



# "DADS THE WORD"

The Way Forward for Fathers

A study of Dads  
in Greater Pilton

Edinburgh Family Service Unit

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## Introduction

Centred on real experiences of what it's like being a Dad, this groundbreaking study has enabled men to identify the issues about parenthood that concern them. Through in-depth interviews with 20 local fathers in the Greater Pilton area, this report provides, for the first time, the stories of men coping with being a Dad. It offers their insights into current service provision and outlines the supports they want to assist them with their parenting responsibilities.

For some time agencies working with children and families in the Greater Pilton area have been concerned about the role of Dads and the absence of specific services to support them to be more effective. Lack of provision for men in general and particularly for Dads caring for Under Threes was identified.

Reflecting the strength of those concerns, agencies locally formed a partnership group, 'Men as Parents' to focus on the needs of Dads and seek ways of meeting those needs. Successful in a bid to the City of Edinburgh Council, funding through the Sure Start Initiative has allowed for this study of needs to be carried out and for the appointment of a male development worker to facilitate ways of meeting those needs. One of Sure Start's key objectives is to maximise opportunities for parental involvement by promoting innovative outreach provision to families not likely or able to seek services.

Family Service Units Scotland (FSU), which has been working in the Greater Pilton area since 1974, is managing both the study and the worker. FSU has a long and well-established track record in promoting social inclusion and providing support to families affected by poverty and discrimination. It has developed a particular expertise working with families with multiple and complex difficulties, families from black and other ethnic communities and those who find it difficult to form relationships with workers in statutory services.

## Wider Context - a literature review

Structural changes in society have brought about fundamental changes to the role of men in family life. Traditional identifications of men as breadwinner have dissipated, especially perhaps in the lower socio-economic groupings, with the decline of manufacturing industry.

Structural changes that redefine men's roles are amplified by attitudinal changes placing a greater expectation on them to be more involved in the family (Rowntree 1999). The importance of the broader notion of parenthood is evident in a wide body of literature and exemplified through initiatives such as Sure Start.

Despite the prevalence of initiatives aimed at supporting parenting (over 800 were identified in Scotland), services aimed at fathering are few and far between. Aberlour runs a Healthy Fathering Initiative in Stirling; a family centre in Ruchazie has appointed a men's development worker, funded through Children in Need; the Centre for Theology and Public Issues at The University of Edinburgh carried out a two year study on fathering from 1996-98 which is summarised in the Cool Dads booklet. However as is indicated by a number of commentators, provision on parenting generally is patchy and poorly evaluated (Henderson 1999).

The above study classifies fathers within the category of parents with specific needs. In so doing, it unwittingly reinforces what Buckley (1998) calls the motherhood syndrome, a pervasive assumption that parenting is essentially the responsibility of mothers. This assumption is rooted in traditional views of the male as provider. It is reinforced at a theoretical level by some of the early texts of the psychoanalytical movement on attachment (Freud, Bowlby), which, though now subject to considerable challenge and modification, remain influential at a societal level and perhaps especially within professions such as social work and health visiting.

This widely accepted view of the pre-eminence of the mother's role in parenting is still reflected in the legal system, whereby fathers who are not in a marital relationship are not automatically accorded parental rights, though this matter

is currently being reviewed by the Scottish Law Commission. In terms of custody matters, there are good historical and contemporary reasons in terms of safety and quality of care issues for such judgements to be made in terms of the mother. However some Dads argue that this position fails to adequately recognise and address each case on its merits. Such claims point in the direction of a presumption in favour of the primacy of the mothering role at a number of levels. Wider societal structures and attitudes are mirrored in the role the social work profession adopts in respect of family support.

To some extent, this position is predicated upon the increasing expectation placed upon the profession to take on the role of custodian of society's child protection agenda. From a child protection perspective, it is easy to label men as actual or potential abusers, given their disproportionate numbers in reported abuse cases. Writing from a feminist perspective Helen Buckley argues that the direction the child protection agenda has taken can lead social workers to get caught up in a narrow forensic approach when dealing with abuse, to the detriment of any fuller assessment of the circumstances (Buckley 1998). For a variety of reasons, including the legitimate fear of male violence, men are often marginalised in the conduct of child protection investigations (Buckley). This can have the unintended consequence of some men "dropping out" of their parenting responsibilities, allowing them to adopt a "victim mentality" and to see themselves as "disenfranchised". In turn this can result in men not being challenged about their parenting role and repeating the same cycle with other partners, with deleterious effects on the children involved.

Services established with a remit to support parenting could unintentionally exclude men. Attempts to involve male staff more fully in service provision can run the risk of stereotyping them in particular roles such as running men's groups (Christie 1998). Men can feel left out, both in service provision and when it comes to encounters with social work over childcare matters (O'Goighan).

Despite the potential vilification of men in family matters, there is an increasing recognition of the importance of the role they play in child-rearing. A growing body of evidence suggests that a boy's distance from his father can cause or aggravate any behavioural problems he might display (Pleck 1996). Other studies (e.g. Burgess 1997) describe a range of benefits to children, including better educational achievement, of positive parental involvement in families. The symbolic importance of fatherhood is also acknowledged in the literature

(McKeown, Ferguson and Rooney 1997). This dimension emerges in the current study as men acknowledge the importance of their own fathers, however imperfect they might have been, in facilitating their rite of passage into adulthood.

The most striking feature to emerge from this study is that the men interviewed had powerful stories to tell. Some of the older respondents in particular found it easy enough to tell that story and welcomed doing so. However, there was also an acknowledgement that the prevailing social construction of masculinity inhibits men from asking for advice or support or to talk about their vulnerabilities or feelings in any public way (Hogan 1998).

This study, in its own small way, begins to highlight what is a major gap in social welfare provision. There is a constituency of fathers who are inadequately provided for and often misunderstood. There is a challenge to the welfare agencies to work more meaningfully with men, both as fathers and as men in their own right (Hogan 1998).

## **The Consultation**

The methodology was community development based: listening to Dads was the primary focus. Interviews and focus groups were designed to feel non-threatening. Using styles that facilitated and encouraged participation and listening, the in-depth interviews allowed the opportunity to hear directly from Dads about the issues that concerned them. This approach was welcomed by Dads who commented "that they are often told things rather than asked."

The Men as Parents Group were clear that gathering the experiences and day to day reality of Dads was of the utmost importance. Care was taken to ensure that the sample of Dads was as representative as possible considering the small sample.

To access Dads all resources for 0-3 year olds in the Greater Pilton area were contacted and their participation sought. Nurseries, Children's Centres, the Pilton Stress Centre and other local voluntary organisations were useful in identifying interested Dads. Social Work Centres and the Health Visitor Service also provided access to Dads.

The consultation exercise also featured in-depth interviews with key stakeholders such as service providers. A questionnaire was issued to relevant statutory and voluntary agencies within the Greater Pilton area.

The aims of the consultation were to gather first-hand accounts of the experiences of vulnerable Dads and seek their views about services in the area and accessibility to them. Through this process the barriers to access and gaps in service provision were identified. Including Service Providers' perceptions and understanding on these issues broadened the whole exercise and allowed for an in-depth base of information to be readily available for the Male Development Worker.

## **Fathers' Profile**

Of the 20 men interviewed 11 were married or in long-term relationships. Of those who had partners four saw themselves as the main carer for the children because of their partners illness/disability and two were unable to do much caring due to their own illness/disability. Of the nine 'lone' Dads, four were the primary carer; one shared custody; three Dads did not live with their children but had contact; and one Dad classed himself as an absent parent.

## **The Responses**

The interviews were based around a number of core themes which included the type of parent they believed themselves to be, their family background, coping with the pressures of parenthood and how suitable they thought local services were.

Almost all of the men interviewed were highly committed to their children. They saw their job as getting a better life for their children. This was expressed both in terms of material gain and 'quality of life' themes such as happiness and good health. The majority of Dads said it was up to them to "give the children a good start" and help them not to repeat the mistakes they had made.

## **Being a Good Dad**

Three quarters of the men described themselves as a good Dad with only a

quarter regarding themselves as only OK or what they termed "not good Dads". In describing the attributes of a good Dad most respondents referred to "always being there for the kids". Others indicated that it was not just a physical thing "but thinking about your kids and carrying them in your head" - a sentiment that would more often be attributed to mothers. Providing a good and happy home was another key theme.

Beyond that, some found it easier to describe what they did not want to be. This was often based on their own experience of growing up, either in a violent relationship or where the father was absent, such as "my Dad was a shadowy figure, never saw him and he was always at work". There were strong views expressed about hitting children, with two-thirds saying they could never smack their child. This view was shared by those who had been hit as a child and those who had not. The remaining third, some of whom were older and some of whom had been in care, thought that in their experience smacking did no harm.

Most fathers were proud of what they could do well. Many contrasted how they were better listeners than their Dads. Often the things that Dads said they were good at were those they enjoyed. This included putting children to bed and traditional male play activities such as rough play, making children laugh and being more indulgent with discipline. A significant number of Dads felt they were less good at "keeping their temper and not shouting at the kids" and for those with daughters there was concern about "doing and playing girly things". A minority of Dads didn't think that they were good at the nurturing role, seeing it as the mother's role, yet they wanted to be better at it.

Inevitably in terms of involvement there was a distinction between Dads living with the mother and those who did not. For lone Dads it was a case of extremes, either they were highly involved as the sole carer or had little involvement and only occasional contact. For those in a relationship the split was even, with a quarter having a high level of involvement, a quarter being quite involved and the remaining half with not much or hardly any involvement. Further differences were identified with those in relationships more likely to focus on a traditional division, for example, rarely preparing the evening meal but regularly taking children to the park or swimming.

What was striking was how keen all men were to put their children to bed. Over two-thirds stated they put their child or children to bed every night or on a

regular basis. In particular those who worked long hours and those who had occasional access stated, "It's the part of the day I look forward to, reading them a story and watching them drop off".

One area where a third of Dads with older children [as well as with under threes] felt they had difficulties was in the area of homework. They found helping their offspring difficult because of their own educational experiences and lack of basic literacy and numeracy skills. This is an area where more effective support is required.

All the respondents said that there were things that get in the way of them being a good Dad.

## **Custody/Contact**

Custody and contact were issues that caused a lot of concern and anguish. Of the 20 men interviewed, four were divorced and five were separated from their common law partners. They shared a common perception that the Courts always favour women when it comes to custody battles.

For two men whose ex-partners had begun new relationships agreed contact arrangements were often changed at short notice and they saw activities being organised by the new partner. These Dads felt squeezed out and felt their children were forced to choose. Increased friction between the two parents made it difficult to discuss matters of common concern and made these Dads feel more excluded.

Even where arrangements were mutually agreed one Dad spoke of the frustration of trying to have some continuity over things like bed-times and food. "Trying to keep a family together over two houses even when you get on is hard for me, I'm not sure what it's doing to the kids."

## **Confidence/Ability**

Another area that affected a number of Dads was their confidence and ability. For a significant number of Dads this was tied up in their perception of themselves. Many felt that they would be a better Dad if they were in work. It



would provide more money but would also give them status that they felt they had lost, particularly if their partner worked. The "breadwinner" culture was still strong amongst all ages interviewed, yet over two-thirds are unemployed because of their illness or disability or by being the sole carer for their children.

Dads caring for a partner felt guilty about having to ration their time between the children and their partner and stated that they did not get enough support from services. Two men stated that their own incapacity made them feel they weren't "proper Dads". Lone Dads with daughters were worried about how they would deal with "women's things" when the girls were older.

A number of the men interviewees indicated that they didn't have positive role models growing up. Just under half had an unhappy childhood and they believed that this has affected their ability to be a good Dad. Divorced parents featured strongly and for one-third their fathers had died while they were growing up.

Just less than half the men interviewed had a significant other male adult in their lives. For most respondents their mother was the most powerful figure in the home both in terms of nurturing and running the show.

Three of the fathers interviewed had been in care. One father had since had three marriages and numerous children with a variety of different partners. He felt unable to settle down, blaming his parents rather than the care system. The two others felt that they had no preparation for what it was like to be a Dad.

## **Acrimony in Relationships**

Many respondents cited regular and low level arguments over how to bring up the children as one of the things that got in the way of being a "good Dad". Where partners were both unemployed, the difficulties of living on benefit often combined with housing pressures meant short tempers and lack of patience with the children and increased stress.

## **Perception of Services**

Very few of the men enjoyed their school years. Almost half found it difficult to attend and achieve in school and left at the earliest opportunity. A quarter had been involved with child psychological/psychiatric services and one third had experience of Social Work input growing up, including three men who had been in care. These experiences of education and social work had informed their views and led to mistrust and suspicion. One older man with a drink problem from the age of thirteen stated, "They meant well, but promised things they couldn't deliver".

Recent experiences of some services have been more favourable. Health Visitors had established contacts with one third of those interviewed. Reactions were mixed, with some Dads thinking that they are "trying to catch you out and find out if the house is clean enough - like you're being spied on". Others gave grudging praise to the service saying, " They can be nippy but they help me a lot".

The nursery services were well regarded by all the men though those on their own sometimes felt talked down to by the staff. Men who go with their children to the Children Centres say, " The place is not for us - it's run for women".

The sense that services are run for and by women was strong. Two thirds of the men felt they had experienced 'dominant women' either at home or at school growing up. For some this experience came from Social Work input on child welfare and protection issues. This appears to have had significant implications for men, who were reluctant to be told what to do yet again in their life by 'dominant women'. This was especially strong amongst Dads directly caring for their children who resented being judged or "waiting to be caught out". This affected their willingness to access services.

## **Pressure of Parenthood**

All men found that parenting got on top of them, and whilst there were individual reasons for pressures there were some common themes. There was no difference between those in relationships and those not. Two thirds of lone Dads found it difficult to cope with what they saw as constant demands for attention and felt they were "running out of ideas" to keep their children occupied. Arguments between children drained their energy and confidence. A number of them said they would often lose their temper and shout at the

children.

Two other men trying to get work found being around the house difficult. For those in work it was often an experience of long hours with little return. Two Dads in relationships each clocked up 129 hours per week on a regular basis, severely limiting the time to spend with their children.

The men with a disability felt frustrated that they could not do the things that 'normal' Dads do; "I can't even roll about the floor, far less take her for a walk. I feel that I am just lying here watching her life go by".

For Dads who were primary carers the fear of falling ill was a constant pressure. A number of these Dads had no informal supports and were unwilling to seek help. The absence of regular adult company is a difficulty for these men. One man referred to regular visits to his mother as a godsend, "even though she's a bit flaky, it's someone to talk to rather than always kids' stuff". Relationship break-ups were seen as a major pressure, particularly in attempting to insulate their children from the effects. Lone Dads also found it more difficult to sustain friendships after their circumstances changed.

The full time Dads feel they didn't get the same respect and support from the system as a woman. Particular reference was made to the Employment and Social Security agencies, where they believed their caring role was not accepted. According to one father "when I go to sign on, I am always asked why I not working."

## **Dealing with the Pressures**

Over a quarter of all men said they had little time for spare time interests to help them relax. A further quarter worked long hours which left them little time to see their children, far less take up hobbies. For Dads who had spare time their activities were mostly house-based, solitary pursuits.

Most of the men interviewed said they did not use alcohol and drugs to relieve pressures. There was a significant absence of the pub culture in their responses. They gave a number of reasons why they did not use alcohol and drugs. One was money: none of the lone Dads worked and they live on tight budgets. Another was the need to maintain control; alcohol and drug misuse

could result in loss of custody or contact. In addition a number of men had grown up in an alcohol-fuelled violent home.

All the men interviewed "bottled up" the pressures. Almost half of all Dads felt they had no one to talk to when things were getting on top of them. A number of them were reluctant to talk to professionals, especially Social Work, fearful of being regarded as not coping and "losing" their children. Others saw themselves as self-contained individuals who should be able to deal with things themselves. Two men from ethnic minority communities were brought up in strict households that would not allow the discussion of their problems with others. Those with informal and family support living close by had regular contact but would not talk about emotional issues - "I would talk for hours about anything rather than what is going on for me with the kids and her". The fear of Dads exposing themselves as failures emerged as a very strong theme.

Yet carrying the pressure takes its toll. One lone Dad stated, "I guess I am gonnae explode soon - can't keep all this in my head". Of the sample twenty percent were diagnosed with depression and another fifth stated that they constantly felt depressed.

## **Barriers to Access- Service Provision**

Throughout conversations with men there was a constant perception that there was nothing for men, that services only cater for women. This was most strongly felt by those men who did not have custody of their children and only occasional contact. They said they wanted help to be a better Dad, but that it was difficult without regular contact and there was nowhere for them to get "training in being a Dad". They believed there was a lot of local projects for women and that the emphasis is on supporting mothers. A significant number of men did not object to this approach but felt they had been left behind and that there was "little advice and support for Dads". One respondent referred to the advertising of services as "useless and not directed to men and Dads".

The majority of men who access the Children's Centres and nurseries felt uncomfortable because services are so "women dominated". This was a common criticism in terms of staff but also in terms of community space. In one Children's Centre there are a large number of mothers who regularly use the community room and some Dads were intimidated to enter 'the women's room'

and felt excluded from that resource.

Over half the Dads interviewed didn't think the staff in agencies understand their situation or needs and felt awkward about approaching them. This was particularly true of Social Work, with some men feeling they would be judged as poor Dads because they were asking for help. Some Dads said they resented being told about parenting by what one described as "a middle-class woman do-gooder".

The men commented that when statutory services were involved with their children, they wanted to deal with the mother. A number of men resented "being frozen out and treated as a bit part".

Almost all the men interviewed felt that having male workers in services would make them feel more comfortable and more likely to use local services. A number of men observed that they wanted to relate to someone who knew what it was like to be a Dad in what they perceived as a "women's world". Male workers were few and far between yet the men interviewed who used Parkway Children's Centre found the male worker helpful - " I felt I could talk to him easily".

## **What Men Want**

For most of the men interviewed there was an absence of appropriate services as well as barriers to existing services. Almost all Dads were seeking two broad types of support: practical help and emotional support.

Over half of all men said they would value advice and help with parenting in the widest sense but in a way that didn't look down on them. Some lone Dads wanted effective and flexible childcare to assist with return to work, and to get some time for themselves to re-establish friendships.

Advice about custody, contact and child support was identified as a crucial area by a number of Dads, "living in a world dominated by women and Courts who always take her side" was how one Dad put it.

The consultation scotches the myth that men don't want to talk about personal issues. Over half felt it would be helpful. Some lone Dads felt speaking to

others in a similar position gave them a greater sense of perspective. For the three men who attended the FSU Men's group, each felt they benefited from sharing experiences. An informal drop-in service for men whose children attend a local nursery has been operating for a while and more men are valuing the chance to talk about issues that are affecting them.

Almost half of the men said they would like a service that would provide advice and support as well as an opportunity for companionship and a social outlet. One older man who looked after his grandchildren said, "I've been there, bottling it up playing the hard man- its takes lumps out of you, and I am past the age of worrying about losing face. It's good to get the other boys to talk about what's eating them, things like custody."

A number of the men recognised that they needed to do something for themselves and suggested borrowing examples from local women's groups such as setting up a babysitting circle and organising outings and social events.

## **Service Provision- A Provider's Response**

This section is based on an analysis of questionnaires returned from agencies in both the voluntary and statutory sectors. These include groups and projects operating in the broad areas of health, education and social work. There was a 60% response rate. The questionnaires were supplemented by interviews with a representative range of service providers.

The analysis is qualitative and seeks to identify some of the issues raised in the responses. A more quantitative analysis was not possible, nor necessarily desirable, due to different agencies having different remits and responsibilities within the broad area of parenting. For example, the drugs project that responded caters for a client group which includes men who are not parents. Likewise, education department nurseries have specific remits in the field of pre-school education which might not necessarily involve a wider social welfare role. Figures across the responses are not, therefore, always comparable.

Only one agency, a family learning project, reported having more men than women on their staff group, a ratio of three to one. Another agency had an

equal balance. Staff groups in the remaining ten were heavily skewed towards women, three of them reporting all-female staff groups and others ratios of one to ten or one to eleven.

The use of services was likewise skewed heavily towards women. Those agencies which we are able to provide figures showing Dads' usage of their services gave percentages ranging from five to twelve per cent of total usage. There are likely to be many reasons for these figures, one of which may simply be that those men in full-time employment are not in a position to take up many of the services. Possible attitudinal and cultural factors contributing to the low usage of services by Dads emerge in subsequent responses.

Four agencies have attempted, in the past, or are currently involved in providing services or activities geared specifically to men. All four have run men's groups or fathers' support groups and three report that these were successful. One also held a Men's Health Day, which attracted 30 to 40 visitors, perhaps indicating the level of potential interest amongst men in issues that strike a chord with them. Although the agencies involved reported that their men's groups were successful, they do not appear to run on a regular or sustained basis. In one case the group was last run in 1998. One of the agencies acknowledges the difficulty in sustaining the engagement of the men in groups or activities and is actively seeking to involve them through arranging a seminar looking at men's issues. It is also proposing an ICT course targeting men. Interestingly perhaps this is the only agency that records a majority of men on their staff group.

When asked to identify the kind of issues facing men, respondents offered a comprehensive range, including poverty and its link with unemployment. Other respondents developed this theme by acknowledging the identity confusion or role uncertainty, which can affect men experiencing unemployment, in a culture which still perceives of them as breadwinners.

Other themes emerge around the general area of relationships. In one case a link is made from current relationship difficulties to men's own experiences of being parented or otherwise cared-for. Another identifies childcare and parenting as an issue. One respondent identifies domestic violence as an issue faced by Dads but does not develop this to explain whether this is as victim or perpetrator. Several respondents identify the hurt and acrimony of separation

from and contact with children.

The potential and actual isolation of men as Dads is also identified in responses. One of these noted that " men's social networks do not sustain / support childcare in the same way as women's, particularly if men have given up work to look after children." Another noted that men as Dads needed the support which comes from contact with other men, something often denied those caught up as sole parents.

Health difficulties facing men as Dads were noted in the identification of drugs or alcohol abuse, HIV/AIDS and stress as further potential features in their lives.

Respondents identified a host of reasons why more men do not access or use services. A number of these were linked to the low confidence and self-esteem previously noted. Another angle highlighted was men's negative experience of their own education and a consequent lack of self-worth. Possibly as a result of this poor self-esteem, or perhaps indicative of deeper cultural norms, two responses highlighted the difficulty men have in engaging emotionally or in asking for support. One response did, however, point to experience of men being able to speak fairly freely, to either male or female workers, within a one-to-one situation.

The difficulty men experience in seeking support is likely to be amplified by the perception noted in a number of responses suggesting that parenting was mothers' work and "the notion that only mothers need support." Existing services are seen as being "female oriented." Several respondents acknowledge that a female dominated environment and a paucity of male workers was a potential disincentive to men using a service. One suggested that "men do not like to be the only guy in a group of mainly women." Peer pressure and the stigma that can attach to men as parents potentially reinforce this observation. Other responses note that existing services offer little which is specifically targeted at men.

The potential for men to access services is further constrained by the legal framework. The team manager in the local social work department pointed out that the statutory duty upon his team was to work with parents and that, within these parameters, mothers generally presented as both the primary carer but



also the legal parent (in cases where the father was not married to the mother or has not subsequently applied for parental rights and responsibilities). The opportunity for the social work team to work with fathers was often predicated upon the nature of the relationship between the parents and the attitude of the mother as to whether she was prepared to agree to the father's involvement. Another respondent also questioned whether women in parenting group situations, possibly as a result of their own past experiences, might not want men to be involved alongside them.

Several respondents recognised the need for services to target men more proactively. There was a view that services should not presume what men wanted but should canvass their views and "start from where they're at."

At an attitudinal level, there was an opinion that the experience of parenting and specifically of being a Dad needed to be promoted in a more positive light.

Several respondents felt that services and activities should offer activities more specifically geared to men such as football or bowls and that generally they should incorporate more of a "fun" focus. One pointed to the success of an inter-agency five-a-side football tournament. Another suggested that men should be accessed through less conventional means, through for instance, pubs or football clubs. The same response suggested that activities might include things like crafts, swimming and songs, presumably as a practical focus for father/child interaction.

Other agencies felt restricted by their remit or by funding constraints to continue offering their services along existing lines. One indicated that men might potentially become involved in nursery trips etc but tended not to do so. Another, which ran a parents' group, noted that "no father as ever shown an interest in attending." Another agency did not feel able within their existing resources to offer anything specifically for men, indicating that any services accessed by men would have to be within the framework of existing provision.

## Conclusions

The evidence from this consultation exercise with twenty men living in the Greater Pilton area shows their strong desire to be good Dads. It is clear that they had thought a great deal about it and they say that they are prepared to work at it. They want to be more involved in the nurturing and caring for their children.

Service providers echoed the themes and issues that emerged from the interviews. The difficulties facing men as parents in the Greater Pilton area are clear. Their needs are readily identified and the problems they experience trying to access help are apparent. Clarity about the difficulties does not mean that the answers are so easily attained.

The interviews highlighted a large gulf between the aspirations of Dads about their parenting role and the reality of their contact and interaction with their children. The strong sense that emerged was that they were aware of the difference but felt they had no means to bridge that gap. In some instances they felt that those who should help them actually hindered more meaningful involvement with their children. Some agencies recognised the reality of that position; health visitors are changing the delivery of their services to allow for more involvement of men. This is welcomed and should continue to develop. For other agencies such as Social Work the complexities of relationships often make changes difficult to implement, however agencies should be aware of how they may be reinforcing stereotypes like parenting is women's work.

The men all wanted their children to have 'better lives' than them: providing a secure and happy home is a priority for them but they have little experience of what that feels like and have no 'model' to replicate or build on. Their low educational attainment clearly affects their ability to help with homework and to relate to their child's schooling. This undoubtedly increases a sense of 'failing' their children. Their educational attainment is also reflected in employment status, the men and their families live with the financial pressures of unemployment or the demand for long hours in low paid work.

This compounds their sense of failure because they believe that they are not providing well for their children. Agencies in the area strongly identified the 'breadwinner' culture as a significant contributory factor in the low self-

esteem of men and considered that it may be a factor in any reluctance to use services. Service providers must recognise these issues and find ways to target men that send out messages of welcome and respect.

There was a lot of emotion expressed during the interviews: anger, resentment, sadness, worry, guilt and loneliness were all there. It certainly showed that these men are ready to consider talking through the issues and problems they are experiencing, that they are prepared to seek advice on personal and family matters, that they want to access sources of help and guidance. The challenge that is faced by services is to make that available in ways that make sense for men. They are looking for an environment that feels non-threatening and non-judgmental that will allow them to share their feelings and begin to explore ways to be a more effective parent or to check out that they are a 'good enough' Dad. Building confidence, developing skills and providing practical help could be achieved within some existing services if changes were made to become more aware of and more responsive to the needs of men.

There is evidence from agencies that men's groups have worked, what appears to be lacking is ways of sustaining these groups and ensuring they are addressing relevant issues. Some agencies are trying to engage with men positively in finding out what they want and this could be achieved if the attendance figure for the Health seminar is an indication of interest. The appointment of a male development worker offers a positive opportunity to develop a coordinated approach that is based on the existing knowledge of what works and the gaps in provision and barriers to accessing services.

The consultation demonstrates that men want information and advice about contact and custody to be available locally. Alongside the legal issues there is a requirement for guidance and support to help them work out what is best for their children and how they can maintain contact and continue to develop their relationships with their children following relationship breakdowns. There is a need for mediation services to allow an opportunity for separating couples to manage their children's welfare both at the time of separation and for their continuing care.

Social isolation and health problems were identified by Dads and agencies as serious stress factors. Agencies providing opportunities for social events may contribute significantly to helping pressured fathers cope and may be a much

less threatening way for initial contact to be made with agencies. Activities that focus on having fun with kids could enhance Dad's abilities and strengths and broaden their experiences, helping them engage differently with their children.

This type of focus will also enhance the opportunities for informal and peer support. It is essential that the contribution that men can make is recognised and that we do not fall into the trap as seeing them only as recipients of services. Developing Community capacity and nurturing the skills and gifts of individuals must be given a high priority if changes or developments in services are to be sustained.

Health issues require more serious consideration. Agencies raised concerns about alcohol and substance abuse, although the men interviewed did not consider these issues for them at this point. The figures here show high levels of depression; evidence from the city wide Men in Mind study identifies a serious under-reporting of men's ill-health therefore it may be that the problem is worse than it appears.

The lack of male staff is widely recognised as a very significant factor for men gaining access to services. Men are very clear that the services seem to them to be provided for women by women. Where there are male staff men have engaged with them. Considering the ratios of male to female staff in the agencies in this study and the fact that women form the majority of staff in welfare services the challenge to services is great; they will need to give a 'men-friendly' message without having a great deal of men directly involved in the provision of services.

Not all agencies can or should change their work to any great extent but they do need to begin to factor in the issue of men's needs in their service delivery and consider the impact. The potential tension for organisations in recognising men's needs should be acknowledged; changes should not be to the detriment of services and programmes for women but agencies need to ensure that they are not, through policy or practice, making it more difficult for men to positively contribute to their children's well-being. Other agencies have the capacity to develop new ways of working and specific programmes for men. Partnership is central to begin to deliver what men need. A coordinated approach informed by best practice and continuous learning offers the best opportunity for sustaining

men's involvement and helping make real changes.

Two men from minority ethnic groups were interviewed. Particular issues that arise from their ethnicity were not part of the focus of this study but in the development of any services their needs should be researched further.

This study focuses on the needs and requirements of Dads who are either the main carer, or living with, or have regular contact with their children. The issues for and about absent Dads are different from these and should be researched so that services can find ways of connecting with these 'hard to reach' Dads.

Inevitably wider issues were raised that are beyond remit of this study. Throughout the study, men who were carers expressed their frustration at what they regarded as a lack of recognition of their role. This requires at a Governmental level a more sophisticated approach to policy that does not regard the primary care as gender specific. This has in turn implications for labour market and employment strategies and associated consequences for welfare benefits.

One of the areas not covered in depth by the study was young Dads. There is substantial evidence that young men come ill prepared for parenthood. This is often exacerbated by a period in the looked after system. It is important that the looked after system and through and the through and after care policies of local authorities adopt and promote positive models of being a father.

Finally the lack of male staff in both Primary Education and Social Work, especially in Child Care, is an issue throughout Scotland and the rest of the UK. More male workers in the service provide children with positive models of adults but also enable Dads to be more comfortable in approaching services. This is a structural matter that needs to be addressed by the Scottish Executive, Westminster, and academic institutions and employers.

## Recommendations

The study has both national and local implications for agencies and service providers. The primary focus of the study has been Greater Pilton but there are also wider strategic matters that are more properly addressed to the Scottish Executive.

### Strategic level

In light of the findings of the study the Scottish Executive needs to review policies so that parenting is not seen as gender specific.

The Scottish Executive should consider commissioning further detailed research into the role of Dads as parents. This study should focus on encouraging the involvement of 'hard to reach' and absent Dads.

The study comments on a shortage of male staff for working with Dads within services, particularly child protection. To remedy this situation the Scottish Executive in conjunction with employers and academic institutions look at ways to address the shortage of male workers within the education and social work professions.

### Breaking down the barriers

At a national and local level there needs to be an attitudinal change that promotes more positive and a visible role for Dads as parents. In particular service providers need to ensure that their policy and practice does not reinforce a stereotype of parenting as "the woman's role".

At a service delivery level, agencies need to recognise the low self-esteem of some Dads and how this militates against service take up. This requires services to adopt a more inclusive and "male friendly" approach. This can be achieved by:

- use of language and imagery that is appealing and relevant to men, for example having photos of Dads and children together for leaflets, ensuring that 'Parent' is used for groups such as 'parents and toddlers'

- ensure effective advertising to increase take-up and participation, targetting areas/clubs more likely to have men
- consider having 'men only' sessions
- encourage staff awareness and sensitivity to the needs of Dads
- ensuring that services are respective of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds

## **Providing Services**

Service agencies need to more sophisticated in developing flexible packages of support Each agency should undertake an audit of existing planning and service functions to assess their appropriateness and effectiveness in making services more inclusive to men.

All the appropriate agencies in the Greater Pilton area should participate in a local planning conference. This should develop a strategic response to reducing barriers to access and adopting more " Dad" friendly services. The Male Development worker should be regarded as a service resource to assist in this matter.

Service providers need to create a climate that is non-threatening and non-judgmental and focuses on making existing services more flexible. It should consider new ways of working to: -

- adopt a pro-active approach and introduce outreach methods to contact 'hard to reach' and absent Dads
- seek opportunities to make more male staff available in local child and family resources
- regularly review services taking account of the needs of Dads
- where Dads are using services ensure that feedback is encouraged so that services remain relevant.

Agencies and service providers need to adopt a coordinated approach to build long term and sustainable change. Funding should be sought for a longitudinal study. Its aim would be to measure and evaluate change in terms of access and appropriateness of services for Dads. It should include all those who participated in the Sure Start sponsored consultation.

## **Health**

Primary health care services need to respond to Mental Health and well-being issues identified in the study and develop and promote a 'well men' community health strategy.

## **Schools**

Schools need to recognise the difficulties that many Dads have in being comfortable in the school environment. They need to examine how to encourage the participation of Dads in their children's education. This should also include the availability of literacy and numeracy skills training and computer awareness locally to enable fathers to better understand and relate to what children are learning at school.

## **Developing new services**

The provision and shaping of services to become more Dad friendly need to reflect the range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds within the Greater Pilton area. The Black Community Development Association should be seen as an important resource to assist the development and provision of inclusive services to meet the needs of Dads.

The approach to developing new services needs to be a community development one. It should focus on building confidence, developing skills and providing practical help. An approach that encourages community capacity, building on the skills of the Dads involved is necessary to ensure changes in services are to be sustained. This should include the following: -

A range of groups is required:

- practical parenting - having fun with kids, use of toy libraries,
- emotional - anger management, dealing with contact and custody problems
- social - making connections, getting support from others

Information and advice about custody and contact came out as a high priority in the study

- seek opportunities for a specialist service to be provided in the area
- seek opportunities for a mediation service to be provided in the area



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# Edinburgh Family Service Unit

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