

Building a system that works for fathers: Durham's Fatherhood Champions journey

Fiona Smith is an Operations Manager in Durham's Early Help service, where she leads work on reducing parental conflict and strengthening support for families across the county's network of family hubs.

Through this work, Fiona became increasingly aware that fathers' voices were largely missing from conversations about family support. Recognising that improving outcomes for children requires engaging both parents, Durham County Council began exploring how services could better understand and include fathers.

This journey eventually led Durham to partner with the Fatherhood Institute to train practitioners as Fatherhood Champions and begin embedding father-inclusive practice across the local system.

A lightbulb moment

The work began with a piece of community engagement linked to Durham's parental conflict programme. A survey was distributed to parents and carers across the county to better understand their experiences and the support they needed.

The response was strong, with more than 450 parents completing the survey. But one statistic immediately stood out.

"We had 451 responses, which was fantastic, but only four percent were from dads and male carers. That was my personal lightbulb moment. I thought, what on earth is happening here?"

For Fiona, the finding raised important questions. If fathers were not responding to consultation processes, were services unintentionally excluding them in other ways too?

That realisation prompted Durham to look more closely at how fathers were being engaged across family services.

Listening directly to fathers

To understand the issue better, Fiona and colleagues organised focus groups with fathers and male carers from across Durham.

The conversations were revealing. Many fathers spoke openly about their experiences of parenting and how they perceived their role within families and services.

“What was really sad was that they themselves perceived their parenting role to be secondary to that of mum.”

The discussions highlighted how cultural expectations and service design can unintentionally reinforce the idea that parenting support is primarily for mothers. From marketing materials to everyday interactions with services, fathers often felt overlooked.

These insights made it clear that improving father engagement would require change across the whole system.

From insight to action

Durham’s work gained further momentum through a national research project exploring how family hubs could increase fathers’ participation in parenting programmes.

As part of the project, local fathers were trained as peer researchers and worked with practitioners to test how services and communications were perceived by dads.

The findings confirmed that even when services intended to be inclusive, communication materials often spoke primarily to mothers. Although this bias was not deliberate, it influenced how fathers perceived the services and whether they felt welcome to participate.

The research helped Durham rethink how information and marketing materials were developed so that fathers could see themselves reflected in family services.

Creating a network of Fatherhood Champions

Recognising that meaningful change would require workforce development, Fiona and her colleagues decided to build a network of practitioners dedicated to improving father engagement.

Within Durham’s Early Help service alone there are fifteen family hubs and seven intensive family support teams. Fiona invited volunteers from across these teams to form a fathers project group and help drive the work forward.

These practitioners were then supported to complete the Fatherhood Institute's three-day Fatherhood Champions training.

“We were really keen to genuinely invest in people as individuals and their training and not just opportunistically slap a label on them saying ‘you’re a dad’s champion.’”

Following the training, Champions began sharing their learning within their own teams and helping colleagues think differently about how services engage fathers.

Scaling the work across Durham

The Champions programme quickly became a catalyst for wider system change.

The initial group of trained practitioners worked together to develop a three-hour workshop introducing father-inclusive practice. This workshop is now delivered regularly to professionals across Durham including health, education, substance misuse services and safeguarding partners.

The aim is to start conversations across the system about how services can better engage fathers and male carers.

Interest in the initiative grew rapidly. Durham's Safeguarding Children Partnership joined the fathers project group and partner organisations began requesting training.

Over time, Durham has trained more than forty practitioners through the Fatherhood Institute's Champions programme.

Changing the conversation across the system

One of the most significant impacts has been the way fathers are now considered in strategic discussions.

Across Durham, professionals are increasingly asking whether fathers' voices are being heard when services are designed or evaluated.

“When we develop strategies or policies we always try to seek service user experience. But we know it's predominantly mums. So now we actively ask what we're doing to seek the dad's voice as well.”

This shift reflects an important cultural change. Rather than assuming fathers will automatically be included, services are beginning to design engagement with fathers deliberately.

Lasting impact on services

Durham's work demonstrates how the Fatherhood Champions programme can act as a catalyst for wider system change.

By investing in workforce training, creating cross-sector networks and embedding father-inclusive thinking within policy and strategy discussions, the initiative has helped place fathers firmly on the agenda across the county.

What began with a simple question about why fathers' voices were missing has evolved into a coordinated effort to ensure that dads and male carers are recognised as essential partners in supporting children and families.

As Fiona explains, maintaining focus on fathers across the system is key to making progress.

“Keeping dads on our radar and making those small changes can have a huge impact.”

For Durham, the Fatherhood Champions programme has provided both the structure and the momentum to make that change happen.

Evidence of system change in Durham

Durham County Council has used the Fatherhood Champions programme to drive change across its early help system.

Key outcomes include:

- 40+ practitioners trained as Fatherhood Champions
Building capacity across family hubs and early help services to champion father-inclusive practice.
- A cross-service fathers project group established
Bringing together practitioners from family hubs, safeguarding, health and partner organisations to coordinate improvements in father engagement.

- Workforce training rolled out across services
Local workshops now introduce father-inclusive practice to professionals across the county, including health, education and safeguarding teams.
- Fathers' voices embedded in strategy and policy development
Services now actively ask how fathers' perspectives are captured when developing programmes and consulting families.
- Practical changes to services and environments
Initiatives such as Durham's "Dads Kitemark" recognise organisations that actively create father-friendly environments and welcoming spaces for fathers.

Together, these developments show how investing in Fatherhood Champions can move father engagement from a marginal issue to a whole-system priority.