-to-face interviews⁸. Telephone interviews, like face-to-face interviews, have a personal touch and they can collect meaningful responses⁹.

Young fathers took part in a one-to-one interview with a researcher (with the choice of an online or telephone discussion), whereas professionals and employers participated in online focus groups only. With participants' consent, interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed (full verbatim). Interview transcripts were then coded using a pre-established coding framework and thematically analysed with the research questions in mind. Pseudonyms were applied to participants' names for anonymity purposes.



Recruitment: Young Fathers

We defined young fatherhood as those who became fathers, or experienced the first pregnancy, before the age of 25. By using this definition, a young man could be over the age of 25 to take part in the study if they met the criteria above. Recruitment strategies for young fathers included assistance from our project partners, who advertised the study within their physical settings and/or shared the study advert on their social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook.

We also invited young fathers from the 'New Pathways for Young Fathers' study to take part in the research, as these young men had provided permission for the researchers to re-contact them if further research opportunities arose. We were fully aware of the potential ethical risks and challenges of enlisting the help of professionals when recruiting young fathers and the issues around re-contacting former participants. Voluntary participation was always stressed, and the study was granted ethical approval from the lead organisation and obtained additional approval from participating local authorities to ensure rigorous ethical conduct throughout.

Table 1: Young Fathers Recruitment Routes

Through professional organisations	Social media	Former participants
11	3	11

Table 2: Young Fathers-Sample Information

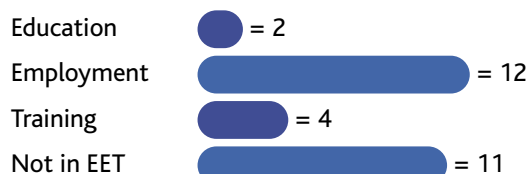
Locations



Age range



Employment, education, and training status



Note: Some young fathers are in training alongside employment, and this is reflected in the figures

Number of children

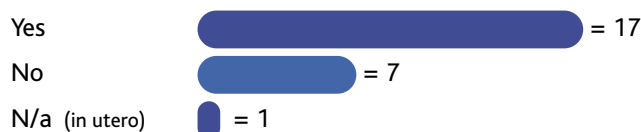


Note: Age range of children: in utero -17 years

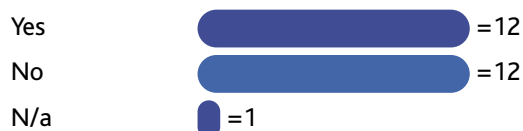
Relationship status with the child's mother



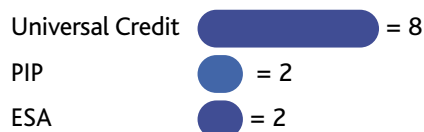
Residential father



On welfare benefits



Welfare support received



Receiving professional support currently



Note: Received professional support in the past = 7

Professionals and Employers

Professional service providers and employers who took part in the study were either contacted directly, or participants had responded to the study advert that had been shared through email distribution lists of research partners and associates, via national networks, and forums.

Table 3: Professionals and Employers Recruitment Routes

	Direct invitation	Responded to study advertisement
Professionals	8	7
Employers	4	2

Due to the recruitment methods, the professionals and employers involved in the study were from diverse sectors and locations, which provided a wealth of insights. Some professionals and employers had direct involvement with young fathers, whereas others had more experience with older fathers or families more generally. A more detailed summary is provided in table 4.

Table 4: Types of Professional Service Providers Involved in the Research

Organisation works directly with young fathers and older fathers	8
Organisation works with families more widely, rather than being father/young father specific	7
Location	Rural =9 Urban=6

Table 5: Types of Employers involved in the Research

Employer size	Description of employer/company
Large National Employer	A large national employer with stores across urban and rural settings, who consistently wins awards for their work, and with dads in particular.
Large National Employer	A national charity for working parents in the UK who produced a telephone helpline, and a range of other services.
Small to Medium Enterprise/SME	An events organisation and consultancy company specialising in flexible work for all and changing workplaces to be a more flexible culture.
Small to Medium Enterprise/SME	An innovative SME who pioneers flexible working within the organisation - with young employees based across both urban and rural settings.
Small to Medium Enterprise/SME	A leading coaching organisation with a specific focus on working parents.
Small to Medium Enterprise/SME	An employer who specialises in transport services for those with mobility challenges across urban and rural settings.



"It was nice to actually get to see him grow up because I got quite a bit of time off work. And obviously that is not a good thing but it is always a bit of a bonus to spend more time with your children." (Tyler, age 27)

Views of Young Fathers



"A good dad is someone who is around their kids constantly and having that relationship and bond. Nothing to do with working and stuff."
(Terrie, age 32)

The young fathers we spoke to had varied family arrangements and personal backgrounds, including socio-economic circumstances, residential status, relationship status, employment status, education status, and training experiences. The young men also differed in age, from their mid-teens up to their mid-thirties. Despite these differences, all the young men had a positive view of being a young father. They also reported that parenting was a rewarding experience, and they were proud to be a parent.

"I love being a father, it's the greatest thing that ever happened to me... I can't wait to flourish with her [daughter]." (Addison, age 22)

The young men often described close bonds with their children and saw themselves as taking on the role of friend and confidant. There were additional remarks about being a role model to the child, making sacrifices, connecting with children, and supporting the other parent.

"Even if we're not doing anything in the house and we're in the house together just chilling, I enjoy it. I love spending time with him, do you know what I mean, even if we're not actually doing anything. We're just sat down doing nothing, but we're in the same sort of vicinity as each other, it's lovely." (Andy, age 27)

As a result of the pandemic and subsequent job losses, being furloughed, or having to work from home, some young fathers were able to spend extra time with their children and they had the chance to witness key milestones, such as children walking for the first time or learning to ride a bike.

Alongside the caring and emotional aspects of being a father, the young men also vocalised the importance of the provider role. All the young men agreed that paid employment enabled them to meet their child's basic needs, in terms of food, clothing, heating and for some, the ability to provide for non-essential items and 'treats' such as take-aways and holidays. Similar accounts can be seen in the 'New Pathways for Young Fathers' study which was conducted prior to the pandemic. Currently the rise in living costs for groceries, gas, and electricity, appeared to exacerbate the worries and concerns that the young men had with regards to meeting the family's needs and this was frequently aired by both those in EET (education, employment, and training) and those who were not.

Interestingly, although providing financially was seen as being of paramount importance by most of the young fathers, especially on a practical level, there were varying degrees of importance attached to being the main economic earner in the family. For some, the ability to provide financially and 'being there' in a physical and emotional sense was equally vital. For others, they felt that fatherhood was not just tied up to the breadwinner role and there were other fatherhood qualities which should be prioritised and aspired to (as seen in the accounts above). The latter views came from participants who were both employed and unemployed, but it was most striking in the accounts of self-labelled 'stay at home dads,' and those who had a more reflective outlook on parenting as a result of the pandemic.

Fatherhood Challenges

The interview accounts demonstrated the close bonds between fathers and children and the fulfilling nature of parenthood for many young men. However, the young fathers also reported the various difficulties that they could face in their day-to-day lives as parents. This included: child contact arrangements, conflicts with the child's mother (who also acted as gatekeepers of children), unsupportive or hostile relationships with professionals, mental health issues, parenting concerns about the child's behaviour or development, low confidence levels as a parent, and limited support.

"When we, me and my partner, my ex-partner, split up she kept stopping me seeing the kids and I lost my bond with them." (Justin, age 27)

"At the minute obviously, I'm going through a bit of a hard time right now with the social services, because I've not actually got my little boys in my care right now." (Stephan, age 22)

For some, the imposed lockdowns had negatively impacted upon their abilities to parent and the father-child relationship. There were young men such as Bryan and Wayne who could not attend any medical appointments during the pregnancy or the birth when the first and most severe lockdown was in place. This then affected the extent to which young men felt involved in the antenatal period, the transition to parenthood itself, and severely limited the professional support available to them during a significant period.

"I was not allowed to go to the birth. . . It wasn't the best feeling in the world. I was very anxious. I didn't know was going on. I was very on edge." (Bryan, age 16)

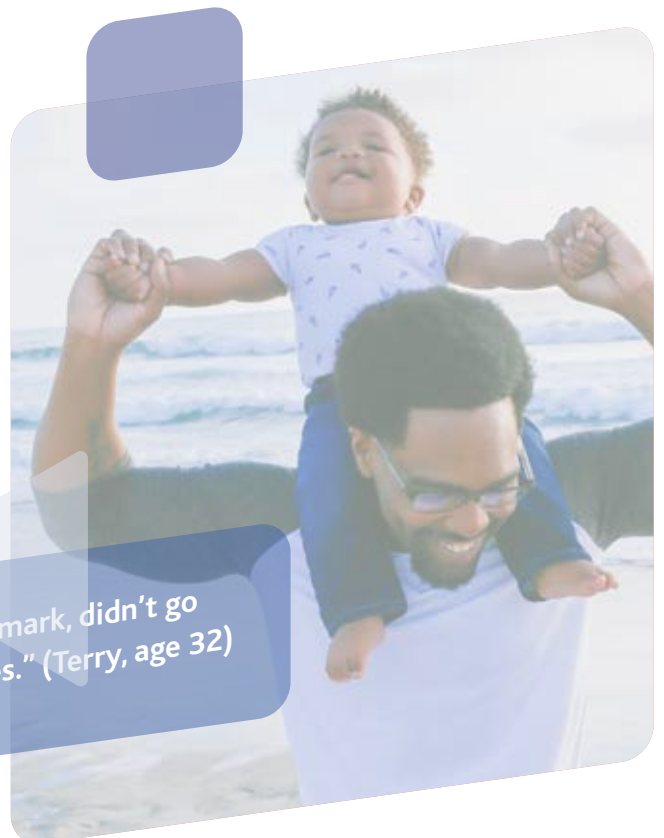
The ability to rely on informal support networks such as friends and family, and the opportunity to meet with other parents or fathers during this time, was also undermined. The lack of social support could then lead to, or deepen, a sense of isolation amongst young fathers.

"Isolated constantly. We didn't overstep the mark, didn't go out, didn't see anybody. Just stuck to the rules." (Terry, age 32)

For non-residential fathers, and in cases where there were child protection issues and professional involvement in place, these young men reported limited or no physical contact with their children during the lockdowns. In these instances, video or telephone calls were used to maintain the father-child relationship, but such technology could not replicate face-to-face encounters. Consequently, young fathers felt that the parent-child relationship had been negatively affected at the time.

"I went quite a long time without physically going over and seeing my children which was horrible. You know, I've got my children on video call, 'when are you coming round daddy, we miss you?' It became a thing where my children would watch Boris doing a press conference and if he said, 'we're going to end lockdown,' they were happy because daddy could come over." (Justin, age 27)

It was noticeable from the interviews, that employment issues were a key concern for young fathers. These included finding employment, earning an adequate wage, treatment as an employee, and unemployment issues for those who were NEET/not in education, employment, or training. The interviewees' accounts highlighted the complex ways in which employment could then have an impact on other areas of their lives. In the following sections, we unpack the young fathers' viewpoints and journeys related to work and the implications it could have.





“A lot of my work has come from recommendations and working for other people that put my name forward.”
(Graham, age 29)

Finding Employment

At the time of the study, twelve young fathers were employed with ten being in full time positions. The young fathers also occupied a range of roles, from junior to senior posts, within various industries. A summary is provided in the table below:

Table 6: Summary of Employment Information

Sector	Education = 2 Finance = 2 Public Services = 4 Retail = 1 Housing = 1 Deliveries = 1 Plumbing = 1
Planned or unplanned career route	Planned = 5 Unplanned = 7

Five young fathers such as Troy, Justin and Graham, had planned their careers with deliberate choices made at school or college to follow a particular pathway, this included plumbing, catering, and hospitality. Conversations with family members and teachers had helped to inform the young men’s choices after formal schooling.

“I’ve always been into like tractor driving and digger driving from a young age. So, I went to college and studied. I got all the qualifications I needed and just went into employment.” (Troy, age 26)

Seven young fathers had ‘found themselves’ in particular roles due to the circumstances and the job opportunities available to them at the time. Other young fathers suggested that a lack of qualifications, limited or no work experience, and the sense of urgency to find work (due to impending parenthood), were influential factors, when it came to job choices and decision making. Job websites such as ‘Indeed.Com’ and job agencies were frequently used to search for employment.

The pandemic itself had created more work opportunities for some. Areas such as construction, cleaning, and hospitality were growing trades which were recruiting at a higher rate due to the changes that had been brought about from COVID-19. For example, the increased popularity in staycations had created more roles in hospitality. Likewise, the strict rules around infection prevention meant that cleaning services were also in high demand.

Young fathers such as Graham, Austin and Maxwell recalled the role of informal contacts and chance encounters as crucial in getting jobs at a particular organisation or setting. Such accounts were voiced by both rural and urban young men but were aired slightly more by those in rural areas.

Young fathers from rural areas felt that the job market was often limited in choice, not just in terms of the number of jobs available but the types of sectors. Rural and coastal areas were often characterised by seasonal work opportunities, which meant that finding work in the winter months was difficult and stable jobs were rare to find. Finding jobs in niche markets could also be more challenging in rural areas.


"I'd say there's less opportunities for work around this area. I mean it's a very touristy area but it's quite quiet. I mean you can find plenty of seasonal work in the summer and that, but when it comes to winter it's hard to find work round here, unless you want to be a carer."
(Graham, age 29)

The remoteness of where the rural young men lived, the lack of travel infrastructure in place, alongside the rise in fuel and public transport costs, meant that travelling for work purposes was problematic and expensive. Travelling further afield for work was also not a viable option for many given the expenses incurred, and it could have a disruptive impact on family life by severely limiting the young man's time with his family. Some rural young men had considered moving homes for work purposes, but the rental and housing market were deemed too expensive in their immediate area and neighbouring locations. Living in or near a popular tourist location was seen to affect the housing prices, as most properties were being sold as holiday homes and were too expensive for most locals. It was notable that many of the young fathers in both urban and rural areas did not drive, so public transportation was vital. The cost of buying a car, taking out car insurance and rising petrol costs prevented many young fathers from owning their own car.

Urban young fathers were more willing to travel over larger distances for work opportunities and this was enabled by direct transport routes and frequent public transport. Young fathers from urban areas also suggested that entry level positions were advertised frequently when searching the local job market. This meant that finding suitable roles was not a problem, for those who were open to different opportunities. Young fathers such as Calvin had frequently moved from one casual role to another for example.

For many of the employed and unemployed young fathers in rural and urban areas, secure employment was highly sought after, and they were attracted to roles which could offer this. The impact of the pandemic had also highlighted the importance of job security and avoiding what was deemed as 'risky' employment.

"There's a reason I didn't go into a risky job, or a risky career. Obviously having a family is a big thing. You don't want to go into something that's risky and then not be able to provide for your family." (Mark, aged 33)



"I like being busy, I like having something to do. And especially since I've progressed recently, it's just rewarding isn't it. It's good for your mental well-being and everything." (Wayne, age 25)

Being Employed: Positives Experiences

For fathers such as Stephan and Ted, being financially independent had always been important to them, and they had often worked from an early age after leaving school or college. For others, securing and maintaining paid employment took on a new significance after the birth.

So, when my son was born, that's when I thought yeah, I need to get a job ASAP really, to be able to provide for my family and things like that." (Jorge, age 21)

The young fathers felt that being employed was beneficial for many reasons, and not just the ability to earn money for their families. Several young fathers enjoyed their jobs and found it rewarding, either on a personal level or by contributing to society more generally.

"I do like working, I work really hard, and I think it's good for your feeling of self-worth, you know, you're giving to society. For me personally and for the kids to see that I'm going to work each day, I think it's good for them to see that you're working hard. It is important." (Mark, age 33)

The young fathers mentioned the mental health benefits of working, in terms of providing routine and structure for the young man, alongside a sense of direction in life. Some even described the workplace as allowing 'headspace' from other aspects of their life.

The ability to work and provide for yourself and others also helped to foster feelings of self-pride, self-worth, and confidence. Working was also a way to role model positive behaviours and attitudes around employment for children.

"I've always been a worker, I love working. I like having that feeling when you leave your workplace, like I've actually done something for people, for myself, for my family. I've actually done something with my day, instead of sitting round doing nothing." (Stephan, age 22)

Some fathers were highly aspirational and actively thinking about their future career paths. Mark and Dale for example had worked their way up to high status positions over the years. Opportunities for professional growth and development was mentioned by a small number of young men within settings such as retail, finance, education, and public services. Engaging with continuing professional development (CPD) was said to be beneficial for internal prospects and for external vacancies.

The young fathers highlighted the importance of positive and supportive working environments which could then foster feelings of job satisfaction and positive mental health. For the young men who were open about their parenting status and felt supported by the workplace, should any childcare or family related issues arise, they were extremely appreciative of such support.

Examples included children being ill, lack of childcare due to COVID-19 outbreaks, and having to attend hospital and other professional appointments. The types of organisations mentioned were not restricted to particular industries and varied in size, but they were all characterised by a family-friendly work culture and empathetic line managers, who at times, were also parents themselves. Young fathers who felt respected and supported at work, often remarked that they would, in turn, go 'over and above' for their employers and the organisation.

"I suppose it's a bit like the old saying isn't it, 'you scratch my back, I scratch yours.' If they look after you, you want to do a good job and look after them and make sure everything runs smoothly for their business. It works both ways." (Graham, age 29)

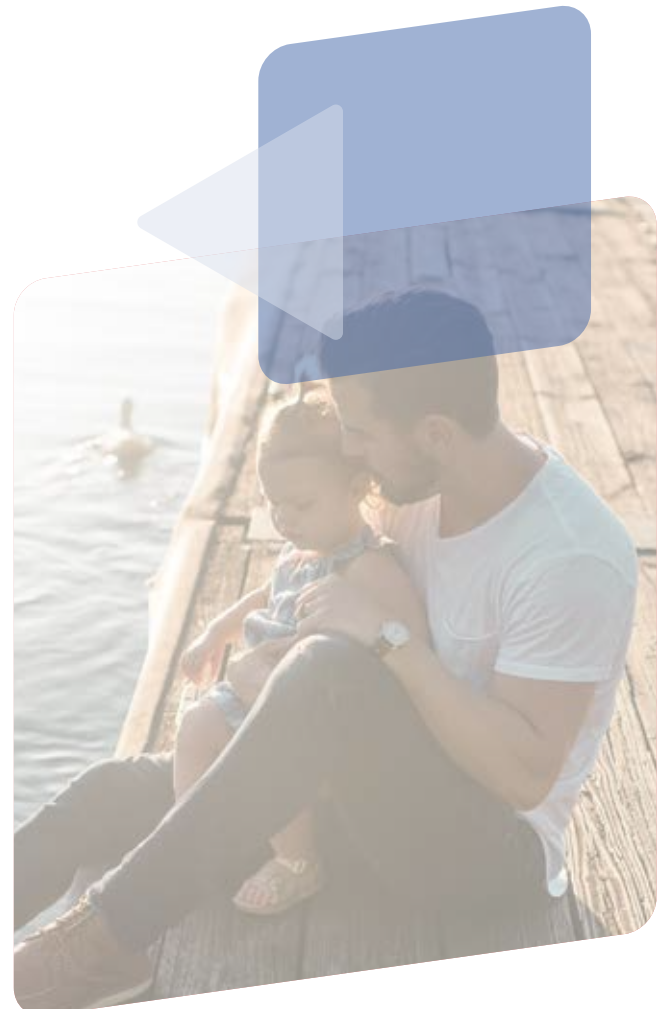
The ability to manage the balance between home and work life was often mentioned by those who prioritised their families and by young men who had supportive employers and flexible working arrangements in place. For example, young fathers such as Mark, Tyson, and Max, had explicitly stressed that family was their top priority, which helped them to ensure that there was some degree of balance between work and home life, regardless of their employment differences.

"It's always been that family's more important than work. And no amount of success I have in my job is worth ruining my family for. There's a saying that no amount of success in the workplace, can compensate for failure in the home." (Mark, age 33)

Flexible policies within organisations (both pre- and post-COVID) tended to be in sectors such as public services and finance industries, so not all fathers benefited from such arrangements. However, there was evidence in the study that young fathers working in smaller and family-run business (such as Graham and Austin) could arrange ad-hoc flexible working arrangements directly with management when needed. For young fathers who switched to working from home during the lockdowns, this also helped to enable a better balance between priorities at home and work. Some employers continued to operate flexible working policies after the lockdowns, which benefited young fathers in terms of additional family time, doing the school pick-ups and drop-offs, being able to accompany children to their extracurricular activities, whilst having more time to relax after work itself.

"My eldest child's school is like one or two streets away so I can literally nip off during work to do the school run which really helps. Whereas if I was working in the office, I wouldn't be able to nip off from work to do the school run. So, it [working from home] allows me to build up the hours that I need, so that I can leave early and spend time with the kids." (Joel, age 27)

Other young fathers such as Ted and Graham sought to ensure a better work-life balance when they found out about the pregnancy or after the birth. These young fathers reflected on the pros and cons of different types of employment in terms of hours, expectations and travel needed when making decisions, and how this would impact upon the family. The ability to spend meaningful time with children, being actively involved in the day-to-day childcare, supporting the child's mother in a practical sense, childcare costs and childcare availability were all critical issues for the young men to think about. For one young man, self-employment was highlighted as an effective way to manage home and work priorities. Self-employment was seen as particularly beneficial for setting your own work hours and 'being your own boss', but there were risks involved with this type of work, such as the lack of employee benefits and an unpredictable income.



"When I was doing the management role, I nearly killed myself doing it. With two young children, getting four hours of sleep a day and then going and doing what is both mentally and physically draining after five years, it just broke me."
(Miles, age 34)

Employment Challenges

Many young fathers felt fortunate to be in paid employment, particularly in the current climate. However, some of the interviewees' accounts highlighted the many challenges of working as a young father, which could then impact upon health and well-being, working relationships, and work/home life balance.

Some young fathers expressed that they did not enjoy their jobs. The lack of job satisfaction was due to assorted reasons and often it would lead to feelings of resentment, feeling 'trapped', lack of engagement with work itself, and seeking other work opportunities elsewhere. For some, they felt that the job itself was not interesting or stimulating enough. Fathers who had found themselves in job roles due to circumstance, rather than choice, often expressed such views.

"If you don't enjoy it and if you're just sort of slogging through the day, you're not going to put every bit you can into your work. But when you enjoy it, you're going to give everything you've got." (Ted, age 21)

In some instances, the young men wanted to take on more responsibilities and advance in their careers, but the opportunities to do so were lacking or they were not encouraged to do so by their employers, which could be demotivating. Others felt that their work was too pressurised or stressful in terms of physical and mental demands. Some job roles such as catering or construction were said to be particularly exhausting, which could lead to burnout. Senior management positions were also described as stressful by some.

Other reasons for job dissatisfaction included the perception that employers' expectations were unrealistic. Examples included unachievable targets to meet, being allocated additional responsibilities in an unfair manner (or without consultation) and being asked to 'do more with less.' Young fathers vocalised feelings of being 'just a number' and easily 'replaceable' in these organisations, which did little for their morale.



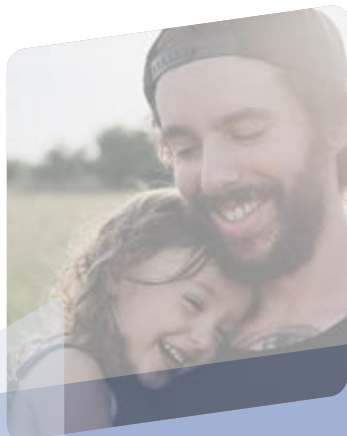
"This is why I didn't stay there; I didn't see the point. You're not worth anything to them. You're just another person that can be replaced." (Damon, age 32)

Some young men felt that the employers' priorities were purely profit driven with no regards for the workers including their health. One young father who worked in construction for example, was particularly worried about the lack of safety measures in place which could then lead to serious accidents. Poor management, work politics and dealing with difficult colleagues could also lead to young fathers' disengagement with work.

Interviewees' accounts frequently mentioned the role of line managers who could be a significant cause of worry and concern for the young fathers. Some managers were said to show a lack of understanding when it came to family or childcare matters if they came up. It was also felt that employers expected staff to put work first and family second. In one account, the young man was threatened with dismissal if he chose to attend to a serious family issue, rather than go into work. In another instance, the fear of losing work meant that one young father missed antenatal appointments and scans during the pregnancy. Affected young fathers spoke of the unfair power imbalances at play.

"They brought me into the room for a review and due to me having a couple of days off for taking my son to the hospital or he'd been ill, he said – 'if you have another day off, then take it as you're fired and don't come back in.' I explained it was for my family, he explained his side of it and he just didn't like the fact that my responsibility lied with my family first and I walked out of there fuming." (Spencer, age 23)

Some young fathers remarked that it was the interpersonal qualities and professional approaches of line managers themselves which led to unsympathetic responses, resulting in hostile relationships between employer and employee. Others such as Damon, Calvin and Ted felt that the difficulties with line managers related to attitudes seen within the wider top management, the existing work culture, and the policies (or the lack of policies) in place to protect employees. A small number of young fathers, such as Addison and Andy were not aware of any employment policies when asked, except for paternity leave. In other cases, young fathers such as Trent felt that mothers were treated better in the workplace with little regard for fathers. Trent also highlighted that in his setting, there was no form of HR/human resources or HR planning which left him feeling vulnerable at work.



"There were a few scans that I missed, but that's because they absolutely begged me not to go. I felt miserable about it. But there wasn't anything I could do. I felt like I was on the verge of losing my job at that time, so I have to bend my knee and it's like 'yes sir, of course sir, I'll come in sir, absolutely.'" (Logan, age 22)

According to the young men, jobs in the catering trade, hospitality, retail, and production-based roles were the least flexible in terms of working arrangements and related policies. In other cases, some companies did implement flexible working policies, but they did not apply to the young men as their roles were not eligible. The lack of a home/work life balance experienced by the young fathers could then contribute towards negative outcomes and adverse feelings such as worry and stress. Young fathers also felt that they were spending limited time with their children and missing out on key milestones. Furthermore, the young men expressed that their personal lives were severely affected when an imbalance existed in terms of tensions with partners, poor eating habits, lack of self-care routines, and limited time to unwind and/or to complete basic household chores. Young fathers in these positions were looking for other types of work which could provide a better home/work life balance. But some fathers felt that they had no choice but to continue in the work setting, as they needed to earn money to provide financially for their children, or the low pay meant that a higher number of hours were needed to make ends meet.

If difficulties with the organisation or managers occurred, this could lead to a range of outcomes, including absences, sick leave, and work related anxiety. In a minority of cases, fathers were relying on recreational drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism to deal with the pressures and strains of work. For those who worked for larger and more established organisations, the companies offered health and well-being services for employees, but these internal systems were not utilised by the young men. The principal reason for this, was due to the young men's worry about the repercussions of engaging in such a provision. Despite the support being confidential, there were concerns that information may still 'get out', if the young men decided to use these services and this could then negatively impact upon promotional or other opportunities at work. There was also the view that the support in place may not be particularly helpful, or it could be biased. As such, the young men felt that it was better to seek out help outside of the organisation if they needed to do so. Several of the young fathers named friends and family as a preferable source of support for example.



"I used to get videos sent of her walking and talking and doing everything for the first time while I was at work, but now I'm at home, I can still see these things."
(Terry, age 32)

Unemployment Experiences

Thirteen young fathers were unemployed at the time of the interviews and twelve of these young men were claiming welfare support (including Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment/PIP and Employment and Support Allowance/ESA). All the young men had been previously employed within the last year or two. There were varied and sometimes complex reasons for the young men's unemployment status. For one young family, the child's mother was in an economically secure and well-paid role, and so, the parents came to the mutual agreement that the young father would be the main caregiver at home with the child.

"My partner is full-time working, I'm a stay-at-home dad at the moment. Yeah, so we wanted to swap roles for a little bit, so she obviously spent the first year staying home with the little one and yeah, we thought let's give it a swap." (Jorge, age 21)

In other cases, three young fathers were the main custodians due to child protection issues or personal circumstances relating to the child's mother. These young men struggled to find work which would be compatible with their childcare responsibilities, and they were often unaware of the government funding available for early years settings. Childcare costs were deemed expensive by many of the young fathers regardless of EET status and considered to be significant barrier and consideration when looking for work or retraining.

There were also fathers who had quit their jobs to spend more time with their children, those who had been dismissed, or the companies they worked for had ceased to trade, consequently leaving them out of work. For four young fathers, mental health issues or ill-health had prevented them from seeking out full-time employment. These young fathers had enjoyed working in the past and were hoping to find paid employment soon, but due to a set of complex personal and social circumstances, it was felt that unemployment, for now, was the best option for their health and well-being.

"My mental health got bad so I went on sick, and when I went to one of those medical appointments, they signed me off for work due to the medication I was on and how my frame of mind is." (Calvin, age 26)

Unemployed young fathers were able to spend more time with their children compared to employed young fathers. The young men appreciated the extra family time that they had with their families and described the joys and benefits of being available to their children. Witnessing the child's significant achievements was particularly treasured. Some of the young fathers were also pleased to be able to support the child's mother more whilst they were NEET.

Being unemployed could also bring about a slower pace of life and less stress, which was welcomed by some of the young men. Mental health benefits were also cited when NEET, particularly if the young man's previous employment role was highly pressurised.

"Yeah, my mental health's got a lot better since I've been out of work... I've still got a long old way to go, but yeah, since I've been out of work it has got a lot better."
(Troy, age 26)

However, the lack of structure and routine caused by unemployment itself was an issue for most young fathers who were used to working. Many of the young fathers were frustrated that they could not find adequate work as they wanted to earn and provide. The young fathers also spoke about feelings of boredom, isolation, and demotivation because of their NEET status. Financial struggles were often mentioned and not having enough to 'get by'. The increase in the cost of living was a significant worry. Being unemployed also limited the young fathers' ability to buy non-essential items and being able to take their children out to places or buy them things. The young fathers did not like being unable to provide, particularly for their children, and this impacted upon the young fathers' self-confidence and self-worth.



"I feel depressed now, if I'm being honest, I do I feel depressed. I feel like I'm not worth anything at all now, because I'm not working. I would love to work." (Stephan, age 22)

Several young men commented that they were labelled as 'layabouts' whilst unemployed and they felt the pressure to be the economic provider, due to traditional views on gender roles within society. Frequently they faced discriminatory remarks from friends, family, professionals and even strangers, who questioned the motives and decisions of young men who were unemployed. Receiving such comments created feelings of frustration for the young fathers who had their own and often personal reasons for being NEET. The young fathers were also made to feel undervalued as a parent when there was a complete emphasis on fathers being solely breadwinners.

As mentioned, four of the young men were actively looking for work at the time of the research study, but it was often difficult to find suitable employment. There were limited jobs that the young men could apply for due to their lack of experience and/or qualifications. Other challenges included a lack of jobs in the young men's field or finding jobs with suitable hours and family-friendly policies. Finding jobs which offered a home/work life balance and roles with adequate pay and recognition were also in short supply in many areas.

"Everyone wants to pay minimum wage, or there's a lot of zero-hours contracts out there, or a lot of twelve-hour contracts. That is no value to me obviously. I can't work twelve-hours a week. I don't think it's much value for many people my age, in my situation, not at all."
(Addison, age 22)

A minority of the young fathers spoke about the impact of the pandemic and additional difficulties which can arise when finding suitable work. This was due to concerns over COVID-19 infections, vaccine hesitancy (which then limited job choices in some sectors), and finding jobs which offered some level of security and contingency (such as the furlough scheme), should another lockdown occur.

"During the pandemic, I lost my job as they didn't have enough jobs on for me. And since then, I've done nothing but send CVs off and apply. I've also phoned agencies and things like that. And I'm just not getting anywhere."
(Asher, age 27)

The Job Centre was a source of support to some extent in seeking employment. Positive comments included help with CV writing, providing information on the young man's options, money management, opportunities for re-training, and helping the young men to build up their confidence whilst applying for jobs. The movement to online or telephone appointments with the Job Centre as a result of the pandemic was viewed in a favourable manner by some young fathers. As removing physical appointments to see advisors was more convenient and could save travel costs.

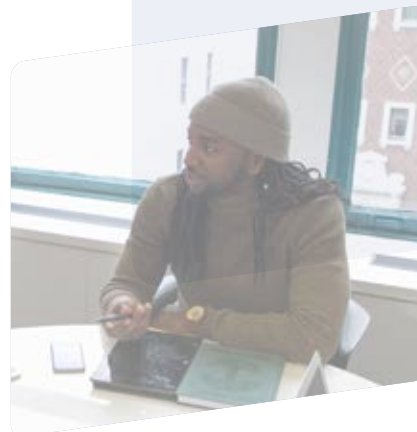
"Yeah, can't complain. They helped me look for a job and the coach that I had was lovely, always helpful."
(Tyler, age 27)

However, the young men's remarks about the Job Centres were often negative. This included comments regarding the lack of help and support received from staff or the perception that irrelevant advice was provided. The young fathers also commented that advisors could be quite negative towards them, in terms of stereotypical thinking (i.e., perceptions of young fathers) and a lack of understanding when it came to young men's employment concerns, such as mental health or family issues.

Some fathers felt pressurised or harassed to find any type of work available by Job Centre advisors, without there being some level of consideration for the young man's circumstances, such as his employment interests and goals, suitability of the work location, and family factors. Participants also spoke of the Job Centres' unrealistic expectations around job searches, engagement levels with the Job Centre and proposed training to attend. During the lockdowns, some of the young fathers mentioned that there was less pressure from advisors at this time and more understanding from them, which was welcomed by some of the participants.

"She would ring me up every four weeks, or every two weeks, going, 'You got a job yet? You got a job yet?' Don't get me wrong, over COVID, there was no stress, but come September 2020, when the first lockdown was easing off, she was on me. She was on me fortnightly going, 'You got a job? I want to see all these jobs you've applied for on Universal Credit.' And I was applying for everything, absolutely everything, didn't matter if they were rejecting me, she was still pressuring me to get a job." (Spencer, age 23)

"I don't feel like they work at all. I feel like the Government have just put things out there to make themselves look good."
(Justin, age 27)



Some of the young fathers were aware of Government initiatives to help young people find EET such as Kickstart and apprenticeships which were advertised on Facebook or information was provided by the Job Centre. However, issues such as age limits (Kickstart for example), low pay, long hours and the lack of security associated with such schemes, made them unappealing for young fathers who wanted something long-term and stable.

The young fathers happily accepted and believed that the onus was on them to find employment, however some felt that the Government could do more in terms of sharing information on the help available to get onto EET pathways, extend the age caps on certain schemes and have more of a consideration of parenting responsibilities for those who are seeking EET. It was also felt that assumptions and stereotypes around fathers as breadwinners needed to be questioned and challenged more widely and amongst some professional services. Although many young fathers want to provide financially, they also want other aspects of their parenting to be recognised and acknowledged when looking for work.



Professional Support

At the time of the interviews, 15 young fathers were receiving support directly from professionals. This included support from social workers, school officials, counsellors, Job Centre advisors and specialist fathers/young fathers support groups for example. There were other services relating to health, mental health, legal advice, and drug and alcohol misuse that were utilised. In ten cases, young fathers were receiving support from multiple providers.

For some, the professionals provided a major source of help in relation to various issues. Professionals were able to provide advice on parenting, childcare, relationship support (with the child's mother and child), financial support, and advice around health and well-being. Interestingly, despite the importance of employment for young fathers, the topic of work, and finding work, was rarely a core feature of the programmes. Instead, employment was addressed in relation to other issues such as building confidence and mental health issues.

For young fathers who were receiving specialist support, which was targeted towards fathers or young fathers specifically, they spoke very highly of such provision, and it was described as 'life changing' for some. Based on the young fathers' accounts, there were several features that could be seen amongst the specialist providers, in both rural and urban areas, which the young men appreciated. This included: The ability to build trusting relationships with the professionals; providers being understanding and empathetic; being listened to in a genuine manner and without judgement; the creation of a safe space to discuss personal issues and concerns (one-to-one and in a group environment); and opportunities to engage with peers.

"I do feel like they care. It's just the people around you, you've just got to surround yourself with positive people who you can talk to. For the last few years, I've been surrounded by people who I don't feel like I can talk to, which is why I feel like my mental health has really gone downhill. [The Fathers' Group] changed my view. For now, once a week, I am surrounded by people who are supportive and who do care, and it's great, it's a really nice feeling." (Logan, age 22)

The young men's accounts demonstrate the significant role that professionals can have in their lives. The importance of professional support was particularly great for the young fathers who were experiencing mental health issues and for those who were unable to turn to their partners, friends, and family for help. However, not all young fathers were confident in reaching out for support. For both rural and urban young fathers, there were mixed views in terms of their understanding of what types of formal support was available to them and how to access these services. Several young fathers were aware of generic services such as Citizens Advice and general practitioners/GP who could be contacted for help, but other types of family and father/young father specific support was often unknown and unheard of, and this was attributed to the lack of advertising and information sharing by service providers more generally. For those who were aware of universal and targeted service provision, this was due to referrals and other experiences with professionals in the past (including signposting) and advice from friends and family who had such insights.

Other barriers to seeking out support included the associated stigma of asking for help as a man. It was felt by many young fathers that it was better to deal with problems yourself. The view that males should be strong and resilient was based on individual opinions of the young fathers, but it was also felt on a wider level in terms of expectations from friends, family, and society. Furthermore, the negativity surrounding young fatherhood specifically in certain areas such as politics and the media, meant that some young fathers did not want to be seen as a young parent who was struggling at the same time.

There was a high level of mistrust and the existence of negative perceptions around professional support, what it would entail, and the potential consequences of asking for help, or by showing vulnerability. It was a common perception and worry for instance, that social workers would remove children if parents were seen to be struggling. Another concern was that professionals would use the information shared with them as ammunition in some way in the future.

Services were also perceived to be female and mother-focused. This was in part due to the young fathers' previous encounters with professionals particularly with antenatal and health visiting services. Young fathers remarked that they were not asked to attend appointments and professionals did not try to accommodate their availability. Young fathers living in rural areas had the added difficulty of travelling long distances in order to get to meetings and the costs incurred.

"Young fathers feel like the system's rigged against them." (Timothy, age 33)

Young men spoke about being ignored, disrespected, being unfairly judged, and labelled when working with professionals. Young fathers also felt that professionals were overly critical of them in terms of their parenting capacity and skills, compared to how they treated mothers. There were other issues raised too, such as long wait times, delays in answering questions, lack of a family centred approach, lack of appropriate support being available, limited communication and transparency around professional involvement, and unrealistic expectations of young fathers from professionals themselves. Support professionals sometimes questioned young men's motives if they were full time carers and not in full time paid employment.



"I feel like you, you're the man of the family. You don't want, you don't need that help. You should not be asking for help as a man. That's how I look at it still. I might be completely wrong but a lot of blokes would rather swallow their pride than ask for help." (Graham, age 29)



"I think that professional support is very hard to interact with as a father, especially if you're going through a breakup or you're a single father because when I was asking for support, I used to get the vibe often that they don't agree with the son being with their father by themselves. I think they believe that the child should always be with their mother no matter what. . . You feel like you're just going to get the same result from every professional." (Maxwell, aged 20)

Young fathers also mentioned that many professionals were not aware or insensitive to the needs of men and fathers as potential and actual service users. Professionals often relied on the young fathers to make the first move, but this can be difficult for the young men given the potential barriers around reaching out and asking for help as discussed. Some young fathers also felt that mental health issues were not taken seriously, even when young fathers were quite vocal about these concerns.

The pandemic had impacted the service delivery of many providers and young fathers responded differently to this. During the first and subsequent lockdowns, some young fathers felt that professionals were slow to respond and adapt to the government restrictions, with many appointments being cancelled or rearranged. Contact with professionals was said to be inconsistent and responses to young fathers' queries or concerns were slow or delayed. Although the young fathers understood the difficulties that the professionals were facing, they felt that much more could be done to ensure that more vulnerable families were supported during such periods. In contrast, for young fathers who experienced fraught relationships with professionals, having reduced contact with them was preferred.

The move to online and telephone meetings in lockdown and their continuation post-lockdown was aired on numerous occasions when young fathers spoke about professional support. On the one hand, young fathers preferred meetings which were online or over the phone, as it was more convenient and cheaper to attend in this way. For others, it was more difficult to build relationships with professionals. Switching off the video cameras during online meetings and technical problems added to the young fathers' sense of detachment from the meeting and the professionals themselves. When meetings occurred in-person, the implementation of COVID-19 precautions was said to create sterile environments, which could be off-putting for some of the young fathers who already felt reluctant or anxious about engaging with professionals.

"It's all over telephone call. I've managed to meet the social worker once, and she came to supervise contact, but other than that, it's all been over the phone because of COVID... I feel you can't get to know someone over the phone. For instance, you have no idea what I look like, anything like that. I don't understand how someone can get to know you over the phone. . . Not when it's once every three months especially." (Addison, age 22)

For those who were unaware of what formal support was available to them and for those who had experienced negative encounters with professionals, they would sometimes turn to informal networks for guidance, but the extent of this varied. Some young fathers would name partners, friends, and family as reliable support but others did not have such networks in place. The concerns associated with asking for help raised earlier, could also prevent young men from talking to those known to them.

Finally, peer group work that was found within some provision was positively viewed, and many looked forward to these meetings. Peer groups were either face-to-face or online and often seen as an exclusive space for the fathers to get together and share their insights and concerns. Meeting other fathers and the process of sharing with others was described as reassuring and comforting for the participants. Some of the groups were mixed in age and fathers were from different socio-economic backgrounds, which added to the diversity of the peer support provided. Being able to speak to both peers and professionals was helpful for the young fathers' mental health and for gaining new information and much needed advice.

Young fathers placed enormous value on having a voice in such environments, especially if they had encountered negative relations with other professionals previously or did not know of any other young parents. Being acknowledged and valued as a person and as a father, could then contribute towards feelings of empowerment and higher levels of confidence when it came to addressing any challenges that the young men may be facing.



"I think they are brilliant, they do great. It's nice to have other dads to talk to. And it's really nice to have that group element. You know, I can't praise the professionals enough. Like they are brilliant at running it." (Ted, age 21)

Supporting Young Fathers: Professional Viewpoints



The professionals who took part in the research had worked in various settings, such as health provision, young fathers provision, children's services, and family support (a summary is provided in table 7). Nine professionals were based in rural areas, and six were based in urban areas.

Table 7: Service Providers in the Study

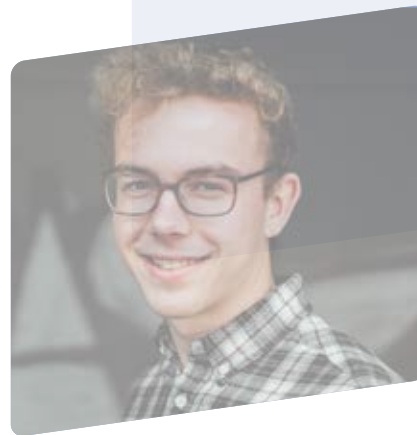
Role of professional	Number of professionals in that role
Programme provider	2
Specialist young parents' worker	1
Dedicated young fathers' worker	4
Dedicated fathers' worker	2
Early help worker	1
Health visitor	1
Families data analyst	1
Parent advisor	1
Children's Centre worker	1
Health service manager	1

"Quite often we'll start with putting out those fires. Whether it's breakdowns in communication between them and statutory services, their relationships with their partners, housing, contacts. You know, there's a lot that goes on for dads, that we kind of hand-hold a little through, help them find their own way." (Dedicated young fathers' worker, rural location)

“Lots of family workers, health visitors, and social workers lean on us and make us a part of the core groups and parts of the plan for these parents, to hopefully maintain a relationship in some form or another with their children.” (Dedicated young fathers’ worker, rural location)

Professionals in various locations provided a wide range of support based on the needs of the fathers that they were working with. Support needs included housing, family support, sexual health, poverty, homelessness, mental health, dealing with stigma, finances, and child access issues. Professionals also helped young fathers in terms of learning practical parenting skills (such as changing, bathing, and feeding), supporting identity changes that the young man may go through when becoming a father, and discussing coping strategies (including therapeutic approaches).

Some young fathers were not registered with a GP or struggled to access other facilities in the community such as libraries and museums. Those working directly with young fathers described how they supported them in accessing these services, and becoming more involved in their local community. It was also noted that young fathers may have faced communication breakdowns with family members and statutory services. As such, professionals provided relationship support and helped young fathers to re-establish and re-build relationships and trust with other providers.



“Our offer is kind of fairly broad and quite organic, or it has been from the start, so a lot of one-to-one support, which can be, you know, whatever dad comes with really. So it’s often housing, employment, benefits, relationships, social care proceedings, family court proceedings, loneliness and isolation, and then we do a lot of peer support work as well. So we do a lot of groups that’s getting dads to meet other young dads, a lot of football, cycling projects, peer support groups, that type of stuff.” (Dedicated young fathers’ worker, urban location)

The length and type of support varied, this included 1-day programmes, 12-week courses, regular and continuous provision, or drop-in support for as long as fathers wished to access it. Some services offered support to young fathers only, whereas other services included older fathers, children, and mothers (see table 8 for full breakdown of client groups supported).

Table 8: Breakdown of Client Groups Supported by Professionals

Client group	No. of professionals supporting that group
Young fathers only	4
Whole family including young fathers	5
Whole family not including young fathers specifically	1
Fathers of any age	3
Young parents	1
Mothers and children	1

Young fathers tended to access support through self-referral or being referred by other services such as children’s services, their GP, maternity services, schools, or the Family Nurse Partnership (FNP). As might be expected, partnership working was a feature of many services involved in the study.

Employment Support for Young Fathers

The offer of employment support was mixed amongst professionals. Some professionals did not offer any support in this area. Others tended to signpost to other employment specific services, explaining that they were in a better position to provide support in this area, as they had the required knowledge, networks, and appropriate access to funding. When signposting, it then allowed professionals to spend more time on supporting young fathers' emotional and relationship needs.

Despite not offering direct employment support, several professionals mentioned that the support they offered in relation to young men's mental health, poor well-being, low confidence, and low self-esteem could then indirectly help fathers to address the various barriers related to finding work and staying in employment.


"And very quickly we find, 'oh you're in a quite traumatised, vigilant, anxious state all the time, therefore you keep getting jobs and quitting, you go to college, you quit.' We start looking at these patterns and then the fathers generally want to get a job and they're more aware of themselves and what comes in the way."
(Programme provider, rural location)

Where employment support was offered, this included CV writing, supporting young dads to attend employment-related training, and working with employers. One service described how they provide voluntary and paid mentoring opportunities for young fathers within that service.

"It's a range of stuff. Sometimes it'll be a case of accompanying them to courses, or the first days of training, getting them there, giving them lifts. I've ended up in a couple of situations where I've ended up speaking to their bosses or employers, just to help the employers understand a little bit more about their emotional situation, and then helping them with CVs sometimes."
(Specialist young parents' worker, urban location)

Several young fathers in the study had described the contradiction of being unsuccessful in applying for certain jobs due to a lack of experience, whilst at the same time, being unable to gain the needed experience without a job. Providing opportunities to gain work experience could improve young father's prospects of securing better job roles, and the types of employment they are interested in, rather than simply 'falling into' the jobs that are available to them.

When supporting working young fathers, some professionals stressed that providers may not be considerate of the young men's employment circumstances. For example, young fathers may be expected to attend appointments at specific times, which are incompatible with their existing work commitments. It was also noted that accessing support could be a personal and confidential matter, with some stigma attached. Because of this, young fathers may not want to share this information within the workplace, making it difficult to request or take time off. Some of the professionals who we spoke to, tried to work around this barrier by being flexible with timings. For example, holding groups in the evenings or on a lunchtime to encourage working fathers, and those in education, to engage with them. However, such flexibility may not be possible for services that tend to operate around traditional working hours. Furthermore, providing out of hours services is not always guaranteed to engage working fathers. As one professional noted, working fathers often felt they were on a positive trajectory with their lives and therefore did not feel the need for professional support in the first place.



"I mean if I'm honest I outsource... You know, there are other organisations with much better links, much better experience and they get the funding for that job." (Dedicated young fathers' worker, rural location)

Ways of Engaging Young Fathers

Creating Dad-Friendly Spaces

One feature of engaging young fathers was finding a safe and suitable space where they would feel comfortable enough to share their feelings and experiences, while at the same time maintaining confidentiality. Outdoor spaces were considered to offer neutrality, and some professionals were creative in finding different outdoor spaces to use, including allotments, woodland, and park spaces. It is interesting to note that programme providers and dedicated fathers' workers tended to use outdoor spaces, whereas other professionals did not mention their use. Professionals that used outdoor venues would describe them as being particularly successful for engaging fathers. One service purchased bicycles for young fathers. This activity not only provided young fathers with a form of transport for everyday use, but also enabled the young men and their project worker to go on bike rides together with a neutral space to talk.

"[Being] outdoors they can just get involved in any way they want to. You know, we've got a shed, they can sit down and drink tea and coffee and have a chat and have some biscuits. Or they can dig and there's none of that expectation of eye contact and stuff. So, we find that space really handy to use." (Dedicated young fathers' worker, rural location)

Aligning with existing research¹⁰ it was noted that spaces linked to services with children, such as nurseries and Children's Centres, are often perceived as feminised, not only in their décor, but also due to a female dominated workforce.

Some of the professionals highlighted a need for more men within the workforce and more specifically, professionals who exclusively support dads. However, other participants felt that the service programme itself needed to be specifically tailored to dads rather than mothers. One dedicated young fathers worker mentioned that in his experience, some services perceive themselves as services for mothers, without realising that they are in a prime position to support fathers too.

Expanding the remit of existing services to mothers and fathers was seen as a way of supporting young fathers without the need for introducing new services. To do so would require a cultural shift not only at ground level, but on a policy level too. However, one Children's Centre worker suggested that despite the work being done to promote parental equality, this is not always reflected in policy documents.

"Some men won't go to a Children's Centre because it's perceived to be you know, girly or, you know, 'oh I wouldn't do that. Oh, you know, I'm a dad.'" (Dedicated fathers' worker, rural location)



Group Work and Peer Support

Group work was considered to have several benefits for engaging and supporting fathers of all ages. Such approaches could provide a regular and safe opportunity for young men to open-up about their problems and any other issues in their lives. Professionals also noted group work's potential for bringing dads together and promoting peer support. Furthermore, professionals felt that peer support was well received by fathers who valued the opportunity to speak to other fathers, hear about other dads' experiences and share their own, whilst learning from each other. Peer support appeared to work well with groups of young fathers and groups of mixed aged fathers. Differences in age and backgrounds in the latter, was seen to offer group members a range of perspectives and knowledge.

"You start to bring them together, to be able to listen to each other and connect. Then suddenly it's very magical when peer support starts developing." (Programme provider, rural location)

A further advantage of group work was that this approach could have far-reaching impacts. For example, it could benefit the wider community through the activities delivered, as well as leading to supportive friendships that could last way beyond the lifespan of the support group itself.

"I bump into these guys sometimes a couple of years later and they're like, 'oh we've still got a WhatsApp group and we'll meet up in the park and we know how to talk about how our day is, rather than just going down the pub'. So, I think that's really important." (Programme provider, rural location)



“What we want to be doing is be on the ground, doing the work.”
(Dedicated young fathers’ worker, rural location)

Barriers to Engaging and Supporting Young Fathers

Funding and Resourcing

Several professionals recalled how there had been an ebb and flow of policy interest with fathers over time and they described the impact this has had on funding and available provision. At times of increased policy interest, funding was available to provide a variety of services for fathers, such as dedicated workers, dads’ groups, and dad-friendly resources. However, over the years, policy focus on fathers has been inconsistent and for some services, the decline in funding has led to the reduction of provision, removal of specialist workers from their offer, limited services, and having to stretch funding that is in place to cover a wider demographic of fathers. Depending on their role and the length of time in their position, some professionals had never experienced a time of increased funding for services for fathers.

“We had dads’ champions, we had dads’ groups. We purchased resources that were dad friendly in Children’s Centres. You know, we did all that and then it just went off the boil. So, it’s never ever been in strategy or policy to be able to sustain that.” (Children’s Centre worker, urban location)

It was felt that government funding has been continuously stripped back and the availability of youth services and support provision for young people has been in consistent decline. As seen in other research¹¹, limited funding has resulted in patchy service provision across the country with some areas offering extraordinarily little for young parents. Some professionals mentioned that they have been expected to do more work with less local authority funding as a result.

“I think the only thing I’d say is where’s the money gone? Where’s the money? My entire professional career has always been- do more with less, do more with less.” (Programme provider, rural location)

One dedicated young fathers worker explained how they have resorted to finding alternative sources of funding from the private sector or charities to keep their service going. The process of finding alternative sources of funding and building up networks and relationships to secure such funding could be time consuming. Time spent on sourcing funding opportunities would then negatively impact upon the time that the professionals had to carry out their direct work with young fathers.

Child-Centred Working

Several professionals from different services in both rural and urban areas had described the implementation of a child-centred approach as part of their models of working. However, the professionals who we interviewed, felt that a child-centred approach would often involve mothers but can be exclusionary to fathers as part of the process.

*"So, I think the focus has been so much on the child and the mum, and not necessarily including dad in that."
(Families data analyst, rural location)*

During the professional interviews, the key role of dads in their children's lives and the positive impact of fathers in relation to children's outcomes was consistently mentioned and acknowledged. But some felt that the role of fathers had not yet been fully considered within their own provision, whereas others felt they were already taking steps towards incorporating this into their service.

*"If you do engage them, you do get better outcomes for the children, it's a no brainer."
(Dedicated fathers' worker, rural location)*

Many professionals expressed that data on fathers is seldom collected which can hinder providers' attempts to reach out to young men. It was felt that the lack of data was due to the overarching focus on mothers and children within the related professions. Professionals described how a lack of records then creates a barrier to identifying and reaching out to young fathers.

*"Traditionally services have been very focused on certain ways of working and things are not always recorded. So, you know, dad might not be recorded in the system because the primary reason why we're working with that family is to sort out the fact that the child's not attending the school or has got behavioural issues, or whatever they're presenting with. So, I think the focus has been so much on the child and the mum and not necessarily including dad in that."
(Families data analyst, rural location)*

The lack of direct contact with fathers meant professionals then relied on mothers as a gatekeeper to their service. This could be in the form of giving information to mum to pass on to fathers, which may not be particularly successful depending on the young man's relationship with the child's mother and other family circumstances.

*"Often it will be the mothers who will see the notification that this course is even running. And then there's a suggestion that perhaps their partner might want to attend."
(Programme provider, urban location)*

Recruiting fathers in this way could be problematic in situations where mothers did not want the father to be involved. Professionals would try to work with mum, emphasising the importance of father involvement, however this was not always fruitful. It was also acknowledged that where mothers did not want to disclose details about the father, professionals are powerless to do anything about this.

*"We try to involve them, but sometimes it can be a bit of a barrier because for whatever reason, sometimes mum doesn't want that contact with dad."
(Early help worker, rural location)*



*"So, from a health visiting point of view there's been quite a lot of strives recently to recognise this family focus, rather than just mum and child"
(Health visitor, rural location)*

Side-Lining


Despite some services wanting to improve inclusivity for dads, young fathers in this research and previous studies have reported feeling side-lined by services from the antenatal period and beyond^{12,13}. In agreement, several professionals acknowledged that fathers continue to feel overlooked by services.

"I mean there's quite a number of dads I've spoken to, especially regards to like how they found interactions with services such as health visitors. Quite often they'll say they feel like a bit of a spare part." (Dedicated young fathers' worker, rural location)

Three of the professionals expressed that side-lining was due to cultural assumptions about fathers in society and what fathers will and will not engage with, within the sector and wider society. Not only did these affect professionals' interactions with young dads, but they could also affect how services were perceived by young fathers leading to disengagement.

Among some of the female professionals, it was felt that there were other barriers to translating inclusion into practice. These included a lack of practitioner confidence to ask about fathers, and practitioner fears around working with fathers with a history of violence or aggression. With regards to the latter, it is important to note that such cases were rare and such actions should not be seen as representative of all young fathers. The viewpoint of young fathers being 'at risk' to themselves and others is seen within the existing literature¹⁰, which can lead to unhelpful and discriminatory attitudes amongst service providers and denying all fathers a level of service.

"So, trying to inform practice so that it is inclusive and trying to build their [professionals'] confidence within that because I think that's a lot of the problem. And for us as well, obviously it's difficult when we've got dads who are domestic abusers et cetera." (Children's Centre worker, urban location)



"There's a perception that dads aren't required in that visit. I don't know where that's come from, whether it's within a population, a kind of impression of what health visiting is, or what we give off subliminally in our visits." (Health visitor, rural location)

Communication

Language and communication were also considered key aspects when supporting and engaging with young dads. Professionals discussed how to engage young fathers, and felt it was important to specifically address dads, rather than 'parents' more generally. It was also felt that being mindful of the wording used in any communications was important, as this may affect fathers' responses. Communication included verbal interactions and written documents, such as policies documents and posters.

A further communication barrier identified was the use of professional jargon. This could lead to young fathers' misunderstanding of what was said. One dedicated young dads' worker noted that young men may not ask for clarification due to it being perceived as a sign of weakness. In some cases, the lack of understanding could have quite serious repercussions.

"I've been in core groups before and the social worker has said, 'I'm going to have to take legal advice.' And after the core group I've said, 'do you understand what taking legal advice means?' 'No.' I was like, 'oh that's why you acted quite blasé about it in the core group. It means they're looking to remove your child.'" (Dedicated young fathers' worker, rural location)

Professionals also noted that subtle messages could be given out through the physical environment of the service provision. Linked to this, is the lack of male representation among professionals in the family and early years sector, which can impact fathers' views of services and the ways in which they will engage with providers.

"I think it's a lack of male staff. In the Children's Centres that's an issue. They could put up positive posters as well because if you go to most Children's Centres, the only depiction of a man will be something about domestic violence." (Dedicated fathers' worker, rural location)

Two of the professionals noted that services are often aimed at mothers, delivered by mothers, and consequently will use language aimed at mothers which can be off-putting for fathers.

"A lot of perinatal services are delivered by white middle-aged women. So, there's that barrier and we don't talk the same language as men. We have different perceptions of roles and experiences of being a parent. You know, we come with our own female experience versus what it's like to be a male." (Health visitor, rural location)

"It's terminology as well, we know that a lot of dads don't respond to the word depression, but they'll respond to the word stress." (Health visitor, rural location)



The professionals' focus group discussions highlighted that many young fathers have experienced some form of service involvement for most of their lives. As part of this experience, some young fathers may have encountered negative interactions with professionals, leading to feelings of being judged and the development of mistrust towards services. This could then impact upon a professionals' ability to support the young men at a later point.

"The institutions around the children are not friendly to men. And so, they're instantly mistrusting of you when you're coming in." (Dedicated fathers' worker, rural location)

In many cases, the professionals we spoke to had to work extremely hard to build up relationships with the young fathers, to try to get past the mistrust that had built up. The professionals voiced that it was important to be neutral and non-judgmental in their approach and communication, to enable them to develop positive relationships with young fathers.

"What it boils down to is, is hearing appropriately and making sure that what we said, our messages don't come from a place of judgement, they don't come from a place of criticism necessarily but support." (Dedicated young fathers' worker, rural location)

Once the trust was established, the professionals could then work with fathers in a meaningful way. It is noteworthy, that building relationships with young fathers could take time and some services were restricted in their length of delivery or funding.

Impact of the Pandemic on Services

The pandemic impacted on the ability of professionals to conduct face-to-face support with young fathers and their families, and many services turned to online and telephone methods of service delivery instead. Professionals found some surprising benefits to this, noting increased attendance and engagement by fathers due to easier access, the elimination of geographical barriers and familiarity and confidence with using online spaces.

"Since COVID, when we've moved online with a lot of our workshops, the engagement from dads and male carers, has improved greatly and that's been wonderful." (Parent advisor, rural location)

However, some professionals had experienced limitations to online service delivery. One of the dedicated fathers' workers noted that it did not suit everyone, leading him to deliver his mental health support group outside, so that it would still comply with COVID-19 guidance. Attendees here were able to benefit from face-to-face provision at a time when contact with other people was limited.

"So, we'd just meet up in a park and we used to do, like, a little warm-up, we used to do a little exercise thing, because it was freezing quite often, and then we'd do some different activities. That was a brilliant way to bringing people in and meeting each other, because no-one was meeting during COVID." (Dedicated young fathers' worker, urban location)

Other services working with children and families spoke of the difficulties of doing assessments online and being unable to establish a whole picture of the child:

"I have completed whole assessments where I've not actually met with the family, where they've had to self-isolate or there's been health needs." (Early help worker, rural location)

One of the dedicated fathers' workers was concerned that online delivery of group sessions could compromise the confidentiality of the fathers in the group. Given that young fathers would often attend sessions at home or work, there could be other people present who could hear or see the online participants. The dedicated fathers' worker also noted that virtual provision could make it harder to interpret how dads were feeling and more difficult to build up relationships with them.

"The one thing we found really hard was to be able to keep a safe space which we can do within group settings which are face-to-face... Sometimes, halfway through the session, someone would just walk past the screen, and we'd say, 'well who's that?' And they'd say, 'oh it's my partner.' And we'd be like, 'well dude it's supposed to be a safe space' cause obviously there are other discussions going on from other dads... It's also really hard to read someone's mental health over a screen because some people didn't have their cameras on. So, we weren't able to fully connect and bond as we would normally in group settings." (Dedicated fathers' worker, rural location)

A further difficulty was the inequality of access to the internet which left some fathers being unable to access services at all.

"The whole country, the whole world came to realise that there is a poverty when it comes to having access to the internet." (Dedicated young fathers' worker, rural location)

The pandemic also increased the frequency and complexity of the support needs of families. Consequently, some professionals experienced an increased workload. Despite the easing of the pandemic and related restrictions, they felt this trend had continued.

"My caseloads have increased quite significantly and the complexity of cases that I have. Things are a lot more complex now and there's more need." (Early help worker, rural location)



"I can spend quite a lot of time travelling and not actually seeing people."
(Early help worker, rural location)

Rural and Urban Support

For those in rural areas, the most common difficulties in delivering services and engaging young fathers were related to transport. Poor public transport networks and infrequent services could make it difficult for fathers to attend appointments and support groups. In some areas, travel over long distances was required to get to services and this was considered time-consuming for both fathers and the service providers. Professionals felt this could reduce dads' motivation for attending, as it took a large amount of time out of their day. For professionals, long journeys meant less time for home visits which reduced the number of young dads they were able to support and created disparity in the level of service that could be provided in different areas.

"If they don't drive, those public transport links are really slow. You know, round the houses, hour and a half journey there, hour and a half back. Feels to them, is it worth it for hour and a half of support. They've lost the best chunk of a day." (Dedicated young fathers' worker, rural location)

Difficulties with transport networks were mixed for urban areas, with some of the larger cities having good networks and those nearer to the coast and rural areas being less so. However, for both rural and urban areas, the cost of transport was understood by professionals to pose a big burden to young fathers who may be struggling financially. Young fathers who were on low-incomes and in receipt of Universal Credit were seen to be the most affected.

"I think a big theme is, it's massively underestimated by a lot of services, how little money, and resources a lot of these guys have. They're living hand to mouth a lot of the time, day to day, and it's like, it's really hard to get them to prioritise something that even though you know that in the long-term is going to benefit them, it's like really difficult." (Specialist young parents' worker, urban location)

One of the dedicated fathers' workers made comparisons to the basic essentials, such as food and fuel, that could be bought in lieu of transport costs and would be a priority for young fathers. This is particularly pertinent in the current climate when many families are currently feeling the effects of the cost-of-living crisis. Another dedicated young fathers' worker had shared that some of the young men in the service could not afford food or fuel and were turning to food banks. In such a context, the professionals stated that transport costs to attend provision would add further strain to household finances.



"Food bank is a big issue, food poverty and fuel poverty. You know, some of the lads are talking about their gas and electric bills and just saying they can't pay it. So yeah, within that, transport's is a biggie." (Dedicated young fathers' worker, urban location)

Two of the fathers' workers had tried to ameliorate this problem by reimbursing travel expenses either before or after attendance. However, this did not always mean attendance was guaranteed. The lack of financial resources to draw on and rising living costs could mean some young fathers had to use the travel money elsewhere to get by.

As well as differences between rural and urban areas, professionals noted intra-urban and intra-rural differences. These included differences in young fathers' acceptance of the need for support and young fathers' support needs were variable. With regards to employment specifically, the types of employment available and issues with employment (such as contract types), were frequently aired by the young men. Some professionals discussed how location-specific employment types and the varied working patterns of fathers meant groups of dads from a similar area may have specific needs and preferred approaches for support and engagement. Accordingly, professionals covering several areas would adapt their approach to meet the needs of the young fathers more specifically in each area. It was also found that professionals' ability to contact fathers directly and the differences in engagement were dependant in part on the affluence of the area, reliability of mobile phone networks, young fathers' employment status and their cultural background.

Policy views and Perceptions

Professionals were asked about their knowledge and views of current Government policy agendas including Supporting Families, Levelling up, and Family Hubs. With regards to Supporting Families, some professionals had a limited knowledge and awareness of it, particularly where it was not within their funding remit. Others had positive views – including that it was better named than its predecessor, i.e., 'Troubled Families', where it was felt that the title had created a lot of unnecessary stigma. One professional suggested that the Supporting Families programme has the potential to deliver a better and more inclusive service to families as it promotes a whole family approach, a singular access point for families through Family Hubs, and easier information sharing among professionals.

Professionals expressed some optimism about Family Hubs, voicing that the whole family approach could promote the inclusion of fathers, and the offer of both face-to-face and virtual support within the Family Hub could make services more accessible to families. However, there was also concern that the limited availability of Family Hubs would affect professionals' ability to deliver their services.

"There's no point having things like Best Start in Life and the Beyond paper that was written, saying we need to invest in really good services, if we can't deliver those services because there's no Family Hubs." (Health visitor, rural location)

Views on Levelling Up were mixed, with some professionals having some or very little knowledge about the agenda. Others had knowledge of it in terms of the North-South divide and schemes related to building infrastructure. In their experience so far, two of the professionals suggested that funding has not necessarily been given to the geographical areas that need it most.

"There's still loads and loads of poverty, and it's still really disadvantaged in loads of areas. I think the levelling up stuff, there's loads of areas of the north that have got almost nothing." (Dedicated young fathers' worker, urban location)

Some professionals saw the benefits of larger schemes like HS2¹⁴ and HS3¹⁵ but felt that the focus on levelling up infrastructure would benefit some communities but not others. A couple of the professionals expressed that there needs to be a focus on levelling up at both micro- and meso-levels. One dedicated young fathers' worker suggested that in his area, investment in infrastructure would benefit few people. He considered that investing that money in Children's Centres would be more beneficial for that community. Another professional also felt that there needs to be a focus on levelling up within the family unit.

"I think if we're really wanting to look at levelling up, it's got to be done on quite a long level if we really want to make things equitable for fathers as well as mums." (Health visitor, rural location)



"An integral part of the Family Hub is the hybrid model, so that families can access either virtually or face-to-face which is a real positive." (Children's Centre worker, urban location)



"We need to be engaging dads as soon as they know they're dads. You know as soon as that pregnancy test comes back positive. Just like how services are a set interaction for mums, we should have same systems and checking to make sure that that is being done." (Dedicated fathers' worker, rural location)

Policy improvements

Our research indicates that government policy around children and families is still heavily centred on mothers and children, with fathers often being excluded from the discussion. Professionals advocated for the need in policy and practice to invest in, and promote, dads as an asset to the family. Whilst at the same time, acknowledging the impact that fathers can have on improving outcomes for children.

They also cited a need to be understanding of the challenges faced by young dads and the role of policy interventions to help prevent and ameliorate some of these challenges. Consideration of fatherhood at policy level would then promote consideration at practice level. As noted by one of the professionals:

"Although we've got much more of a family focus, we've not always really considered to its fuller potential, the input that young fathers can have and the insight that they can provide. I think that's naturally because a lot of our commissioned services, a lot of the work that we do, and the public health work we do, is geared towards mothers." (Health Manager, urban location)

The lack of government policy was also remarked on by a Children's Centre worker:

"I think what's missing is that it's not in a strategic plan anywhere to include fathers, is it?" (Children's Centre worker, urban location).

Some professionals voiced the need for policy and funding to provide universal services for dads and equality of services for mothers and fathers. This does not necessarily mean introducing new services, as existing services could be adapted to support both mothers and fathers. Related to this, more focus is needed on engaging and working with fathers, but professionals felt that this needs to be the responsibility of all services and to start from the beginning of pregnancy.

Several of the professionals highlighted the importance of early intervention explaining that it not only reduces the level of support needed potentially, but it can also be more cost-effective overall.

"Loads and loads of money and resources could be saved with better preventative work." (Specialist young parents' worker, urban location)

To put all these things in place, the availability of funding and dedicated focus on supporting fathers and young fathers needs to be consistent, rather than sporadic over time. There was some discussion that including paternity as a protected characteristic, could help to emphasise the significant role of fathers. Such a move could also help remove some of the barriers that fathers faced in fatherhood and family life in relation to employment.

A last point by professionals was that a better focus on young fathers and improved support as a result, would not only be beneficial for fathers, but it could also contribute to relieving some of the pressures and limitations on mothers around childcare, career progression by young people, and other aspects of family life. Therefore, by emphasising the support needs of young fathers, it could serve to benefit both parents and ultimately their children.

"The idea that protecting paternity right would theoretically be a benefit to both parties." (Dedicated fathers' worker, rural location)



“We’ve got a health and wellbeing service, which also offers access to free therapy and counselling if you need it.” (Large National Employer)

Employer Perspectives

Our study has demonstrated the important and valuable nature of employment for fathers and that the benefits of work are far-reaching. To complement the insights from the young fathers’ and professionals’ interviews, we spoke to six employers to ascertain their perspectives on the experiences of young fathers in the workplace. It is important to note that the employers we interviewed were not the employers of the young fathers interviewed. Instead, the researchers reached out to specific organisations across the country, who we felt could provide and share pertinent insights on young fatherhood and employment issues that had been uncovered in the earlier strands of the research. A brief overview of the six employers who took part in the research is provided in the participant information section at the beginning of the report.

Our research questions on young fatherhood and employment covered five key areas with the employers:

1. *Current policies and programmes*
2. *Examples of innovation and good practice*
3. *Awareness of young fathers’ entry points into employment*
4. *The work/home life balance of young parents*
5. *Future of the workplace for young fathers*

We then asked employers to share their views in relation to: 1) young fathers within their own organisations, 2) young fathers within the industries that they operated in, and 3) views on the workplace in the future, with regards to young fathers and critical areas of change needed.

Current Policies and Programmes

A consistent theme across all the employers’ interviews was the reference to a range of formal and informal policies that are currently in place, which can benefit young fathers directly. These included flexible working, time off for appointments, a four-day working week and extended paternity leave. Such policies were either implemented in their own organisations or the organisations that they collaborated with (and could still help young fathers as employees). From one of the large organisation’s perspective, equal parenthood was noted as a strong testament to the company’s culture, and something that is carried through in their parental leave policies.

“We have our equal parenthood policy, which we launched last November. This offers all parents, regardless of how they become a parent, six-months paid leave to care for their new child, so that’s 14 weeks at full-pay and 12-weeks at half-pay. So that’s very much focused at the early stage of a child entering a family, whether that’s by birth, by surrogacy, adoption, or however it is that the child becomes part of that family unit. [This] supports embedding and supports the parents as well, to build those relationships and bond with their child.” (Large National Employer)

There are currently few organisations, particularly those that operate at a national level, that offer the same level of equality in their parental leave policies. This type of policy would have a notable benefit for dads, as the young fathers' accounts in this research and other studies¹¹ have demonstrated the young men's desire to 'be there' for their children and their active parenting goals.

Adjustments to parental policies can be seen within smaller employers also. In one business for example, the impact of the pandemic itself had led to a reflection on the company's existing maternity policies and subsequent changes.

"We quickly learnt that our maternity leave that we had initially wasn't very competitive. You just got the standard maternity pay and that was it, which stopped after so many weeks. So, we had to look into that and learn from our employees what a competitive package was". (Small to Medium Enterprise/SME)

The young fathers' interviews highlighted that most young men are keen to support and co-parent with the child's mother, regardless of their relationship status. As such, policies which affect mothers can have an indirect effect on dads also, including the young man's family unit, the wider decisions around employment choices for both parents (with implications for the child), and broader issues around home and work life. Employment policies which can benefit mothers can therefore benefit fathers and vice versa.


In addition to the importance of parental leave policy, flexibility was key when it came to young fathers, and parents more widely in the workplace. The most effective policies involved parents themselves as part of the discussion, when devising the policy framework and going beyond standard sector expectations.

The offer of flexible working policies, which are in tandem with parental leave policies, are a combination that reflects the work and life goals of the young fathers that we spoke to in both rural and urban areas. Young fathers in this research study also desired an appropriate home/work life balance. When such a balance occurs, it can benefit employees and employers in terms of productivity and workplace morale. However, despite the many reported benefits of flexible working arrangements for young fathers, some employers felt that policies could be used as a 'tick a box' exercise, rather than a tool for creating fundamental change in the workplace for parents and young fathers specifically.

"I think the biggest thing that I see across the board are good policies on paper. Lots of promises to employees that they will be supported in their parenting journey or caring journey. Quite a lot of expectation from those parents that they're going to be supported and this could be going into new roles or in their existing companies. [But] actually, when they have to put their money where their mouth is and deliver genuine support and empathy and flexibility, then it tends to fall down more often than not." (Small to Medium Enterprise/SME)



"With our paternity leave, we automatically tell all of our dads that you get a month off, no arguments. At the end of that month, it isn't a case of back to work, it's a case of having a chat, how are you, do you want another week off, do you want another two weeks, you know, are you ready to come back?" (Small to Medium Enterprise/SME)



“We’re not interested whether you’re a man or a woman, whether you’ve biologically given birth to a baby that is biologically yours or, you know, they’re not interested. It’s just for whatever reason a baby, a child has come into your life.”
(Small to Medium Enterprise/SME)

Beyond existing organisational policies, some of the employers also spoke of several programmes which were on offer to all employees, which would benefit young fathers. One of the large employers, for example, provided support on financial wellbeing and assistance, a parent-buddy system, and their apprenticeships were available to everyone. Some of the young fathers we spoke to were aware of internal support systems within their work settings, but were often reluctant to take up the company’s offer, due to fears around negative judgement or repercussions in terms of their career opportunities. Employers need to consider such issues to promote uptake amongst employees.

Examples of Innovation and Good Practice

Employers who were mindful of young fathers and parents in general were often forward-thinking and innovative in their approaches. The employers’ interviews captured several examples of innovations in the workplace that can affect young fathers, and four are outlined below.

1. *Blind parental leave*

Blind parental leave was referenced as a key area of innovation. Blind parental leave takes away the notion of who the parent is, and instead gives HR teams and decision makers the ability to look even more objectively at an employee’s circumstance.

The insight above is particularly noteworthy as it was made specifically in relation to an organisation within the construction industry. The construction sector itself is not necessarily recognised for having a strong culture around flexible working and inclusion more widely. It was therefore encouraging to hear that such innovation was occurring.

The employers were in full agreement of the importance of parental leave and the benefits of this for families. However, one of the SME employers discussed the financial burden this could place on employers and particularly smaller businesses who may struggle to afford it. Furthermore, some employers may be unaware of or lack a full understanding of the rights of their employees. It was proposed that there should be more practical and financial support in place for employers to reduce this burden and to enable necessary policies.

2. Rethinking what flexible working means

One SME employer provided a unique example of innovative working arrangements and leave. As a fully remote working organisation, they allowed employees unlimited annual leave, without the need for a formal request.

"We don't expect people to request time off, they tell us that they can't work, or even if they just don't want to work for a certain week, and it will always be automatically approved. That's the way we operate because we want to offer flexibility." (Small to Medium Enterprise/SME)

Clearly this way of working is more achievable for certain types of organisations with particular modes of operation. However, our interviews demonstrated an increase in employers incorporating or thinking about flexible working arrangements, even amongst those who were historically more 'fixed' in their employees' working patterns. Flexible working was considered to have benefits for both the employer and employee, supporting a better work-life balance for staff, and having a positive impact on employee motivation and attitudes towards work. With flexible working, time off could be made up later meaning neither employer nor employee were compromised. Flexible working was viewed as being of increasing importance to fathers in the workplace and was demonstrated in our interviews with young men also.

"The ones [dads] I've spoken to, they love the flexible working that employers are offering now, because I think that's becoming a lot more important these days." (Small to Medium Enterprise/SME)

Although working flexibly and the ability to work part-time has been welcomed by employers and employees, there was concern by some of the employers interviewed that working fathers who do so, may feel penalised in the workplace for such choices, resulting in delayed progression and promotion opportunities (in a comparable way to mothers, who have been affected by similar decisions¹⁷).

"Fathers who are working part-time or flexibly are telling us that that is impacting their career progression in the workplace, so they are beginning to see exactly the same challenges as the motherhood penalty, that has been affecting women for generations." (Large National Employer)

3. A culture of inclusion

It was evident that a culture of inclusion was occurring in both larger and smaller organisations. Through reflection and new ideas, particularly as a result of the pandemic, this has enabled new ways of working that reflect further inclusivity in the workplace to benefit employees. One large national employer shared an example:

"We also have the parent buddy system as well. So, we've got parents across all areas of our business who have experience of all different types of parenting journeys, whether that's adoption, biological, IVF, surrogacy, same sex couples, LGBTQ-plus. Whatever journey it is, we've got a parent who is willing to share their story and support others who are going through similar journeys as well." (Large National Employer)

Several interviewees discussed the emphasis that employers placed on collaborating with their employees and described some of the steps taken to ensure that both mothers and fathers have a space in which they feel comfortable to air their views.



"There are obviously companies who do both very well. They have the right policies in place. They also critically involve the parents in policy making and those conversations, through the likes of working parents' networks internally, where the parents aren't just delivered this message from above, but it's actually a collaborative process." (Small to Medium Enterprise/ SME)

However, one SME employer raised questions in relation to how companies communicate with young fathers and whether the young men feel truly represented by the working parents' groups that are established in the workplace. The potential mismatch and gap between fathers who are older and 'more established' in their careers, compared to younger fathers may be an issue. Younger fathers may not be as confident about their voice and rights, nor have full awareness of their options, or may have concerns around job security. In such a light, there is a need for employers to consider more deeply the ways in which young men and young fathers are understood and engaged with in the workplace.

"I think that actually a first step is what is the best way to communicate with a younger audience and younger parents? What language resonates with them? What's their problem statement as a young father, a young parent versus the older new parent would have in their workplace?" (Small to Medium Enterprise/SME)

4. A long-term cultural shift

In relation to policy, all employers agreed that better support for young fathers was only as good as the culture in place to enable it. Long-term cultural shifts were seen as a vital component for a positive workplace environment and future for young fathers. However, one employer felt that tackling culture in employment alone was unlikely to effect change. It was proposed that in order to be sustained, cultural change around the views of fatherhood and the way we treat fathers needs to be instigated in multiple contexts including societal, policy, legislation, health, and employment, echoing the findings from the interviews with the professionals in the study.

Awareness of Young Fathers: Entry Points and Barriers

Limited data was collected by employers on young fathers within the workplace.

"I don't think we would specifically say that we've got entry points that are specific to young fathers. I think our entry points would be more generic." (Large National Employer)

However, there was a greater awareness of the exact number of young fathers employed by SME organisations, whereas larger organisations tended to collect data on parents per se. The lack of data means that the precise entry point and development pathways for young fathers throughout the organisations were unknown. Collecting this information would facilitate the assessment of clearer pathways for young fathers in the future, as well as that of other segments of the workforce.

The Home/Work Life Balance of Young Fathers

The mental health of young fathers has already been noted earlier on in this report, and the employers' perspectives on mental health also highlight the importance of recognising and supporting mental health issues within the workplace. Employers' perspectives highlighted their continued work on this area, whether through a formal programme or through a strong desire to open up conversations about well-being across the organisation:

"Our working parents' network. They have run loads of sessions on fathers, for mental health of fathers, for support for fathers and returning from work after parenthood leave." (Large National Employer)

When we asked the employers about facilitating better home/work life balance, there was a clear theme of consultation which came through, as well as an understanding of how important family life is to parents.

“Our kind of culture and business decisions are very much driven by the kind of opinions and views of our [employees], through our democratic bodies, and through the feedback we receive from them.” (Large National Employer)

“I’m never going to hold it against people if they say, ‘Can I have the day off for sports day?’ I’m not going to be taking that out of their wages. I’m not going to get them to make the hours up.” (Small to Medium Enterprise/SME)

However, there are some notable observations that those supporting working parents are starting to make. As the changing world of work becomes more focused on shift work for some parents, this is affecting families’ use of childcare and limiting their choices when making decisions around employment.

“Most of the parents we speak to who are on lower incomes cannot afford full time childcare. All of their childcare is done informally, or as a parent. But what those parents are finding is that their shift patterns are changing, and that means that they then really struggle with childcare. Then it’s this, you know, this absolutely appalling choice, which of course is now not a choice. Well, which one of us doesn’t work, while the other one of us looks for a job?” (Large National Employer)

The Cost-of-Living Conundrum

In addition to issues with childcare affecting employment choices, the cost-of-living crisis is impacting young fathers and families across the country and was mentioned elsewhere in the report. Beyond the difficulties affecting day-to-day family life, it is adding extra pressure on many young fathers who already feel they are in a vulnerable position at work. One Large Employer observed that job security is becoming a major concern for working parents, preventing them from pursuing other roles that may provide opportunities for self-development, organisational challenge, and an increase in income.

“To leave where you currently are, where you know that everything is sorted to move to a new role where you have absolutely no guarantees. Of course, you’re then being employed in a situation where you’ve been working for somebody for under two years, so you know, you have even fewer workplace rights.” (Large National Employer)

Employers put forward ideas that would support families in the current economic climate. These included more support with childcare, mandating flexible working from day one, and paying employees the ‘real living wage’¹⁸. These types of support could benefit young fathers. As described earlier in the report, this study has highlighted the excessive cost of childcare and lack of universal help with childcare costs before children reach the age of 3, which was a concern for many of the young fathers interviewed. Further, for those young fathers working in precarious, low paid roles, increasing the national living wage to meet the ‘real living wage’¹⁸ would be beneficial.



“The pandemic didn’t change how we operated, so we didn’t see that. I think in terms of mental health, it would be naïve of me to say it didn’t affect anybody. Was I aware of any problems? No. We constantly spoke to all of our staff and said if anyone is struggling, you know where we are.” (Small to Medium Enterprise/SME)



The employers all felt that organisations need to be truly in a position to listen to the concerns of young fathers, and parents/carers more widely across the board. They considered it their responsibility to ensure parents are aware of their rights in the workplace, as they have the means to research that information and then pass it on to other parents.

"The people I have that went on maternity didn't know their full rights and I spent a lot of time with HR making sure that our policies were correct. And I believe we have a responsibility because we have the resources, with HR and advisors that can actually do that. And we can share that with the employees." (Small to Medium Enterprise/SME)

The Future

Our employers made recommendations relating to the future of work for young fathers. Dominant themes included protecting fatherhood in law and improving skills and training opportunities for young people and parents.

The employers noted that maternity is currently a protected characteristic in UK employment law (The Equality Act 2010), but paternity is not. Despite maternity being a protected characteristic, there is still considerable evidence of maternity discrimination across workplaces¹⁷. Hence, having protection as statute in law does not on its own prevent discrimination. However, not having a wider definition of carers beyond maternity was seen as a gap in current law, which means that fathers and their rights at work are currently not represented in law, when it comes to the workplace. This not only has implications for them as fathers, in that it restricts their ability to stand up for their rights, but it also impacts on the other parent.

"I think fatherhood being a protective characteristic must be there because overarchingly, if the flexibility doesn't exist for the father or the protection, then that directly impacts the other person in that relationship, or the other person caring for that child, because they can't be flexible if the other person's not." (Small to Medium Enterprise/SME)

However, several employers also mentioned that protecting paternity on its own may not truly reflect the UK's workforce and its representation in everyday family life, with wider definitions of 'parenthood', or 'carers', being put forward as strong recommendations instead.

"We would like to see caring as a protected characteristic, so that it is irrespective of your sex and irrespective of the age of the person that you're caring for." (Large National Employer)

There are a range of programmes and public budgets that organisations can tap into for training and upskilling - in line with key criteria. But the employers' felt that some of these are no longer fit for purpose and should be re-allocated. Two examples were provided here, such as Apprenticeships and Agile Skills Training.

"[Apprenticeships] From a skills and social mobility perspective, I would say that the key thing is around funding for vocational training and lifelong learning. At the moment, the only game in town is the apprenticeship levy, which can only be used for apprenticeships, which aren't always the right vehicle for someone... I think there is an opportunity to use that to fund more vocational training and different types of vocational training, and pre-employability programmes." (Large National Employer)



"[Agile skills training] I would say that whole area of skills funding needs to be looked at. The government's proposed a lifelong loan entitlement, but what that is, is you're able to take a student loan to do a degree at any other point in your career, so you must, A, pay that back, which is a huge barrier from a social mobility perspective. B, not everyone needs to do a degree to be able to access the job that they want to do. With a lot of tech jobs especially now, it is much shorter courses. And C, the proposal is that those loans would only be limited to people who get a certain grade or above, and again, if you've struggled at school and the classroom wasn't for you, but you want to return to learning at a future date, it's not accessible from a social mobility perspective. So I'd say that's important, sorting out the adult skills funding, and making sure it's a properly flexible system that supports people who've got different levels of education from school, and different needs in terms of their career." (Large National Employer)

There has been firm agreement that not only does the characteristic of 'parenthood' need much wider adoption in UK law, but also that organisations need to start looking at young fathers as a distinct group from fathers generally. The young men's challenges and entry points are unique amongst a much wider characteristic of fathers in an organisation. Young fathers would benefit from more understanding of their circumstances and more initiatives and styles of communication that truly engage them in the workplace.

Final Words

Employment was important to all the young fathers we spoke to. Work could provide stability (both mentally and financially), and contribute towards a sense of pride, achievement, usefulness and belonging. Fathers also felt that by working, they were being good role models to their children.

However, regional inequalities in relation to work opportunities, and the evidence of pay gaps, job insecurity, discrimination within the workplace, and poor mental health (because of working conditions), were expressed by many of the young fathers who we spoke to. These difficulties could then lead to negative impacts in other areas of their lives. For young fathers who lacked professional support or had experienced a disconnect with support professionals, this could then compound any existing employment issues or other difficulties that the young fathers were facing.

In contrast, young fathers who expressed positive employment experiences, in terms of job security, recognition, adequate pay, feeling respected, having an empathetic manager, and having flexible working conditions, reported higher levels of job satisfaction and had better opportunities to develop professionally. Young fathers in these positions also experienced a better balance between home and work responsibilities and were able to spend more time with their children.

Employment success stories and challenges such as these, helps to uncover some of the complexities around young fathers' employment experiences and parenting. We also found that when young fathers experienced difficulties in relation to work or family life, professionals are in a prime position to support them. If young fathers are able to build trusting relationships with professionals, and where support is respectful, understanding, and meaningful, this can then make a significant difference to the young fathers in terms of being listened to, being able to develop appropriate coping mechanisms, and improve decision-making, which can all contribute towards feelings of empowerment.

Creating better employment opportunities, advice, and protection for young fathers and the vital role of effective professional support, are some of the key issues which came out of the research. If we are truly committed to making a positive change for young fathers' lives, then such issues need to be considered by all relevant stakeholders and acted upon. Over the next year there is a real opportunity to influence the Government's priorities for 'levelling up' and this research will help provide a greater understanding of how to best target policy initiatives and resources to support fathers in all parts of the country.

Footnotes

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