

Bitesize Case Study: Dadly Does It

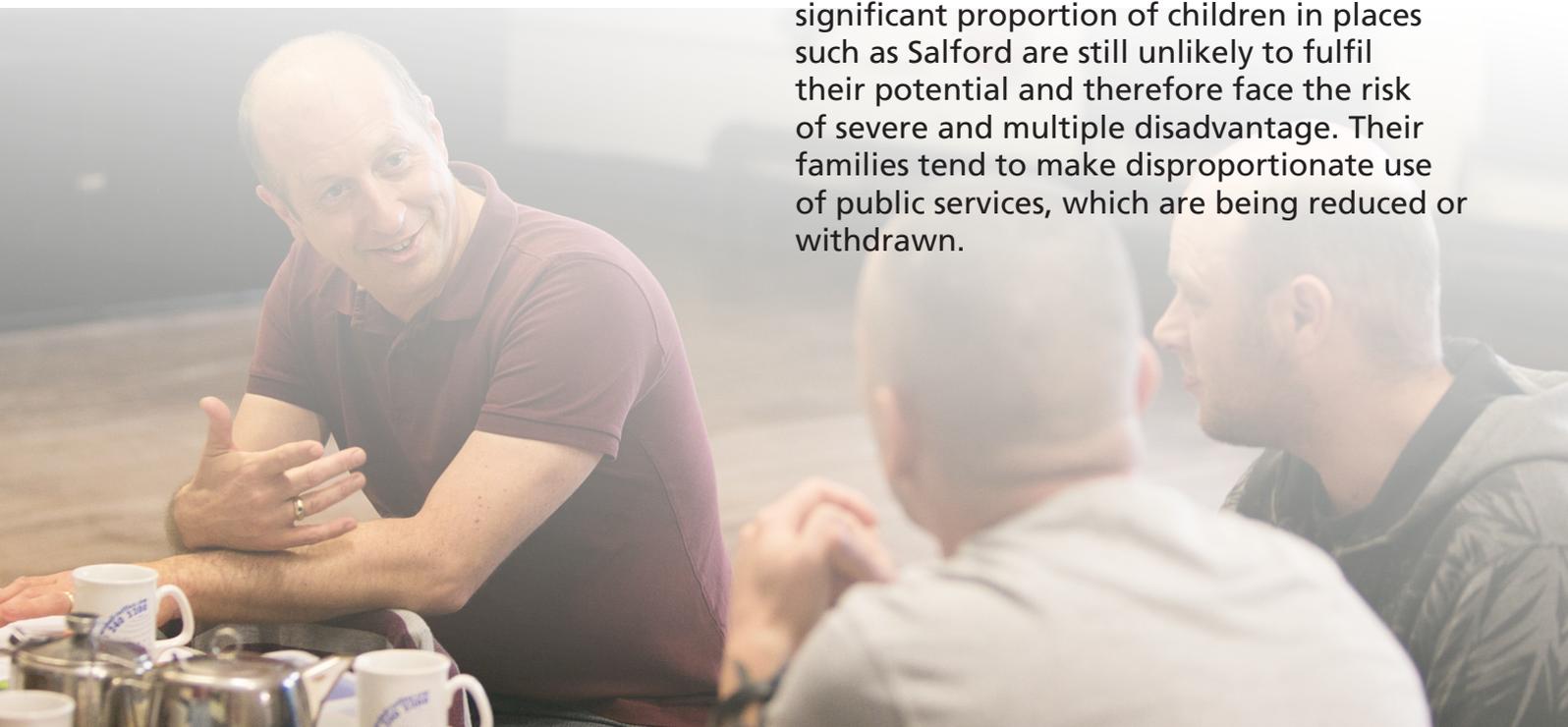
Voluntary Sector North West

This case study is one in a series of studies curated to capture best practice, and highlight innovations, from the joint Health Education England (HEE) working across the North West and Voluntary Sector North West 'Learning Matters' awards 2017. The awards are part of a cross sector adult learning campaign delivered for the health and care sector through a number of key regional partnerships and collaborations. The overarching theme of the awards is simple: lifelong learning is good for people, organisations and health.

What was the issue or problem? What did you set out to do?

The core group is fathers with long-term histories of economic and social marginalisation. Many have experienced various childhood traumas, with associated complex and difficult family relationships and poor educational experiences.

The fathers often have poor quality of life – especially mental ill-health and social isolation – reflected in poverty, unemployment, homelessness, substance misuse and/ or criminal activity. They are at great risk of punitive and coercive interventions by public service agencies. The project is also important because, despite all the work by statutory and social organisations over many years, a significant proportion of children in places such as Salford are still unlikely to fulfil their potential and therefore face the risk of severe and multiple disadvantage. Their families tend to make disproportionate use of public services, which are being reduced or withdrawn.



The initial work in Little Hulton in Salford (in the 3% most disadvantaged localities in England) found family breakdown and worklessness as key elements affecting fathers' well-being. Fathers' pride and shame often means they isolate themselves and tend towards unhelpful coping mechanisms, as they are often marginalised from the family home. How fathers feel is mirrored in the experience of the other core group: their children, whether living with, having contact with, or estranged from them. The children often experience similar early roots of severe and multiple disadvantage: background poverty, complex and difficult family relationships, and poor educational experiences.

The project aims to minimise the proportion of children experiencing these things. This helps to reduce the proportion of adults and future generations facing severe and multiple disadvantage. Complementing others' work with mothers, this can be achieved by co-designing flexible responses with fathers, delivered shoulder to shoulder with other fathers, to develop and move on.

The team engage people facing severe and multiple disadvantage by relating to fathers as fathers, rather than as men. Being a good father is often a strong motivator to take action and make changes. Enabling fathers from similar backgrounds to work together and become positively supportive mates can sustain this. They can then collectively determine the terms of their own inclusion.

The ambition:

The team is testing in two new neighbourhoods whether the successes of fathers and children in Little Hulton in changing their lives can be sustained, deepened and replicated elsewhere. By doing so, the hope is that further evidence can be gained about how, and why, this approach works and how it might benefit public services.

An ideal transformed system would afford fathers and mothers equal importance, with work focussed towards meaningful life and relationships, as they define them. This means responses that fit them, recognising individuals and families as a whole, and valuing their strengths and capabilities, with support available when it is needed. This implies relationships of trust, at every level, with genuine listening, empathy and respect for fathers and families.

People would be able to determine the terms of their own inclusion, rather than be supplicants at the dinner table of agencies. In fact, those who provide responses should be accountable to the intended beneficiaries. It is therefore critical that the approach is seen as citizen-driven for the well-being of fathers and families, not a 'service' with 'referral pathways', etc.

The team seek to transform lives through mutual enquiry and co-production with fathers by working to co-design and co-develop flexible responses with fathers and families, leading towards solutions that they want. Critically, this includes fathers working shoulder to shoulder with other fathers in protected spaces to develop and move on.

This starts with the strengths and wisdom ('tacit knowledge') within a community. The team use a strengths-based approach called positive deviance: finding those who overcome problems, despite having the same resources as everyone else.

During the action research, the team discovered the 'positive deviants' may be fathers able to overcome their pride and shame to express their feelings. Using social narrative – either one-to-one or in public – they give hope to other fathers who are isolated and in agony. Having a 'mate' and working 'shoulder to shoulder' allows fathers to open up and share their feelings with others who are or have been in similar situations. This allows them to develop positive coping strategies.

What did you do? What was the intervention or initiative?

The team is seeking to replicate the approach adopted in Little Hulton, adjusted to reflect the learning gained there. This is being done in two new areas: Winton in Salford; and Langley in Rochdale borough. These localities were selected after consultation with stakeholders including families and local leaders.

The organisation uses the four stages of positive deviance (4Ds) in each locality:

1. Defining the problem
2. Determining the positive role models ('positive deviants')
3. Discovering what dads do (uncommon practices or behaviours)
4. Designing ways of sharing solutions

Fathers lead the work and communities are discovering for themselves what the problems for fathers are, who their 'positive deviant' fathers are, and how they deal with problems.

In principle, fathers design spaces where positive role models talk openly about their problems, shoulder to shoulder, not face to face. Fathers then design and run dad-child fun activities, enabling bonding with their children.

The team learned in Little Hulton that, if fathers feel listened to, feel accepted and have purpose, they regain some control over their own lives and well-being improves. The biggest change is in confidence, enabling them to grow as fathers and as men. Children become more confident and the father's relationship with the mother improves. This challenges mothers' images of what fathers are like. There is the start of a cultural shift in attitudes as an alternative positive model of fatherhood emerges.

The values and principles of strengths-based working are replicable. Leadership and knowledge transfer are central to embedding these ideas in mainstream public services. Specific local solutions emerging from this approach may not be transferable without change. They rely on community knowledge, engagement and commitment rooted in specific local circumstance (Foot et al., 2010).

What were the Key Outcomes?

The reported changes that have so far come about from fathers' involvement include:

- a greater sense of positive identity and belonging (feeling cared about and caring for others)
- improved self-confidence and self-esteem
- increased engagement in community events including volunteering, education and work opportunities
- improved relationships with partners or ex-partners, assisted by a greater child focus and therefore more common ground within these relationships
- improved opportunities for positive and interesting engagement with children, leading to greater confidence in their parenting ability and skills; this has a ripple effect, leading to greater self-confidence in the children themselves

Whilst not all these are seen in all the men engaging, they are common themes and often cumulative – that is, the greater or longer the involvement, the more of these changes that become apparent.

The women also report most of the above changes amongst the men. Both the men and the women report Dadly Does It has been 'life-changing' in its impact for many of the men involved. In addition, the women see benefits for themselves in terms of: improved relationships; creating a more positive view about men (for some); greater sharing of the parenting 'burden' (and joy!); and providing them with more time to either relax or develop their own lives and interests.

The data collected from children and young people is particularly compelling. They report not only an increased amount of time spent with their fathers but very noticeable improvements in the quality of this time. This is linked to 'happier' dispositions and improved friendships that they notice their fathers have developed. This leads in a cyclical way to mutual improvements in trust and respect between the children and their fathers, and concomitant improvements in their own behaviour. Some also note improvements in relationships between their parents and certainly greater enjoyment in relationships within the home.

The work is continuing to evolve, with fathers themselves taking greater active control of the direction and strategic vision. New ventures are being attempted to continue to ensure the work is diverse and inclusive, reaching numerous men within the neighbourhood and, hopefully, beyond.

In summary, three key changes have been identified in fathers:

- fathers are now better able to cope with challenges
 - fathers are more confident and engaged fathers
 - fathers feel that they are able to lead more worthwhile lives
- (Robertson et al, 2015)

Public and voluntary sector workers have also verified that they have seen a change in the fathers and that this has reduced the resources they needed to allocate, or were likely to allocate in future, to support a few of the families. A social return on investment study found that the potential financial return to children's services alone is £1: £2.25 in savings, while every £1 invested yielded approximately £14 of well-being value for the core fathers involved (Inglis, 2016).

What were the lessons learned?

While the team is still doing much learning in the two new neighbourhoods, the men involved, especially those most fully involved, describe how the project provides a safe setting and environment in which to share enjoyable social time with other men. In turn, this generates important opportunities for personal sharing and for recognising both the many stressful situations that they face are common to other local men and that positive ways of coping with these issues are possible. In this sense, engagement in Dadly Does It provides an alternative to previous settings and relationships that often fostered negative coping mechanisms (smoking, drinking, social isolation) to stressful situations.

The greatest challenge is that many child-related services focus on mothers and largely ignore fathers. Services that do engage tend to operate so people must fit them, rather than services fitting people. Services often look in silos at specific needs of individual 'clients', rather than relating to whole people in their social context and recognising their strengths.

There is now good research evidence that psychological and emotional aspects of paternal involvement in children's early upbringing (particularly how new fathers see themselves as parents and adjust to the role), rather than the quantity of direct involvement in childcare, is associated with positive behavioural outcomes in children (Opondo et al., 2016).

Equally, the Dadly Does It project still risks being viewed as a 'service' delivered 'to' the men rather than a project owned with them. The idea of genuine co-production with local people and communities is still a challenging one for many professionals and agencies.

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As a result of this, the team have learned how to engage and negotiate with 'mainstream' agencies and how to gain recognition of the important role and influence of fathers on the health and well-being of children. Not least by drawing on behavioural insights to engage with leaders and decision-makers in statutory agencies – spreading change through making things easy, attractive, social and timely, such as:

- Easy: make engagement easy; start small
- Attractive: reframe risk; highlight the benefits to practitioners, managers and commissioners; share stories
- Social: incentivise whole groups; widen team and train them together
- Timely: incentivise change now; make tools timely; change mind sets

Level of award:

Runner up - Projects

Organisation: Unlimited Potential

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