

Equal Opportunities Committee
Fathers & parenting
Summary of evidence submissions

Purpose

1. The purpose of this paper is to summarise the written evidence that was received as part of the Fathers and parenting Inquiry and draw out the key themes. A collated list of recommendations with a focus on issues relating to active fatherhood, including employment, education, and healthcare is available in Annexe A.

Overview

2. The Committee received a mixture of evidence from parenting organisations and fathers themselves. The evidence suggests that men increasingly want to spend time with their children and take a more active parenting role. Some submissions outlined the positive influence a more active father figure can have for the child's development and general financial and emotional wellbeing of the family.

3. However, there are a number of barriers which stand in the way of them achieving this. Overall there was a feeling that men do not receive the same flexibility in the workplace to address child care requirements. There was also the feeling that support services available to parents are really directed at the mothers and that fathers are not perceived as being equal in parenting skills or responsibilities. There was also the suggestion that front line workers make, possibly unintentional, assumptions about who will be the main carer and the quality of care provided by men. It was also noted that front line workers and care staff are mostly female.

4. In addition the Committee received a number of anonymous submissions from fathers that are currently experiencing issues around residence of their children and rights to access.

Key themes

Engaging Fathers

5. The majority of the submissions received outlined the desire for fathers to be more active participants in the development and parenting of their children. Investment in parenting support was seen to be just as important for men as it is for women. It was viewed that fathers ideally should be involved right at the beginning with an understanding of the importance of the early years. There was also the suggestion that societal views are slowly changing regarding how dads should interact with their children. However, more work needs to be done, particularly in the area of separated fathers who suggested that their input was viewed by many as "nice to have around but not essential".

6. Evidence also suggested that fathers were typically seen by service providers to be more difficult to engage with. Services are accustomed to supporting the needs of mothers. Men can present differently which can challenge traditional views about the ways in which support is provided and managed. Additionally fathers, if separated, don't tend to have residence of the child and be at work during the day. As such fathers require specific approaches.

7. Fathers stated that they often feel intimidated or unwelcome at groups which are focused at women. This is down to both the other female participants and the staff. It is also hard to find support that is tailored to father's specific needs which can lead to feelings of isolation.

8. One submission acknowledged the positive results of setting up referrals with existing services like nurseries, particularly for fathers who are at risk of poverty or substance abuse. This was seen to demystify the role of family support services and any perceived threat. Some fathers were also seen to respond better to male support workers or activity leaders. This can be a challenge for the traditionally female dominated social work and care sector.

Workplace issues

9. Whether they are separated or part of a couple fathers are more likely to be working and expressed views on the difficulty managing work and family life. While it is recognised that mothers also face this difficulty it was noted that in some companies fathers would be less likely to be granted flexible working, reduced hours or be allowed time off to look after children during holidays or when they are sick. An example was also given of colleagues being less likely to show compassion and understanding for the parenting issues of male staff. It was highlighted that there has been research which suggests that young fathers are more resentful of this situation.

10. Workers at the upper levels of some organisations expressed guilt about the time that they had to dedicate to the job as opposed to spending time with their children. However, it was noted that they tended to be offered greater flexibility than workers lower down the pay scale.

11. It was considered vital that employers recognise the need of fathers as parents and that there is adequate support in the workplace to allow fathers to be active parents. This also applies to the support made available to those looking to enter employment or training. One submission suggested that this was particularly important for young or teenage dads. While some progress will be made in upcoming changes to parental leave there was seen to be much more to be done.

Childcare

12. The affordability, flexibility and provision of childcare was seen as a major issue. Greater flexibility would make it easier for parents to split caring responsibilities more evenly, allowing women to return to work. This flexibility is important both in the provision but also in how entitlements are structured. The childcare workforce is mostly female and tends to be low paid. Higher paid jobs and more opportunity for career progression may encourage more men into the role.

'Father Friendly' Information sources and Publicity Materials

13. As part of the National Parenting Strategy, the Scottish Government commissioned Children 1st to undertake a mapping exercise of current parenting information resources. The research discovered a wealth of information resources available, but found that only a relatively small number of parenting resources were explicitly aimed at fathers, lone fathers or separated fathers. The research found that many information resources, while claiming to be for a universal audience, were more targeted at mothers, than fathers. The research also highlighted that some

information resources may alienate fathers due to the language, wording and photos used to illustrate the resource.

14. These findings were mirrored in other submissions and the importance of positive role models for fathers was deemed as important.

Finance

15. Information on benefit eligibility was seen to be hard to find. Fathers also suggested that they will often have no entitlement to benefits for the child even if they have part time care or suffer from long delays when trying to establish a claim. This can lead to them not having enough money to feed the child or heat the house when the child is visiting or cover travel or activity costs. An example stated that often the benefits agency will not acknowledge this as an issue. Furthermore the local authority will often refuse financial assistance to allow the father to have contact with this child because they have already had public funds to support their upkeep. In some circumstance delays can lead to situations where fathers, who cannot work because of childcare issues, have no income. Evidence suggests that this leads to fathers feeling inadequate and lessened their perceptions of themselves as “good fathers” and providers.

Attitudes of front line workers and access to information

Education

16. While there are some positive examples of relationships between schools and fathers there were cases reported of phone calls and emails going unanswered, failure to record contact details appropriately so that non-resident fathers receive communications from the school, schools calling mothers in the first instance, even when the father has been set out as primary contact and teachers ‘just checking’ with the mother before engaging with the non-resident father. ‘Children in Scotland’ is producing guidelines to help Schools deal with this issue.

Health

17. Examples were offered of hospitals or GPs refusing to engage with non-resident fathers or provide medical information on their children’s health. However Renfrewshire Council highlighted the challenges facing health visitors when parents are estranged. Often conflicting information is provided by each parent and the health visitor is in the difficult position of having to determine what is factual.

Social Services / Children’s Services

18. Mothers were often viewed as naturally more capable than men and it was noted that there is a tendency to assume the mother will be the main carer no matter the circumstances. For example in some cases a mother with persistent drug or alcohol problems may be given more ‘chances’ to resolve the problem than a father in the same circumstance.

19. There was the suggestion by some fathers and fathers groups that wishing to be involved in a child’s life was viewed with suspicion or as a danger and that upon separation they had to prove that they were suitable to perform activities which were considered normal when the couple were together.

20. The recently passed Children and Young People (Scotland) Act requires the development of local Children's Services Plans which focuses on early intervention and parenting support. It was noted in one submission that there is a danger that these plans could become "maternal normative" and assume mothers as the main care givers.

Housing

21. An example was given of separated parents of a child of additional support needs. Often the house which is adapted to meet those needs will be that of the mother. In some cases the father will not be able to obtain appropriate ground floor social housing making overnight visits and being involved in the care of the child more difficult.

22. The so called 'bedroom tax' impacts on fathers having overnight visits with their children or shared residence arrangements. Due to changes in Welfare legislation parents who are not considered to be the main carer will need to pay extra to keep a room 'spare' for their children to visit. Discretionary Housing Payments may be available to help depending on circumstance.

Job Centre

23. Fathers may face difficulties at the Job Centre in terms of scheduling of appointments during non-child friendly times or assumptions that the mother is the main carer. It was also suggested in one submission that it would depend on who was on duty at the job centre that day whether a father would get sanctioned for missing an appointment due to child care issues. The lone parent adviser at the job centre was also said to be at a loss with what to do with lone fathers as many of the part time jobs are focused at women.

Action

24. South Lanarkshire Council highlighted in their submission the programme of work it is undertaking in order to change the culture within Health, Educations, Social work and the Voluntary sector to ensure that dads are routinely included in all aspects of their child's development and education. This includes things like getting information from schools sent to the non-resident parent and housing allocations policies which are friendly to split residence. North Ayrshire Council is also involved in training and awareness raising with staff to improve the involvement of fathers.

Examples of services available

25. Overall the provision of support groups aimed at fathers was viewed in the submissions as poor in comparison to the support available to mothers. Two submissions suggested that only one NHS board ran ante natal classes for fathers. Many groups were self-started by dads who acknowledged the gap in provision. It was noted that support tends to focus on older fathers. However, that services focused on more vulnerable, younger fathers were also very important.

26. Organisations that submitted went into detail on the type of services that they provide. Overall groups provide a range of activities from practical hands on support in the form of cooking lessons, days out or musical instrument training to more emotional peer support for the fathers. Positive interactions often focused around physical activities. Groups were seen as valuable supports for father who at times found it more difficult than mothers to talk to friends or family. They were seen to

increase confidence in parenting skills, allow one to one time with the child, provide the opportunities for informal support, reduce isolation and allow fathers to share experiences.

27. Barnardos said that partnership was very important to success and highlighted that the way in which programmes are delivered, rather than the type of programme, can be a key element of success. Focusing on the strengths of parents, their relationships with their children, the relationship between staff and client and overall taking a holistic approach and working to identify barriers.

28. Renfrewshire council said that it has two 'First time Mother Groups'. However, the content of the group is not specific to mothers beyond the first week. It is considering changing the name of the group to 'First Time Parents'. However, other submissions went further calling for father focused groups as in many cases 'parents' groups were groups for mothers in all but name and some fathers felt unwelcome due to the female focus.

Benefits of increasing fathers' involvement in their child's development

29. Evidence reported that increased involvement of fathers in their child's development resulted in children being more open, happier and confident. It also reported better educational attainment, less likelihood of being in trouble with the police, better relationships in adolescence and a reduction in homelessness and mental health problems. In particular support groups gave fathers a range of coping strategies reducing possible physical punishments and confrontation between the father and the child.

Legal issues

30. There were a number of submissions received directly from fathers experiencing difficulties in establishing residence or access arrangements with their children. They focused on the challenges in maintaining a civil or constructive relationship with the child's mother, the expensive nature of the legal action involved and facing perceived preconceptions on the part of social workers and the courts who were seen to be heavily biased on the part of the Mother. Evidence also outlined the considerable stress and emotional upset caused by the whole situation which at times was unfolding over a prolonged period of time.

31. Evidence and recommendations related to justice issues fall out with the scope of the Committee and will be forwarded on for the attention of the Justice Committee.

Annexe A: Recommendations

All submissions made comment on the situation for fathers in Scotland and some made observations on how this could be improved. However, a number of submissions set out explicit recommendations directed at the Parliament, Scottish Government, Health Boards or Local Authorities which are included below. (As noted above recommendations related to justice matters will be forwarded onto the Justice Committee.)

Families Need Fathers would welcome:

- An unequivocal statement by the Committee which acknowledges the need for both parents to be involved in the children's lives after separation (unless it is shown that this isn't in the best interests of the child).
- A show of political leadership in the form of an enthusiastic speech about the positive contributions of fathers to the care and welfare of Scottish Children.
- Guidance to GPs to enable them to be more even handed about the provision of information about their Children's Health to both parents.
- Posters, leaflets and general information should be 'father friendly'. Just being gender neutral is not enough when good parenting is seen to be the province of mothers alone.
- Schools Inspectorate should explicitly include assessing schools on efforts made to include fathers, especially non-resident fathers. Without this the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act will remain a low priority.
- (two further recommendations on justice matters)

Dads Club would welcome:

- Proactively hiring more men in early years services to help tackle the assumption that men are less capable parents.
- Greater emphasis placed on health visitors to document their interaction with fathers.
- Greater expectations placed on social workers to involve fathers in care planning and audits of cases to ensure that this is happening.
- Improved support and efficiency levels from DWP and HMRC dealing with cases of fathers taking over the care of children 0-4 yrs.
- Tackling the geographical inconsistency of support groups by providing greater emphasis and funding to create similar support across the country.
- A more proactive approach by Government to targeting negative attitudes against fathers in the same way that government has been involved in addressing other forms of prejudice.

Children in Scotland would welcome:

- Systematic provision of ante-natal education specifically designed for fathers, available and accessible to all.
- As GIRFEC is now enshrined in statute, all 'named persons', and any other professionals involved in assessing and planning for families, should ensure that they involve and include the child's father in all relevant processes

- Education Scotland and the Care Inspectorate should actively consider how effectively establishments for pre-school children engage with fathers; this issue should be routinely looked at in inspection processes
- Consistent with the National Parenting Strategy services should value and support mothers and fathers equally, for example in play, communication and other activities that promote children's healthy development.

Barnardos would welcome:

- As national and local policy plans are developed there is due attention paid to holistic family support approaches, as well as due investment in targeted support to both fathers and mothers.
- All prison staff to be trained to a basic level to understand and support fathers with their parental responsibilities, in order to secure better outcomes for the relevant children.
- Consideration of recruitment and access to the social work and childcare professions which are current underrepresented in terms of men.
- Highlighting the role of the Health Improvement Services in involving fathers, especially young, vulnerable fathers at the early stages of pregnancy and child development.
- A stronger emphasis in Relationship, Sexual Health and Parenting Education on parenting and raising children. Particularly emphasising the benefits to young men of a positive relationship with babies and the benefit this can have on their development.
- The Committee following the work of the early years taskforce in terms of the increased quality, availability and flexibility of childcare in Scotland.
- Further consideration of whether anything more can be done to encourage employers to be family friendly in their work practices and allow flexible working for their employees. Family friendly workplace awards for example.

STUC would welcome:

- Further consideration for measures to improve policies for effective flexible working, including part time work in good quality jobs which would benefit all parents with caring responsibilities.

One Parent Families Scotland would welcome:

Contact with Services

- Early Years Services. Some of the fathers felt that they had encountered views from nursery staff which assumed that they are not as capable as mothers. The Fathers would like to see Early Years Services being proactive and encouraging more men to work in these services.
- Health Visiting Services. Some fathers felt that Health Visitors fail to acknowledge the role fathers play in the health of their children. The fathers suggested that health visitors should document their interaction with fathers.
- Social Work Services. Some fathers reported a feeling of fear when working with Social Work Services and some said that they had been treated with suspicion by Social Workers around about why they wanted to care for their child(ren). The fathers would like to see greater expectations

- placed on social workers to really involve fathers in care planning, within the framework of the appropriate legislation
- Education Services. Some father felt excluded from important meetings about their child (ren) when the mother was included. Fathers suggested that would like schools to be more proactive in involving separated fathers. However OPFS fully appreciates that any decisions around contact and involvement should be in the best interests of the child.
 - JCP & HMRC There was a unanimous view from Fathers that the attitude of JCP staff on the phone and in Jobcentres is uncaring of their circumstances as single parents and disregards their role as fathers. Fathers felt strongly that JCP & HMRC should review processes around how benefits are set up and transitioned between separated parents. They felt that it is important to look at the inefficiency that often surrounds fathers taking over the care of children 0-4 yrs and improve the support from the DWP and HMRC.

Provision of services

- Fathers felt that some of the challenges they face as single fathers are unique, and valued tailored support from agencies which understand and were able to support them to be the best parents they can be to their children. Fathers said they would like to see greater emphasis and funding made available for support for single fathers and their children across the country. It was also suggested that statutory services should be more aware of specific support services for lone fathers so they can signpost them on.

Societal attitudes towards Single Fathers

- Fathers we spoke to wanted to be treated as parents who have the same skills and challenges that mothers do. Fathers said they would like to see a government campaign to challenge the stereotypes about fathers still very much present in Britain. The campaign would aim to challenge the stereotypes about single dads and instead show them for what they really are – hardworking, resourceful and a vital part of the diversity of family life.

Parental Rights and Responsibilities for Fathers and Shared Care

The Government should remove the obstacles that make it harder for low-income couples to share post-separation care.

- OPFS believes the principles, which put the welfare of the child at the centre, should continue to be paramount and would not support a presumption of 'shared parenting/care'
- Parents sharing care should both be entitled to take advantage of the flexibilities available to single parents on Jobseeker's Allowance, such as the ability to fit working hours around school hours if their child is aged under 13.
- The Government should reverse housing benefit changes to the age limit for the shared room rate which would mean any single person under 35 would only be able to claim a lower rate intended for a room in shared accommodation, as these hit the parent in a shared care arrangement not deemed the main carer.

Childcare

Childcare is a major determining factor in how many hours single dads can work and we know that many fathers have said they would work more hours if they could find good quality childcare which was convenient, reliable and affordable.

- The Scottish government to take the lead in implementing the Early Years Framework by legislating to provide a childcare place for every child.
- A universal entitlement to early childhood education and care, with subsidies to limit what parents pay themselves, would make the benefits of early learning available to every child.
- The UK government should reverse its childcare tax credit cut which reduced support for childcare costs from 80% to 70%

Employment and family life

Fathers who are the main carer of their child/ren told us how difficult it is to combine the role of sole carer & breadwinner and that a recognition that single parents in work would benefit from a more family friendly work environment.

- Employers should be encouraged and be made aware of the benefits of flexible working and family-friendly practice.
- Government & Business organisations should promote more tolerance for men who need to spend time with their children.
- Policies such as adequately paid parental leave, improving rights to request flexible working, provision of decent and well-paid part-time jobs, and access to affordable and quality childcare are crucial to supporting single dads to sustain employment.
- System of paid parental leave introduced which as a minimum should incorporate a set number of paid days for the care of children who are ill, which operates in a similar way to statutory sick pay for individuals.
- In addition, we believe that unpaid parental leave should be available until a child is aged 18.