

Embedding father inclusion in family hubs: Staffordshire's Fatherhood Champions journey

Fran Hales works within the Family Hubs programme in Staffordshire County Council, where she plays a key role in developing services that support families during pregnancy and the early years of a child's life.

Family hubs aim to bring together a wide range of services for parents and children in one accessible place. As these services developed across Staffordshire, Fran and her colleagues began to recognise that fathers and male carers were not always fully engaged in the support available.

To address this, Staffordshire began exploring how father-inclusive practice could be strengthened across its family hubs network. This led to collaboration with the Fatherhood Institute and the introduction of Fatherhood Champions training for practitioners working across family services.

Recognising the importance of fathers

As family hubs were being developed, there was a strong focus on ensuring services supported the whole family.

However, staff began to notice that fathers were often less visible within family hub activities and programmes. Attendance at groups and engagement with services was frequently dominated by mothers.

This raised important questions about whether services were unintentionally designed in ways that made it harder for fathers to participate.

Fran emphasised that improving father engagement was not simply about increasing attendance. It was about recognising the role fathers play in children's lives and ensuring they feel included in the support available to families.

"If we want to support children and families effectively, we have to recognise that dads are part of that picture too."

This realisation reinforced the need for family hubs to actively consider fathers when designing services and communications.

Building knowledge and confidence

To strengthen the workforce's ability to engage fathers, Staffordshire supported practitioners to complete Fatherhood Champions training.

The training provided staff with evidence about the importance of fathers' involvement in children's development and encouraged practitioners to reflect on how their services were engaging dads.

For many staff, the training helped consolidate ideas they had already begun to notice in practice and provided the evidence needed to support change.

"The training really helped us think about what we were doing and how we could make our services more welcoming for dads."

Practitioners were encouraged to review how services were communicated, how groups were delivered and how fathers were included during everyday work with families.

Connecting fathers to support

One important outcome of the training was that it helped practitioners across different services think more deliberately about how fathers could be connected to support.

As awareness of father-inclusive practice grew, staff began to recognise family hubs as important access points where fathers could find information, support and activities designed for families.

This shift helped ensure that fathers were more visible within conversations about family support. Professionals working with families became more aware of the role family hubs could play in supporting dads as well as mothers.

Rather than assuming services were primarily for mothers, practitioners began to consider how fathers could be welcomed and encouraged to access the help available through family hubs.

Creating champions across the workforce

A key outcome of the training was the development of a group of Fatherhood Champions across Staffordshire's family hubs network.

These practitioners act as advocates for father-inclusive practice within their teams. They encourage colleagues to think about how fathers are invited into services and help identify small changes that can make family hubs more welcoming to dads.

By building a network of trained Champions, the local authority has created a sustainable way of embedding father-inclusive thinking across services.

Instead of relying on a single initiative, father inclusion is now being supported through workforce development and peer learning.

Making family hubs more father friendly

Following the training, teams began reviewing how family hubs presented themselves to families.

Promotional materials were updated to ensure fathers were visible in images and messaging. Practitioners also began to think more carefully about how they spoke with fathers during visits and activities.

Small changes such as addressing fathers directly, inviting them to attend sessions and ensuring they were included in conversations about their child helped signal that their role was valued.

While these adjustments were often simple, they helped shift the perception that family support services were primarily designed for mothers.

Lasting impact on family hub services

Staffordshire's experience demonstrates how Fatherhood Champions training can strengthen the effectiveness of family hub services.

By equipping practitioners with the knowledge and confidence to engage fathers, the programme has helped ensure that dads and male carers are increasingly considered in the design and delivery of family support.

Importantly, the work has also helped raise awareness across services that family hubs can act as accessible points of support for fathers.

This shift means that fathers are more likely to be recognised as part of the wider system of support available to families.

Evidence of system change

Staffordshire's work shows how Fatherhood Champions training can support system change within family hub services.

Key developments include:

- Fatherhood Champions trained across family hub services
Practitioners have developed the knowledge and confidence to engage fathers more effectively.
- Greater awareness of family hubs as places where fathers can access support
Professionals across services are increasingly recognising family hubs as welcoming spaces for dads as well as mothers.
- Father-inclusive practice embedded in service design
Family hub teams have reviewed communications, group delivery and practitioner practice to ensure fathers feel included.
- A network of Champions supporting colleagues
Trained practitioners promote father-inclusive practice within their teams and encourage ongoing improvements.
- A cultural shift in how services view fathers
Fathers are increasingly recognised as essential partners in supporting children's development.

Together, these changes show how investing in workforce development can help family hub services better engage both parents and strengthen outcomes for children.