

PIP: Parenting Implementation Project

Delivery Resource: Fathers

Strengthening Fathers, Strengthening Communities

There are many good practice examples of working with fathers, but it is sometimes difficult to then sustain fathers' involvement at a community level and to embed a father friendly approach in service delivery. To address this Lincolnshire's Parenting Plan Steering Group established a multi agency task and finish group to report on how father friendly services could be best achieved.

By outlining the steps taken by Lincolnshire to identify and develop a sustainable model and provide some learning and tips for other LAs considering this approach, it is hoped that this document will help inform work in other local authority areas.

This study provides details of two different approaches to developing and sustaining group work with fathers, ensuring ownership and stronger community engagement.

For more information please contact Katherine Gourley
katherine.gourley@lincolnshire.gov.uk



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Introduction

'The Parenting Journey', Lincolnshire's Parenting Plan, recognises that fathers are as important as mothers to children. As a response to evidence from research and new legislation, a consultation conducted by Parentline Plus in February 2008 to inform Lincolnshire's parenting plan included a focus on fathers. The results reflected national research with regard to the need for and the barriers to the development of father friendly services. In response, the Parenting Journey Steering Group established a multi agency task and finish group to report on how father friendly services could be best achieved. This case study outlines part of the work of that group.

There are many examples of individual good practice in working with fathers in the county. However there was a challenge in sustaining fathers' involvement at a community level and embedding a father friendly approach in service delivery. This case study provides details of two different approaches to developing and sustaining group work with fathers, ensuring ownership and stronger community engagement.

The case study outlines the steps taken by Lincolnshire to build on this experience to identify and develop two sustainable models and provides some learning and tips for other Local Authorities considering this approach. It is hoped that this case study will help inform work in other local authority areas.

Background

Lincolnshire is the fourth largest county in England, covering an area of 6,000 square kilometres with a population of 673,530 of which 149,156 are under the age of eighteen. The main centres of population are Lincoln (86,000) and Boston (56,000), with the remainder of the population being widely dispersed and 26% living in village or hamlet settings. Rural communities are often isolated from services because of poor accessibility and low levels of need. The county ranks highly on the indices of Multiple Deprivation with 25 wards across the county amongst the 20% most deprived in England. Accessibility and delivery are a key challenge.

Lincolnshire is a diverse county with a wide range of communities. The main centres of population contain concentrated pockets of deprivation often containing migrant workers. Much of the economy is seasonal relying on agriculture and the tourist industry. As a result there is significant transience in the population, particularly on the east coast which has an impact on children, families and communities. Parents need to work unsocial hours during the summer season and are less likely to have time with their families during the long school summer holidays.

In general, Lincolnshire has a low wage, low skills economy but only 1.7% of the working population is unemployed in comparison with 2.3% nationally

Lincolnshire has agreed a vision across the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership "Working together, we will ensure that every child and young



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person in every part of the county has the best possible start in life and is able to achieve their potential." Parents and carers (including fathers and male carers) are an important part of this partnership having a key responsibility to support their children's development

To support this approach all Children's Services are committed to evolve to be parent inclusive. It is agreed to be a shared responsibility of all agencies to work together to ensure the needs of children, young people and families are identified, met and outcomes measured.

The Parenting Journey, Lincolnshire's parenting plan is a work stream of 'The Strengthening Families Strategy', Lincolnshire's preventative strategy. It is closely linked to Lincolnshire's approach to integrating service delivery. Its aim is to deliver multi professional teams working in collaboration at the front-line to support early intervention and enable clear pathways into integrated services.

In response to the views expressed by fathers in the Parentline consultation, the Parenting Journey Steering Group established a task and finish group to report on how father friendly services could be best achieved.

Many examples of good practice based on multi agency working with fathers were identified in the county. These included Family Learning, YMCA, health visitors, the Teenage Pregnancy Service and Surestart Children Centres.

Activities in these groups were designed to help fathers build relationships with their children by interacting through games and craft activities. In particular they supported communications and developed fathers' confidence in their role. Cooking sessions gave the opportunity to talk about healthy living and any eating/feeding concerns that fathers might have. This was a particular issue for fathers who only cared for their children at weekends.

Dad only groups were established to meet the needs of the fathers. These included lone fathers, fathers who were unemployed and had lost confidence and fathers in the armed forces who were re-forging relationships with their children. But it was also considered important to provide a man friendly environment which gave fathers

'space' to interact with their children in a way they found comfortable.

These groups had largely evolved as a result of a committed professional responding to an identified need in the community. However, lack of a strategic lead and lack of funds meant there was a threat to their long term sustainability.

Three groups with the potential to develop a sustainable model were identified. These were each based in very different communities.

- **'DadsRus' (fathers, children centre team, health visitors and library service partnership working)**

This group was set up in Grantham, a market town in the west of Lincolnshire. On the main east coasts railway line, Grantham is relatively prosperous. This group was developed within a defined community on an estate which represents a significant pocket of disadvantage in the town. The Dads R Us group was set up 4 years ago by a group of local fathers whose wives or partners attended Sure Start groups. They identified a gap in service provision for fathers and asked if they could set up a father specific group. They were supported to do this by the Children Centre Team.

- **'Dads, Lads, Lasses' (Family Learning/YMCA/ School partnership working)**

This group was developed at Skegness; a seaside resort on the east coast. Largely dependent on seasonal employment, Skegness has a very transient population. Summer visitors who like the area in the summer often try to stay on through the winter but become disillusioned with the winter weather and lack of employment and housing and move away. As a result community links can be fragile. The group at Skegness was based at a junior school which provides a core activity for families and identified the need. The focus of the group developed in response to a request from the Head Teacher of the Infant school who asked if fathers from her school could be invited to attend in the summer term to support the transition from her school to the junior school.

- **‘Dads, Lads, Lasses’ (Family Learning/YMCA/ School partnership working)**

This group was developed at Ruskington: an attractive rural village close to Sleaford. While not recognised as an area of disadvantage, poor transport links and low wages result in significant isolation and lack of services, particularly for children aged 8-13 years within the community. The need here was identified through researching the need for extended services at the local schools. The school were aware of the need to support fathers at the school. The community police team identified the gaps in positive activities for young people aged 8-13 years. The group was therefore designed to meet these needs.

Recruitment and engagement of fathers

Recruiting fathers can be difficult. At Grantham where the group was requested by fathers, it still took time to encourage fathers to attend on a regular basis. At Skegness, children at the school were introduced to the possibilities of the group at school assembly and encouraged to bring their fathers along. This worked well for initial recruitment but there were still problems with retention especially during the summer season. The most successful retention, short term, has been at Ruskington. This is a small mixed community and the group comprises a range of fathers with mixed skills and abilities. Being a smaller community also meant that fathers were more likely to know one another.

It has become clear that the engagement of fathers is dependent on a number of factors and can take time, perseverance and patience, especially when trying to engage fathers who have had bad experiences of services in the past. The development of the group needs to be crafted to meet the needs of the fathers involved. Some of the learning is identified below.

- Fathers can be very suspicious of such groups – they need clear aims and objectives, encourage a local health visitor to attend to do weigh-ins and checks etc, invite other agencies along, e.g. credit union, a first aid course, and managing children’s behaviour course.

- At first only 3 or 4 fathers attended on a regular basis. Experience shows that it is counterproductive to make plans for the group without involving the fathers. It is more effective to consult and plan and organise what they want. From this basis the group grew steadily.
- Give fathers ownership of the group. Encouraging and working with the fathers to design a flier and leaflet for the group and a competition to design a logo all helped with engagement.
- The dynamics of a group are vital. It was essential to be welcoming and friendly and promote inclusive practice, to set out the ground rules from the outset and ensure the group have time to bond and meet without the children.
- Encouraging fathers to do craft and play activities with their children, role model good practice and keep explaining what and why you are doing things. Experience suggests many wives and partners do not encourage fathers to get involved in their children’s care or play, tending to do it for them.
- It is important to recruit the right staff to work with men. These can be men or women but must be well trained and supported and positive about father-inclusive practice. Co-working between male and female workers can be very helpful initially and contributes to learning for the co-workers.
- Fathers do not respond to a traditional toddler group, fathers appear to like time and space. They do not like to feel they are being watched.
- The environment is a key factor in the success of a group – At Grantham we were fortunate in having access to a Children Centre, which offered flexible use space and a library and computers as well as a sensory room and community café area. This has provided the opportunity to spread out and have a number of things going on at once, such as sessions in the library, cooking in the café area and play activities in the community room. This type of free flow activity is hard work but seems to be enjoyed by the fathers.
- At Ruskington the group has been able to make use of outside facilities including the environmental area. This led to building bird

boxes and re-vamping the school environment area. The group starts with bacon butties which helps fathers to chat easily to one another. Toast or a snack is provided for the children which gives an informal and relaxed atmosphere. It allows the opportunity to talk about healthy living and any eating/feeding concerns the fathers may have. Those who only care for their children at the weekends are often anxious about these issues and value advice. Cookery sessions have been a big hit with the group and cater for all ages, including children from a few months old, right up to a 13 year old.

- Fathers attending the group had a wide range of experience, lone fathers with full-time care of their children, fathers who only see their children at the weekend, step-fathers, older fathers with teenage children who have children with new partners, often saying that they want to do it differently the second time round, full-time working class fathers, full-time middle class fathers, fathers with very dominant partners, fathers with substance misuse problems.

Establishing a sustainable group

As the groups have evolved two main sustainability models have emerged.

Forming a constituent group

The management of the group is designed to give fathers confidence in their contribution to the group and value their role as fathers. As part of the development of DadsRus group this was re-enforced with an away weekend at a youth hostel in the Peak District. The communal living and the teambuilding activities strengthened the group and enabled fathers to get to know one another as individuals as well as fathers.

Through this activity fathers gained the confidence and trust to form their own committee. They were supported to agree their own constitution and terms of reference. They are now able to make bids for funding for their group.

The group now hold regular evening committee meetings and have organised social events and special days out for families.

After one committee meeting it was agreed to set up a Dads R Us Facebook site. This has been a real success and a useful means of communication. The site also has links to Parentline Plus, and the Fatherhood Institute.

A leadership model

The ethos and culture of the Dads Lads and Lassies group is designed to encourage fathers and demonstrate that their contributions, interests and skills are valued. After week four of the Ruskington group the fathers were leading sessions, activities included bird box building, re-vamping the schools environmental area, and making pizzas etc. The sessions were led informally by the fathers. Fathers are encouraged to complete 'Learning Diary' sheets with their children evidencing the achievements made in the sessions around new skills learned, new friendships made, development of self confidence and in particular memories made spending time with their children.

Throughout the weeks the YMCA and Family Learning Team identify fathers who are interested in the potential leadership of the group. The Group facilitators then offer them a leadership course.

Outcomes achieved by these groups include:

- Two fathers were initially trained to run the group in Skegness. The group now has a nucleus of five fathers one of whom is chair of the School Governors. The fathers who joined to support their child's transition are still part of the group
- The Grantham group has been formally constituted as a standalone (from LA) group owned by the fathers, with clear terms of reference, bank account etc. 10 fathers are on the committee which has an elected Chair, Secretary and Treasurer who will now access committee skills training.
- Fathers have naturally taken on more responsibility for the group, encouraging each other and recognising each other's skills.
- Fathers have set up their own Facebook site as a way of communicating and supporting each other.
- Two fathers from the Ruskington group have become governors at the school.

- Through engagement with Family Learning, more fathers have gone back to learning; Four fathers have accessed an ICT course; Two fathers have accessed maths and literacy courses; Three fathers have enrolled on training to become a Football coach.
- The group has engaged with other services in the community through guest speakers etc responding to fathers' needs – thus fathers are starting to drive the agenda.
- The Grantham Group gave a presentation to practitioners at a LA workforce development conference. This raised the profile of work with fathers and emphasised the need for services to be father friendly. This group have also appeared as guests on the local radio giving their views of the papers.
- The Ruskington group have re-vamped the environmental area at the school.
- Where activities take place on a school site it is essential that there is a smooth flow of communications and a sympathetic and approachable site manager.
- Perseverance – it takes a long time to establish a group. Even when only one or two fathers turn up, it is important to stick with it.
- Flexibility – it is important to be flexible and responsive to Dad's priorities e.g. not holding groups when cup matches are on the television!
- Third sector involvement –this was crucial to the success of some groups because the voluntary organisation had experience and expertise in working with fathers and there was less stigma attached to the workers.
- Training – in order to help fathers take responsibility for the group, training was essential. This must not just be a one off but ongoing.
- Support – the groups require some ongoing support (even if it is just in the background).
- Responding to the needs of the group. The model for group activities needs to be flexible and able to respond to the interests and changing needs of the group. This could include key fathers leaving and new ones becoming involved in the group
- Residential weekend – the weekends away really helped to develop and consolidate the groups.
- Facebook – this has really appealed to fathers and is a useful medium of communication for them.
- Peer support – the groups have fed back that they work best when fathers are at different stages of development, so that those who have been through difficulties can support those who are struggling.
- Focusing on the fathers and their interests – it is important to value the fathers in their own right and keep their interests at the centre of the programme.

Learning points

The success of the two fathers' models in Lincolnshire has been due to the partnership working of the agencies involved and continual evaluation of feedback from the fathers involved. In particular, the leadership model has evolved over two years of Family Learning and the YMCA continually developing working practices and persevering with sometimes irregular attendance patterns due to the chaotic lifestyles of some fathers. Perseverance and adaptability was also needed to establish the Dads R Us at Grantham.

The factors below have helped to make the groups successful.

- Co-working between a male and female worker. This was really helpful in setting up and running the groups initially.
- The active engagement of multi agency partners including fathers. Fathers have been supported to be proactive. For the groups to continue to be successful this multi agency partnership engagement needs to be sustained.
- A multi agency approach with partners who have similar outcomes and aims creates a much wider base to fund these projects.

Next steps

The outcomes from these groups have been very encouraging. Much has been learnt that can be used to support the development of the 'Think Family' and 'Think Fathers' agendas. Next steps for Lincolnshire include:

- using the learning from this work to inform the development of new groups;
- adding value to Family Learning's successful bid for FLIF (Family Learning Impact funding) to help sustain groups and appoint a Fathers' Worker to provide support when needed. This embeds sustainability and supports the development of Father Friendly Services;
- undertaking research into the impact of fathers group work on their children's development and outcomes. 3 Children are being tracked in one school to assess whether they are accessing more opportunities during the school day as a result of their involvement in Dads, Lads and Lassies;
- developing the independence of Dads R Us and help them apply for funding in their own right;
- supporting the ethos of partnership working by encouraging the ethos of father friendly services within all children's services;
- family Learning, YMCA and Connexions plan to establish a mentoring scheme for young fathers to be teamed up with more experienced fathers; and
- there will be a celebration of Fatherhood; this will take place around Father's Day and Men's Health Week. The aim is for it to be a residential weekend, allowing all the Dad's groups the opportunity to meet, with their children. This will hopefully allow for some peer mentoring/ networking opportunities in an informal setting.

For further information

Further information can be obtained by contacting:

- Lisa Collins, Principal Practitioner, Children's Services, Lincolnshire County Council
lisa.collins@lincolnshire.gov.uk
- Sarah Copey, AHT Winchelsea Primary School, Ruskington/Lead Coordinator Ruskington Extended School Consortium
sarah.copey@winchelsea.lincs.sch.uk
- Thea Croxall, Direct Delivery Manager, Lincolnshire County Council
thea.croxall@lincolnshire.gov.uk
- David Shenton, Programme Manager, YMCA
david.shenton@lincsymca.co.uk
- Katherine Gourley, Principal Practitioner Parenting
katherine.gourley@lincolnshire.gov.uk
Tel 01522 553407