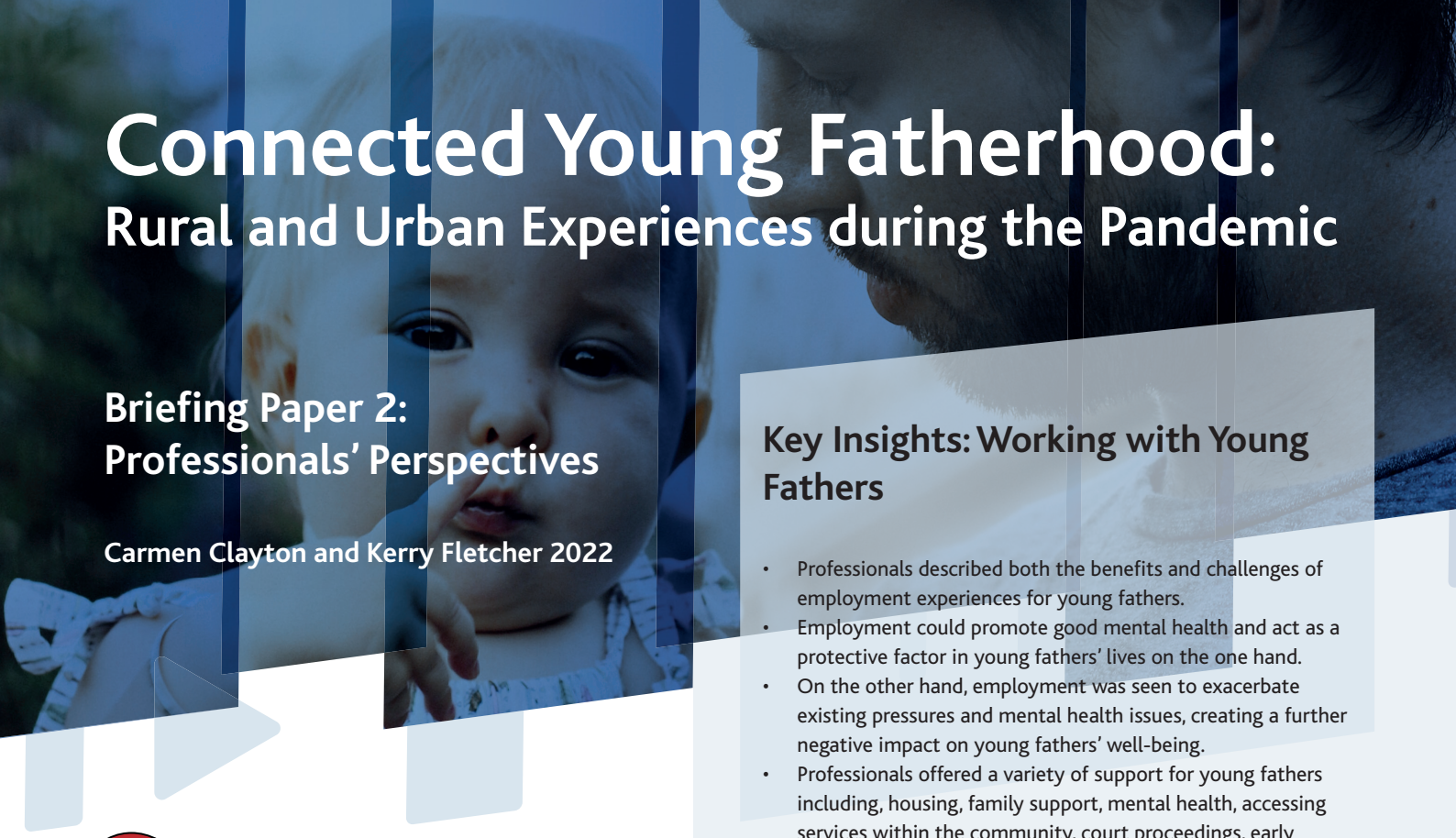

Connected Young Fatherhood:
Rural and Urban Experiences during the Pandemic

Briefing Paper 2: Professionals' Perspectives

Carmen Clayton and Kerry Fletcher 2022

Introduction

'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 Fathers- 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.

As part of the current study, we spoke to 25 young fathers (defined as under the age of 25 at the time of the first pregnancy or birth), 15 professionals in the family and fathers' sector, alongside 6 employers, using online or telephone interviews, to gather a range of insights regarding young fatherhood and employment issues. Alongside our full study report, we have produced a set of three briefing papers, with our key recommendations arising from the findings. In this second briefing paper, we focus on professionals' perspectives on supporting young fathers and their employment experiences, and the key issues to consider for policy and practice.

Key Insights: Working with Young Fathers

- Professionals described both the benefits and challenges of employment experiences for young fathers.
- Employment could promote good mental health and act as a protective factor in young fathers' lives on the one hand.
- On the other hand, employment was seen to exacerbate existing pressures and mental health issues, creating a further negative impact on young fathers' well-being.
- Professionals offered a variety of support for young fathers including, housing, family support, mental health, accessing services within the community, court proceedings, early help, parenting and repairing breakdowns in communication between young fathers and their families, and other services that they were involved with.
- Delivery of support was varied, with programmes ranging in length and content was dependent on the needs of the fathers that they were working with.
- Approaches to support also differed and included therapeutic, child-centred, practical skills teaching, group work and one-to-ones. Professionals often used several of these approaches rather than relying on one method only.
- Accessing support was usually done through self-referral or being referred by other services such as the young man's GP, Children's Services, Schools, Maternity Services or the Family Nurse Partnership.
- Partnership working with other practitioners and organisations was a key part of the professionals' approaches when supporting young fathers.
- The offer of employment support for young fathers was mixed, ranging from no offer at all, to support with employability skills, providing work experience opportunities, accessing training, CV writing and applying for jobs.
- Most professionals did not provide specific employability support, however, they felt that the wider support being provided through their service provision could then contribute to fathers being in a better position to pursue employment and to maintain their employment status.
- The pandemic affected how professionals delivered their services and most provision went online.
- Online service delivery appeared to increase young father's engagement with services due to ease of access and familiarity with technology.
- There could be drawbacks to online service provision – it did not suit all service users, confidentiality could be an issue and not all young fathers had access to the internet.
- Some professionals experienced an increased workload during the pandemic due to more frequent and complex support needs of families. This had continued despite the easing of the pandemic.

Engaging Young Fathers

- A lack of data and other records on fathers made it difficult to identify and contact young men about the support available in both rural and urban areas.
- Professionals were creative in finding safe spaces that were appropriate for support and maintaining confidentiality, where fathers would feel comfortable. They often turned to outdoor spaces such as parks, allotments and woodland, which seemed to facilitate father engagement with the service.
- Group work was spoken of highly by many professionals who explained that it helped to bring fathers together, develop a peer support network, led to supportive long-term friendships, and can benefit the wider community through the activities delivered.
- Some services were able to adapt the timing of their provision to facilitate access around the other commitments of young fathers, although this was not possible for all services.
- Even where timing was adapted, this did not guarantee engagement with the provider as some fathers did not feel the need for support.

Barriers to Engaging Young Fathers

- Engaging young fathers could be difficult for formal services for many reasons.
- Policy interest and funding could have a significant impact on the availability of support provision for young fathers.
- Professionals voiced that there has been an ebb and flow of funding over time. They described how there has been a continuous stripping back of funding for services, leaving them constantly having to do 'more with less'.
- The availability of services across the country was considered inconsistent, with some areas having very little or nothing on offer for young parents let alone young fathers.
- Due to lack of funding, some services turned to private and charity funding to keep their organisations going. Sourcing funding could be time consuming, reducing the time that professionals had available to focus on their direct work with fathers.
- Professional culture was commonly mentioned as a barrier to engaging young fathers in terms of traditional and gendered ways of thinking about the roles of fathers or men.
- The children's workforce is heavily female dominated. The lack of male presence, support tailored specifically to dads, or resources for dads, were felt to negatively impact on father engagement.
- A common approach to working with families is child-centred practice. Practitioners expressed that this tends to focus on mothers and children, which can be exclusionary to fathers.
- Professionals acknowledged the importance of fathers' involvement for the outcomes of children, however some felt this had not been fully considered in policy, their organisation or working practice.
- Some professionals had tried to be more inclusive in their practice but faced barriers here. This included limited direct contact with fathers, which in part was influenced by a lack of data records on dads themselves.
- Professionals expressed that the lack of direct contact with fathers led to their reliance on mothers as gatekeepers to their services which could be problematic, particularly where there was conflict between parents.
- Professionals were aware that young fathers could feel side-lined by services and proposed that such practice could be due to a mixture of unconscious bias and cultural assumptions regarding young men and young fathers within the sector and wider society.
- Despite good intentions, professionals felt there was some reluctance amongst staff to engage with young fathers, due to lack of confidence in approaching and engaging with dads.
- Communication was a further barrier to engaging fathers whether verbal or written.
- The wording of written communications such as policies and posters, the dominance of females in the sector, and the language used by services, could be exclusionary to fathers.
- Professionals expressed awareness that young fathers' previous engagement with services may have had a negative impact on young men. 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.
- Being neutral and non-judgmental with young fathers was considered to be the best approach to engaging with them.
- The use of professional jargon was highlighted as a source of miscommunication and misunderstanding, which could then have severe consequences for young fathers.
- Several professionals voiced that communication with young fathers should be straight-forward and honest.
- The delivery times of the professional support offered could conflict with young men's employment, in some cases making support harder for young fathers to access.

Rural and Urban Aspects

- Issues with transport was commonly cited as being a barrier to engaging young fathers, particularly in the rural context.
- Transport links, networks and the frequency of services could all be problematic for fathers in terms of attending groups and other types of services.
- Long travel times in rural areas especially could limit the number of young fathers that a professional could see.
- In both urban and rural areas it was felt that the cost of transport could pose a big burden to young fathers who may lack financial resources and be struggling to pay for basic essentials such as food and fuel, particularly during the current cost-of-living crisis.
- Professionals noted differences within rural areas as well as within urban areas. These included differences in accepting support, the support needs of young fathers, ease of contact with young fathers, and the types of employment in which young fathers were engaged with.

Recommendations for Professionals and Services

1. To be effective, professionals need to appreciate the role of young men as fathers and what difference they can make in children's lives, including the support they can provide to the child's mother.
2. There needs to be a more holistic view of young fathers and a consideration of their circumstances as a whole amongst professionals and employers.

3. We must not apply gendered stereotypes and expectations upon young fathers. Seeing and emphasising the breadwinning role only for young men can be detrimental to the young fathers' sense of worth, health, and well-being.
4. We must challenge the negative stereotypes around unemployment status and young fatherhood. Such views are extremely unhelpful if professionals wish to engage with young fathers effectively and when supporting their employment needs.
5. We must also question dominant assumptions that young fathers are risky, aggressive, or violent. This is not helpful and does not representative young fathers as a whole. If young fathers are labelled in such ways, it will prevent young fathers' engagement with professionals.
6. Employment can provide many benefits for young fathers including their well-being. Professionals need to recognise this to ensure that support is relevant and appropriate.
7. How professionals engage with and respond to young fathers is significant. Young fathers appreciate professional support, which is genuine, empathetic, considerate, to the point, and respectful.
8. 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.
9. Given the complexities of some young fathers' family and employment lives, professionals should try to work flexibly around young men's existing commitments wherever possible.
10. Young fathers are often ambitious but can face multiple barriers when trying to achieve their goals. Professionals need to be aware of such aspirations when supporting young fathers, as this can affect young men's employment views and decision making.
11. Our findings show that young men who are NEET/not in education, employment or training want to work, but it can be difficult to find employment with appropriate hours, reasonable pay, or a suitable location. More professional support is needed to help young men to find and secure employment which is considerate of their family circumstances, health, and well-being.
12. Services need to look at their existing provision and identify the ways in which this can be made more inclusive to young fathers and fathers in general. The focus is still centred around mothers and children within many services, which needs to be addressed.
13. At the same time, there needs to be more policy focus from government on fathers, with more funding made available for local authorities to provide specialised services to support young dads (these could be accessed through Family Hubs).
14. Collecting data on fathers would make them more easily identifiable and facilitate professionals' attempts to engage with and support young men. There is a need for professionals, and all those working with families and children, to be more proactive in pursuing and recording this information.
15. Outdoor spaces were effective in aiding engagement with young fathers and fathers in general. Use of such spaces could be incorporated into more provision for young fathers to provide a safe and neutral space for them.
16. Continuing professional development/CPD for professionals would be beneficial to ensure that the views of young fathers are understood and the heterogenous nature of young fatherhood.
17. 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.

National and Local Policy Recommendations

1. Services need to be centrally funded and efficiently planned to ensure that the local offer is available and accessible to all young fathers.
2. Policy agendas should include a focus on employment, health, social care, support, and promoting parental equality within wider society and culture.
3. Access to and routes into paid employment within urban and rural areas need to be addressed to ensure more opportunities are available for young fathers across the country.
4. There needs to be cultural change around the way we think about young fatherhood and fathers in general. This is needed at all levels starting from government policy and legislation, in order for these to filter in into employment, health, welfare, and employment, to enable all stakeholders to work together.
5. There needs to be more funding for childcare to increase the options available to parents and to reduce the financial burden that this places on families, particularly those from low-income households. For many young fathers, childcare expenses are an added worry with the current cost of living crisis.
6. The Government's scheme to help with childcare costs for eligible 2, 3, and 4 year olds needs to be effectively promoted, and in a more accessible manner, to ensure appropriate take up rates amongst young fathers who are unaware of the support available.

Summary

The professionals we interviewed were keen to support the needs of young fathers and there were many examples of good practice shared, in terms of engaging successfully with young men. However it was also recognised amongst the professionals, that there is still some way to go in terms of transforming professional culture as a whole, to ensure a truly inclusive approach to young fathers within service provision. At the same time, what is needed is a consistent policy focus on fathers, which includes adequate funding and resourcing for services on a sustained level, to help ensure that young fathers and their families are effectively supported over time.

For further information on the study or the briefing paper, please contact:

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