

**‘COUNTING FATHERS IN’:
UNDERSTANDING MEN’S
EXPERIENCES OF THE CHILD
PROTECTION SYSTEM**



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Acknowledgements

We are very grateful for the support shown by the Nuffield Foundation and in particular from Tracey Budd, Teresa Williams and Alison Rees who have been invaluable sources of advice and help. Thanks are also due to members of our London based Research Advisory Group, Dr Alice Haynes, Kate Mulley, Professor Margaret O'Brien, Dr Gavin Swann, Professor June Thoburn and Owen Thomas who have shared our enthusiasm for this study and been encouraging, supportive and committed throughout. The members of this group and Tracey Budd have also given us insightful comments on drafts of this report. Thanks are also owed to Rachael Carver, from the School of Social Work, for helping with the final preparation of this report.

We also extend our thanks to the members of our local stakeholders group: Dr Danny Taggart, Sue Smithurst, Michael Dolling, Andy Wood and Dr Mark Osborn, for their comments on methodological aspects of the study, and on early findings.

We are very grateful to Professor Bren Neale and colleagues from Leeds University who have given their time very generously to offer guidance in our use of the qualitative longitudinal method and with data archiving.

The study would not have been possible without the commitment from our three local authority research partners whose staff have supported us wholeheartedly. Each authority made it possible for us to find men who could elect to be part of this project. All provided enthusiastic participants for focus groups and to respond to our presentations of early findings. Finally, our special thanks are due to the 35 men who generously allowed us to walk alongside them for a year and who were so frank and open with us about their lives and about their experiences of living with child protection services.

The Nuffield Foundation is an endowed charitable trust that aims to improve social wellbeing in the widest sense. It funds research and innovation in education and social policy and also works to build capacity in education, science and social science and social science research. The Nuffield Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. More information is available at www.nuffieldfoundation.org



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Executive Summary

1. Key messages

The purpose of the study is to improve policy and social work practice by addressing the knowledge gap about men in child protection, by focusing on men's own perspectives.

The study challenges assumptions that men in child protection cases do not stay involved in children's lives and always, or only, pose a risk of harm to their child. Most men in this study wanted to be part of their child's life and presented as both a risk and a resource for their children.

...I am a father to my children and I know a lot of men, well I can see why they do it now as well, it is so much easier just to let the women get on with it and see your kids whenever but I am not like that, I want to be an influence in my children's life (Kyle).

The wider context of men's lives as fathers however, was rarely explored. We present the child protection process as a particular form of gatekeeping for men which may facilitate or inhibit their involvement with child protection and with their child. We also argue that the longstanding issue of 'father engagement' is better understood as an interactive, two-directional process, rather than a 'problem' with either men or social workers.

Key messages for social work and wider child protection practice:

Building a full picture of men's lives as fathers

Child protection assessments of men tend to lack depth and context. In order to assess and evaluate the balance of resource and risk of harm a father figure may present, social workers need to understand men's lives as fathers. They should seek the fullest picture possible of the background, relationship dynamics, wellbeing, and current circumstances of the child's father or father figure. Social workers and the multi-agency team need to be curious about men's lives, their perspectives and narratives. What they learn should inform a shared approach which takes account of the benefits to the child's wellbeing fathers may bring, as well as any harm they may pose.

Working relationships with fathers: pursuing active rather than passive involvement

Negotiation and support may be needed to enable men to participate more fully in the work to protect the child. Similarly, men may need support to stay involved with their child. Active involvement is part of a strengths-based approach where honest communication about child

protection concerns does not preclude recognising the positive contributions a father can, or could make.

I don't think anyone really listens to the father most of the time, I think it is one of these 'well as long as the mum is happy and the kids are sorted' do you know it has always been the same (Jesse).

Bringing organisations into step to support better practice

Engaging fathers should be seen as everyday practice in child protection. Better engagement may require organisations to tackle structural and cultural barriers to fathers' involvement. This includes challenging deep rooted assumptions about gender and parenting, where the father-child relationship is often seen as secondary and where the child protection system tends to prioritise mothers over fathers. Workers need confidence that managers will support them in this and managers themselves need to challenge risk-averse, procedurally driven culture and practice. These actions should be considered part of local authorities' duties under the Equality Act 2010.

Because they are not in the household, we will focus quite a lot of the assessment work and the intervention with the resident parent...they are almost forgotten and then seen as insignificant in the network (Manager).

2. Background

Engaging with fathers is yet to be seen as part of the “core business” of social work (Zanoni et al 2013) and the issue of how local authorities may fail to work effectively with men in families is longstanding (Scourfield, 2014; Clapton, 2013). Most studies about parental engagement in child protection do not distinguish between male and female parents (for example Forrester et al. 2012; Platt, 2008; Ofsted, 2014). This tends to be the case even when studies make specific efforts to include men for example the study by Ghaffar and colleagues (2012). Indeed, policy documents and guidance also fail to differentiate between mothers and fathers, for example *Working Together* (HM Government, 2015). The few studies that include men's perspectives have focused on men's *retrospective* criticisms of child protection agencies (e.g., Dominelli et al., 2010; Morris et al. 2017) rather than attempting to understand how men involved in this process negotiate the day-to-day challenges of their encounter with the child protection system. Given this dearth of understanding, Zanoni and colleagues' (2013) conclude that child protection practice with men is only likely to advance if it can draw on the rich insights to be gleaned from qualitative research into fathers' and father figures' own perspectives, especially in real time.

3. Methodology

The central innovative aspect of the research was the year-long study of 35 men's experiences of child protection processes across three local authorities as they unfolded in real time (Saldana, 2003; Thomson, 2007). Each man was a father or father figure for a child with a newly made child protection plan. We aimed to capture critical moments in the child protection process and in the men's narratives which had significance for men's lives and for their engagement with child protection plans and services. To contextualise the findings from these 35 men we studied the case files of 150 children with newly made child protection plans (50 from each of three local authorities). From the files we examined how many men were a father or father figure for the 150 children and the nature of their involvement in child protection processes. We were also able to compare the profiles of fathers and father figures for the 150 children with our sample to check that the 35 men were reasonably representative of men in child protection and of those living in these local authority areas (which was the case). We held focus groups in the three authorities to 'sense check' preliminary findings with social workers and managers.

Limitations

One limitation of our sample of 35 men is that it under-represents men not invited to, or not attending, the initial child protection conference. This means our findings may therefore reflect the experiences of more involved fathers. However, a further implication is that the barriers to engagement and relationship building are likely to be even greater for men who are missing from the initial conference. Another area where the sample of 35 men is not diverse is in relation to ethnicity (all but three participants were White British). Although the sample did reflect the ethnic profile of the local authority areas, we had few opportunities to illustrate this aspect of diversity. In addition, we were not able to recruit any very young fathers although some of the 35 men were very young when they first became fathers.

4. Key findings from the case file analysis

The case files showed that men 'in' child protection were *present* rather than absent in the 150 children's lives with evidence of 139 men in a parental or caregiving role. Not only were men present, but they also tended to stay involved in their children's lives even when they were not living in the same household. One year on, only 39 of the 139 men were no longer in contact with their child and there was a similar pattern of contact for resident and non-resident fathers over the year. Although men were more mobile than mothers, moving in and

out of families, for many men separation did not appear to have been an insurmountable barrier to staying in touch.

The men were linked in different ways to the child protection concern with some being held responsible or partly responsible, others seen as a protective, or a partly protective factor, while for many men their position was unclear or unknown. This reflected the problem of building a coherent picture about the men from the files because information about them was patchy and very limited.

Without better information and more consistent recording in case files men will remain a shadowy or a 'missing' group. It will remain difficult to assess and make decisions about men as a risk or a resource for their child on an individual basis. Similarly it will be difficult, in a wider auditing sense, to discern the extent to which men are engaged with child protection, and which men subsequently become a resource for children and for children's services.

5. Fathers' Lives

The circumstances and preoccupations that fathers brought to the child protection process provided an essential context to their engagement with child protection and with their child. It was striking that well over half of our 35 men reported a significant illness, disability or other impairment. A number of men lived with chronic physical health conditions and a many others reported various mental health challenges including depression, anxiety, chronic stress, substance misuse, instances of self-harm and panic attacks.

But I mean I am on 28 tablets a day...I have got them for the pain you know, I wouldn't say it is a physical depression, err a mental depression, it is more a physical depression if you know what I mean, if there is such a thing...(Jimmy).

Most of the fathers were also living economically precarious lives with diminishing access to benefits, insecure work and increasing debt. We found little in the fathers' accounts to indicate that social workers or other members of the multi-agency team were addressing the inequalities inherent in these fathers' health issues and their precarious circumstances (Bywaters, 2016; Bywaters et al., 2015). These factors will clearly have had an impact on the children the men were parenting.

The complex networks of relationships surrounding fathers and their children meant that men were continually balancing sometimes conflicting demands to maintain their income, meet the needs of their children, meet their own intimacy needs, keep current partners

onside whilst negotiating contact with non-resident children with ex-partners. We found a common pattern at the end of a relationship for fathers rather than mothers to leave their shared home. Given that parents with children on child protection plans and in care proceedings are at particular risk of relationship breakdown, the consequent accommodation issues are likely to impact fathering disproportionately.

6. Domestic violence and abuse in men's lives

Domestic violence and abuse (DVA) influenced the possibility of some fathers having an active role in their child's care. The men's stated disapproval of domestic violence towards female partners was near universal. A minority of men (4) admitted committing such violence though their admissions were often accompanied by accounts in mitigation. A number of fathers protested that assessments of DVA complaints were unfair, in that police automatically believed women's complaints and failed to hear men's accounts. Five fathers claimed that they had suffered DVA from their partners and two had been disbelieved until they presented video evidence. Others said that the abuse had been mutual. In three cases, contested DVA allegations delayed the eventual placement of children with fathers.

The men's views and experiences of DVA raise highly controversial issues, which are echoed in the wider research literature. Fathers' experiences from this study suggest that DVA is rightly taken very seriously as a factor in child protection but that mothers and fathers are not on an equal footing in relation to the assessment of suspected DVA and that being identified as a perpetrator has differential consequences for mothers and fathers.

... if there is domestic violence towards a woman, they get legal aid. If there is domestic violence towards a man, you don't get anything (Kyle).

7. Men and agency

Most fathers recounted formative figures in their past whose positive and negative messages continue to resonate. Fathers' narratives showed that past positives can be reclaimed and the destructive power of negative events and relationships can be reduced. This can clear the way for fathers to invest in their relationships with their children and exercise agency as fathers. Most men claimed to have a close bond with the child who had a child protection plan. Some assumed sole or significant responsibility for their child's day-to-day care but many delegated the main care to female partners. Working fathers were divided between

those committed to involvement in day-to-day care and those who frankly preferred the world of work. The former fathers found it stressful to combine the two roles. The latter, aware of the societal expectation that fathers should be “involved” tended to emphasise their role as arrangers of outings, visits and activities.

I could sort of understand where they were coming from, that I was all work and no family as such but we still have days out, we go all over the place...I hardly feel I am an absent father and I do feel that it is one of the ways I provide for the family with my work (Barry).

Fathers who had stepped in to take on their child’s care because the child’s mother was unable to do so safely, emphasized the actions they took to take control of their children’s disordered lives and spoke of restoring routine. They were wary of allowing social workers or others to work with their children on emotional issues from previous experiences feeling that this was likely to pathologise them. Instead, they believed that their everyday commonsense care promoted children’s happiness. In keeping with this view, they spoke little about listening to their children and more about reassuring and encouraging them.

Around one third of our 35 men expressed some ambivalence about their child which could have been related to the circumstances of the child’s conception and other ensuing relationship complexities. Relationships between fathers and adolescent children were sometimes fraught especially when fathers were ‘in the frame’ for abuse. A small number of fathers in this ambivalent group had to disengage with fathering, at least temporarily, either seeking to avoid the grief and distress that followed a baby’s compulsory adoption or because they felt betrayed by an adolescent child who had complained about them to social workers.

I ain’t got no bond with him, I know in my heart and soul what’s going to happen (Shane).

The quality and intensity of a father’s relationship with his children correlated with the strength of his agency as a father in dealing with the authorities. One continuing significant factor for the exercise of agency as a father was the assumption by social workers, mothers and fathers of the primacy of mothers’ relationship with children. The degree of agency exercised by fathers in the study varied according to the presence of four factors: persistence, sense of entitlement, quality of agency and the father’s relationship with the child. Fifteen fathers were judged to be exercising some degree of agency, with 18 largely resigned from real influence and agency.

I feel like a dad in the sense that I am doing something for my kids, I don’t feel like a dad in the sense that my kids aren’t here (Mark).

8. Time and timing - whose time is it anyway?

Different, or clashing, perceptions of time between men and social workers, can disrupt or undermine men's confidence in the child protection process and/or in their dealings with their social worker. The timing of when, and how social workers seek men's perspective, or include him in an assessment has practical and relational consequences for the direction of the case (and so, the child) and the working relationship between social workers and men. Without knowledge of men's lives and their past, decision-making about children's care and safety is likely to be limited. This underlines the need for persistence and flexibility in relationship building with men. The interactive, responsive nature of men's encounters with social workers, indicated that both could be seen as accountable and within the relationship, both could trigger change.

Conflicting 'timeframes' between those working in the child protection system and fathers produces tensions. Fathers experienced social work time as both 'rushed and slow'. Official timeframes lead to the undervaluing of fathers' lived experience and the pressures on them and their time.

Well how the hell am I going to get money in the bank if you keep making me take time off work... They say, 'right it is 4.59, I finish in a minute so we are going to cut the meeting short'.... you can't just be a Social Worker from 9 till 5, what happens if a kid gets beaten up at 6 o'clock? (Greg).

Fathers' life trajectories revealed how key transitions and turning points played out in their lives. Life events affect men's capacity and ambition to engage in the child protection process and to commit to involved fathering.

9. Fathers' perceptions of unfairness in the child protection system

Most of the men experienced or perceived gender difference as a form of unfair treatment in child protection practice. There were three particular examples of this, firstly in the ways in which men's emotions (particularly anger) were interpreted, secondly in the handling of the child protection enquiry and allegations or concerns about domestic abuse or harm to children and thirdly, the ways in which men's parenting was recognised and evaluated.

I feel like I want to say stuff but I tend not to, I just tend to hold back, I don't want to make an idiot out of myself... If I'm chill then people think I don't care but if I really blow up they'll think I'm aggressive (Will).

If a woman is angry towards you and she is the sole carer of those children you don't really have a choice but to continue trying to engage with her, so I think it is a lot easier to cut a man out of that process at that point than it is to cut a woman out (Social Worker).

The perception of unfair treatment in these contexts was also supported by the comments made in our focus group discussions with social workers and managers. We argue the need for a gender-sensitive approach to practice in child protection, which takes account of the differences in the way men and women are constructed by, and experience services. Gender sensitivity, as opposed to gendered thinking, is likely to enable rather than inhibit more effective relationship building with men in child protection.

In my mind it is still just part of the way that the system is geared up in a way to assume that everything will be okay with mum and that everything will inevitably cock up with dad. Yeah do you get what I mean, and that is frustrating, that is hard to deal with (Luke).

10. Gatekeeping and working relationships with men

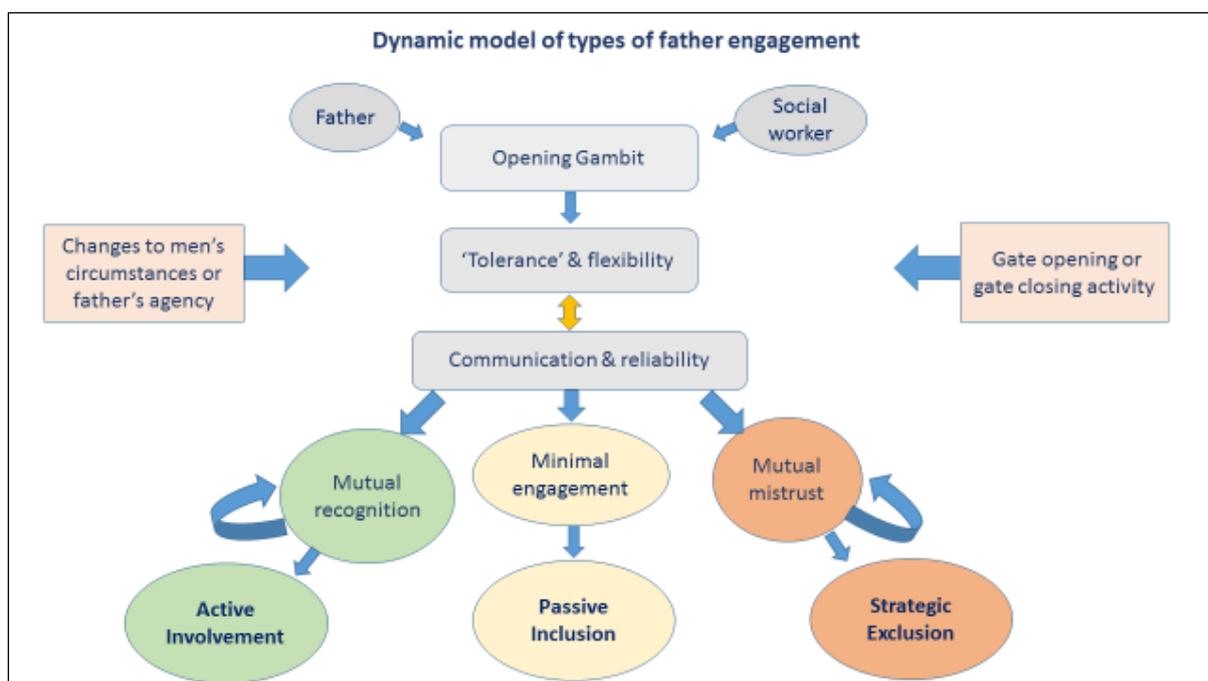
Social workers and their managers were able to generate, or act on ‘**gate-opening**’ and ‘**gate-closing**’ opportunities for men’s involvement as fathers. Men in turn, could also influence such opportunities arising and create their own gate-opening or closing moments. The quality of the working relationship with the social worker was central to this process. Most men wanted a relationship with their social worker and acknowledged the two-way nature of the encounter. They wanted to be listened to and taken seriously and wanted the relationship to have some reciprocity. They also wanted (often practical) support.

A ‘bearable’ working relationship, had enough mutual respect, receptiveness, flexibility and reliability to generate some shared understanding as a basis to discuss the man’s involvement in the child’s life. Barriers to forming working relationships included men and social workers mirroring a sceptical view of each other, with each describing the other as ‘hard to reach’, evasive or defensive. However, things could, and did, change for most men. Most men either described ‘ups and downs’ in their relationship, or could recall at least one previous social worker with whom they had worked well. Yet a significant minority of men experienced mutual scepticism and mistrust as reinforcing, and did not develop any constructive relationship with the social worker.

Factors that may have helped or hindered gate-opening or closing and the development of working relationships, included managing ‘opening gambits’ and the capacity of social workers to ‘tolerate’ men’s emotions and be flexible and reliable. A combination of organisational and attitudinal factors contributed to the gatekeeping mechanisms for men in child protection. Our model of interaction between men and social workers shows how different types or degrees of father engagement may emerge.

Although **‘strategic exclusion’** may be necessary for the wellbeing and safety of the child in some cases, when this occurs, opportunities can be lost for fresh thinking and rehabilitative possibilities. There appears to be a tendency for social workers to settle for **‘passive inclusion’**, yet when there is **‘active involvement’** the results can be transformative.

A dynamic model of types of father engagement.

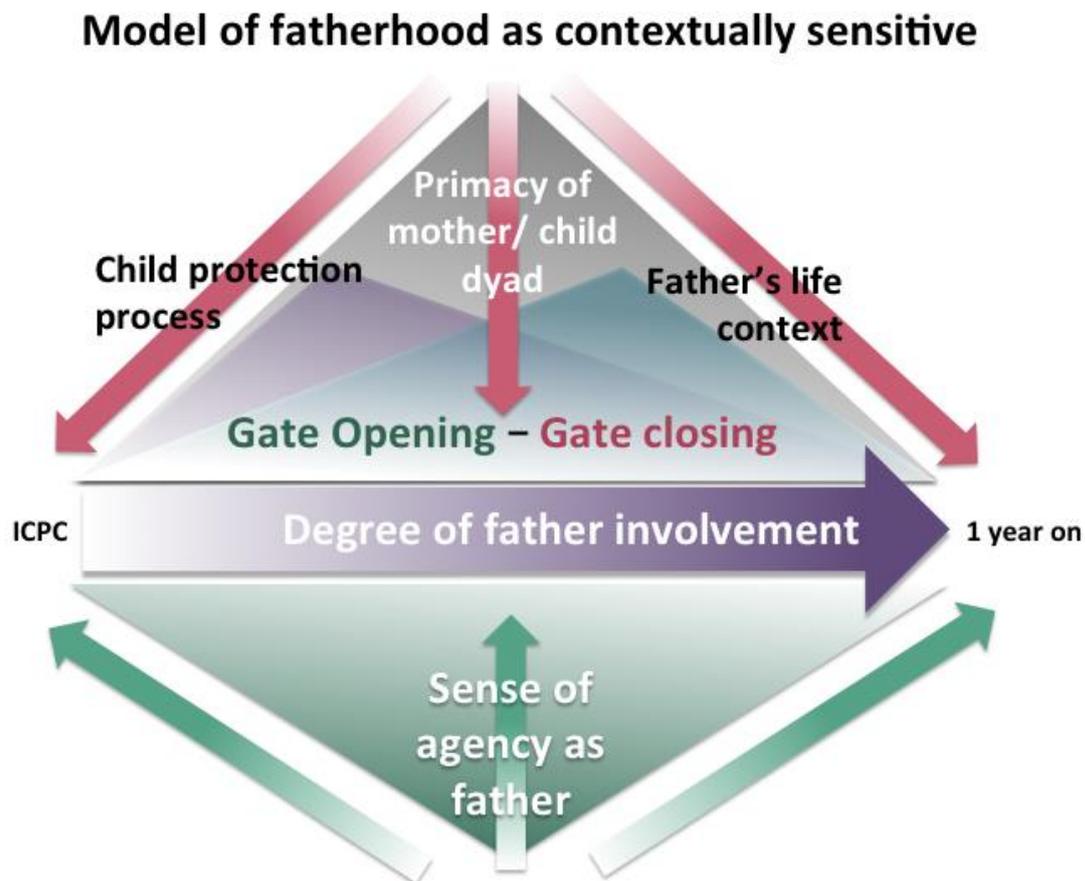


11. A model of fathers' encounters with the child protection system

The longitudinal nature of our contact with the 35 men meant we were able to analyse change over time in relation to their child protection involvement. From this we have established a model to make sense of the ways in which men's lives and the child protection system interacted.

Our overall model of fathers' encounters with the child protection system suggests that fathers' engagement with the particular child protection concerns is influenced by *both* the child protection system *and* each father's own life events. Life events and the child protection system operate in tandem and also influence each other in parallel. Underlying these factors is the presumption by men and child protection professionals of the priority of mothers' relationships with their children. This makes fathering particularly sensitive to the context in

which it takes place and more dependent on, or influenced by, the presence or absence of material and social resources. The actions of social workers and men's unfolding life events mediate these factors in 'gate-opening' and (more frequently) 'gate-closing' moments. Counterbalancing these forces is each father's sense of agency.



12. Implications for Policy and Practice

We have argued throughout, for a 'both-and' approach, where effective engagement with men involves both authoritative and empathic interaction, to hold men accountable, and to directly value their parenting on its own terms. Whilst there is a prevailing organisational interest in 'strengths based' work with families, we suggest that this does not necessarily offer the solution to the entrenched problem of poor father engagement. Our findings point to the value of a more gender differentiated approach in order to understand the experience of motherhood and fatherhood, and in turn, design or adapt services that can respond supportively to each parent. A differentiated approach needs to be signalled in policy documents and routine paperwork, for example, letters to parents, by considering referring

and/or writing to the mother and the father separately. This has important implications for multi-agency guidance and the redrafting of *Working Together*.

Access to the law

Social workers, as the lead professionals in child protection, need better knowledge and understanding of how and when fathers might need access to the law. Local authorities we worked alongside were mostly overlooking the potential to use the current exemptions and legal resources under the LASPO Regulations (Legal Aid, Sentencing & Punishment of Offenders Act 2012) to strengthen child protection plans or to enable fathers to access legal representation. We found examples where fathers were disadvantaged in relation to Child Arrangement Order applications in cases where the mother's care was deemed unsatisfactory but the case had not reached the Section 31 threshold.

Dealing with domestic violence and abuse

Child protection policy and practice guidance (and that of other public agencies, including the Police service) needs to be reviewed in the light of increasing evidence that although most domestic violence and abuse is committed by men against women, a significant minority of men are victims of abuse from their female partners. The complexity of DVA means that more sophisticated assessments procedures and training are needed for social workers and other professionals (Ali et al., 2016).

The range of interventions offered where there is DVA needs to reflect what is known about the greater variety of causes, types, degrees and consequences of abuse on all family members. Programmes for addressing men's DVA are often limited or reliant on short-term funding. A more proactive approach is needed for men who have lost more than one child to public care, who often but not always, have offending histories related to domestic violence. This group of men present complex combinations of vulnerabilities and risk factors, and both pose, and face, the greatest rehabilitative challenges. Currently such men are offered fewer services than mothers who have experienced recurrent care proceedings (Broadhurst & Mason, 2017). Where fathers are incorrectly held responsible for DVA, this may delay or even rule out the possibility of otherwise viable fathers taking on the care of their children.

13. Conclusion

Overall, the study illustrates the possible benefits for fathers and their children of countering gender inequalities in the child protection process and developing a deeper appreciation of

the unique circumstances of each father's life and what he may contribute to his children's future. We suggest that improving child protection practice with men involves, firstly, the development of a gender sensitive approach to practice, supported by organisational and strategic mechanisms and management support. The value of holding in mind that fathers and mothers encounter different expectations, sanctions, opportunities and constraints around their parenting, is pertinent, despite social work's longstanding concern with gender equality. The established approach of gender 'neutrality' may have the unintended consequence of ignoring important differences in men and women's experiences of parenting, leading to, or perpetuating inequalities in how mothers and fathers fare within local authority services and systems. Secondly, we argue the relevance of understanding men's wider lives as fathers, as a necessary part of child protection enquiry and assessment. The need for professional curiosity, persistence and time to create opportunities for hearing men's stories is directly relevant to evaluative decisions about their competence and safety as parents but equally, to building a working relationship out of which such decisions may be 'fairly' reached. We suggest that responding to fathers as people with needs and concerns of their own, through a curiosity about their lives and what they are actually doing, is also likely to improve their agency and ability to be effective, involved, fathers.

Chapter 1: Men and child protection in context

Introduction

The key purpose of this study is to improve policy and practice by addressing the knowledge gap about men in child protection¹. Most studies about parental engagement in child protection do not distinguish between male and female parents (for example Ghaffar et al., 2012; Forrester et al., 2012; Platt, 2008; Ofsted, 2014). Indeed this is also the case with policy documents and guidance such as *Working Together* (HM Government, 2015). The few studies that include men's perspectives have focused on men's *retrospective* views of child protection agencies (e.g., Dominelli et al., 2010) or one off views about children's services (e.g. Morris et al., 2017) rather than attempting to understand how men involved in this process negotiate the day-to-day challenges of their encounter with the child protection system. Given this dearth of understanding, Zanoni and colleagues' (2013) interdisciplinary review concludes that child protection practice with men is only likely to advance if it can draw on the rich insights to be gleaned from qualitative research into fathers' and father figures' own perspectives.

This opening chapter provides some background context to our research which is primarily concerned with fathers' lives and their interactions with the formal child protection system and with social workers. We highlight some key debates about contemporary fatherhood as a backdrop to the long standing problem of engaging men in child protection services and the possible consequences of this for assessment and sound decision making. The tendency for child protection systems not to take proper account of the difficult economic and material circumstances of families has been thrown into sharp relief by recent studies (Bywaters, 2016). The pressures on men and professionals stemming from austerity and 'net widening' in child protection culminating in a higher volume of child protection cases are highlighted.

There is a renewed emphasis, in social work, on relationship based work, whole family and strengths based approaches (Featherstone et al., 2014; Keddell, 2014). These potentially

¹ Within the report we use the term 'child protection', to denote a broad understanding of child protection as part of the spectrum of 'in need' early help, and safeguarding services. The terms 'child protection processes' and 'child protection system' are used more narrowly to refer to the formal child protection system within and beyond enquiries under s47 of the Children Act 1989 and follow up planning and reviewing processes as outlined in *Working Together* 2015.

offer a way for local authorities to manage the growing levels of risk of harm to children whilst also working alongside families in ways that take more account of family practices (Morris & Connolly, 2012). How these rediscovered approaches work in relation to men has not been specifically studied. We also consider key recent policy and law changes, particularly concerning access to legal aid that affected the fathers in our study.

1.1 Contemporary fatherhood and the problem of engaging with men

There is both continuity and change in contemporary expectations of fatherhood. The benefits to children of having fathers who are closely involved in their upbringing is well established so that there is now a widespread expectation that fathers will play a significant role in their children's lives (Dermott & Miller 2015). Yet, at the same time, there are ongoing anxieties about the absence of fathers in families (Social Policy Justice Group, 2006) - also exemplified by the Centre for Social Justice's concept of 'man deserts' (2013). In addition, not all men are comfortable recognising themselves as involved fathers, with some men doubting their competence in this role feeling a stronger affinity with a commitment to work (Barclay and Lupton, 1999; Henwood & Procter, 2003).

This study of men in the child protection system was prompted because of the widespread concern that professionals in child protection struggle to engage men (Clapton, 2009; Osborn, 2014). In these circumstances assessments may not accurately reflect the balance or risk and resource that most men present to children they care for, potentially endangering children and excluding men. Although there is a growing literature on the barriers to involving men in social work practice, this problem has mostly been concerned with service delivery, and investigated from the viewpoint of professionals rather than men (Ewart-Boyle et al., 2015; Maxwell et al., 2012; Skramstad & Skivenes, 2015). Moreover, social workers and other professionals often perceive men in vulnerable families as a threat to themselves as well as to children they are charged to protect and may feel relieved when they apparently absent themselves (Scourfield, 2003; Gilligan et al., 2012).

Much of the attention of social workers is focused upon mothers who are held responsible for children's day-to-day care (Dominelli et al., 2010; Ashley et al., 2013). Where fathers do receive attention from the authorities, it may be as a potential abuser, in which case the tendency may be to seek to exclude them from the family rather than to consider or treat the identified issue (Scott & Crooks, 2004; Scourfield, 2006). Where men are not excluded, they may be assessed as the source of undesirable behaviour without their other needs being

taken into consideration (Rivett, 2010; Forrester et al., 2012). For their part, some fathers may avoid predominantly female social workers, fearing intrusion into their own lives and colluding with the notion that childcare is a female responsibility.

Failure to engage with fathers and male partners of mothers may result in dangerous practice (Scourfield, 2006; Featherstone & Peckover, 2007). Studies of serious case reviews (of child maltreatment related death or serious harm) have highlighted cases of inflexible and fearful thinking by social workers about the role of men in families and finding that men's presence in the family home and the nature of their involvement in caregiving was often overlooked (Brandon et al., 2009, 2010, 2011). Studies examining the safeguarding spectrum, from early difficulties where there are risks of harm through to serious abuse and neglect, have found that although men are often present and influencing family outcomes, they are frequently ignored as either a positive or a negative influence (Brown et al., 2009; Brandon et al., 2009; Gordon et al., 2012; Zanoni et al., 2013).

1.2 Child protection and economic hardship

The challenging environmental and economic circumstances of contemporary life for many in the UK, especially those who struggle to 'just about manage', has implications for men as carers and men in child protection. Deeper poverty and the impact of deprivation as well as welfare reforms have been felt the most sharply by children and their families. At the time when we began our study, levels of child poverty were expected to rise rather than fall (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014). The inadequacies of the child protection system to take poverty and economic hardship into account have been emphasized in recent years. However, three decades ago there were arguments that the child protection system which had been designed to remedy individual and psychosocial disorders was instead being used to deal with wider structural problems and to scrutinise the poor (Parton, 1985; Bebbington & Miles, 1989).

In England, there are renewed claims that the formal child protection system places a disproportionate burden on those who are already disadvantaged and marginalised (Bywaters, 2015b). Bywaters and colleagues' comparative study of inequality across the four UK countries, found that being poor increases the chance of state intervention in your life. Indeed their 'inverse intervention law' showed that less deprived local authorities intervene more readily in children's lives than more deprived neighbouring authorities, with evidence of proportionately more children with a child protection plan or looked after by the state

(Morris, et al., 2016; Bywaters, 2016). This study adds to the US epidemiological evidence which claims that income inequality has a powerful link with maltreatment (Eckenrode et al., 2014) and to the clear evidence that more equal societies and communities have fewer health and social problems than those that are less equal (Marmot, 2010; Wilkinson & Pickett; 2007; Wolfe, 2014).

Welfare reform and changes to the benefits system have had an effect on the lives of men, children and families. The cap on housing benefit and the spare room subsidy have made it particularly difficult for separated fathers to live in accommodation large enough for their children to stay overnight. Working patterns are also changing with men as well as women being part of the 'gig' economy working short or zero hours contracts. This is not the place for a detailed examination of welfare reforms but later chapters expand on the impact of economic stresses on individual men's lives and their struggle to get by.

In recent years local authorities and their practitioners have also been facing pressures: from cuts in funding, from increased workloads as well as from the emotional impact of working with vulnerable and 'difficult' men (Gibson, 2015; Sidebotham et al., 2016; Ofsted, 2014). Financial austerity and government spending reviews have seen successive waves of reduction in the amount of central funds available to local authorities and the requirement to retain statutory provision has seen deep cuts to many non-statutory support services, including services for men. Although they have less money to spend, local authorities have been given some control about how to spend these reduced funds in line with recommendations from the Munro Review of Child Protection which called for a stripping back of bureaucracy, and a degree of local autonomy informing both day-to-day practice and wider policy (Munro, 2011).

While funds have been dwindling, the volume of child protection work has been steadily increasing. The number of children with a child protection plan rose from just over 29,000 in 2008 to over 50,316 children in 2016, although the year-on-year increase is starting to slow down (DfE, 2016). The increased pressure on children's services to protect children effectively can result in harsh criticisms of these services (Ofsted, 2013; Jutte et al., 2014). This fear of the consequences of being found wanting also tends to fuel the risk-averse policy and practice that Munro was so critical of in her child protection review (Munro, 2011).

1.3 Renewed approaches to child protection social work

One challenge to the managerialist risk-focused approach has been to re-emphasise the value of relationships and relational practice (Featherstone et al., 2014). Relationship based practice foregrounds the reparative potential of the relationship between the worker and the individual, including fathers and men. The adoption of a strengths-based approach is seen as another way to manage risk and work alongside the family. These approaches emerged in the 1990s as part of the 'refocusing' of child protection away from net widening (Gibbons et al., 1985) which identified increasing numbers of cases as 'child protection' towards partnership with families (Turnell & Edwards, 1997). There has been renewed interest in these ways of working and substantial funding from the Department for Education's Innovation Programme has been directed to promoting and evaluating strengths-based approaches, and in particular the 'Signs of Safety' model (Turnell & Edwards, 1997). There are, however, critiques of the current use of these models including the argument that unless the social, political and economic contexts within which families exist is explicitly recognised and addressed, these ways of working will still focus on individual not structural failings (Roose et al., 2012).

Each of the three authorities who were our research partners had adopted a strengths-based approach to practice. In one authority this had been in place for over three years while the other two authorities had only recently adopted 'Signs of Safety' when the study began in 2015. One local authority's 'Signs of Safety' training manual stressed that strengths based approaches were a good fit with Munro's emphasis on managing not eliminating risk. It noted the need to change the language used in practice to reflect '*that we cannot ensure safety, but need to strive towards it, and have realistic expectations*' (Turnell, 2012, p46).

1.4 Access to legal representation

Changes to the family justice system since 2010, have made it more difficult for private law applicants, primarily parents or other relatives, to get legal advice and representation and to go to court (Kaganas, 2017; Harding & Newnham, 2016). This has prompted the use of mediation and agreement outside court in section 8 applications and indeed in most cases of family disputes. More restrictions to accessing legal aid from 1 April 2013 were made in The Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 ("LASPO"). A key change was that legal aid for most private family law cases would only be available where there is specific evidence in relation to domestic violence or child protection. While this adds further impediments to accessing legal aid overall, it also potentially opens the door to legal aid for

some fathers (and of course mothers too) involved in the child protection system where for example a father can present specific evidence that they have been domestically abused, or that a mother is responsible for the child's maltreatment. Of course the same criteria apply to mothers in relation to evidence about fathers.

1.5 Summary of the report structure

In the remainder of this report, Chapter 2 outlines the methodology employed to understand more about both fathers' lives and their experiences of child protection. Chapter 3 reports findings from the analysis of 150 children's case files to examine the extent to which men are involved in children's lives where there are substantiated child protection concerns and how and whether these men were engaged in the ensuing child protection process. Chapter 4 is primarily concerned with introducing the characteristics and the profiles of the 35 men who participated in the in depth, year-long study. It also provides a discussion about the smaller group of mothers who took part in the in depth study. Chapters 5 and 6 reveal the hinterland of fathers' lives and the preoccupations, motivations, strengths and weaknesses that fathers bring into child protection. Chapter 7 considers the ways in which time and timing feature in the engagement between the men and social workers in child protection, exploring different staging points for both the men and the system. Chapter 8 considers the issue of gender, and which aspects of men's experience of the child protection system relate specifically to their position as men and as fathers. Chapter 9 examines ways in which child protection can be understood as a form of gatekeeping for men. Chapter 10 summarises important patterns of change and movement in the encounter between men and the child protection system, bringing together findings from previous chapters and developing models for use in practice with men. Finally, Chapter 11 considers implications for policy and practice from the findings and other insights generated by the study.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Objectives and research questions

The key aims of this study were to reveal experiences and patterns as men travel through the formal child protection process. This was to provide insights into their engagement as caregivers and men with both their child and with social workers. Understanding the men and their perspectives in this way can guide future practice and tackle some of the barriers to men's engagement and involvement.

The overall study was guided by the following objectives and their inter-related research questions:

To understand how men's experiences of child protection unfold over time

- How do fathers and father figures experience child protection practice and procedures in real time from the point of the initial child protection conference (ICPC) for the period of a year?
- What are the various pathways for men in families where a child protection plan is made?
- How do men describe their feelings, account for their actions and perceive agencies' actions?
- Are there critical moments in the child protection process and in the men's narratives which are particularly significant for participants' lives and/ or their engagement as men?
- How do a small number of the children's mothers perceive their own role and that of their partner or ex-partner in protecting the child and promoting his or her welfare?
What are the points of difference and similarity with the men's accounts?

To glean from a wider context of retrospective child protection cases, the extent to which men are absent or involved as father figures

- How many men were involved as father figures in 150 children's cases from three local authorities where a child protection plan had been newly made
- What was the profile of the men involved as parental figures in children's lives?

To understand, retrospectively, the extent and nature of men's involvement in child protection processes in their local and regional area

- Across 150 cases, from January 2014 - January 2015, how many men were involved in the plans and the practice to keep the child safe?
- What was the pattern of men's involvement in child protection conferences and meetings, and did they stay involved?

To discern the extent to which the prospective qualitative sample reflected similar profiles and demographic features to the retrospective sample of men from the 150 children's files, and to combine learning from the two samples

- Are the profiles and demographic characteristics of men similar or different across the two groups?
- What are the implications of the different strategies and practices employed by social workers or other professionals to involve men in protecting and safeguarding children?
- What are the barriers and enablers for working with men?

Two complementary approaches were taken to answer these questions and the study had two particular strands. The central innovative aspect of the project is the qualitative longitudinal (QL) study of men's experiences of child protection processes which involved in depth interviews and regular, ongoing contacts with participating men. This was contextualized by primarily quantitative data about men's involvement from the case file analysis of 150 child protection cases from three separate local authorities. This was to capture more variation than is possible in a qualitative sample.

In addition focus groups were held with social workers and managers in each of our three participating local authorities to test out findings from both the quantitative and the qualitative aspects of the study. The groups were also used to gain a professional perspective on the barriers and facilitators of working with men in child protection.

2.2 The case file analysis in the three local authorities

The aim of the case file analysis was to look retrospectively at the recording of children's formal protection processes and practice for each of the three participating local authorities, focusing on the inclusion and involvement of men, and the identification of men in children's families. This broader picture of the involvement of men also provides a context for the in

depth qualitative study of men's own experiences of child protection and a point of demographic comparison between the men in the file search and the men in the QL study.

We reviewed the case recording for a total of 150 children, 50 in each authority, retrospectively, over a 12 month period, from the time when the child protection plan was made. The figure of 50 children per authority (hence 150 child protection cases) was selected to provide an overall sample which would be large enough to offer convincing descriptive statistics about the characteristics of the men and the cases and to provide a point of comparison to contextualise the qualitative data. Cases were selected consecutively in each authority starting from 1 January 2014.

Data gathering from the case files

Locally held electronic case file data on 150 children were studied systematically using the same specially prepared file schedule in each local authority. In keeping with local authority practice, we treated each individual child as a 'case'. We also noted which children were part of a sibling group (so a sibling group of three children would be three cases) and part of the same family to acknowledge the relationships and needs of individual children within families and to understand the complexity of father involvement between individual children and within families that might have full half or step siblings.

The pre-prepared file schedule drew on the audit tool used by the Fatherhood Institute's recent study to elicit information about father involvement in child protection (Osborn, 2014) and on other studies carried out within the Centre for Research on Children and Families at UEA. The schedule tracked demographic information about men identified as fathers or father figures, and information about key characteristics (including substance misuse, domestic violence, mental health, criminality, disability). It also included sections on contacting and staying in touch with fathers; whether professionals see men as protective or risk factors; men's participation in key child protection meetings; the quality of men's contact and relationships with children. We also collected information about any services offered directly to fathers as part of the child protection planning, or if the plan was discontinued before the end of 12 months, as part of services to families of children in need. Whilst most of this information was collected for quantitative analysis, we also made notes about the language and descriptions applied to fathers and father figures and noted examples of inclusive practice and/or barriers to inclusive practice with men. We used additional notes for qualitative analysis and to understand the story of the case and to create case studies.

Analysis of the data from the children's case files

Quantitative data were coded and loaded into the statistical software package SPSS to produce descriptive statistics to demonstrate a profile of key men and a pattern of their involvement over the early months of the child protection process and in any follow up services. The qualitative material from the file schedule was used to create case studies and to provide a broad evaluation of the amount and quality of participative practice with men and fathers.

2.3 The Qualitative Longitudinal (QL) methodology

An innovative qualitative longitudinal (QL) methodology (Neale, Henwood & Holland, 2012; Thomson, 2007) was used in order to develop a prospective study of men's experiences of child protection over a 12-month period. This involved "*walking alongside*" participants through their lived experiences (Neale, Henwood & Holland, 2012,p8) to provide "*a close-up shot of real lives with a focus on plot, story line, turning points and defining moments*" (McLeod & Thomson, 2009, p61). For our project, this method enabled insights into each development and turning point, as the men encountered and attempted to come to terms with the child protection process and the demands of their lives as fathers. A qualitative longitudinal approach also involves addressing the issue of time, in theoretical and methodological terms both as a concept that informs how lives are lived, narrated and imagined, and as a means to examine the temporal aspects of a local authority process (Andrews, 2014).

The 12-month QL study consisted of longer in-depth interviews and regular (approximately monthly) contacts with participating men, to capture their experiences and perceptions of the child protection process and relationships with social workers. It involved looking back, at men's histories, relationships, fathering experiences and any past encounters with welfare agencies, and accompanying them forward, into the current encounter with child protection and its impact on their lives. The qualitative longitudinal methodology has therefore enabled us to map men's encounters with formal or informal support or monitoring systems, their responses to welfare agencies, the changing material and relational circumstances of their lives, and their strategies for material and psychological coping over time.

Sampling and recruitment

Our aim was to recruit up to 30 men (ten from each of the three participating local authorities) shortly after an initial child protection conference (ICPC) where a child protection plan had been made. These men were not part of or recruited from the retrospective case file analysis sample because it was necessary to have a common child protection time reference point, which the ICPC provided. This enabled better and more robust comparisons between men. Men from the retrospective case file analysis might or might not have still been 'in' the formal child protection system. Those who might still have been in child protection would have been at a 'late' not an 'early' stage, so opportunities to understand early engagement would have been lost. We therefore aimed to look *retrospectively* at case recording and *prospectively* at men's lives and practice.

We aimed to over-recruit men initially to allow for some anticipated attrition. We expected that some men might find it difficult to commit to keeping in touch with us for the full year. However, we were aware that a key challenge in qualitative longitudinal (QL) studies is not so much avoiding attrition as successfully sustaining and managing a research relationship with participants over a period of time. Alongside the 30 or so men, we intended to recruit a smaller group of mothers. The mothers were to be the birth mother of the child with a child protection plan who might be either a current or former partner of the eligible man.

Details of the sampling and recruitment process are in Appendix 1.

The sample of men and mothers

In total, 35 men and six mothers were successfully recruited into the QL study. A more detailed descriptive picture of the participating men is provided in Chapter 4 (see also Appendix 2 for a descriptive overview of the 35 men and profiles of the mothers). We recruited at least ten men from each local authority, and achieved a geographical spread and mix of rural and urban areas across a particular part of England. We recruited both resident and non-resident fathers, and both birth and step-fathers (and some who are both) as well as two grandfathers. We also recruited men who were in a partnership with the child's mother, and those who were separated from her. All the mothers who took part were married to or in a partnership with the participating man, at the beginning of the study.

Our sample also includes men who, at the time of the ICPC, were seen as implicated in the child protection concerns and those who were considered by the local authority as protective. In two cases we recruited two men who were connected to the same child named

in the child protection plan, and currently or formerly to that child's mother. In both cases the two men involved were the non-resident birth father, and the mothers' current partner. The willingness of the participating authorities to work with us to try out and adapt recruitment methods was one reason we were able to recruit the sample successfully. Another reason seemed to be that once we had access to a man's phone number, and were able to explain the study and ask him directly if he was willing to take part, most men said yes. We approached 40 men in this way, and achieved 35 participants. This point is important in the context of men, as service users, often being perceived as 'hard to reach' (Davies, 2016)

Limitations of our QL sample

One area where the sample is not diverse is in relation to ethnicity, but our sample does reflect the ethnicity of the three participating authorities, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. Almost all participants were White British. Only two participants were from a minority ethnic group, and one other was White European. Also, we were not able to recruit any fathers who were very young at the time of the ICPC. Our youngest participant (a birth father) was 21, although some of the men were very young when they first became fathers. Another limitation of our sample is that it under-represents the views of men who were not invited to, or did not attend, the initial child protection conference. In part this was related to challenges we encountered when negotiating access to men through social workers as gatekeepers. We found that where social workers expressed concerns about a man's suitability, or particularly his lack of engagement with services, it was hard to enlist further support in making contact with him. We attempted a more purposive approach to sampling, in order to address the issue of representing the experiences of men not invited to the ICPC, but this was not successful. When we asked for further help to try and make contact with such men, some social workers seemed defensive or closed down the request due to their view that the man had already disengaged. This means our findings may therefore reflect the experiences of more readily engaged fathers. However, a further implication is that the barriers to engagement and relationship building identified in our analysis are likely to be even greater for men who are missing from the initial conference.

In relation to recruiting mothers, where men were separated from the child's mother, they were all reluctant to give permission for us to contact her. The reason men gave in these circumstances was sometimes ongoing post-separation conflict, but in some cases it was also because of the mother's mental health or substance misuse issues. We recognise this as a potential limitation in terms of the range of mothers' views. However, the design and aim of the study was to prioritise (and not to corroborate) men's perspectives and sustain

their participation, and therefore we anticipated, and acknowledged this limitation from the outset.

The research interviews and ongoing contact with participating men

Each participating man in the qualitative longitudinal study had a dedicated researcher who was in touch regularly throughout the following 12 months. In the two cases where there were two participating men connected to the same child, each man had a different researcher. Each participating mother was interviewed by a separate researcher, in order to allow the mothers to also have a dedicated researcher who had no direct contact with any participating man. The men, and the mothers, were interviewed at length, at the start, and end of the 12-month period, but only the men were involved in the ongoing monthly contacts. The regular, ongoing contacts with the men happened approximately monthly, and were invitations to 'catch up' and reflect on any changes either in their personal lives or in their encounters with the child protection process, social workers or other professionals. For around half the men participants, the researchers also made a 'mid-point', or six-monthly visit, at the convenience of each man. This was in place of a scheduled phone contact, and was planned as part of the iterative, ongoing approach to our analysis of the growing, rich data. We used these mid-point visits to discuss themes and issues that were emerging across the whole group, such as housing and work insecurity, and access to legal representation. More detail about the research interviews and on-going contacts is in Appendix 3.

Ethical issues relating to the QL study

The study was granted ethical approval by the University of East Anglia Ethics Committee, clearance was also given via the research governance processes in each of the three participating local authorities. A qualitative longitudinal study raises particular ethical issues and to address this we employed a combination of pro-active and reactive ethical strategies. The main issues pertinent to conducting an in depth study over time are achieving informed consent, managing the ongoing research relationship, and managing the volume of sensitive data. The details of managing these ethical complexities are discussed in Appendix 4.

Analysis of the QL study data by ‘case and wave’

The in-depth contact over the period of a year with each man generated a high volume of rich data. It was imperative to organise and manage this information as soon as possible in order not to be overwhelmed by its volume. Accordingly, new data were digitised, summarised and indexed using NVivo software and Word to follow the ‘Frameworks’ approach to data management, retrieval and analysis (NatCen, 2014, Ritchie et al 2014). Data were sorted in the following ways: chronologically by time wave; by each man’s ‘case’ and by different themes (more description of analysis by ‘case and wave’ is given in Appendix 5). In this way, rather than having a separate data collection period, we were continually analysing data as they arrived, and working back from new data to previous data to form a “*cumulative*” picture (Saldaña, 2003, p30) of processes of change over time. We have been able to group waves of data together and analyse them progressively using “*framing questions*” (Saldaña, 2003, p. 64, 67) such as:

- ‘What increases or emerges through time?’
- ‘What kinds of surges or epiphanies occur through time?’
- ‘What decreases or ceases through time?’
- ‘What contextual and intervening conditions appear to influence and affect participant change?’

2.4 Focus groups with practitioners and managers

Focus groups were held in each of the three participating local authorities to ‘sense check’ preliminary findings and to prompt discussion about what helped and hindered working with men in child protection. Only one group per local authority had originally been envisaged, but because of the interest and commitment from each authority, separate focus groups of 8 -10 people were held with social workers and managers in each authority. Each group was led by a member of the research team and for some groups an additional team member observed and took notes. With the consent of each group, the meeting was audio recorded and each of the six discussions was later transcribed ready for analysis.

Including the file study in the early months of 2015 and the QL study which spanned the time period from March 2015 – October 2016, we have an overall picture of around 2 years of child protection practice in the participating authorities.

Chapter 3: Men in the lives of 150 children with a child protection plan

Introduction

This chapter provides key findings from the background analysis of the case files of 150 children with a newly made child protection plan. The aim of the analysis was to find out how many men were involved in children's lives and in the child protection process, and in what ways. Learning more about the men in the lives of these 150 children also allows us to gauge the extent to which the 35 men studied in depth, who are the major focus of the rest of the report, shared broadly similar characteristics or similar experiences of participation. This and other information about the cases also provided a wider understanding of child protection practice in the three participating local authorities.

We reviewed the case recording for 50 children from each of the three authorities, collecting information from the time of the initial child protection conference (ICPC) in early 2014, for a period of 12 months. We collected some information about the child and the child's mother, but our focus was primarily on the men who were connected to the child. We defined as '*connected*' any men recorded or acknowledged in the child's file as being in the close family network, or involved in the child protection issue. All connected men were tracked for their characteristics, inclusion and involvement in the 12 months of child protection assessment, planning and practice.

3.1 Are men absent or involved in the children's lives?

'Connected' men

In contrast with the fears expressed about the absence of men in many children lives by the Centre for Social Justice (Social Policy Justice Group, 2006; Centre for Social Justice, 2013) it was apparent that men were present and stayed present in the lives of most of the 150 children whose child protection files we analysed. Rather than an absence of male figures, most children had more than one man present in their lives, linked to them as kin or by some other relationship. We could identify 139 men who were connected as a father figure to a particular child. Just over half of these were birth fathers while the others included stepfathers, mother's current or former partner, grandparents and other male relatives. The numbers of the different types of connected men are shown in Appendix 6, in Figure 3.1.

All 150 children had at least one man connected to them. A small minority of 29 children had only their birth father as a connected man whereas 51 children had two such men and 46 children had three or more connected men and in their network.

‘Additional’ men

Beyond ascertaining the connected men discussed above, we were able to note a minimum of 113 individual ‘additional’ men. It was difficult to establish the exact number, due to unclear or imprecise references made in the case recording. These additional men were mostly less involved male relatives: grandfathers; step-grandfathers; uncles; adult siblings (full, half or step). However, there were also 23 instances where additional men were living with the family or were regular visitors to the home but not part of the family. These men included: a lodger, a landlord, un-named ‘male visitors’, men in a multiple occupancy household and un-named ‘drugs contacts’. Although these additional men were not in parental roles, some of them may have had an influence on the safety and wellbeing of the child. Because of limited information about these men, for the remainder of the chapter we are focusing on the connected men who were all involved with the child.

The children in the context of family life

Family lives showed some fluidity, and changes of family membership over the year reflected the complexity of family life and parenting in the context of risks of, or actual, significant harm. At the time of the initial child protection conference, only 62 children were living with a father, although as we show later this does not mean these fathers were absent from their children’s lives. All but 17 of the 150 children (133) were living with at least one parent, mostly their mother. A minority (40) were living with both birth parents.

One year on, the number of children living with a parent had dropped (from 133 to 104) and six fewer children were still living with both birth parents. The biggest change was among those who were living just with their mother which had dropped from 71 to 49 children. A total of 65 children lived with a father by the end of the year, just three more than at the outset. However, the number of children living with a birth or step father as their *primary carer* increased from three to 11, meaning that 8 children had moved to the care of a birth father or step-father over the 12 month period.

As part of the child protection decision making, 9 of the 150 children had moved away from their birth or extended family network by the end of the year, either to foster care (7 children aged under 9) or residential care (2 children aged over 10). Two further young people were

living in semi-independent accommodation by the end of the year. The number of children living with a grandparent had increased from 5 to 14. Two children had sadly died; one was stillborn and one died within the first six months of the child protection plan, with the mother being under suspicion.

The majority of the men were connected to the child through either a current or past couple relationship with the child's mother. The types of relationship between men and mothers at the time of the ICPC is illustrated in Appendix 6 in Figure 3.2 which shows, interestingly, that by far the majority of connected men were separated fathers.

The following example illustrates the complexity of family life in some of these child protection cases with a child moving to live with a paternal grandmother who was required to supervise contact between the child and her son. This case is also an example of enduring contact between the child and the birth father when he is not resident.

Family relationships and father contact

The couple separated when Kit was a baby but Curtis had been involved in his son's life since birth. When the parents separated Kit moved to live with his paternal grandmother. Curtis also lived there for a while but did not see himself as the main carer. It was recorded that he was unable to care for the child alone but wanted to be part of his son's life. The file showed a history of domestic violence between Curtis and Angela, Kit's mother, as well as recent allegations of domestic violence with his new partner who was also pregnant with Curtis' child.

Case Outcome: A residence order was made within 6 months and Kit remained with his paternal grandmother. The grandmother was expected to supervise contact and Curtis appeared to have contact each month.

What kind of involvement or contact were connected men having with their children?

Only a minority of these closely connected men lived with the child, as we have shown, but separation did not mean men were not involved in the child's life. Indeed overall, the level of contact between children and men tended to stay steady and in some cases increased over the year, for example some children moved to live with their birth father as the main carer. Most connected men kept in at least some contact with their child and one year on only 39 of the 139 men were not in touch with the child at all. There were different reasons for men

ceasing to have contact, including being excluded from the child's life, moving out of the family, and sometimes moving away from the area. There were also three men who were no longer alive and a lack of clarity about whether or not the birth father was alive in seven cases.

The level and pattern of contact is demonstrated in Appendix 6, figure 3.3.

Although most post-separation contact was with birth fathers, in a small minority of cases there was continuing contact with stepfathers.

Continuing contact with a stepfather

In one case where child protection concerns centred on neglect and the mother's new relationship with a convicted sex offender, contact with a former stepfather was supported by the social worker. The social worker mediated between the birth mother and the stepfather who had a conflictual relationship, to help them agree contact arrangements, although the conflict did continue.

Birth fathers' contact with children

The picture of contact for birth fathers is complex. On the one hand their involvement was steady or improving. The half of the birth fathers who lived with their children at the outset remained resident (at both time periods) and 15 of the originally separated fathers increased their level of involvement over the 12 months (including 5 fathers either moving into the child's household or the child moving in to their household). However, birth fathers also represent a high proportion of the men having *no contact* with their child at both points in time; 24 out of the 30 men who were noted as having no contact with their child at the time of the ICPC were birth fathers, and 22 out of 33 were in this position by the end of the 12 months. More specifically, 12 birth fathers were having less frequent contact with children by the end of the 12 months.

Birth fathers are the group with the most contact with their children and also make up the majority of the men without contact with their child. However, this is probably because they are the largest group of 'connected' men.

Parental responsibility

Parental responsibility or PR refers to the legal rights, duties, powers, responsibilities and authority a parent has for a child and the child's property. Being a birth father or having

formal PR is not always a good indication of who is in contact and who may be in a fathering role with a child (Brandon et al., 2009). Within these files, there was evidence that 65 connected men had no formal parental responsibility (PR) while 50 men clearly did have PR (44 of whom were birth fathers). For 24 connected men this information was either not recorded, or the PR status was unclear. Determining the child's paternity was sometimes an issue and wrangles over paternity featured in many files with DNA tests sometimes being used as part of a claim for PR or as part of a man's application to court for continued contact.

3.2 What picture of men in children's lives can be gleaned from case files?

The picture we are able to build from the files of men and their involvement with children and with children's services is limited. Basic information, like an address and phone number was mostly available but overall, there are important aspects of men's lives about which the case recording tells us little. Although the identity of the birth father was known for all but ten of these 150 children, the fathers' whereabouts were not always known.

Although resident birth fathers were most likely to be known about (and included in practice, as discussed later) there was often limited information even about this group of men. Separated fathers, the largest group of connected men, were even less likely to feature in the file recording in anything other than a sketchy way. This may be because they were less visible, less available or because the social worker had less time or motivation to seek them out and assess them, or obtain a full social history.

The characteristics of the 139 connected men

The information that was recorded about the 139 connected men's characteristics and background, tended to be found in the records relating to the ICPC. However, this information is very thin in comparison to what was learned about the 35 men studied in depth, who are introduced and described in Chapter 4. That said, the profiles of the two groups appear to be broadly similar in many respects.

The 139 connected men's age, ethnicity, religion, employment

Age: The ages of connected men were available for 94 of the 139 men and ranged from 16 to 64 years. The youngest recorded birth father was aged 19 and the oldest was aged 59.

Ethnicity: Ethnicity was recorded for 80 connected men, almost all most of whom were White British (n=66) with a small minority recorded as White Other (n=7). Somewhat surprisingly, but reflecting the predominantly White adult male population of the three local authorities, no other ethnic groups were recorded for the 139 connected men.

Employment: Information about men's employment or work situation was difficult to establish and, what little detail there was, diminished over time. At the time of the ICPC, employment detail was known for only 49 men, and 12 months later this was known for only 34 men. From the information available the pattern of employment for these men and whether they were working, for example, full-time or part-time, appeared to stay fairly steady over the year. Interestingly, fewer men were recorded as unemployed one year on. The detail is available in Appendix 6, Table 3.1.

The 139 men's additional needs and other characteristics

Information was collected about a number of background factors, additional needs or problems for men, including: behavioural/social disorders, mild or severe mental health problems, physical disability, physical health problems, learning difficulty, drug or alcohol problems, neglect/abuse in childhood, domestic violence in childhood, being a victim or perpetrator of domestic violence in adulthood, and being a risk of harm to children. Clear information on many of these factors was rare and was either not recorded or difficult to establish. The available information is summarised in Appendix 6 in Figure 3.4 which also compares recording patterns about men and about mothers. As with fathers, detail about mothers was also patchy, but where there was recording, mothers appeared more likely to be shown as having mild mental health problems and as having been the victim of domestic violence, while men were more likely to be recorded as having had problems with alcohol, as being the perpetrator of domestic violence and as being a risk to children. The significance of these issues in the lives of fathers and in their relationships is discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

3.3 Child protection in the context of the three local authorities

The demography of the three local authorities

The three local authorities who were our research partners share a number of similarities but also some differences. All have a mix of urban and rural areas and two of the three are close 'statistical neighbours' (DfE, 2017). Each has limited ethnic diversity with predominantly white populations across the three authorities. Over 90 per cent of the population in these

authorities identified as “White British” in the 2011 Census. Information from the 2014-2015 Local Safeguarding Children Board’s (LSCB) annual report for each authority showed that this proportion had dropped somewhat in the intervening years. These reports also note that it continues to change in response to patterns of migration and the re-settlement of people outside of London and other metropolitan cities (including to our three local authorities) as a result of the cap on housing benefit and the spare room subsidy.

Patterns of deprivation across England are complex with the most and the least deprived neighbourhoods spread throughout England (Gill, 2015). These three authorities exemplified this complexity with each having pockets of extreme deprivation surrounded by areas of much less deprivation including some areas of great affluence. None of the three authorities identified better practice in working with men in child protection as a priority in their annual LSCB reports for 2014-2015, the time period of the case file analysis.

A brief overview of the 150 children’s cases

One aim of securing a sample size of 150 children at an equivalent stage of child protection (a newly made child protection plan) was to be able to make comparisons with the national picture of child protection cases. It also allowed findings from this sample to provide a baseline from which to check similarities and differences with the 35 men we studied in depth (the QL sample).

The case files concerned 71 girls and 78 boys ranging in age from unborn at the time of the ICPC to 16 years of age. (One further unborn baby who had been included on a child protection plan was then stillborn with gender not recorded). The recent national trend to include older as well as younger children on child protection plans was evident here too, and not all of the children were young. The largest age groupings were for pre-school (n=50) and junior school aged children (n=33) but there were also nine adolescents aged 15 or 16 as well as 26 infants. Most of the children were of White British ethnicity (n=132) with 11 listed as White Other (including White Irish) and the remaining 8 children coming from a BAME group.

In terms of the maltreatment type, neglect dominated as a category of child protection plan in these cases in all three authorities. This is consistent with the national trend for England year ending March 31 2015 (DfE, 2015; Jutte et al., 2015) and also reflected in our QL sample of 35 men, where many of the men told us that professional concerns about the child were in

relation to neglect. Illustrations of the children's ages and the category of child protection plan are in Appendix 6 figures 3.5 and 3.6.

Overall, the 150 cases provide a good enough match with national child protection statistics for the same period and can be said to be reasonably representative of child protection cases throughout England.

The trajectory of children's cases over the 12 months

Within twelve months of the ICPC, just under three quarters of the 150 children no longer had a child protection plan and were not receiving help from within the formal child protection system. At the one year stage, 36 children still had a child protection plan in place, and 46 (almost a third) were receiving services as a child in need. Just over a quarter of the 150 cases (n=37), were listed as 'closed' (for two cases this was due to the child having left the local authority), while in a further 9 cases a special guardianship order (SGO) had been made and closure was imminent. Eleven children had some kind of looked after status, nine of whom were living in foster or residential care. The status of the case at this one year stage, was not clear in 11 cases. This is illustrated in Appendix 6 Figure 3.7. This case trajectory is similar for the children linked to the 35 men studied in depth discussed in Chapter 4, although an even greater number of their cases were closed (10 or just under a third) and a smaller proportion of the cases (5 out of 35) still included a child with a child protection plan in place.

At the time of the ICPC, three of the 150 children had a legal order relating to their care. However, twelve months later, this had risen to 35 children with some kind of legal order (see Appendix 6 Figure 3.8). The cases linked to the QL sample of 35 men, had six completed sets of care proceedings by the end of the year.

The smaller sample of 35 cases appear to reflect the profile of the wider group of 150 cases. Although more cases are closed in the smaller QL sample and there is a somewhat lower proportion of children still with a child protection plan, there is a higher proportion of legal orders in the smaller sample. Chapter 4 outlines the trajectory of these cases in more detail.

3.4 Are men involved in child protection processes?

The picture from the files of men's involvement with children's services was limited and we have already noted that important aspects of men's lives are missing from the case

recording. Across the 12 month period, it was clear that fathers, father figures and male relatives moved in and out of children's homes, lives and networks. Files showed that there were often attempts to include fathers and men, though with differing degrees of persistence and interaction. Overall, it was rare to see explicit and specific action points or services offered to men. The men that social workers were most often engaging with, or had knowledge of were birth fathers who lived with the child, or had a high level of contact or involvement.

Once a man had become engaged in the formal child protection process, attending the ICPC and subsequent core group meetings, they tended, to some degree, to stay involved. Just over a third of the connected men (58) were invited to the ICPC and most of the invited men were birth fathers (41 of the 58 invitees). Offering an invitation promised a good level of attendance with only thirteen invitees failing to attend. This suggests tenacity both on the part of the men and the practitioners assisting their participation.

Five of the men who attended were there for only part of the meeting. These 'split conferences' were most often arranged when there was a high level of conflict between the parents or concerns about domestic violence. Chapters 8 and 9 discuss men's experience and perception of conferences managed in this way.

Little is known about those men who were not invited to the ICPC. No invitation was issued to 51 men and for 23 men this was because their identity or whereabouts was not known at that point. Whilst there could be legitimate reasons for deciding not to invite a man, an invitation rate of 42% indicates a low baseline for inclusion at this important stage of the child protection process. Involvement at this early stage would, arguably, not only produce a better, more accurate, assessment of the risks and strengths of connected men, but also foster their ongoing participation.

The following case illustrates missed opportunities for this early involvement.

Missed opportunities for early father involvement

There were two men involved with the four children in this family; Adam, the separated birth father of three children and the mother's new partner Jack who was the father of the unborn child.

At the ICPC no parents attended. Adam was not invited or contacted prior to the conference and there was no discussion of either men's strengths or risks during the meeting with the discussion focusing instead on Cherry, the mother. Both men were, however, named as core group members. The child protection plan for all children was for neglect because of concerns about Cherry's ability to care for the children and meet their needs. A home visit to Adam occurred only after he contacted the social worker himself after Cherry 'let slip' that children's services had concerns about neglect. Adam also came to see the social worker with his current partner to discuss his further concerns about the children's care.

The file noted that Adam has always had regular contact with his children including overnight stays. There were no concerns over his care and it was recorded that he showed commitment to all three children and was supported by his extended family.

Although both birth fathers attended and contributed to the two subsequent review conferences and were keen to work with children's services, there were missed opportunities to engage with Adam in particular, before the ICPC. It was Adam's own commitment that ensured his ongoing involvement as a resource in the children's lives, which was often in opposition to his ex-partner Cherry's wishes.

We looked for evidence of a man's protective and problematic behaviour being discussed during the ICPC (whether or not he was present), and found 48 cases where men's *strengths* were discussed in comparison with 62 cases where *concerns or risks* were raised. In terms of men's specific inclusion at this stage, we looked at goals set for men and any support needs or services specified at the ICPC. We distinguished between goals set for 'parents' and goals assigned specifically to a (named) man. Mostly goals were set for 'parents' but 35 men were given a specific task or goal as part of the child protection plan. Examples of specific goals set for men included: to support the child's school attendance; to address their own alcohol or drug issues; not to contact or visit the family home; to seek legal advice re PR and to attend a children's centre.

There was evidence of a service being offered specifically to a man in 26 cases. Services offered tended to be limited in their range. They included accessing or attending a children's

centre, drugs service, perpetrator programme, bereavement counselling, and parenting programme.

Involvement of men in child protection over time

By the time of the first review conference (three months after the ICPC) there was still a high level of commitment to attending from the men. Of the 45 men who attended the initial child protection conference, 40 came to the review conference. This could suggest a good level of communication and encouragement from social workers and other practitioners to enable men to continue to participate once they have become engaged. It could also suggest a high level of tenacity from the men. While the overall picture of men's inclusion and involvement appeared to diminish over time, this drop of involvement needs to be understood in the context of a steadily reducing number of children who were still the subject of a child protection plan.

At the point of the first review conference, 23 men were recorded to have been accessing or receiving some kind of service. While many original child protection plans might have remained largely unaltered, in 14 cases a new or additional goal was set for a man although no new or additional service or need was identified for him. This might imply either a lack of support for fathers in meeting these goals, or an assumption that the social worker, as lead professional, would be following through the earlier goals set with or for the man.

By the second review child protection conference (six months on from the ICPC), 23 men were still attending. This suggests commitment by the small number of men and fathers who may have been determined to have a say and be part of the formal safety planning process throughout. This was evident in one case where a birth father, who was known to be a poor attender at probation appointments, went to all core group meetings and both review conferences. By this second review conference, 11 men were accessing a service, but again, no new or additional support needs were listed even though 8 new or additional goals were set. Six months on from the ICPC however, in keeping with the national picture, most child protection plans had been discontinued which provides an important context for this dwindling level of paternal involvement.

There is a tension and a degree of uncertainty from these findings about who is responsible for ensuring that men are supported or held to account in meeting original or new child protection goals. While *Working Together* (HM Government 2013; 2015) makes clear that the social worker and the core group are accountable, strengths based approaches like

Signs of Safety share responsibility with the child's parents, or even hand it back, once professionals are satisfied the adults fully understand their concerns. At the very least, this approach acknowledges that the family and their network come up with the details of how the safety goals will be achieved (Turnell, 2012). The terms 'family' and 'parents' tend to be used in documentation about strengths-based approaches and there is rarely any differentiation between mothers and fathers apart from, for example, when specific behavioural tasks are set. This is also true of the child protection conference related documents found in the case file (such as child protection plans and child protection conference minutes). Because there is seldom any differentiation between fathers and mothers it is harder to gauge whether and when fathers and/or mothers attended, or what the extent and nature of their specific involvement was.

3.5 Assessment, engagement and relationship building

Although the section 47 child protection enquiry and the activity in the build up to the ICPC is itself an assessment (often in 2014-5 still referred to as a core assessment) there were other types of assessment noted at this early stage specifically in relation to a 'connected' man. Most common was a parenting assessment (14 cases). There were also two assessments of contact and two viability assessments. There were single examples of a cognitive and community mental health assessment, and a psychiatric assessment for learning disabilities.

Building a relationship with a social worker, the key worker in child protection, needs to be taken into account as an important part of the engagement, assessment and helping process. In some cases, the relationship with the man appeared to develop over time. Where it was recorded, there had been early direct contact between the social worker and just over half of the connected men (70 cases), which is an encouraging start.

Good practice in being open about strengths and risks with men

Across the three local authorities we were able to identify 28 cases where there were examples of good practice using what could be described as 'strengths based' approaches. These examples of good practice were fairly evenly spread between the authorities often in complex cases where social workers were able to build a good relationship with men whilst balancing the risks of harm they posed with the strengths they brought. This included showing empathy, for example with drug misuse, but also challenging men to encourage better parenting. This was the case with a drug misusing father who faced imprisonment and minimised the impact of his drug misuse on his young children. He was confronted by the

social worker who pointed out the harm that would come from the separation from his children that would happen if he was given a custodial sentence.

Other examples showed a positive outcome and a flexible balanced approach from some, but not all, social workers. For example, in the case of one young father we have called 'Terry'.

Terry, aged 21, was a care leaver, with a criminal history, and a history of domestic violence in relationships, for which he was attending a domestic violence perpetrator programme via the probation service. The first social worker encouraged him to attend supervised contact with his baby and to take part in a parenting assessment. This social worker tried to be flexible, taking account of both his needs and his job, including sourcing financial assistance to enable Terry to travel to contact.

Relationships with professionals were, however, strained and this was exacerbated when the case was transferred to a new social worker. There was a delay in the new social worker taking on the case which disrupted contact. When a new job made it difficult for Terry to manage contact, he cancelled some contact sessions, causing his commitment and reliability to be questioned. A month later there was another change of social worker and this again jeopardised the working relationship with Terry. In spite of this he continued attending contact, and professionals became more positive about his parenting. Around this time (nine months after the ICPC), he was allowed unsupervised, but supported, contact in his partner's home.

Two months later Terry was staying overnight with his partner and the baby three times a week and there was now a child in need plan. Within a month, (and one year after the ICPC), the family were living together and the case was closed.

In some of these cases, part of this strengths based approach also involved the serious consideration and/or support for men as primary carers for children. Again this took place in situations where a balanced analysis of men's strengths and limitations had to be made, including the assessment of contested accusations of domestic violence as in the following example of Alex who lived with his children:

Alex, aged 33 was a resident birth father, with 3 sons. The children's mother, Donna, had longstanding problems with alcohol and prescription drugs. There were allegations of violence against Alex, which he denied, and social workers initially saw him as a potential risk to his sons. The allocated worker engaged well with Alex, and discussed the domestic violence concerns with him, and with the children, directly. The Police confirmed that past allegations had found no evidence of domestic abuse. Alex accepted the social workers' concerns about his volatile relationship with Donna, and the social worker accepted that Donna's alcohol misuse and related physical symptoms were also a key factor in the concerns about harm to the children. After further crises and hospitalisation of Donna, the child protection plan tasked Alex with becoming the main carer for the children. He gave up work to do this, and the social worker helped him to apply for benefits. Alex cared full time for the children for around 3 months. There were further periods of tension between Alex and Donna, between the external family network, and between the parents and the local authority. The social worker managed to sustain a reasonable working relationship with Alex in particular, and both parents appeared committed to addressing their couple issues and Donna's drinking. Within nine months of the ICPC, the children had child in need plan, and within the year the family were receiving family support below the s17 social work threshold.

There were a number of common characteristics in these 28 good practice cases. In terms of social worker behaviour, the cases demonstrated persistence and a less 'reactive' approach to men's anger or aggression as well as a willingness to engage with more than one man in each case. Social workers' practice was proactive and responsive and included an explicit recognition of men's actual or potential ability to care safely for children. Other characteristics included fewer changes of social worker. A sizeable minority of these cases had one consistent social worker over the 12 month period. The dynamics and significance of relationships between men and social workers are considered in some depth in Chapters 7-10.

For the majority of the 150 children there appeared to be a successful outcome in terms of child protection risks diminishing, at least over the period of the year that we were scrutinising the cases. Arguably, sustaining a good relationship with men in families is even more important when the risks persist.

Understanding the balance of risk and resource posed by men

Although the case file analysis aimed to capture change over time it was difficult to determine and reflect the dynamic nature of men's position and role in families and knowing the extent to which they were risks and resources to the children in their care. We were also interested in understanding and capturing the dynamic nature of men's positioning by social workers as risk, resource or both (or unknown). From the case file analysis we devised some provisional categories which went beyond the limited binary concepts of men as *either* a risk or a resource to children.

Provisional categories of men in the child protection system

Unknown: identity, background or potential risks/resources not known.

Potential risk: some sense of past or current concern but this is seen as manageable; the risk is 'held' and/or second chance given.

Potential resource: some sense of past or current potential/protectiveness; resources are 'tested' and/or risk still held but seen as a 'safer bet'.

Unexplored risk: past or current concerns identified but either the man is excluded or concerns are not explored/tested.

Unexplored resource: past or current resources/protective factors identified but the man's contribution is not explored/tested or supported.

Confirmed risk: exploration/assessment supports or clarifies the sense of risk/danger.

Affirmed resource: exploration/assessment/support supports or clarifies resources/protective factors.

We also identified different provisional categories of men's engagement with a social worker.

Categories of engagement (with the emphasis on the activity/responsibility of the LA)

Inaction: no meaningful attempt to identify or contact the man.

Exclusion: active removal of the man from the process and/or child's life.

Inclusion: SW knows who he is and has at least some indirect contact with him to inform him of the process.

Involvement: the man is invited to meetings, member of core group, some background knowledge established and views sought.

Passive engagement (as an addition or alternative to classifying men as disengaged): where a man's attendance at meetings, communication, challenging views/behaviour is not monitored or questioned.

Interaction: direct and focused communication with the man; responsiveness; active encouragement and/or specific actions/services allocated.

These provisional categories, based on the patchy or limited picture we were able to build, formed the basis for further testing and development in relation to the rich material and detail about the 35 men. This analysis is developed and discussed in more detail in Chapter 10.

3.6 Chapter Summary

It was apparent that men were present and stayed present in the lives of the 150 children whose child protection files we analysed. Rather than an absence of father figures, most children had more than one man present in their lives. Just over half of the 139 men connected to the children were birth fathers while the others included stepfathers, mother's current or former partner, grandparents and other male relatives. No child was without a connected man and most children had two or three men in their network. Although only a minority of connected men lived with the child, separation did not mean men were not involved in the child's life. Indeed overall, the level of contact between children and men tended to stay steady and in some cases increased over the year.

The men that social workers most often engaged with, or had knowledge of were birth fathers who lived with the child, or had a high level of contact or involvement. Attempts to include men showed varying degrees of persistence and interaction and it was rare to see explicit and specific action points or services offered to men. The terms 'family' and 'parents' tend to be used in all documentation and the lack of differentiation between fathers or men and mothers makes it harder to gauge whether and when fathers and/or mothers are involved or attend key meetings.

In cases of good practice where a strengths based approach and a good working relationship with men was identified, social workers demonstrated persistence and a less 'reactive' approach to men's anger or aggression as well as a willingness to engage with more than one man in each case. Their practice was proactive and responsive and included an explicit recognition of men's actual or potential ability to care safely for children.

Some of the files showed that the men were linked in different ways to the child protection concern with some being held responsible or partly responsible, others seen as a protective or partly protective factor while in many files the position was unclear or unknown. This reflected the problem of building a coherent picture about the men from the files because information about them was patchy and very limited. Without better and more consistent recording, men will remain a shadowy or missing group. It will also remain difficult to assess

and make decisions about what combination of risks and resource individual men present for their child. Similarly it will be difficult, in a wider auditing sense, to discern the extent to which men are engaged with child protection, and which men subsequently become a resource for children and for children's services.

Overall, the 150 cases provide a good enough match with national child protection statistics for the same period and can said to be reasonably representative of child protection cases throughout England. The profile of the 139 men in these 150 cases also bears comparison with the smaller sample of 35 men considered in the remainder of the report.

Chapter 4: Fathers and mothers in the in depth study

Introduction

This chapter paints a descriptive picture of the men and women who took part, or were indirectly involved in the 12-month, qualitative study. There is a focus on the 35 men and to a lesser extent the six mothers who participated, with some additional information about the whole group of mothers of the children involved in the child protection plan.

We present an overview of certain demographic characteristics and aspects of the men and women's lives. We also summarise where change had occurred over the 12 months in terms of the status of the child's case and circumstances. We begin with describing the sample of men (see Appendix 2 for an overview of the 35 men at the time of the initial child protection conference).

Retention, attrition and withdrawal from the study

We successfully recruited 35 men into the study, keeping 28 of them for the full 12 months. Six men withdrew from the study and one man had died. We also have good information for those men who left the study, since the earliest withdrawal was at three months and other men left between three and eight months into the study. For one of the men who withdrew, we retained ongoing secondary information about his involvement, from another participant connected to the same case (and child).

What do we know about those men who withdrew?

Three of the men who ended their participation in the study were fathers who had a history of having physically harmed a child, or had experienced the removal of a previous child from their care. These men were all under suspicion or were 'in the frame' for the child protection concern and quickly found their involvement with the process and the child very restricted. Two of these men also had no secure or settled accommodation. We lost contact with these men within four months, and one explicitly withdrew from the study, saying it was too difficult to take part. We retained ongoing indirect knowledge about one of these men from another participant connected to the case (as above).

One father who withdrew became the main carer for his children three months after the ICPC when the case was on the edge of care proceedings due to his ex-partner's alcohol misuse. We lost contact with this man at around the four-month point. Another birth father had wavered over whether to seek care of his son in the early months of the formal child

protection processes, but then stepped back. He had insecure housing, and precarious, 'gig economy' work, and hoped to continue weekend contact with his young son. We lost contact with him after five months.

One grandfather withdrew after five months, due to additional and multiple stresses in his family network. He and his partner were caring for their grandchild under a special guardianship order. They also had older children with additional needs, close relatives in the final stages of cancer, and were dealing with safeguarding challenges arising from the imminent release from prison of their grandchild's father.

The man who died, five months into the study, had experienced a period of street homelessness and a return to drug misuse. He died in hospital from complications associated with using contaminated drugs. At the time he died, his teenage children were in the care of their maternal aunt.

4.1 The demographic and relationship profile of participating men

Age: The age range for men in our sample of 35 was from 21 to 59, with a mean age of 37.6. The youngest birth father was 21, and the oldest was 57. The two grandfathers who took part were aged 59 and 46. The age profile for men is similar to that found within the case file study.

Ethnicity: As in the case file sample, the majority of the 35 men were of White British ethnicity. Two men were Asian and one was White European.

Employment and income: At the time of the initial child protection conference, 15 of the 35 men were not working and were claiming some kind of welfare benefit. We know that a number of these men were claiming Employment Support Allowance and/or had a Personal Independence Payment. Seven men were in some form of contracted employment, though with varying levels of permanence. Examples included cleaning, construction, administration, armed forces, public transport, and mechanics. Nine men were in a situation of temporary or insecure employment (the 'gig economy'); working in sectors such as construction, care services and retail. Four men were self-employed, with reasonably secure or successful businesses including accountancy, management consultancy and logistics.

Table 4.1 Men’s employment at the time of the ICPC

Men’s employment at the time of the ICPC (n=35)			
Unemployed/Benefits	Insecure Employment (gig economy)	Secure (contracted) Employment	Self employed
15	9	7	4

Housing: The majority of men in our sample were living in some form of social housing (n=11) or had insecure or temporary accommodation (n=11). This included two men who were homeless, one who was living in a bail hostel and several who were staying with an extended family member. Eight men were living private rented accommodation, a small group (n=5) owned, or jointly owned, their home.

Table 4.2 Men’s housing situation at the time of the ICPC

Men’s housing situation at the time of the ICPC (n=35)			
Privately owned (sole or jointly owned)	Private rented	Social Housing	Insecure or temporary accommodation
5	8	11	11

Men as fathers: As in the case file analysis, the majority of men were birth fathers to the child or children who were included in the child protection plan.

Table 4.3 Men’s father status in relation to child/ren on the child protection plan

Men’s father status in relation to child/ren on the child protection plan (n=35)				
Birth fathers	stepfather	Birth and step father	Mother’s partner	grandfather
29	0	4	0	2

However, their circumstances in relation to the child’s mother, and to the child, varied, as did their history of fatherhood, or their ‘paternal career’ (Lee, 2005). For example, thirteen birth fathers had other birth children from previous relationships (not included in the child protection plan). The majority of these fathers had some form of ongoing contact with their

(in some cases adult) children. Nine men had experienced step-fatherhood as part of a previous relationship and two of these men reported still being in contact with their stepchild.

In this way, both samples in our study illustrate the complexity of fatherhood, and in particular non-resident fatherhood (Poole et al, 2016). The tables below describe this variation, firstly in terms of men's relationship to the mother, and then their residence or contact with the child.

Table 4.4 Men's relationship with the child's mother at the time of the ICPC

Men's relationship with the child's mother at the time of the ICPC (n=35)			
Co-resident couple	Non-resident couple	Separated/Divorced	Mother's father (child's grandfather)
13	2	18	2

The two non-resident couples were prevented from living together as part of the child protection plan and/or bail conditions, and this included not visiting the mother's home or having any unsupervised contact with the child. One of these non-resident couples concealed their ongoing relationship from the social worker for 10 months following the ICPC, and at the 12 month point the mother and children had been moved to a refuge. Within the group of co-resident couples at the time of the ICPC, one couple were required, as part of the child protection plan, to remain living with maternal extended family, rather than independently with their baby. Four of the separated fathers had new partners who were included in the child protection process, and two of these men had young children with their partners, who were not included in the child protection plan.

Table 4.5 Father's residence with child/ren at the time of the ICPC

Father's residence with child/ren at the time of the ICPC (n=33)			
Resident (also with the mother)	Resident (separated, main carer fathers)	Non-resident (either due to the CP plan, or through separation)	Resident part time (shared care fathers)
13	3	16	1

The two grandfathers who took part were both living with their grandchild at the time of the initial child protection conference; one as part of an informal arrangement sanctioned by the

child protection plan, and the other due to an existing special guardianship order. One of these men saw his grandchildren returned to the care of their parents six weeks after the ICPC and the other withdrew from the study after five months (as identified above). Whilst the majority of non-resident fathers were not living with their children due to separating from the child's mother, two of these fathers were prevented from living with their child (and the child's mother) as part of the child protection plan.

Table 4.6 Contact with child (for non-resident fathers) at the time of the ICPC

Contact with child (for non-resident fathers) at the time of the ICPC (n=16)			
Regular (fortnightly or more)	Irregular (at least monthly)	Distance (infrequent or indirect)	No contact
14 (includes 3 supervised)	1 (supervised)	0	1

In Table 4.6, we have identified different levels of contact between non-resident fathers and their children based on the typology developed by Poole et al (2016) in their socio-demographic profiling of non-resident fathers in the UK. Here we are describing the contact between non-resident fathers and the child/ren included in the child protection plan, but as indicated above, our study also offered some insight into father's contact with birth and stepchildren from previous relationships. In relation to these children, the majority of fathers described ongoing, though often irregular or informal patterns of contact, and it was notable that two men reported staying in contact with their stepchildren.

4.2 The child protection concerns and change over time

The child protection concerns leading to the initial child protection conference involved men in a range of ways. Ten men were under direct suspicion for the child protection concern or incident and seven men were under scrutiny for their capacity to care for their child (either as a resident or non-resident father). A further nine men arrived into the child protection system already 'marked' as a risk due to a history of violent offending and/or having had a previous child removed from their care. Four men were deemed good enough or safe carers at the time of the initial child protection conference and five men (all non-resident fathers) appeared to be only nominally involved in the child protection enquiry, and were not the focus of the concerns. In six of the children's cases, men's mental health or learning disability contributed to the child protection concerns (this included having a diagnosis of

autistic spectrum disorder or a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder [ADHD]). In seven cases it was the man's drug misuse that was raised as a concern (in four cases the drug was cannabis) and in three cases the man's alcohol misuse was part of the concern.

Men who had lost a previous child to care. In our sample, there were five men who had already lost one or more children to care. One of these men was still in a partnership with the mother of their children. A further four men were in relationships (or had recently separated from) women who had already lost one or more children to care. Another way to describe this might be to say that of the 15 'couples' at the start of the child protection process, nine could be deemed particularly vulnerable and concerning in that they involved either a man or woman (or both) who had lost a previous child.

Category of plan. During the first interview with each man, the child protection plan was explicitly discussed, and in a number of cases voluntarily shown to the researcher. The level of the man's knowledge of the formal categorisation of the plan varied, but it was clear that the majority of child protection plans were for neglect (n=18). It was also possible to ascertain that around half of these neglect cases included a significant concern about the mother. Based on the available information, there were also a number of plans categorised as emotional harm (n=6) or physical harm (n=5).

Attendance at the ICPC. All but two of the men in our sample attended the initial child protection conference, a much higher proportion than noted in our case file analysis. Three men (all separated, non-resident fathers) were asked to attend separately from their child's mother. All but one man was included in the core group. The one man who did not become part of the core group had also not gone to the ICPC, and had chosen not to participate in the process.

A summary of changes over the 12 months

Twelve months after the ICPC only a minority of children's cases (n=5) still had a child protection plan in place. Eight cases were still open to a social worker but receiving services as a child in need (CIN). Just under a third of the children's cases (n=10) had been closed to a social worker because things were deemed to have improved for the child.

There had also been six completed sets of proceedings (two in each of the participating local authorities). Three cases had resulted in the making of an adoption placement order, and three in the making of a special guardianship order (two, to a maternal relative, and one to a

paternal relative). With one exception, all of these care proceedings involved a father and/or a mother who had already had a previous child removed from their care.

Four previously non-resident fathers had become main carers for their children, either through private law or by a voluntary agreement. One further non-resident father had agreed a shared care arrangement with his ex-wife, as recommended by the child protection plan. However, there were also seven fathers who were no longer living with their children at the end of the 12 months. In four cases this was due to the child being removed from their care. This means that in total, three fewer fathers were living with their children by the year's end.

4.3 The picture of mothers

Overall, we have some information on the 32 birth mothers of the children included in the child protection plan, derived mostly from discussions with mothers before or after interviews with the men. Where it was known, the age range of the mothers was from 17 to 48 years, with thirteen aged between 20 and 30; ten between 31-40; and five between 41 and 50 years. The majority were of White British ethnicity; one mother was of South American origin and one was 'White Other'.

Mothers who had lost previous children to care: Five mothers had already lost at least one child to care, and/or had a child placed with its birth father. One of these mothers was in a continuing partnership with the father of the previously removed children; three were in relatively new relationships with the participating man, and one was separated from him. One other mother, whose son was placed with his birth father (the participating man) as part of the child protection process, was also likely to experience further care proceedings, as she had previously lost three children to care and was pregnant again with a new partner.

The child protection concerns: The child protection concerns frequently involved both fathers and mothers, either separately or as couples. Across the children's cases there were 17 mothers whose poor mental health was a reason for the plan; the most common issues were depression, anxiety or eating disorder. There were also five mothers whose problems with alcohol were part of the child protection concerns, and four where drug misuse was a concern. Two mothers had some form of learning disability and five had some kind of chronic physical health condition or disability that was part of the child protection concern. Over the 12 months, two mothers were found (by the local authority and/or the police) to have been physically or mentally abusive to the participating man and/or child. In both cases

it was incontrovertible evidence produced by the participating man that led to a change in the direction of the case.

The sub group of mothers who participated in the study

Part of the study design was to recruit a smaller number of mothers of the children included in child protection plans. As discussed in Chapter 2, this was not to attempt to corroborate fathers' accounts but to include some comparable experiences of the child protection process and to explore mothers' sense of how fathers were involved.

With the permission of the participating man, seven birth mothers were approached about taking part in the study and six agreed. This involved doing an in depth interview with their own dedicated researcher, at the start and end of the 12 month period. All of these mothers were in a couple relationship with a participating man at the time of the initial child protection conference. One of the mothers was also an ex-partner of another participating man and the child protection plan included their child and the unborn child of her current partnership. This mother was prevented from living with her current partner, due to the risks he was deemed to pose from his history of offending and previous child removals. In addition to the mothers who formally took part in the study, we also encountered nine other mothers/mother figures who spontaneously or informally took part in meetings or interviews alongside their male partners, giving their views and sharing aspects of their own lives. In total then, we obtained some direct data from fifteen women. The individual profiles of the mothers and their perspectives is presented in Appendix 2.

Summarising the perspectives of the mothers

The mothers who took part in the study offered their own perspective on the child protection process, and whilst the sample is small, it captures a range of experiences. It is notable that the mothers' separate account of the child protection concerns, at the time of the initial child protection conference, were similar to that given by the participating father. Couples tended to present a united front, regardless of being interviewed separately. Mothers also often defended fathers or challenged the social worker's view of them. However, some women came to revise their view of their now ex-partners, and others did demonstrate some cautious ambivalence about their current partner's parenting.

The mothers' accounts illustrate cases where a certain level of mutual recognition and acceptance existed between the couple, and the social worker. By contrast, there were also cases where there was mutual mistrust and hostility. Some of the mothers felt able to accept

or reconcile themselves to the child protection concerns, while others felt shamed or angered. Within their interviews some mothers also talked spontaneously about perceived differences in the ways fathers and mothers were treated by social workers. Sometimes these differences were seen to disadvantage the mother (one mother felt that her ex-partner was 'let off' by the social worker) and at other times to disadvantage the father (one mother felt that the social worker was over-critical and kept 'digging' at the father). In the chapters that follow, we present the accounts and lives of the fathers, and analyse the issues raised by both fathers and this smaller group of mothers systematically and in detail.

4.4 Chapter Summary

We successfully recruited 35 men into the QL study, keeping 28 for the full 12 months. By retaining all men until at least the three month stage, we also have good information for those who left, adding to the overall pool of rich data about the men.

The 35 men shared similarities with the profile of the men in the analysis of 150 children's case files reported in Chapter 3. This was particularly so in relation to the majority being non-resident birth fathers. Age was also similar (it ranged from 21 to 59 years) as was ethnicity, (all but three were White British). The men's circumstances varied, as did their history of fatherhood but, as in the case file analysis, men were present and involved in or 'orbiting' children's lives. The majority of fathers described ongoing, though often irregular or informal patterns of contact with their children.

Better information about these 35 men than about men in the case file analysis revealed that well over half had a significant illness, disability or other impairment. Over half were also living economically precarious lives with diminishing access to benefits, insecure work and increasing debt. The majority (22) were living in social housing or had insecure or temporary accommodation. Men were continually balancing demands to maintain their income, and meet their own and their children's needs.

The child protection concerns leading to the ICPC involved men in a range of ways. Ten men were under direct suspicion and seven were under scrutiny for their capacity to care for their child. A further nine men were already 'marked' as a risk due to a history of violent offending and/or having had a previous child removed from their care. Four men were deemed good enough or safe carers and five non-resident fathers were only nominally involved.

One year on, an even smaller proportion of children's cases than in the case file analysis still had a child protection plan in place (n=5). A further eight cases were still open to a social worker and ten cases were closed. There were six completed sets of care proceedings, all of which involved a father and/or a mother who had already had a previous child removed from their care.

The perspectives of the six mothers who took part capture a range of experiences. Their accounts of the child protection concerns were notably similar to the men's and couples tended to present a united front. Although mothers often defended fathers or challenged the social worker's view of them, some women came to revise their view of their now ex-partners.

Chapter 5: Fathers' lives beyond the child protection plan: socio-economic conditions and intimate relationships

Introduction to Chapters 5 and 6

Chapters 5 and 6 set out findings regarding the hinterland of the lives of fathers in the study. Some of these factors immediately impinge on the child protection process. Other factors may have an invisible influence on the degree to which the father is involved in the process. This chapter explores fathers':

- Socio-economic status including health and economic wellbeing,
- Patterns of intimate relationships and
- The implications for fathering of domestic abuse allegations.

5.1 The socio-economic conditions of fathers: health, work and money

Father's health: parenting under stress

Twenty out of 35 participants reported some significant physical illness or disability, mental health issues or other impairments during the course of the study. Seven participants experienced more than one health issue. For example, Fred had hearing and sight impairments and mobility problems as well as being on the autistic spectrum. There were several participants who had chronic physical conditions which required indefinite management, pain relief or medication. Henry had a chronic heart condition which reacted adversely to stress. However, during the year he required an emergency operation following a stressful family incident arising from the child protection dilemma.

A significant minority of fathers mentioned "self-medicating" with alcohol and/or cannabis to deal with chronic stress. In addition, two participants had very serious substance misuse problems. Cody was registered for long-standing opiate addiction, suffering episodic panic attacks, anxiety with episodic self-harming. Derek, also dependent on opiates had serious but unattended physical health issues, became street homeless, and died in hospital after taking contaminated drugs.

Eight participants had mental health issues or suffered from chronic stress. Nick was "*on the sick for depression... stress and anxiety*". He had trouble sleeping. Harry was prescribed antidepressants during the course of care proceedings regarding his child. By the end of the year he said: "*I'm still on the antidepressants [but] I feel a lot better*". Jesse spoke of feeling

suicidal at the start of the year and his mood only improved when he made the decision not to offer to take on the care of his son. Mark's mental health, which had prevented him working for some years, had improved by the end of the year in which he moved away from his previous partner and established himself in a new life. For a number of participants who were suffering from stress, their emotional state was clearly related to the child protection crisis taking place for them and their children. Some fathers were trying to deal with other pressing issues such as relationship breakdown as well as the child protection crisis. For example, Gary whose partnership ended and who faced criticism of his performance at work, commented on the way the child protection issue leaked into every area of his life: "... *Everything, financially, emotionally, workwise, there is no getting away from it*". Shane faced loss and isolation after his marriage ended and his child was made the subject of a special guardianship order while Fred was in poor mental health at the year's end and feeling suicidal after his wife left him. Seb was receiving counselling for most of the year to deal with the aftermath of a serious illness as well as child protection related issues.

Nick: multiple issues impact on emotional health

Nick had had a history of anxiety, insomnia and sleep apnoea before his current partnership. Because of his partner Shelley's previous losses of children to care, the couple were subject to close scrutiny when she became pregnant. Then following a sexual assault on Shelley, Nick blamed himself for not protecting her and went "*on medication...on the sick for depression ... stress and anxiety*", taking a mixture of prescribed psychotropic drugs aimed to alleviate his mood and sleep problems. Ongoing care proceedings, debt, and his inability to work added to his stresses. When tests revealed that Shelley had resumed drug use, Nick's partnership ended in recrimination and his new-born son, Logan, was placed for adoption. Nick had also lost the support of a fathers' worker. By the end of the study Nick was drinking heavily, not eating properly and very depressed.

The twenty out of thirty five men mentioned above with current significant health issues did not include several other participants who have experienced previous serious health problems including mental health issues. Jamie, for example, had experienced depression: "*I used to cut myself really bad*". But fifteen of the participants were in good or acceptable health. Some were consciously taking steps to look after themselves better. For example, Brett had decided to join a sports club as an antidote to the ongoing stressful situation regarding his children.

Fathers' work and income

Paid work was of great practical and symbolic importance for most participants. But at the time of the initial child protection conference, 15 of the 35 men were not working and were claiming some kind of social security benefit. We know that a number of these men were claiming employment support allowance and/or received personal independence payments. Some were faced with the real possibility of benefits being terminated or reduced. Jimmy was not in work due to a health condition and was looking after his disabled partner: *"I have got my personal independent payments... which is basically sick pay"*. However by the end of the study Jimmy had

"...worries... They are now going to change to universal credits which my friend has just been told to do and she has now got no money for six to twelve weeks while they sorted out".

Mark had recently lost his disabled living allowance following a work capability assessment and then had got into a *"benefits muddle"* while joint claiming with his partner. This led to his housing benefit being suspended. It took many anxious and impoverished months before these issues were resolved.

Drew and the gig economy

Drew worked in excess of 60 hours a week as a delivery driver earning close to the basic minimum wage with no promise of set hours and pressure to do overtime. To stay in employment he had to commute 50 miles a day. His partner Debbie also worked full time. Drew and Debbie faced difficult work/ life balance choices. They had rented a larger house to accommodate existing children and have space for staying contact for Zoe, Drew's daughter by previous relationship who had been abused in his ex-partner's care. The choices were to *"make ourselves incredibly tired or don't get things done"*. Drew linked his long hours and lack of quality time at home with ongoing relationship tensions with Debbie and their shared children.

Nine men were in a situation of temporary or insecure employment (the 'gig economy') working in sectors such as construction, care services and retail.

Seven men were in some form of contracted employment including some work benefits and some degree of security. Examples included jobs in cleaning, construction, administration, armed forces, public transport, and mechanics. Brett was in a secure but modestly paid job as a mechanic. In order to care for his children, he took on a house with an 'affordable rent'

and was finding it *"a bit of a struggle"*. He received child benefit and tax credits. However, he stood to lose £100 weekly if that was withdrawn. He was also servicing considerable debt. Four men were self-employed, with reasonably secure or successful businesses including accountancy, management and logistics. For example, Seb was a business consultant in increasing demand enabling him to aspire to buy a house in the near future.

Thirteen of the thirty-five participants expressed a fierce commitment to the ethic of work. This was the case whether or not they were in work at the time and a job was within their grasp. For some, work appeared to be a moral duty. Several participants, even those struggling with work and money, aligned themselves with some mainstream narratives regarding 'skivers' and 'strivers'. Jessie said of himself: *"I'm a grafter"* as if to defend himself from the charge of skiving. Drew expressed his anger towards those who skive on benefits whilst he worked long hours. Jamie claimed: *"I worked really hard"*. For some such as Aaron, the provider role was central: *"I'm providing for my family – that is what I need to do"*. For Anthony, work was essential to male identity: *"a man who doesn't work isn't really a man"*. Others stressed the importance of work as a domain of fulfilment and a place of companionship. Some saw work more as a pragmatic necessity; for others, it was what put money in your pocket giving you status and reach during your leisure time, enabling you to 'treat' your children.

Fathers' educational history: Limited qualifications, informal mentors and lost opportunities

Twenty-one men said they did not flourish at school and left with few or no qualifications. Three men specifically mentioned 'bunking off', joining gangs or underage working. Six men obtained GCSEs (or equivalent) or A levels but two of these men did not use these qualifications and entered the labour market in unskilled labouring jobs. Two men later gained a vocational diploma and three obtained degrees. Seven men said that their father or father figure had mentored them informally enabling them to acquire skills which they had not done through formal education. But some men regretted not making better use of their school education.

Fathers' economic wellbeing: precarious living for most

Although the study was not intended as a detailed audit of participants' economic well-being, the topic was unavoidable. It appeared that some 19/35 men in the study (including all those on benefits or attempting to remain on benefits and many of those 'gig economy' workers) corresponded with the socio-economic group referred to by Standing (2011) as *"the*

Precariat". Members of the Precariat typically live on money wages, without occupational pensions, paid holidays or other benefits. They lack a clear occupational identity. Their work is often insecure. They are often 'suppliants' for benefits, have little or no savings and live on the edge of unsustainable debt and are obliged to "*spend a huge amount of time dealing with diverse bureaucracies*" (Standing, 2013 p8) to stay afloat. Savage (2015) estimated that the Precariat accounts for around 16% of the general population. In this study, over half of participants' lives appeared to be economically precarious.

By the end of the study, we were still in touch with the financial situation for twenty nine of the thirty five original participants and attempted to judge whether they were more or less financially secure at the year's end. The finances of 12 men whose situations were precarious at the start of the study were becoming even more insecure as the study came to an end. Other participants were more equally balanced between those better or worse off at the year's end. The factors which appeared to be linked with downward financial trajectories were disability, injury and poor health (n=13); requiring larger accommodation to accommodate a child (n=7); relationship breakdowns (n=6); reduced or terminated benefits (n=5); continuing debt (n=5); low pay, long hours or poorer working conditions (n=4); meeting the demands of the child protection plan for the father to be available during working time (n=4); spending money to compensate for acute emotional stress in families due to parental non-availability (n=2).

The minority of better off fathers in the study were able to use their resources to move accommodation, offset the financial damage resulting from relationship breakdown and balance working and caring by reducing their working hours or employing extra help. They were also able to consider paying for their own legal representation in Child Arrangement Order applications. However, the economic state of Precariat fathers is likely to deteriorate further. The prospect of more benefit and public service reductions in addition to a wage freeze in coming years is likely to erode further the capacity of these men to be successful providers and involved fathers for their children.

5.2 Fathers' intimate relationships: Patterns of partnership and relating

The status of their intimate relationships proved to be another critical issue in the lives of participants. As Trevithick (2003, p168) argues,

It is impossible to ignore the misery that results from failed relationships. The suffering caused when people feel abandoned, unwanted, lonely, uncared for, isolated, can be unbearable for many human

beings. It can leave people feeling depleted, empty, de-energised, lacking in motivation, and without a sense of hope and optimism about their lives and future.

Our findings showed fathers at the centre of sometimes complex networks of personal relationships in which they were adapting to past losses, managing relationships with other carers, attempting to fulfil their own need for intimacy and attempting to manage their own feelings. Here we present findings regarding aspects of that network including,

- *Participants' previous relationships and partnerships*
- *Current partnerships and relationships*
- *Partnership breakdown and fathers' housing*
- *Keeping in touch with children from previous partnerships*
- *Fathers considering new relationships*
- *Fathers negotiating the role of new partners as carers for the father's previous child*

Participants' previous relationships and partnerships

Including current partners, participants reported an average of two previous partnerships with a range between one and four. In this context, a partnership was deemed to include a relationship, usually a continuing sexual relationship, involving sharing of money, domestic arrangements, accommodation and possibly childcare. Twelve fathers had had just one significant relationship. The question arises as to whether participants might have underplayed the existence and significance of past relationships. A few of the sample had a comparatively high number of previous sexual partners suggesting a fluid changeable lifestyle. But for the most part, participants had only declared one or two relationships as partnerships. This could be an underestimate of their numbers and significance of partnerships and romantic relationships. On the whole, participants seemed keen to protect their privacy regarding relationships which may embarrass them or not fit with the general tenor of their narrative. Kyle parried questions on previous relationships. Henry appeared to cast a veil over his previous romantic connections and mentioned, though avoiding any details, two sexual relationships that took place during the course of the year's contact, dismissing them as insignificant. Mark mentioned the existence of previous children only at the end of the year suggesting that the significance of this relationship had previously been underestimated. This may have been concealed before because of possible complications for him arising from the child protection plan for his subsequent children.

Current partnerships and relationships

Twenty participant fathers were in a partnership and thirteen were single at the start of the year. Fourteen fathers still counted themselves as in a partnership with the mother of the child with a child protection plan at the beginning of the year's contact. Six fathers had formed subsequent partnerships. The two grandfathers in the sample were both in settled relationships.

Partnership breakdown and fathers' housing

In participants' accounts, it is more usual for men (rather than women) to leave home when a relationship ends. Including all relationship breakdowns (not just those occurring during the study), twenty participants had experienced leaving or being ejected from property occupied by a partner at the breakdown of a relationship. Of these, four fathers have experienced this twice. The consequences for fathers and their relationship with children of needing to find another home are varied.

Just before his first interview in the study, Jesse was ejected by his partner of one year and had rented a room in a shared house. The implications for him and his son were that whilst overnight contact was possible, the accommodation was so unsuitable that staying contact was less frequent. Jesse and his son lacked privacy and were effectively confined to one room. His son missed seeing Jesse's ex-partner's children who had become his friends.

Brandon left his room in a young people's housing association project with the eventual promise of renting his own one bedroom flat to live with Janine, a young care leaver who became mother to his son. She held the tenancy of their shared home. Their relationship was volatile.

...every time we would have a barney she would kick me out so I would always come back to mum's house, you know and my mum would be like 'Have you broke up again?' I was often knocking at her door with bags in my hand, it was just a regular occurrence (Brandon).

After a final break up, Brandon lived with his own mother for approximately two years. During that time, a child protection plan was made in respect of his son and Brandon and he was able to have his son for some day and overnight contacts but could not offer to care for his son permanently. Eventually, he revived his housing application and moved into a new flat just in time to come forward as his son's main carer.

As well as fathers made homeless following relationship breakdown, four fathers (all of whom were seen as a significant risk to their child) have been required at some time during the study period not to live with their partner and child as part of the child protection plan. For example, Aaron (who had a conviction for injuring a child of his previous partnership) and his new partner lived together in a rented room for around two years during which time his partner suffered a miscarriage. When she became pregnant again, child protection procedures were invoked. Pending lengthy assessments, Aaron and partner were only allowed proximity to their new baby if they agreed to live with his partner's family in overcrowded circumstances. Some six months later, Aaron was still in daily touch with his partner and child but had moved to lodgings nearby.

Keeping in touch with children from previous partnerships

In some cases participants' previous father or stepfather status was unclear. Fourteen men had mentioned no previous children or stepchildren. However, eleven out of eighteen fathers were still in contact with birth children from previous relationships, whilst 2/9 were in contact with a stepchild from a previous partnership. So, although fathers' contacts with previous birth children remained relatively stable following their separation from the child's birth mother, participants' relationships with their previous stepchildren were relatively fragile. As Jesse explained,

I don't really have a relationship with Alli [ex partner's son]. He still calls me dad and stuff but I don't really have much of a relationship with him. My relationship was brought around Taylor [Jesse's birth son]. I feel that if you leave a relationship that you leave it behind and if they are her kids I leave them behind and Taylor is my flesh you know.

Jesse's explanation underlines the provisional status of the stepfather even whilst reconstituted families are together. Once parted (and note again the common presumption is that the male partner will leave) separated men are unlikely to press for continued contact in the face of opposition from their ex-partner. In Jesse's case, the separating partners appear to share an implicit belief that the departed stepfather was not entitled to keep the link going even if a stepfather was a significant figure in a child's life. However, we know from the accounts of participants such as Greg and Drew that stepfathers can be more formative in children's development than birth fathers. In blended families which split, there may also be consequences for the stepfather's own child. Jesse mentions his son Taylor's distress at parting from Jesse's ex-partners' previous children who had become like siblings to him. Jesse had "banned" his son from talking about them.

Fathers considering new relationships

Single fathers in the study shared thoughts and feelings about the possible risks and rewards of new relationships and what they were seeking in future partnerships. Five participants who had been hurt in previous partnerships, questioned whether or how to risk entering another full partnership or seek to contain sex and intimacy within short term relationships, keeping prospective partners away from the centre of their everyday lives including sharing living space, money, responsibility for children, family founding and other life aims. Their stories reveal men as contemplating and managing complex factors including protecting their children's welfare, pursuing their future family aspirations, their own (demonstrably) limited ability to predict the outcome of human relationships and the need to maintain existing key working relationships (e.g. with their children's birth mothers). These four case studies set out some profound questions discussed by participants:

- Is the commitment of parent to child the only permanent relationship? Are romantic relationships best approached as transitory gratification?
- Can trust be regained following loss and betrayal?
- Can a new relationship thrive under the shadow of a previous relationship and contact arrangements for a previous child?
- How can the 'right partner' be found to fit future aspirations?

Jesse: Relationships are “for a reason, a season or forever”?

Having been painfully ejected just before the study commenced from a year long live in relationship with an older woman with 3 children, Jesse had a short relationship during the study which seemed to evaporate without comment or pain. Jesse explained his thoughts about relationships in terms of the familiar internet trope that relationships are “*for a reason, a season or forever*” implying that most relationships are temporary and should not be held too tightly but in retrospect can be seen as part of a pattern. Jesse described his hedonistic approach to romantic relationships with immediate gratification and enjoyment as the aim. He had no intention at this stage of attempting to find permanent accommodation, build a family, or seek a mother figure for his son. Jesse's view of relationships appeared to relate closely with his current economically precarious lifestyle in which he was sometimes flush with money and sometimes broke. Relationships could provide him with some immediate solace, excitement and fun. But to expect more was unrealistic. There was dissonance between this view and Jesse's future timeline aspiration to meet a long-term partner, have a permanent home and look after his son Taylor and other children of the relationship. Jesse placed his relationship with his son in the 'forever' category. He would always be there for his son, although with no immediate prospect of resuming a resident father role.

Kyle and Kenny and the problem of trust

Kyle was ambivalent regarding the possibility of future partnerships. He was appalled by his previous partner Tracey's betrayal of his trust and initially declared he would not enter another live together partnership where he could be betrayed again. On the other hand he would not want to deny himself sex and intimacy indefinitely. His possible compromise was to manage an intimate sexual relationship on the basis of sleeping with a partner a couple of times a week, but "*keeping her away*" from any real foothold in his finances, home life and parental role. Reflecting further on this, he commented ruefully that once having started a relationship on this basis, he might lose control of the outcome and end up living with someone again, risking hurt and further upheaval if the relationship failed.

Kenny had a deep sense of betrayal by his previous partner Sadie. Sadie not only cheated on him with his friend but later allegedly choreographed his son's complaint against him leading to his imprisonment. So trust was a huge issue for Kenny. If that trust was betrayed, the relationship comes to an end instantly. He viewed his current partner as highly trustworthy and loyal. He had an essentialist view of women: in any relationship they constitute the power behind the throne. "*Women have better memories than men*" and never let old issues go. "*There is nothing you can do about it, it is just built into them to think that way*". This must be accepted as *quid pro quo* for a successful relationship. Kenny's ambition was to live with his current partner Christine and their son Aaron. He saw himself as building a family rather than just being interested in short term relationships. Kenny formed a general judgment about partner trustworthiness and then kept it under constant review.

Henry: No new partnership which might inflame his ex-partner

Henry aimed to keep any new sexual partner away from his home life and parental role. He mentioned two unnamed sexual relationships that took place during the year, dismissing them as insignificant. However, when describing a major conflict around his children's contact with their mother Rosie which triggered Henry's health crisis, his second girlfriend was clearly becoming involved in the conflict and her presence inflamed Rosie. Rather than attempting to protect and nurture a new relationship, Henry took the view that having a serious new relationship and managing his children's contact with his irrational and potentially violent ex-partner was not possible and he ended the relationship.

Anthony's recruitment process for a new life partner

Anthony took a rational approach to these relationship dilemmas in an attempt to avoid the emotional (and financial) traumas of a failed partnership whilst meeting the need for sex and intimacy. His more ambitious aim was to re-establish his ideal self as a Family Man. He was not just seeking an affair. He sought a partner who would help him look after his children, assist him with contact arrangements with their mother, Gayle, but who did not have her flaws (i.e. chronically poor mental health). Prospective partners were tested. Firstly, he had a couple of relationships to get "*back on track*" with dating. He was unsure as to whether to seek a partner with existing children or a childless partner. He lived with woman and her daughter for a time but she proved to be alcoholic. Kim, Anthony's current partner of 18 months, has no child but wants a baby in future. It appeared to be part of their understanding that she should be involved in caring for his previous children and mediating with Anthony's ex-partner over contact issues.

Fathers negotiating the role of new partners as carers for the father's previous child

In 5/6 cases in which fathers have found new partnerships after splitting with the birth mother of the child with a child protection plan, new partners have taken on a significant role in relation to the father's previous children. In these cases, the child was living with or had previously been living with the child's birth mother. Involving new partners in care arrangements appeared to be a solution to the father's dilemma: how to retain a significant stake in their child's life whilst continuing to prioritise work. New partners assumed several roles. Some were full-time carers, others provided care during staying contact, assisted with contact visits, or even (as in Anthony's case noted above) negotiated contact and child care arrangements with the birth mother.

The study suggested that there are some important implications for fathers and their new partners in relation to balancing their new relationships with their commitment to their children in the context of the child protection process. The start of a new partnership may potentially disrupt relatively settled contact arrangements if birth mothers fear being supplanted by a new woman in the child's affections. Partly for this reason, when William's new partner helped him look after his son during contacts William "*keeps quiet about it*".

Harry's partner Sian: Supervising a child's contact with his birth mother

Harry's partner Sian has welcomed Harry's 3-year-old son Ben into the family at the end of long and contested care proceedings. Ben was conceived when Harry had a brief affair with his ex-partner Kayleigh during a period when Harry and Sian were separated. Initially, social workers arranged supervised contact for Harry's mother Kayleigh. At the close of proceedings, however, children's services pulled out. Since Harry is caring for his disabled mother, it now falls to Sian to supervise Kayleigh's contact with Ben. This is in spite of a somewhat tense relationship between the two women and Kayleigh's history of making complaints about the way Harry and Sian look after Ben.

In some cases it was implicit or explicit that the new partner must indefinitely postpone her desire to have her own child. Paul's new partner Anna had no previous children and wanted a child of her own. This aspiration seems to have been postponed because of the demands of looking after Paul's previous children, a situation which was likely to cause future tension in the relationship. Drew and partner Debbie's experience (see box below), illustrates another possible difficulty for couples: that fathers' new partners may feel the lack of a mandate to parent their partner's previous child.

Drew's partner Debbie: Lacking a mandate to parent

Zoe, aged 11, was the child of Drew's previous relationship with Michelle and was living with her. Drew and his partner Debbie who already had her own son Liam from a previous relationship, launched into a new pregnancy aware of the extra emotional work, potential conflict, stress and financial planning that would follow. The couple's baby Florence was born just as child protection concerns were coming to a head regarding Michelle's care of Zoe. Drew had successfully established his relationship with Liam and Liam's dad Terry. Drew and Debbie were committed to frequent staying contact for Drew's daughter Zoe (with a child protection plan, care proceedings and then a special guardianship order to Drew's mother Heather) partly to support Heather. However, Zoe did not accept Debbie in a quasi-parental role and worse still, could not be trusted in proximity to baby Florence. Although there was little emotional connection between them, Debbie was often called upon to look after Zoe for extended periods on her own in Drew's absence through long hours of work. In addition, she complained of being treated like a servant at the beck and call of Heather. Drew described being continually engaged in relational work to maintain the shaky network of relationships around Zoe.

In addition to the known challenges of making a success of blended families (Zelevnikow & Zelevnikow, 2015), we found some participant fathers and their new partners in the study were attempting to overcome issues related to the child protection process and their child's previous adverse history. This seemed to demand high levels of emotion work (Hochschild, 1979) (i.e. managing one's own emotions) and relational work (tending and adjusting relationships in the child's network) for both the fathers and their partners. Fathers in these situations were being pulled in regularly to mediate between the needs of their child's birth mother or carer, their new partner and the child. There was jeopardy in a failure on their part to balance these commitments. To fail to support or overburden their current partner risked the whole relationship and the prospect of founding a new family together. To say no to their child risks losing contact and the possibility of keeping them close within the family.

5.3 Domestic violence and abuse allegations, intimate relationships and fathering

Fathers' accounts of domestic violence and abuse

Whatever participants' experience of domestic violence and abuse (DVA), there was near universal agreement that, in principle, it was wrong for men to assault their partners. The implication of this is that when participants admitted such abuse, some combination of mitigation and/or remorse was required. Allegations against them of abuse were regarded as serious matters requiring explanation, mitigation or denial.

Participants had become aware of the importance placed on the issue in the child protection process but beyond that, there was a sense from some participants that the issue was one of masculine honour and identity:

I have never ever punched a girl, I weren't brought up like that, I would never punch a girl in my life.
(Brandon).

...you know you don't go round hitting women... (Nick).

However, as will become clearer in what follows, some fathers did not regard verbal abuse or threatening behaviour as equivalent to domestic violence and one father who admitted a pattern of the most serious and chronic abuse for which he was repeatedly imprisoned seemed to be blaming the victim, his ex-partner.

Thirteen of the participants said that they had had some involvement in domestic abuse either historic or present, as a perpetrator or victim. Four men admitted past or current incidents in which they had assaulted a partner though admissions were usually made with

mitigations and reservations. As previously mentioned, Jordan sought to explain (and partly excuse) his long history of abusing a previous partner because of her provocative personality. He argued that there was no physical conflict in his current relationship, not because he had changed but because his partner was more reasonable.

There is so many differences between Jaycee [previous partner] and Laura [current partner]. Jaycee, to be honest, I can't stand the thought of the woman anymore because it is down to me as well that the kids were taken but it all started because of her.

Jordan admitted a long-standing pattern of abuse. For others, the abuse was described as a single incident. In Greg's case, he had "*pushed her away from me*" during a row but accepted later that this constituted domestic violence. He also regretted that he had also been behaving in a threatening manner towards his partner. Asked to attend a group for men who were domestic abusers, Greg was initially resistant but later identified his attendance as a turning point in his relationship with his partner.

...it was amazing, everyone should go on it...there was a lot of guys in there and...the things that were coming out of their mouths, they were in there to try and help with domestic violence and they go 'so what would you do if she done this?' 'Well I would give her a backhander' and I am like- 'what is the matter with you! You are here to stop, to try and get your kids back, you haven't seen your kids for two years and you are telling them that you are going to give them a backhander!'

Four men denied DVA allegations made against them by partner or ex-partner. Two men denied domestic *violence* but accepted that they had *verbally* abused their partner. For Corey, verbal threats or abuse did not really count as abuse:

I haven't been done for any violence... [Swearing] doesn't come under violence does it? (Corey).

Similarly, Brandon, who had verbally abused his ex-partner but denied her allegations of assault maintained he was innocent of domestic abuse: "*I didn't do fuck-all*". He was one of three participants who had been in further trouble for defying bail conditions or non-molestation orders following domestic abuse related offences.

Those participants who admitted assault and the two who admitted verbal abuse comprised the six participants who had convictions relating to domestic abuse. The criminal penalties varied in severity between repeated spells of imprisonment for Jordan through to receiving a police caution.

Three participants described being subject to abuse historically. For these participants, being a victim of domestic abuse was significant for its effect upon mood, self-image and

confidence. Luke reported regular physical and emotional abuse by his previous partner which he hid from outsiders for some years before carefully planning his escape with the child of the marriage. Barry had been married for 14 years before his marriage ended. His wife “*used to hit me*”, then left him, denied him contact with the children, following which he drank “*far too much*” and attempted suicide.

Four participants maintained that they had recently been victims of domestic violence. One participant maintained that the abuse was mutual. In terms of the child protection plan, there were seven cases in which the domestic abuse issue was cited in relation to participants. Three men who eventually became main carers for their child found that the allegations made against them substantially obstructed that outcome. It appeared that DVA allegations, whether substantiated or not, close a gate to greater father involvement and may slow if not prevent men from coming forward as sole carers.

Henry: Police “*automatically assumed that...I was guilty.*”

Henry had become de facto main carer for his two children following a relapse in his partner Rosie’s mental health and related substance misuse. In marital conflicts over many months Rosie repeatedly assaulted Henry but he was reluctant to take action because he wanted her to accept psychiatric treatment and he did not think that calling the police and seeking prosecution would help matters. Following a crisis witnessed by the children in which Rosie attacked him with a knife, the police were called, Rosie was arrested but Henry did not press charges.

Later, in retaliation, Rosie alleged assault against Henry which he denied. Although Henry had visible injuries from an attack by Rosie, he was arrested and spent the night in police cells. The police “*automatically assumed that...I was guilty.*” He was released without charge.

Henry had videoed numerous incidents on his phone in which Rosie was behaving in a wild and threatening manner.

Eventually, Henry persuaded a police officer to view the videos, following which the approach of the police and social workers to the issue changed dramatically. The child protection plan was reframed. Rosie was required to live separately and her contact was to be limited and supervised. From alleged domestic abuser, Henry’s status in the child protection plan was transformed to that of protective parent.

Three men who alleged that they had been assaulted, expressed a reluctance to complain about their partner or press for her prosecution. Three men alleged that they were arrested

and detained in situations where the abuse was mutual or where the woman was the aggressor. Kyle exemplified both situations. His relationship was in grave difficulties when, *...she assaulted me and I rung the Police. Since then it has all gone wrong... she got arrested. I dropped the charges because she is the mother to my children... I just wanted the incidents to stop...she had me arrested six times in two months...she was doing it for a reason of the court... [!] never got charged for anything because I never actually did anything wrong... (Kyle)*

Participants mentioned factors that they felt had contributed to the DVA allegations. Firstly, a number of participants mentioned their partner's history of domestic abuse as perpetrator or victim in previous relationships. Nick claimed that *"...every relationship Shelley [current partner] has been in has been a violent one"*. Others mentioned their partner's poor mental health. Henry's partner Rosie, for example, *"started self-harming in 2004"*. Kyle's ex-partner: *...used to self-harm; she took overdoses...then we got together and she was all right... [before]...going on a downhill streak (Kyle).*

Another factor mentioned in relation to DVA crises was the participants' partner or ex-partner's substance misuse. Corey claimed that his wife's complaints of domestic violence invariably coincided with bouts of heavy drinking. Finally, two fathers mentioned domestic abuse allegations against them arising from their decision to attempt to see their children in spite of their volatile relationship with the child's mother.

Risk assessment of domestic violence: Automatic assumption of men's responsibility?

The assessment and prosecution of DVA related offences heavily influence social workers in the subsequent construction of child protection plans. A proven history of domestic abuse weighs heavily in current child protection plans. A good example of this was Jordan whose string of assaults on a previous partner resulted in long terms of imprisonment. His history was the main factor in the child protection plan with a new partner and her expected baby. So the nature of the investigation into domestic abuse and the evidence relied upon can be very important to the outcome for fathers and children.

The widespread view amongst the participants who had experienced domestic abuse investigations was that the assessment of DVA was often flawed and unfair. They believed that police assume that men are the aggressors and take women's accounts at face value. They claimed that the police do not listen to their accounts because their procedures dictate that there can be only one complainant and one victim. They suggest that men who are abused find it humiliating to complain and are reluctant to prosecute a partner who is, after

all, as Kyle remarked, *“the mother to my children”*. In contrast, some alleged that women, empowered by public campaigns against domestic abuse, are prepared to misrepresent rows as assaults and call in the police to achieve the ejection of their partner from his home and children. Where fathers are suspected perpetrators and are excluded because of DVA allegations this penalises them not just in relation to the criminal law but their civil law rights in relation to their children. Kyle’s experience was that,

... if there is domestic violence towards a woman, they get legal aid. If there is domestic violence towards a man, you don’t get anything (Kyle.)

Participants suggested that the effects of domestic abuse being alleged against a father are generally more severe than those experienced by mothers. In relation to the investigation and assessment of DVA by the police, all three men who eventually became main carers alleged that their accounts of the incident leading to the allegations of domestic abuse were either not sought or not given any weight. Two of these men video recorded subsequent interactions with their partner in an attempt to prove that their partner was the aggressor.

Fathers’ description of the complexity of domestic abuse

Participants reported variations in a number of factors in relation to the abusive relationships they reported. Firstly, in the severity of violence, the severity of immediate and ongoing psychological effects on victim: humiliation, fear, depression, anxiety et cetera. They also reported situations in which the abuse was exclusively from one person to another and other situations in which the abuse was mutual. Another distinction drawn from the data was whether the abuse became subject to police investigation, action and prosecution; some incidents were reported and lead to prosecution although many did not. Then there were incidents of abuse which led to child protection concerns and those that did not. Participants reported abuse that was part of a pattern and isolated single incidents.

Putting participants’ experiences in the context of current DVA literature

The men’s views and experiences of DVA raise highly controversial issues, which are echoed in the literature. On the one hand, courts and social workers are properly open to criticism for sanctioning continuing harm to children by allowing domestically abusive fathers continuing contact (Macdonald, 2016). However, questions have been raised in the literature about the reliability of DVA assessments in the UK because of an inadequate theoretical base and the use of inflexible assessment tools and practice guidance which assume an exclusive male-on-female model of domestic abuse (Ariza, Robinson & Myhill, 2016). Professional social work guidance may also reflect this assumption (e.g. Association of

Directors of Children's Services, 2015). In addition, current practice may not do justice to the complexity of the phenomenon of DVA, overemphasising risk assessment and neglecting the managing of risks in cooperation with both partners and whole families (Stanley & Humphreys, 2014; Stanley & Humphreys, 2017). The complexity of the domestic abuse phenomenon is illustrated in a review of current research and theory on patterns of domestic abuse. This highlights a range of different typologies of abuse, mirroring the variety of situations reported by the study participants (Ali, Dhingra & McGarry, 2016). Several studies cite evidence that men are sometimes the victims of DVA (e.g. Bernadino et al., 2016) and the Crime Survey for England and Wales for the year ending March 2016 records that 7.7% of women and 4.4% of men said that they experienced DVA during the previous year (ONS, 2016). However, the measurement of the incidence of DVA and the extent to which abuse is gendered remains a contested issue (Myhill, 2017). Although it appears from the literature that the effects for women of DVA are often more serious than for men (Hamberger & Larsen, 2015), it seems likely that situations in which abuse may be mutual, or predominantly by women towards men, are underreported.

5.4 Chapter summary

This chapter selects some of the circumstances and preoccupations that fathers bring to the child protection process. Some factors were directly relevant to each father's direct relationship with their child and the way that they may appear in a child protection plan. However, a number of other factors seemed to have significant influence on fathers' agendas and capacities to contribute positively to their children's welfare.

Fifteen participants said that they were in good health. However, it was striking that a majority of participants reported a significant illness, disability or other impairment. Significant minorities of the sample lived with chronic physical health conditions whilst others reported various mental health challenges including depression, anxiety, chronic stress, substance misuse, instances of self-harm and panic attacks. This level of morbidity raises questions about the effect of health issues in blighting fathers' potential for active involvement in pursuing their children's welfare. In addition, most of the fathers in the study were living precarious lives with diminishing access to benefits, insecure work and increasing debt. The study did not include an analysis of all child protection plans although some fathers shared these with us. However, we found little in the plans we saw or in the fathers' accounts to indicate that social workers were intending action to address child welfare inequalities (Bywaters, 2016) inherent in these fathers' health issues and their economically precarious circumstances.

There was considerable complexity in the networks of relationships surrounding fathers and their children. Men were depicted as continually engaged in a process of balancing sometimes conflicting considerations to maintain their income, meet the needs of their children, meet their own intimacy needs, keep current partners onside whilst negotiating contact with previous children with ex partners. In addition, the fathers were engaged in relationship work to maintain their relationship networks. In this study, it seems that a common pattern at the end of a relationship is for fathers rather than mothers to leave their shared home. Given that parents with children on child protection plans and care proceedings are at particular risk of relationship breakdown, if this is a pattern repeated more generally, the resultant accommodation issues are likely to impact on fathering disproportionately.

Domestic violence and abuse (DVA) was found to be an important theme in the study data not least as it influenced the possibility within child protection plans of some fathers having an active role in their child's care. The men's stated disapproval of domestic violence towards female partners was near universal. A small minority of men admitted committing such violence though admissions were often accompanied by pleas for mitigation. Others acknowledged the harm caused by domestic violence but did not recognise other forms of domestic abuse. Several fathers protested that assessments of DVA complaints were unfair, in that police automatically believed women's complaints and failed to hear men's accounts. A few fathers claimed that they had suffered current DVA from their partners but had been disbelieved until presenting video evidence. Others said that the abuse had been mutual. In three cases, contested DVA allegations delayed the eventual placement of children with fathers. This study reports fathers' experiences which suggest that DVA is rightly taken very seriously as a factor in child protection but that mothers and fathers are not on an equal footing in relation to the assessment of suspected DVA and that being identified as a perpetrator has differential consequences for mothers and fathers.

Chapter 6: Fathers' lives beyond the child protection plan: life narratives, relationships with children and fathers' sense of agency

This chapter offers participants' own descriptions of what fatherhood means to them and how this relates to what they say about important people in their own lives. It also considers the relationship that the men claim with their children and their sense of agency as fathers.

6.1 Formative figures in fathers' stories and what they represent in fathers' current identities

In this section we present findings regarding fathers' stories of important people (whom we refer to here as formative figures) who represented encouragement or discouragement and whose opinions and actions still resonate in their lives and seem to contribute to their sense of agency as fathers. Not all participants told such stories but most did.

We approach these stories not so much as historical accounts of fathers' earlier lives but as living myths which are invoked to explain and contextualise the father's current experiences and challenges. The participants often make a connection between previous (often adverse) circumstances, the influence of a formative figure or figures in their life and the person they have since become. The stories frequently seem to follow this pattern although some stories 'end' with a note of adversity surmounted, some with disaster and some with a degree of confusion. Formative figures may be depicted as positively encouraging, abusive and denigrating or some blend of both. Positive figures may have given the participant care and emotional support and/ or inspired subsequent achievement, for example, by imparting skills or personifying success in the face of difficulty. The stories have added poignancy and drama when the formative figure has been removed from the father's life by death. In some cases, the import of this part of the story seems to be that the resource represented by this special person is no longer available to them.

A few fathers' stories do not include formative figures and we comment on these below.

What stories of formative figures may achieve for fathers

Narratives involving formative figures may serve different purposes. Firstly to help the father to explain and justify some aspect of their lifestyle or conduct with particular reference to their role as father or their enactment of masculinity. Attention is deflected from shame

inducing experiences to the actions of others. For example, Jamie, in the context of describing his confused feelings about fathering cites his lack of experiencing it for himself. *I think... I could have done with someone, you know your dad is meant to be your best friend, you know you are meant to do a lot growing up together and I never had that (Jamie).*

Citing a formative figure may reduce isolation. Their formative figure may bear witness to them, advocate for them or share some of the responsibility for the outcome. Also, the inclusion of formative figures in life scripts acts as a reference point to guide men's own actions, giving life some coherence particularly when outside circumstances are unpredictable and chaotic. Alternatively, stories may constitute redemption narratives, stories which relate how difficulties have been confronted and overcome. It may be that the repeated telling of a story may help to distil and identify the meaning of a key event or turning point (McAdams, 2013).

Lawler (2008) argues that identity is achieved largely by narrative. So confused and incoherent narratives may reflect an identity crisis. As Polkinghorne (1991, p135) argues, "under stressful conditions, self-narrative may decompose". Indeed, for most participants, encountering the formal child protection system initiated a profound challenge to their previously constructed identities. The identification and prioritising of formative figures may be helping some fathers to overwrite condemnation narratives (in which a person repeats and enacts a story of shame and unworthiness) and adapt existing narrative scripts (Singer et al., 2013). Internalising the positive characteristics attributed to the formative figure might help rebuild a more meaningful identity (Polkinghorne, 1991, p135).

Findings regarding fathers' narratives

Four kinds of narratives were identified in fathers' accounts (N=35):

Consistent narratives (n=8) in which the father either drew upon mainly positive formative figures to construct their stories, or where the negative influence of earlier formative figures was corrected in the context of later positive figures.

Confused narratives (n=12) in which both positive and negative formative figures could be identified but tensions between the narrative threads remained unresolved.

Independence narratives (n=7) in which no formative figures were mentioned and the father's story centred upon the process by which they had become "self-made".

Impoverished narratives (n=6) in which there were negative but no positive formative figures.

No relevant data were found in 2 cases.

There follows an example of each and some concluding comments.

A consistent narrative: Brett

Brett's formative figures were his parents: his mother predominantly but also his father. His upbringing was generally happy and uneventful until his teens when his mother died. She was the family's lynchpin both emotionally and practically.

She organised everything, financial wise, going to see your family, schools, she done the lot...

As well as taking good care of Brett, what she brought to the family became achingly apparent in the gaping hole left by her death. Brett's father had practical skills and had studied to be an electrician, later setting up his own company. He was not emotionally demonstrative and worked long hours but he taught Brett many practical things and inspired Brett to follow in his footsteps. Once married and with children, Brett, qualified as a plumber, became self-employed and "*like dad*", worked very long hours. This he pursued to the detriment of his wife Kirsty and children. His relationship with Kirsty, who had mental health problems, deteriorated. When they separated, Kirsty became the main carer but she became too ill to fulfil this role. Faced with the possibility of the children needing to go into foster care, Brett stepped forward to be a main carer like his mother, drastically reducing his work hours. As he describes it, he knew how to *organise everything* for his children and proceeded to do so. Brett drew on things learnt from two formative figures in different areas of his life. He cited the story of his mother to explain how he felt able to step into the role of main carer and also to reflect on earlier regrets that he had neglected his wife and children.

A confused narrative: Tim

Tim described himself as the "*black sheep*" of the family partly because his disability prevented him from living up to the family's armed forces tradition. His mum told him "*you didn't stand a chance when you were little*" reinforcing his sense of being worthless. His birth father was a "*violent alcoholic*". His stepfather provided some stability for a while but died when Tim was 11.

...when I lost my step dad, I went off the rails... drugs were my friends...

Estranged from his family, only his grandmother remained a positive figure.

...when my own family didn't want to know my Nan she was always there...

Later, as a father to a young person whose behaviour was beyond his partner's control, Tim was encouraged by a social worker to exercise parental discipline. In doing so, however, he became involved in a physical confrontation with his daughter. It seemed that Tim was exposing his confusion as to how men are supposed to be protective and active but without being violent. Tim could not seem to identify anything in his story to draw upon to support a different kind of masculinity. In his story, the twin realities of his family's rejection and denigration of him and his grandmother's support seemed to coexist without resolution.

An independence narrative: David

David told us that his mother was drug dependent. His father was unknown and that he had no bond with his stepfather. He remembers "...not having any love from anyone... Having been kicked out by his parents he was looked after in institutional care where he "...had to fight there for myself..." in order to survive. His subsequent narrative features his own determination to take control of his life fearlessly, deferring to no one, moving to the UK and developing his own creative career, forming a partnership and having children. His subsequent narrative features his own determination to take control of his life fearlessly, deferring to no one, leaving home early and subsequently reinventing himself.

An impoverished narrative: Dale

Dale's account features several negative formative figures. He related domestic violence between his parents who colluded with sexual abuse by a paternal uncle and then rejected him when the abuse came to light. When living in a hostel as a teenager, he could identify no redeeming relationships and subsequently became seriously entangled with substance misuse. Dale seems to use his story to explain and account for his situation in which he felt depressed about the present, prone to risky behaviours and fatalistic about the chances of being a successful father in future.

The power of fathers' narratives to facilitate change

Most fathers in the study identified formative figures in their lives who either sustained them by care and support or helped them realise their potential. However, particularly for those participants with confused narratives, positive formative figures may remain largely unreclaimed from the past, their significance obscured by negative events. The narratives shared by the participants reveal that many men were obstructed in their attempts to confront current challenges by destructive voices from past formative figures.

Participants in this study have frequently told us that they have rarely had the chance for their stories to be fully heard. If, as Lawler (2008) maintains, identity is constructed socially and if stories clarify in the telling and shaping of identities, then it is important for social workers to be listeners to stories, enabling fathers to re-imagine the adversities of the past bringing alive into the present the affirming messages of mentors and supporters. This may also be a chance for fathers whose narrative identity is confused or partially developed to clarify their identity in the process of story-telling, discussion and reflection.

6.2 Fathers' relationships with children

Meeting the expectations of fatherhood

This section explores what the participants said about their relationship with the child or children who were the subject of a child protection plan. In recounting their relationships, the participants were also sharing their concept of what it was to be a father and how they assessed themselves as fathers. The literature discusses the emotional challenges for men when they make the transition to becoming fathers involving as it does, adaptations to their identity, relationships and responsibilities (Draper, 2003; Chin, Hall & Daiches, 2011). Then come the challenges of day-to-day fathering. According to Norman (2017, p89) the standards against which “‘good’ fathers are commonly assessed [are] financial provisioning (breadwinning) and contributions to childcare (involvement)”. These standards are evident in popular media discussion and political discourse. The ideal of the involved father is now well established in the UK (Dermott & Miller, 2015). In academic discourse, the notion of father involvement and its effects on children has received sustained attention for some three decades. In 1987, Lamb and colleagues (1987) proposed three dimensions of paternal involvement- accessibility, engagement and responsibility. Whilst some men have embraced the notion of involved fatherhood, some have doubted their competence in this role and experienced strain in partner relationships and in their commitment to work (Barclay & Lupton, 1999; Henwood & Procter, 2003). Against this background, we catch resonances in participants' accounts of what they believe society expects of them as fathers and whether they are succeeding or aspiring to these expectations.

Transition to fatherhood when a child has a child protection plan

For most participants, the child who was the subject of a child protection plan was not their first child. Participants varied as to their feelings about the pregnancy and birth and what they said about their intention to conceive a child with their partner.

Seven fathers indicated that the pregnancy was desired and intended. For example, Jimmy was happy but surprised to hear of the pregnancy:

Oh I can't wait, I really, really can't, yes it is my first kid, something I thought would never happen to me because there are certain issues with my health and that and it happened so...[the birth] 'wasn't as bad as I thought it would be'; I cried floods; I couldn't help it'.

Kenny and his wife “spent about seven years trying” to have a child and,

...as soon as we stopped trying the little man comes along!... he was only ten months old when I went to prison [convicted for abusing a previous child].

For six fathers, the pregnancy had not been planned but the baby was welcomed into an established relationship. Greg and partner had both had children from previous relationships but welcomed news of the pregnancy which, they felt, served to cement their reconstituted family.

Two fathers indicated that the pregnancy had been both unintended and too early in their relationship which came under intense strain as a result. Gary said that his girlfriend's pregnancy was “*unintended*” in spite of precautions. Subsequently, *we couldn't agree on names, so that is the only one we could come up with...*

Jamie, who was present at the birth, described being astonished by his son.

H is beautiful, he is handsome... honest he is the most beautiful baby ever!

Henry's children's births revealed to him “*the meaning of life!*” and the subsequent bonding with his children “*is the most beautiful experience of my life...*”

For seven fathers, there were varied reasons for ambivalence regarding the child's conception and birth. Cody was “*racked with guilt*” because he had lost several previous children to care as a result of his and his partner's drug abuse. Although eager to be a father again, news of the pregnancy filled him with foreboding at the possibility (which became reality later in the year) of losing yet another child.

Distraught really, she was on the pill... and we were not planning for any more children and all the heartache of losing our other children.

Nick's ambivalence stemmed from his partner's previous history of losing children to care and the sudden intrusion of social workers and child protection plans in his life. In addition,

Cody and Nick were among the fathers in the study whose economic situation was precarious.

Chandra's wife's pregnancy following IVF had been embarked upon somewhat against his better judgment because of his concerns for his wife's mental health which were later realised. Seb embarked upon the pregnancy with his wife as part of their life plan to build a family and family home but he admitted that his wife "*was more keen than I was; I guess in some ways I was more of a typical bloke around the house*".

Several participants reported that previous casual sexual partners had become pregnant at times when they were not motivated or able to take an active fathering role as carer or provider. This category of conception resembled that described by March-Augustine et al., (2009, p102) as "*just not thinking*". But only one pregnancy with a child in the study seemed to fit this category at all. Harry, recently out of prison, homeless, depressed and having split from his partner and mother of his children, embarked on a brief affair with a previous partner which he immediately regretted and ended but not before his daughter was conceived. However, on reuniting with the partner who was mother of his other children, he eventually successfully gained care of the child born during his brief affair.

Most participants in the study welcomed the pregnancy even when unplanned. Some expressed delight at their child's birth. However, the pregnancy was perhaps in March Augustine et al's (2009, p112) words "*ambivalently desired*" by a significant minority. The fathers' narratives of pregnancy and birth illustrate some of the ways in which structural, health, economic factors and fathers' previous histories as carers permeate intimate private decisions and shape fathering identities from early in a child's life.

Involved fathering: The new test for men

The participants seemed all too aware of expectations that to be a father in the full sense, men should lay claim to involvement with their child. It now seemed insufficient for them to claim fatherhood in a full and satisfactory sense by being a provider only. Most participants (20 of the 35) claimed a close bond with their child or stressed its importance. What they meant by this seemed to be a good cooperative relationship with their child carrying through day-to-day living or which could be counted upon to be rekindled at contact in the case of fathers and children living separately. Eleven fathers cited evidence of their expertise in the daily lives of their children by speaking in detail about the child's particular needs, preferences and routine. A few fathers appeared deeply committed to a "hands on" role with

their children whilst having a full time job even though for some, their female partner did most of the day-to-day care. These fathers spoke about their struggles to balance home and work commitments in a way that was more typical of working mothers. Corey, whilst he “*does everything that a single parent would do*” simultaneously attempted to run his business and bid for new work, fitting in work and caring with extra bought-in help.

Work orientated fathers: delegating daily care and arranging activities

Around half of the fathers (even those currently without jobs or with very poorly paid jobs) emphasised their belief that it was a key role of fathers to provide for their families and eight fathers intimated that they prefer the world of work to being at home. Kyle had formalised their parenting roles on traditionally gendered lines.

I go out to work and she looks after the children and at weekend I will give her a break and I will get up and look after her children and take them out and that.

However, even those fathers who delegated most of the day-to-day care of children and home to female partners claim to interact with their children through activities. So Barry, responding to a social worker’s criticism “*that I was all work and no family*” cited museum trips and outings as proof that he was a good enough father. Mitchell, a working father who had contact with his sons at weekends, described their relationship in the same breath as their typical shared activities.

Mine and Jake’s relationship is good. Most of the time he just wants to play on my tablet or if we go to the park, we will go to the park...

Fathers’ care ensures happiness and security

Some fathers significantly involved in daily child care and claiming the closest bond with their children suggested that their having a rapport with their children afforded the children emotional protection and security from the disruption in their lives associated with breakdown of their mother’s care. The existence of such a relationship and demonstrations of the children’s emotional reliance on them were cited as evidence of the children’s general happiness, security and welfare whilst cared for by them. For example, Henry, whose ex-partner Rosie’s behaviour around the children had allegedly been frightening and unpredictable, stated that,

The children are happy to be with me ...they are giving me hugs all the time.

Brett’s children,

...would still rather live with me... Because I am more level headed and talk more sense than their mum does... they just seem to get on with me better...

Whilst Corey's mother (the children's paternal grandmother) observed with approval that, *They [children] don't want to let him [Corey] go anywhere.*

It was noticeable that some such fathers, when it was suggested to them that their child may have been suffering emotional distress as a result of the events and situations triggering a child protection plan tended to play this down. Henry, whose children had reportedly witnessed their mother's persistently dangerous behaviour appeared to discount the potential impact, dismissing possible signs of one daughter's distress, seemingly anxious to see them as happy children free from "*nervous disorder*".

Corey contested professional concerns about his children's emotional status and behaviour arising from their having witnessed repeated domestic conflict. He continued to see his children as simply "*kind and happy*". He could not accept reports that his son had been involved in bullying at school. He resisted proposed counseling sessions for the children as well-meaning, wrong-headed attempts to pathologise his children and put things into their minds. Professionals might suspect these that fathers were acting self protectively and neglecting their children's mental health by taking such a position. However, the fathers concerned acknowledged that their children had had adverse experiences and saw themselves as protecting their children from being labeled as problems and doing all they could to bring normality to their children's lives. These fathers sought to take control by seeking to *limit outside interference* in family life including from social workers. There is more about fathers' scepticism regarding 'direct work' with their children in Chapter 8.

Fathering as 'doing something'

This section describes fathers' parental activity on behalf of their children. We distinguish this everyday fathering activity, which may be visible or invisible to the casual observer, from fathers exercising *agency* in their role. Agency, as will be discussed in the section *Men's actions and sense of agency as fathers* which follows, is understood here as a father's consciousness of power, entitlement and self-efficacy in their public role as a father. In this sense, approximately half of the participants appeared to have a limited sense of agency as fathers. However, a number of fathers with a more highly developed sense of agency sought to validate their fathering credentials by claims to be *doing something*. Action was required especially when the children have been subject to their ex-partner's poor or abusive care. So these fathers present themselves as resourceful competent people *taking control* in a difficult situation, thus laying claim to one of the main elements identified by Lamb et al (1987) as crucial to involved fathering: taking responsibility.

Anthony, for example, characterised himself as *'the dynamic parent.... there isn't anything I can't sort out for them'*. Developing expertise in their child's life is another example of doing something especially when the father's expertise in the child's routine and daily life is put to work to *structure their children's lives*. Kyle in the aftermath of the children's removal from their mother's care, described this as *"sorting the children out"*. He emphasised his children's need for clear meal and bed times; coherent rules and sanctions when they break them; play times; football training and ballet club; planned outings; having friends to tea and planned contact sessions with their mother. Kyle railed against his ex-partner for her unpredictability in keeping to contacts.

But taking direct responsibility for children's day-to-day care involving hours of unpaid work leaving behind the world of work was,

...quite hard really because it was nothing I was used to ... I was doing all the housework and washing and getting their school uniform ready and packed lunch ready and it was just completely different from driving a truck all day you know, that was quite daunting yeah... (Brett).

Structuring children's lives extended for some fathers to attempts to *manage their child's emotions* by geeing them up, encouraging optimism, jollying them along in the face of the unpredictable present and future. The corollary of the emphasis on emotion management was that there was relatively little evidence of fathers highlighting the need to listen carefully to their child's feelings and empathising with their child. Luke was an exception in relation to his teenage son Toby. He described watching and listening carefully over a period of time as Toby went through and emerged from a personal crisis. When the crisis passed, Toby had *"gone back to being his totally cool self again"*, much to Luke's relief. The grandfathers in the study displayed more obvious empathy. Tom noticed his granddaughter's non-verbal communication when seeing her mother. She *would kind of like sort of try and make herself small...* Graham, speaking about his daughter Caitlin who is the mother of the child with a child protection plan described his attempts to reconnect with her.

I am trying to understand what she is trying to say, not the words or the way she is talking because you know it is difficult because a lot of it is attention seeking, but some of it is a cry for help in a different way...

Father ambivalence towards or rejection of their child

Around one third of fathers expressed significant ambivalence in their feelings about their child. Of those, some had focused on work to the exclusion of their relationship with the child. Some expressed perplexity regarding their adolescents' fluctuating emotions or drew attention to the child's challenging behaviour which, it was implied, limited or frustrated their

attempts at fathering. A few fathers who had been 'in the frame' for abusing their child had particular difficulty in maintaining a positive narrative of fathering for their child. For example, Seb often in conflict with his adolescent daughter,

I can remember her telling me she wanted me to die of cancer on two or three occasions when she was in one of her tempers.

Tim denied abuse and was stung by his daughter's temerity in bringing accusations against him.

Can't get that accusation out of my head... I am not going to hurt my daughter, she might get on my nerves and quite often I feel like really beating the crap out of her but she is my kid at the end of the day...

At the far extreme of the spectrum were participants who had let the aspiration of active fathering go or had it taken from them. Some had children removed from them to care during the study period and were either serial loss fathers or 'marked men' (see Chapter 10). Three fathers had not dared to get close to a new baby whose loss to care was expected. Shane declined to "bond" with his baby because "they are going to take the baby away anyway" making his grief even more unbearable.

Four participants appeared to effectively abdicate their involvement as fathers with children when held responsible for child maltreatment and feeling unable to remain engaged with the child protection system. Asif rejected social workers' concerns about his care and turned his anger against his now estranged "obnoxious" daughter.

We have done everything for our daughter and yet she is actually saying you have not done anything for me and you hate me.

Six fathers were left with little in the way of a coherent narrative of themselves as fathers after losing a child to care and, perhaps, previous children and/ or experiencing a serious rift in the relationship with child. A seventh father, Mark, seemed to be an exception. In spite of losing his children to care and becoming a 'marked' man because of alleged child maltreatment, he remained buoyant and appeared resilient.

In general, the fathers in this study present a conventionally gendered picture of a range of parenting styles which is recognisable from other studies (for example, Doucet, 2004).

Whether closely involved in their child's day-to-day care or more distantly connected, fathers in the study talking about their children tended to emphasise practical provision, activities and security. Emotional aspects of care (such as nurturing and empathising) feature far less

prominently. A small number of participants had taken on full responsibility for their child's care or aspired to do so. Some with female partners attempted to be active carers whilst fully engaged in the world of work whilst a larger group had delegated the role of main carer to their female partner. A few had withdrawn or been strategically excluded from active fathering.

As already mentioned, taking responsibility for their child's care is seen by Lamb et al (1987) as a key indicator of father involvement. As Doucet (2004) indicates, that responsibility is an emotional one in the sense that a responsible parent undertakes continuing, specific and detailed "worry work" and action for their child in each domain of their lives. As will be proposed in the next section, the default setting in our culture is to expect mothers to do this for children. However, this study shows some fathers embracing this role underlining Doucet's (2004, p108) observation that,

...when mothers are not available, or where mothers let go of caring for brief or long periods, fathers do come to take on and fill that powerful and protective space where emotional responsibility is taken on.

Our findings raise the question as to whether the child protection system is subtly feminised in its view of what constitutes good enough parenting, tending to underestimate the potential of some fathers to care for their children. As Doucet (2009, p116) argues, it is possible that, *...listening to, and theorizing from, fathers' narratives through a maternal lens means that paternal forms of nurturing are ignored or obscured.*

We found that the quality and intensity of a father's relationship with his child is correlated to his sense of agency as a father. This is discussed in the following section. But where fathers express ambivalent feelings towards their child it appears that there may be complex factors at work including ambivalently desired pregnancies, conflicts with the child's mother, allegations of maltreatment against the father and challenging behaviour from the child.

6.3 Men's actions and sense of agency as fathers

Fathers doing something

In contrast to the concern in some quarters regarding the supposed absence of men in the lives of children (for example, Grant, 2006), this study shows men as being both *present* and *active* in different ways and degrees in the lives of their children.

Although much of this report describes the external factors which men experience (either in their day-to-day lives or in relation to the child protection process) and the ways in which these factors may obstruct, enable or shape men's actions, there is abundant evidence of men "doing something" in a variety of ways which may or may not appear helpful to the outside observer. Here are just some ways in which we found fathers to be active:

Problem solving by demonstrating proactivity and resourcefulness, over things like finding work, getting housing, dealing with bureaucracy/agencies (including benefits) and managing childcare.

Relational work in which men try with varying degrees of success to maintain or manage relationships with partners, children, extended family, 'mates' (and bosses).

Emotional work carried out by men in managing their own emotions in the face of loss, threat, depression, chronic/physical pain, love, rejection, criticism and shame.

Fathering including providing, practical/direct care tasks, organising care arrangements expressing/showing love, and displaying their knowledge of the child (Finch, 2007).

Seeking and accepting help in relation to health issues, advice, but also linked to engagement with services/referrals made as part of a child protection plan.

Risk-taking/impulsive acts - including over relationship and/or conception decisions.

What it means to have agency

So, participants are generally "doing something" in relation to the factors that bear upon them, their life circumstances and their role as fathers. However, that is not the same as saying that they are actively shaping the key issues that are relevant to being fathers. This requires us to consider the extent of their *agency*. Writers generally speak of agency not in absolute terms but situated within an individual's social life. It is impossible to quantify how much of a person's actions are the direct result of decisions expressing agency and how much are dictated by societal forces. What most writers agree is that people are not "*cultural dopes*" (Garfinkel, 1984, p67) as allegedly portrayed in earlier structural sociology but that individuals have some ability to shape their destiny and to shape society in return. According to Broadhurst's (2012) account of the work of John Dewey, pragmatism, which gave rise to social constructionism offers a helpful way of conceptualising agency within the social work

context. Pragmatism posits every aspect of human life as being socially mediated. So individual humans operate within a circumscribed repertoire of social actions. However, life is so multifarious that the individuals have to choose between actions which are socially sanctioned. So the exercise of human agency when it occurs is always within a social context.

For some, agency includes the idea of mastery at least in the domain of your own life (Mirowsky & Ross, 2007). Giddens (1991) posited the idea of reflexivity to emphasise the way that some individuals are able, whilst acting within a context which is socially mediated, to use structural elements to their own advantage, bending and adapting social structures to fit their own requirements and needs. Such reflexive people grasp the importance and possibility of acting in a way that will influence the social conditions under which they must live.

For Emirbayer & Mische (1998) a time or *temporal* aspect is essential to the notion of agency. Likewise for Hitlin & Kirkpatrick Johnson (2015) a sense of future *hopefulness* is part of the narrative imagination in Andrews' (2014) work and of the idea of future perspective in Zimbardo's classification of time perspectives (Zimbardo & Boyd, 2008). Having a sense of mastery over your own life as it unfolds does not sit well without the ability to imagine and move towards a different more hopeful future. Precarious living has been associated with an impoverished, fatalistic sense of the future (Fieulane & Apostolides, 2015) and therefore greater risk of a diminished sense of agency.

Tenuous and dynamic agency

Writing specifically about fathers, Dermott (2008) suggests that there are degrees of agency. Some fathers may think about what it means to be a father in a day-to-day sense and then adopt one or more readymade fatherhood tropes from the surrounding culture. This tenuous agency is, Dermott suggests, similar to Bourdieu's notion of "habitus". Others with a stronger sense of agency will find their own new approach to the challenges of fatherhood.

Dermott implies that a more radical approach to agency may come about in response to a crisis in fathering such as the possibility of losing all contact with their child following the breakdown of a relationship with the child's mother. The encounter between fathers and the child protection process is surely one such crisis. Within the study we note that a number of fathers do indeed exercise some degree of limited agency in adopting a particular readymade version of fatherhood which could serve to legitimate their own fathering

practices. For example, some present themselves more or less convincingly as involved fathers. Others make appeal to the more traditional provider role of fathers. The distinction between weak and strong agency is illustrated in Kyle's case. Here, speaking of the period when he was non-resident with his children he indicates the degree of determination which enabled him to remain close enough to his children to become aware when his son was experiencing abuse and make a convincing plea to become the main carer:

...I am a father to my children and I know a lot of men, well I can see why they do it now as well, it is so much easier just to let the woman get on with it and see your kids whenever but I am not like that, I want to be an influence in my children's life.

6.4 The primacy of the mother-child dyad: The context for fathering

Analysis of our study data suggests that social workers, mothers and even fathers act on the basis that, all things being equal, it is best to "*let the woman get on with it*" conceptualising the relationship between mothers and children as more fundamental for children and assuming that, if parents part, mothers should be main carers.

This becomes apparent in many aspects of participants' stories. Kyle observed social workers' preoccupation with mothers and children,

...all you hear about is how you are going to support the mother and how you are going to help the mother, you don't hear anything about the father.

Greg commented of his depressed partner that "*she weren't doing her job as mother*", assuming that the main carer role would be hers. His own mother betrayed the expectation of attentive motherhood: "*At the end of the day a mother is meant to protect you...My mum couldn't deal with us because she was a terrible mum*". Similarly, Brandon complains that his ex-partner,

...doesn't care about the kids like every mother should...they don't get play time, they don't get the care, the love that they need...from their mother, from their own mother.

Cody notes that the social workers,

...mainly focus on Mandy [partner] which I don't complain about because I think that is what they should do, is focus on Mandy really...[because] she is the mum isn't she?

The unconscious assumption of mothers' priority as carers was also mentioned in focus groups with managers and social workers (and is discussed in Chapter 8).

6.5 Evaluating fathers' agency regarding their child

Based upon a close reading of the men's case studies, we identified four important properties of fathers' agency to help us to evaluate the nature and strength of each participant's agency in relation to their child. Evaluating in this way has limitations not least because the circumstances of the men were so varied as was their relationship to the safeguarding concerns for their child (for example, whether they were 'in the frame' for child maltreatment or intervening from outside the household, or seen as a 'safe pair of hands' by social workers [these categories are discussed in more detail in Chapter 10]).

Moreover, the obstacles to involved fathering faced by each participant varied.

The properties identified were:

- Persistence
- Sense of entitlement
- Quality of agency
- Relationship with child

Each of these properties is susceptible to influence from the variety of factors already discussed.

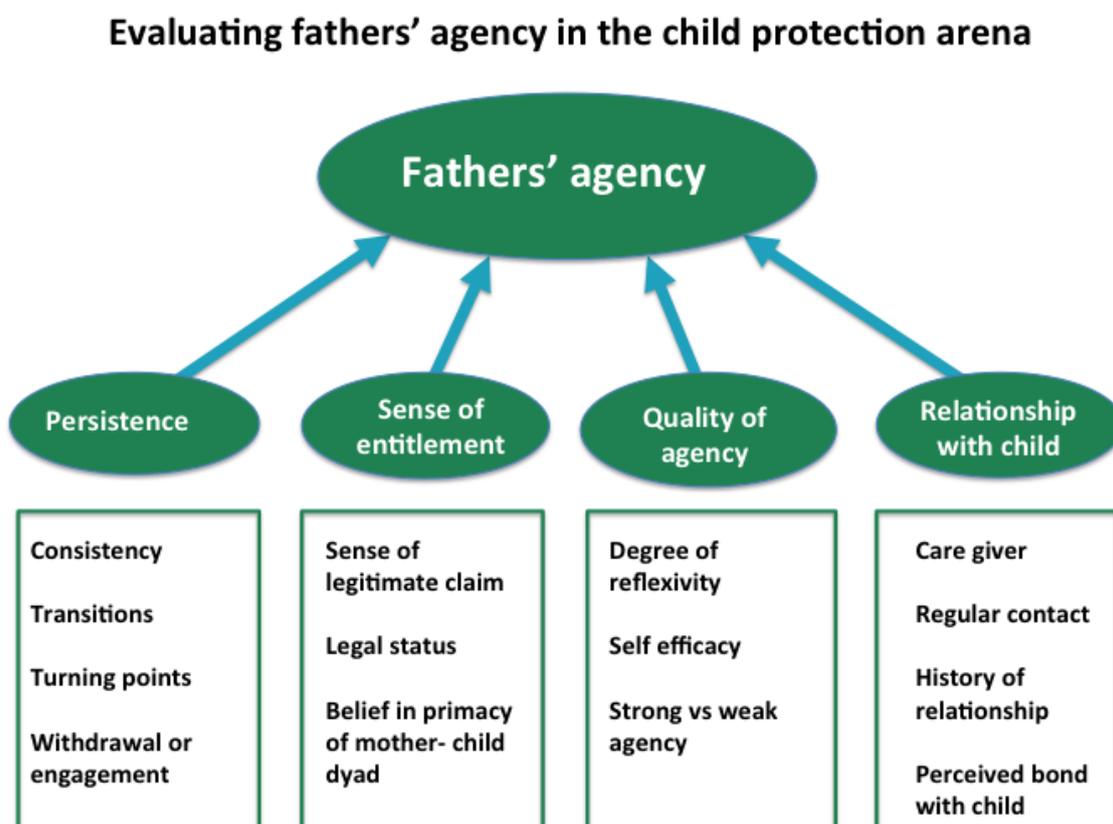
Persistence refers to the father's ability to continue to assert and perform fathering roles in relation to the child and his engagement with the child protection system. The way in which fathers negotiate transitions and turning points is examined. Also whether there are periods of withdrawal or disengagement.

Sense of entitlement. This concerns the father's sense that he has a legitimate claim to intervene in relation to his child. This may be related to whether or not he has parental responsibility. It could also be related to the degree to which he accepts the primacy of the child's relationship with the mother.

Quality of agency. This relates to the strength of the father's commitment to put forward his view and take action on behalf of his child. Also to the degree of reflexivity he displays: How much does each father understand himself as an actor who can negotiate, shape and transform and approach things on his own terms?

Relationship with child. Degree of current involvement in providing care. History of relationship with child. Quality of relationship with child. Father's perception of the strength of relationship.

Figure 6.1 Fathers' agency in the child protection arena



Findings regarding participants' sense of agency

Four main groups of participants were identified in respect of the nature and degree of their agency as fathers: Challengers (n=7); Pragmatic Performers (n=6); Confused but Committed (n=4) and Resigned or Retreating (n=18).

The seven fathers in the **Challengers** group had a high sense of entitlement as fathers. Even when resident with the child's mother they were not content to leave child care issues to her. Mostly they claimed a strong and active relationship with their child though not necessarily as resident carer. All but one of them had apparently been regarded by social workers as aggressive, threatening or unreasonable at some stage during the year although some seemed to progress beyond that label as time went on. They were extremely determined and consistent in what they thought should happen in relation to their child even when life transitions and social worker actions seemed to make them peripheral.

Apart from their manner, what also made them challenging for social workers were some of their attitudes and actions. At the most radical end, two fathers continually disputed the whole basis of the child protection plan, maintaining that social workers had greatly exaggerated risks to the child. There was little sense of trust of social workers in this group. They were critical of social workers (whose motives were often impugned), child protection conferences, core groups and the role of other agencies in supporting the plan. Generally, they did not want help from social workers and saw demands for their involvement in the plan as interference. Other fathers acknowledged the existence of risk but maintained that they had been unfairly treated (for example, by being regarded as a domestic abuser). Some made complaints about social workers or about the service their family received. One father living separately from the child's mother alarmed social workers by his unilateral action in failing to return his child to the mother's care because of his worries about the risk she represented.

In terms of the quality of their agency, these fathers demonstrated strong agency and reflexivity in that they were convinced that they could influence the outcome. However, all but one of the group seemed to have comparatively little ability or wish to understand the perspectives of those managing the child protection system and reach some accommodation with them.

Researchers did not have sufficient information about the child protection plans or the fathers' relationship with their children to form a view about the justice or otherwise of their cases but it appeared that by the end of the year at least two fathers had prevailed in their campaigns. In two or three other cases, the fathers were fighting on and matters were still not finally resolved. Clearly, child protection plans involving Challengers are in greater danger of deadlock and indefinite extension.

The strong sense of agency of **Pragmatic Performers** was not so obvious because it could appear that they were simply conforming to the demands of the child protection plan. Occasionally, fathers in this group would resist pressure for change but were more able to understand the viewpoint of social workers, strategise, negotiate with social workers, accept help and take the initiative. One non-resident father appreciated the child protection dilemma immediately and took the initiative, with his ex-partner's agreement, to take on the main carer role for two of the children. Another father was somewhat bemused by his interaction with social workers but highly motivated by his desire to support his partner and children. Four of the six fathers claimed significant involvement in their child's day-to-day care whilst

one was mainly a “provider” father. Most described meaningful engagement with the child protection plan. In three cases, the main child protection concerns were focused on mothers while fathers were identified as protective. In this sense, the prerogative for fathers to intervene, problem-solve and not be subject to serious criticism themselves appeared to bolster their sense of entitlement to active fathering.

Relationships with social workers were described as generally more open and positive than with Challenging fathers. In summary, Pragmatic Performers had a strong sense of entitlement to father based usually on a strong relationship with their child, a belief that men should be active agents in their children’s lives. It was empowering to them that most of them were not the main focus of the child protection concerns. Perhaps because they were more relaxed about their fatherhood status, they were better able to enter into negotiations regarding the child about the protection plan and consider the perspectives of their children and partners as well as the social workers.

Only four fathers comprised the **Confused but Committed** group whose sense of agency, based mainly upon an unwavering relationship with the child, was powerful at times but appeared to falter at other times and circumstances. These fathers were strongly committed to their children claiming good rapport based upon being a main carer or being in frequent contact. They were clear about what they saw as the unacceptable care of the children by their ex partners. Their sense of agency seemed to waver in relation to issues of entitlement. They had doubts, for example, as to how to manage conflict with the child’s mother and how able they felt to seek to take over the main carer role and with it, responsibility for perhaps placing some limits on their ex-partner’s involvement. This was challenging to fathers who still retained some sense that the relationship between mother and child was irreplaceable. This was in spite of what they knew about their ex partner’s seriously inadequate care of the child. There was also some confusion as to their legal entitlement and how to surmount the problem of applying for a Child Arrangement Order given that they would be unable to claim legal aid to do so. Given their doubts about their entitlement, it is understandable that these fathers were not necessarily strong, coherent and consistent in their representations to social workers about what should happen for the child. In terms of reflexivity, this group were generally aware of the perspectives of others but for various reasons, seemed to be uncertain about what they wanted to achieve in the encounter with their network and the child protection system and also somewhat diffident about their ability to influence the outcome. Rather than making things happen, these fathers tended to watch and wait.

Eighteen fathers were grouped as **Resigned or Retreating**. What was noticeable was that 15/18 of these fathers displayed a low sense of entitlement to father. This seemed to be related to two main factors. Firstly, most of the group (12) had been identified as being “in the frame” in relation to care concerns for the child. Secondly, most of the group (12) appeared to have a poor, tenuous or undeveloped relationship with their child. Six fathers appeared to be preoccupied with their own physical and mental health issues. Whether as cause or consequence of the above factors, most members of this group (14) seemed to have a diminished sense of reflexivity and their own efficacy as fathers able to negotiate good outcomes for themselves and their children. Two fathers in the group felt so angered and threatened by the child protection process that they abandoned all claims to parent the child in question in future.

6.6 Chapter summary

Most fathers in the study shared life narratives featuring formative figures in their past whose positive and negative messages continue to resonate in the present enabling or obstructing adaptive change. Fathers’ narratives represent a site where past positives can be reclaimed and negative events and relationships can be reduced in their destructive power clearing the way for fathers to invest in their relationships with their children and exercise agency as fathers.

Most participants in the study claimed that they had a close bond with the child who had a child protection plan. Some assumed sole or significant responsibility for their child’s day-to-day care but many delegated the main care to their female partners. Working fathers were divided between those committed to involvement in day-to-day care and those who frankly preferred the world of work. The former fathers found it stressful to combine the two roles. The latter, aware of the societal expectation that fathers should be “involved” tended to stress their role as arrangers of outings, visits and activities.

Fathers who had stepped in to take on their child’s care because the child’s mother was unable to do so safely, laid emphasis upon the actions they took to take control of their children’s disordered lives. They claimed detailed knowledge of their children and spoke of restoring routine. They were wary of allowing social workers or others to work with their children on emotional issues to do with previous experiences feeling that this was likely to pathologise them. Instead, they believed that their everyday commonsense care promoted children’s happiness. In keeping with this view, they spoke little about listening to their

children and more about reassuring and encouraging them.

Around one third of participants expressed some ambivalence about their child which could have been related to the circumstances of the child's conception and other factors.

Relationships between fathers and adolescent children were sometimes fraught especially when fathers were "in the frame" for abuse. A small number of fathers in this ambivalent group had disengaged with fathering completely either because of seeking to avoid the grief following a baby's compulsory adoption or because they felt betrayed by an adolescent child who had complained about them to social workers.

The quality and intensity of participant fathers' relationships with their children correlated with the strength of his agency as father in dealing with the authorities. One continuing significant factor for the exercise of agency as a father was the assumption by social workers, mothers and fathers of the primacy of mothers' relationship with children. The degree of agency exercised by fathers in the study varied according to the presence of four factors: persistence, sense of entitlement, quality of agency and the father's relationship with the child. Fifteen fathers were judged to be exercising some degree of agency, with 18 largely resigned from real influence and agency.

Chapter 7: Time and timing in child protection practice with men

Introduction

A key aim of our study was to examine the child protection system as a dynamic process, that plays out over time, and which may have particular staging points both for the man and for the system. We sought to understand men's perception and experience of child protection practice, again with a focus on the timing, pace, and change of approach by social workers or other professionals. We were particularly interested in the dynamic nature of the encounter between men and social workers. We aimed to present this, and thus the longstanding issue of 'father engagement' as a two-directional, interactive process, rather than a 'problem' with either men or social workers. In what follows, we identify and discuss what the men's experiences tell us about the importance of time, and timing, of social worker interactions with them.

The main data for this and the remaining chapters come from the research material given by the men, and focus group discussions with social workers and managers, conducted in each participating authority. The men's data includes the interview accounts; the ongoing phone contacts; the individual case studies we produced for each man, and the summaries we compiled to compare across the whole group. Also, as previously mentioned, we were often shown the child protection plan document and invited to read it. After quotes from the men in this chapter, and in Chapter 8, we add men's ages, and details about their status in relation to their children, for example whether they are a resident or non-resident birth father, and whether they have lost previous children to care.

7.1 Early encounters and 'opening gambits'

The men made clear the importance, to them as fathers, of early direct communication about the child protection concerns and/or the initial child protection conference (ICPC). One implicit but important message this early communication gives is *recognition* of the man's role and of his relationship to the child. The '*courtesy*' of such recognition appeared as an important early influencing factor in the evolving relationship with the local authority (Back, 2016, p1). Recognition was particularly relevant to separated fathers who did not live with their children. Whilst most men had some direct contact with a social worker leading up to the ICPC, only a third of the fifteen non-resident fathers spoke of a separate visit or phone

call as part of the child protection enquiries and assessment. Fathers who were not contacted directly often felt ill prepared for the conference, or unaware of the seriousness of the concerns:

I didn't know until I got there that this child protection thing was going to be put in... That really did wind me up because I thought you could have put me in the picture... I would have liked to have a bit more info on it before I went in there, what was going to be said and what the outcome could have been... they sat there and said 'your kids could go into care' and that is the first I heard of it. (Brett, non-resident father who became the main carer, aged 48).

Some of the resident fathers also spoke of being taken by surprise or feeling that they had not been kept informed of concerns about their children, which had often built up over time. Barry, a married, resident father who worked full time described his disappointment at a lack of communication from professionals who he felt, had the opportunity to raise concerns with him:

I had a phone call off nursery because she had fallen over in the park and grazed her chin but I never had a phone call to say she was being presented dishevelled or smelling of urine, and no one, I felt out of all the professional services, gave me the opportunity to give my point of view on what happened, before pushed! (Barry, resident birth father, aged 57).

Early direct contact was also seen as important because of men's expectation that social workers should demonstrate an even-handed approach to each parent. This expectation was most strongly felt by non-resident fathers, and/or where there was a high level of conflict between parents, including over culpability for the incident leading to the child protection conference. The issue of 'fairness' included the timing and length of visits from social workers. For example, David (a father in a high post-separation conflict situation) felt that the social worker had not taken a balanced view:

The social worker went to Marie first, twice, for like one and a half hours each time, so she has got all Marie's story, she only based her questions to me on Marie's story and everything that Marie accused me of she didn't check any of it (David, separated birth father, aged 46).

A more general finding, which is particularly relevant here, is the recurring tendency we found of men and social workers to mirror the way they perceived each other, in relation to contact and communication. Both saw each other as 'hard to reach'; a term often used to describe the 'problem' of engaging parents, and fathers in particular (Davies, 2016). Both also saw each other as 'hard to contact' (Daniel et al., 2011) and both men and social workers felt the need to be persistent if they were to succeed in making contact. However, each attributed responsibility to the other to be so persistent. For example, Anthony (a non-resident father aged 45, who came to have shared care) describes his own tenacity in

keeping himself updated by the social worker: *“it’s so slow...I’m doing all the running”*. Social workers described situations where men had avoided attempts to communicate, or were resistant to engagement: *“they blame everybody else”* (Social Work Manager).

In terms of relationship building, our findings also showed how these first encounters between social workers and men often involved each presenting an ‘opening gambit’. This, more or less, strategic approach to the first meeting or conversation could set the tone for any potential relationship. Some men said they were suspicious and defensive from the outset, but also perceived the social worker as being equally so:

The first time I met her she was too blunt...it felt like she had an opinion of me already before she actually met me (Paul, separated shared care birth father, aged 31).

Well I think she was a bit aggressive ‘I am a Social Worker.’ ‘And!’ I said ‘what do you want a medal? Yeah, I think I was a bit hard man do you know what I mean a bit harsh (Shane, separated birth father who had lost a previous child to care, aged 46).

What was also notable was the capacity of some men to recognise their own part in the initial interaction. Shane and his child’s social worker became stuck in a defensive relationship, and things did not improve for the five months that she was allocated to the case. In his final interview, Shane reflected again on this relationship and whilst he attributes responsibility to the social worker, he acknowledges his own part in the interaction:

If she had been more down to earth, you know instead of just telling me to do all this. I thought who is she to tell me what I can and can’t do? When she started doing that I started being the big man do you know what I mean?

Social workers also showed an awareness of the significance of the opening gambit, particularly in relation to making contact with men already identified as aggressive or with a history of violence. One aspect often acknowledged was that anticipated or assumed aggression could, and did affect practice in terms of adopting a more suspicious or defended approach:

I think often it is just said ‘go in twos’, and I don’t know whether that is unpicked as much as it could be (Social Worker).

Considering the perceptions of the men and the social workers alongside one another, highlights the mutual nature of defensiveness, and a shared awareness of how such gendered and generalised suspicion constitutes a barrier to effective relationship building:

It was very rare that I actually experienced a really aggressive man but there was quite a lot of occasions where I expected to (Social Worker).

Yeah, sort of bald head covered in scars, straightaway people look at me and they just see thug they don't actually see anything, they don't see past that (Greg, resident birth father and non-resident stepfather, aged 37).

7.2 Assessment: what's the problem?

The woman has been the one that has been involved in the assessment throughout and the man's part is almost dipping in (Social Worker).

Unless the concerns are specifically related to something like the father's substance misuse, where you would then definitely get a kind of full social history, I think sometimes you can, you are talking to the man in a more practical sense you know literally like you could do a, b and c rather than just that more reflective discussions (Social Worker).

Chapters 5 and 6 offer rich illustrations of men's lives beyond the child protection process. This picture, as articulated by the men themselves, demonstrates the complexity and range of circumstances in which men could become fathers or father figures, and how much the economic, social and emotional resources available to them, impact on their capacity to be safely involved in their child's life and in the child protection system.

Now I have got just as many pressures, I sleep in the park, so that is a big pressure because it has been raining for the last three days, so I am out in the rain every day, but in all honesty it may sound a bit sappy, because I have Laura, I am not bothered, and because my child is due soon. Regardless how the next meetings turn out she is still going to be born they can't stop that (Jordan, non-resident birth father who had lost previous children to care, aged 27).

Given the barriers to achieving dedicated, direct contact with men illustrated above, what the findings pointed to was the often limited understanding of men's lives. From the men's point of view, there was also a limited appreciation by social workers, of how fathers saw the child protection 'problem' and possible solutions. Social workers and managers appeared to frame this issue in terms of organisational or procedural constraints, which militated against non-resident fathers in particular.

If you have got tight timescales then actually the amount of people you can include in assessments gets lower (Social Worker).

Because they are not in the household, we will focus quite a lot of the assessment work and the intervention with the resident parent...they are almost forgotten and then seen as insignificant in the network (Manager).

These responses may also reflect the wider debate about the primary purpose and focus of child protection practice, in which a preoccupation with detecting and managing risk is

contrasted with the recognition of welfare support, and structural inequality (Gove, 2013; Bywaters et al., 2015a). Some social work managers felt that the routine inclusion of men was improving and becoming an institutional and cultural expectation. However, the experiences of our men did not fully bear this out and the pattern of delaying men's involvement or assessment is discussed further below. Men pointed out different levels of interest or curiosity shown by social workers with most men feeling that social workers had only a limited interest in their lives and views:

I don't think anyone really listens to the father most of the time, I think it is one of these 'well as long as the mum is happy and the kids are sorted' do you know it has always been the same (Drew, non-resident birth father, aged 32).

They say 'oh how are you Cody?' 'Yeah I am fine yeah' but they don't say 'what do you want?' They don't ask my opinion on much (Cody, birth father who had lost previous children to care, aged 34).

As we have described in Chapter 5, men in our study talked at length about factors affecting their own lives including housing, insecure employment, mental and physical health, changes to welfare or out of work benefits, new partners and family relationships. All of these issues shaped the context in which they could 'be' fathers and 'do' fathering. Our findings challenge longstanding assumptions about physical and emotional father 'absence', in that (for better or worse), the men were actively trying to retain a material, emotional and moral stake in fatherhood, in often very challenging circumstances. Our point here is that without good knowledge and insight about men's lives, assessment of their capacity to be a safe carer and assessment of the balance of resource and risk they may present, is likely to be limited (Rivett, 2010). This is especially so if assessment is based on assumptions about, for example, non-resident fathers and fatherhood.

Successful engagement with the child protection process tended to be linked to men having reached some agreement with social workers over the nature of both the 'problem' and the possible solutions. This was much easier to achieve when men felt their perspective had been sought and understood. However this is challenging not least because across the group of men, we found a preference for 'doing' rather than 'talking'. Their call for practical action appeared to come from a belief that child protection should 'help' by supporting the child's welfare in the light of the economic and social circumstances of the family. Men who spoke more positively about the child protection process referred to examples of direct support including: providing or facilitating advice on tax credits or other benefits; providing financial support for childcare; accessing housing; accessing or coordinating support from voluntary organisations; mobilising the paternal family. For many men in our study, key criteria for feeling the child protection process was helping were the degree of urgency and

motivation shown by social workers and other agencies to pitch in and help (the family) solve the problem that professionals said they are concerned about.

They don't mention anything about...trying to find me somewhere to live with the kids. (Brett, non-resident birth father who became the main carer, aged 48).

If you want to do something like actual proper help and support like you are saying, rather than just coming in and judging, maybe you could get people to see at the Council that actually I could do with a bigger place (Luke, main-carer birth father, aged 40).

The preference for 'problem solving' and 'doing' rather than debate, was also a feature of men's responses in Thoburn and colleagues' early study of parents' involvement in child protection conferences (Thoburn et al., 1995). This view also tended to come to the fore when men became frustrated by the slow 'pace' of the child protection process or felt there was a reliance on formal meetings.

Well we went in there and they were saying 'oh we are concerned about this' and it is like the record got stuck they kept saying over the same thing day in and day out (Shane, non-resident birth father who lost a previous child to care, aged 45).

Since April 2013, all we have done is created an inch of paperwork and we have had loads of meetings but the problem is still exactly the same as it was back then (Anthony, non-resident birth father who came to have shared care, aged 45).

Nevertheless, there was some evidence of a form of negotiation occurring between social workers and men, around the use of the term 'neglect' in child protection plans. This is significant given the prevalence of neglect as a category of plan and the implications that arise from defining parents or families as neglectful. As described above, men in our study were often preoccupied with the material conditions of the child's, and their own, life, and appeared to clash with social workers over the extent to which the child protection process should acknowledge and address these concerns. In different ways, some fathers attempted to challenge the label of neglect, by either claiming that they were doing their best in financial hardship to meet children's basic needs, or that they had improved a child's welfare through both practical and emotional work. The following illustrations are from Dale and Paul. Dale had lost previous children to care and at the beginning of the study was, with his partner, on the brink of care proceedings for his son and stepdaughter. Paul had agreed, with his ex-partner, to take on the care of two of their four children at the time of the ICPC. Dale expresses his mixed feelings of being judged, whilst also recognising his shortcomings, while Paul makes a claim to 'good fatherhood' through having solved his son's soiling problems, in an improved home environment:

I don't know what they expect of me anymore, this is the thing. I have got a roof over my head, I am not in debt with my rent or anything like that. I put food on the plate for my kids, they are going to

school...Okay the emotional support thing I need to work on, agreed, but apart from that. (Dale, birth and stepfather who had lost previous children to care, aged 27).

Social Services put it down to emotional neglect, and she [mother] had him under the hospital... but in all fairness with the change of diet, patience and understanding and encouragement he has sorted himself out where he doesn't soil himself (Paul, shared care birth father, aged 31).

One final example illustrates the complexity of this issue still further. Fred, and his partner Kelly both had a degree of physical disability and Fred also described himself as autistic. A child protection conference was called when Kelly became pregnant and concerns were raised both about their poor living conditions and their capacity to care for their baby. Fred rejected the term neglect but described being encouraged to accept the making of a plan as a gatekeeping (gate-opening) mechanism for other services;

They said 'we are only putting you on a child protection plan in order to unlock the help you need' so I have got two thoughts going on in my head, it was like 'are you doing the child protection plan because my child needs protection or are you actually doing it because I have got a disability?' (Fred, resident birth father who became a non-resident father, aged 35).

Overall then, our findings illustrate some of the ways in which the consideration of men's perspectives and circumstances come to be included, or not, in the assessment of child protection concerns. We also suggest that the experiences of men in our study can be linked to wider debates about how social work practice addresses the challenge of balancing structural with individual factors, particularly in the context of defining child neglect (Bywaters, 2016; Featherstone et al., 2016).

7.3 Different time frames: social work as 'rushed and slow'

Studying the child protection process over time has revealed certain insights about how time is perceived and experienced by the men, and how this impacts on their involvement with and confidence in social workers. An important and recurring theme across the findings was a clash of time frames (Adam, 2004) between the men and child protection professionals, with each appearing to view time in a different way. For men in our study, the formal child protection process produced a powerful perception of social work as both 'rushed *and* slow'. As time went on, and as men began to be able to reflect back on what had happened, with the child's case and with family and personal life, they would describe short or sudden periods of action by social workers followed by what they saw as long periods of delay or inactivity: *"there is a cycle of urgency followed by non-action"* (Anthony non-resident birth father who came to have shared care, aged 45). This perception may be linked to men's

tendency to see the reliance on formal meetings as repetitious and preoccupied with talk over action, but it also reveals an important difference in men's understanding of both the purpose of child protection, and the mechanisms by which it is implemented. Seeing social work as 'rushed and slow' frequently led men to lose faith in the child protection process, by raising questions about the authority, credibility or capacity of professionals involved:

If they don't really care then what was all the fuss about in the first place? (Barry, resident birth father, aged 57).

They only step in in a crisis...the preventive stuff isn't there, I don't see it...the system is slow and over-stretched, so of course they only do what is necessary (Luke, main-carer birth father, aged 40).

This temporal experience of the child protection process also seemed to act as an indicator of social workers' ability or willingness to care about men and their children. Men in our study often pointed out the difference between organisational time, and their own 'lived' time, and the difficulties this caused, or the lack of attention paid to this by social workers:

'Oh yes we will talk about it and we will make another appointment'. I am not going to sit back and wait for another month and then another month and another month (David, non-resident birth father, aged 46).

I have lived for the last five years every day, but the social workers pick up a file, they go through it for a couple of days and put it down, they go on another file, they pick it up a week later, two weeks later (Anthony, non-resident birth father who came to have shared care, aged 45).

They said we won't go down that road because that could take months and months and months to sort out' and I felt a bit like, 'well no let's talk about it now' you know (Brett, non-resident birth father who became the main carer, aged 48).

This highlights a potential mismatch between professionals' framing and perception of time, and those of men as service users. This mismatch can become a barrier to father engagement and to sustaining working relationships. Greater clarity and transparency about formal processes and timescales, and more regular communication could be part of addressing this issue, or at least managing men's expectations. However, we suggest that the more general experience of social work as 'rushed and slow' raises bigger and deeper questions for practice.

7.4 Engaging with men: whose time is it anyway?

It is about making dads' services more responsive because obviously if dad loses a job we are in a much worse situation for that child than where we started so, but it is a barrier to working with fathers and it is really difficult in conference because you are sitting there saying 'well actually you need to do

this piece of work' and they are like 'well actually I can't because I am working' and it becomes a really challenging conversation (Manager).

Perceptions of time also appeared as a factor related to men's involvement in child protection or other meetings. Men in our study talked about tensions between themselves and social workers in terms of expectations over availability, flexibility and the value, or cost of time. As the quote from the social work manager above suggests, working with fathers can involve difficult negotiations over how time is spent, apportioned and valued. Where such negotiations break down, men may perceive a form of unfairness in that their time is valued less than the social worker's time or that there are unreasonable demands being made of them. In some instances, men talked about this explicitly in relation to employment and their role as providers, but in others the issue was framed more in terms of a perceived attempt by social workers to exercise power, through controlling time.

I have to go to the other side of London...to generate business yeah, well I can't, because I have got to meet you at half nine, that is my day done (Corey, non-resident birth father who became the main carer, aged 37).

We got a report saying, Social Services coming round every day at 5 o'clock. They was here every day for about three weeks. I come in and I go 'right I have got to cook dinner' 'No we need you out here we have got to talk and sort this out' so the kids are sitting here going 'I am hungry when are you doing dinner?' Social Services will go about half six and then a week later a report comes through the door 'kids always hungry' (Greg, resident birth father and non-resident stepfather, aged 37).

Greg was in a relationship with a woman who had lost previous children to care, and they were being assessed in relation to the care of their own young baby in the light of concerns about the mother's substance misuse and also possible domestic abuse. Greg described a challenging relationship with social workers, in which he both resisted and acknowledged concerns and interventions (including parenting programmes). The extract above was one example of where he felt the social worker had sought to control his time in ways that set him up to fail. Their case came out of child protection after 3 months and their baby still had a child in need plan 12 months later. Greg continued to feel the need to challenge social work practice in terms of double standards over valuing men's time, seeing this as something that was unfair and detrimental to his role as a father. Here he talks again about the cost of taking time off work for meetings, and his frustration at social workers' lack of flexibility.

Well how the hell am I going to get money in the bank if you keep making me take time off work...They say, 'right it is 4.59, I finish in a minute so we are going to cut the meeting short'.... you can't just be a social worker from 9 till 5, what happens if a kid gets beaten up at 6 o'clock?

Our study reveals certain flashpoints over the way men's time is valued in child protection practice. We also suggest that considerations of men's availability can often be shaped by ideas about gender and parenting, for example, how the scheduling of meetings within certain hours may make assumptions about and/or militate against men's involvement. What the study also highlights though, is the potential for negotiation over time in terms of flexibility and fairness, and the relevance of this for building working relationships. Whilst debates about flexible working in social work are not new, these findings contribute another important dimension, in terms of considering the relational as well as the practical benefits of responsive practice:

...sometimes there will be an element of, you know, obstruction [from a father] and 'well I can't see you until 6 o'clock' but actually then when we have started supporting them with that and making sure we have gone later then there has been a bit more flexibility from their side but it should be seen that we are trying to be flexible too, so it has got to come from both sides (Social Worker).

Focus group discussions with managers in one area suggested there must be limits to flexibility and of fitting appointments around men's availability when the job market (and in particular the 'gig economy') dictates that many men's working patterns will be very variable. In comparison with the 'can do' social worker quote above, this could appear to be a somewhat defeatist attitude militating against efforts to be flexible.

7.5 Delaying men's involvement: Fathers as a last resort

We put all our eggs in one basket hoping that it is going to come to fruition and she is going to improve her parenting (Manager)

Another pattern relating to both time, and timing, in child protection practice was a tendency to postpone or overlook considering men as potential carers for children. This was something recognised by both men and social workers, and could occur in a range of contexts, including once again, non-residence:

...they only ever rung me when they couldn't go to Michelle for permission which made me feel like I was just last resort (Drew, non-resident birth father, aged 32).

This was further illustrated when three fathers in our study were approached to be full-time carers only once their child's case was on the brink of care proceedings. All three felt frustrated at having been kept at bay, or not having had their concerns about their child's care taken seriously. Whilst care proceedings could trigger assessment and hence more support for a man to be able to care for his child, this was another example men used to

describe 'rushed' social work. This type of request to 'step up' as a father, was more likely to be experienced as a challenge or an ultimatum to their moral identity as fathers:

They said 'do I want to go for Landon or do I want Landon to go into Care?' So I said 'no I want Landon to come with me.' So that is why my solicitor had to get involved (Harry, non-resident to main carer father, aged 29).

She said she can't cope again, and I got a phone call from the social saying 'do we have your permission to put the kids into care'?... and I said 'no I will come and get him' (Brandon, non-resident birth father who became the main carer, aged 24).

These fathers felt that social workers saw them as carers of last resort, despite their having raised concerns or sought support for their parenting in the past. Whilst these three fathers were able, with active support from social workers and other agencies, to take on the full-time care of their children and thus avoid care proceedings, one further father struggled to reach, and defend, his decision not to seek the care of his son. Jesse's comments here illustrate his personal sense of the practical and psychological obstacles to becoming a full-time carer, and the wider point that without time and support to prepare, some fathers are likely to rule themselves out.

I had nowhere stable for him, y'know, and I'm a worker, I'm a grafter...and to take that away from me...I don't think I could actually do it full time...Not because I don't want to, it's nothing like that. It's mainly because of the pure fact that becoming a full time dad is hard work...But if I had to...I try not to think about it too much, wondering about what is happening...At the end of the day, if he was that in danger, social services would have removed him (Jesse, non-resident father, aged 29).

In their discussions, social workers and managers also acknowledged that to be effective for children, and 'fair' to men (and mothers), assessing and supporting men's parenting requires time, and timing, in order to avoid a reactive focus on fathers as 'last resort'. However, there was also recognition from practitioners and managers that postponing men's involvement could be strategic and linked to both procedural and cultural approaches to risk.

It is about last resort where you have got this attitude from managers as well, so I will look at the supervision record and the manager will never say anything about contacting father or, they are not looking for alternatives because we don't want to open up all that extra risk because you can't manage it (Manager).

I think sometimes true engagement of the paternal side of the family seems to only happen when you are in proceedings because you have to (Social Worker).

We might struggle on trying to kind of do everything we can to support a mum to improve her parenting, before we even look at what the father could offer (Social Worker).

7.6 Reconsidering the risk from men: where does the past belong?

I have sat there in conferences and watched the, something bad has happened to the dad so they say 'yeah sorry about that' but then that risk is talked about over and over and over and over again until that person is so ground down, it almost becomes their identity in that meeting (Manager)

I like to think we are a bit more tolerant perhaps of the potential for men to be something different (Manager).

Time was also a significant feature through the ways in which the past was considered. Assessing the present and making decisions over the future of a child's welfare, also involves some consideration of past history, and our study illustrates how men (and to some extent practitioners and managers) see their personal or family histories being incorporated or discounted in the child protection process. In addition, as discussed in Chapter 6, men's own life narratives also shape how they present themselves, and their sense of self-efficacy in the face of the child protection concerns. Men's experiences here can be linked to a broader theme of 'second chances' and when or how these may be offered or refused by social workers. The examples discussed also illustrate the power relationship involved when professionals decide whether the past can be left where it is, or must be answered for, or will always determine the future.

Within our study, the group of men for whom the past was most likely to shape their future as fathers were those who had lost a previous child to care, or had offences for violence (against women or children), or both. Nine men fell into this category, five of whom had previously had children removed from their care. Their experiences, and their expressed sense of themselves demonstrated how care proceedings and offending histories are stigmatising, so that their identity and presentation to others becomes '*marked*' (Goffman, 1963, p12).

I think sometimes a man who has been violent or who has got a criminal record for being violent, that can, overshadow the whole case and overshadow your assessment of their parenting rather than you know dealing with, looking, digging through it and looking at it in a kind of more holistic way (Social Worker).

They said I have got this anti-social disorder, to this day I have still not been tested but they threw that in the paperwork because paperwork sticks and if in ten years' time I get accused of something all that bad paperwork will come out to light (Kenny, non-resident birth father with an offending history, aged 46).

Our study illustrates different ways in which such 'marked' men may try to manage or defend a 'spoiled identity', cope with profound loss, and continue to try to achieve family life and

fatherhood. As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, men in this group tended to have the most precarious lives, in terms of relationships, work and housing, demonstrating the 'collateral consequences' (Broadhurst & Mason, 2017, p42) of prison and care proceedings. Men in this group also displayed different forms and levels of acceptance of responsibility or reflection on their own agency and accountability for their past. However, all saw that a child protection plan meant that their past was under scrutiny, their future was at stake, and that their chances of keeping their child were slim.

Social Services become involved when he was born, based on my past history! So it is basically they are brandishing me and tarnishing me with the same brush (Mark, resident birth and stepfather who lost a previous child to care, aged 27).

This group of nine men all appeared to have been given some opportunity to demonstrate change. They were perhaps given a second, or 'last chance', but the way that events had unfolded show that building working relationships with men in this situation is particularly difficult. These men were, understandably, more defensive and social workers were, understandably, more suspicious. Their opening gambits were, as described above, likely to be mutually mistrustful or antagonistic. A challenge for child protection is pushing the boundaries of 'risk sensible' practice (Munro, 2011, p135) to consider managing the risks posed by a man with previous offences or child removals. This means that the issue of considering, or reconsidering, a man's involvement with a child is at the heart of emotive and important wider debates about social work policy and practice, and the law.

Debates over the promotion of contact for separated fathers, including fathers in prison and with convictions for domestic abuse, are ongoing and hugely significant (Harrison, 2008; Thiara & Humphreys, 2015). Our study contributes relevant insight from the experiences of men whose histories might or might not place them in a high category of risk but who nevertheless present combinations of risks and resources that were challenging for social workers to disentangle and engage with. For instance, men who felt themselves to be 'marked' were more likely to perceive the child protection process as a series of tests that they were not intended to pass, or to see themselves as being 'goaded' by social workers, as exemplified by Kenny.

Kenny had served a prison sentence for an assault against his son from a previous relationship. When his current partner became pregnant, a child protection plan was made and the terms of his licence prevented Kenny from living with her or visiting their home. Kenny was required to attend a perpetrator programme and parenting course. After 12 months, he had completed his licence but the child protection plan remained. Kenny felt

that the social workers were avoiding reconsidering his involvement with his daughter and his return home, and that their efforts to exclude him were intended to provoke a response: *They under-estimated me, they thought I would have walked away by now, they thought I was going to fail one of their courses and because I didn't they don't know what to do with me...I tell you what, what we will do we will take a step back, not engage him at all and see how he reacts to it. If he flips out, goes mad or starts barking at someone oh we can jump straight back in there and go 'yeah he is like this' (Kenny, non-resident birth father with an offending history, aged 46).*

Other men, including Dale, were less combative in trying to defend against being judged by their past. An alternative response for some, was a form of fatalistic acceptance: to submit to the process with some small hope of a different outcome. Dale had previous experience of the child protection system when he reunited with his son's mother a year before our study began. As part of that child protection plan he was sent for a psychological assessment to establish the level of sexual risk he might pose to his son and stepdaughter. Although the assessment indicated that he did not present any sexual risk, he continued to feel that he was permanently 'marked' by his past as having both survived and committed sexual abuse as a child.

When they sent me to the Psychologist to see if I would be a threat to the children or not and at the end of the interview I asked him his honest opinion and he said to me I wasn't...I was crying at the time I didn't know what to expect, because at the end of the day whatever he said was going to end up being my future.

I was put on the sex offenders register when I was twelve, my parents were told I would be taken off of it at the age of sixteen and that would be it, but it hasn't been it all throughout my life. They always bring it up (Dale, birth and stepfather who had lost previous children to care, aged 27).

Social workers and managers discussed this question of evaluating, and reconsidering the risks associated with men's past and were able to recognise their own considerable power and responsibility in terms of how this was done. Generally, the view from professionals was that there are particular ideas or 'mind-sets' in play when considering or reviewing men's involvement with a child. The following example illustrates the 'problem of the past' from both the social worker and the man's perspective:

We are very good at noting how many offences, and that creates a risk element and that sort of creates a mind-set that actually that person is too risky to engage with and if they do engage we are quite good at telling them exactly what their offending was and when they have done it, and that whole approach, maybe needs to be a bit more comfortable to get people to come in and feel able to be part of it, not sort of judged (Manager).

All the stuff that has been mentioned about me is history, nothing current and there is nothing positive being mentioned about me which is quite hard to sit there and listen to (Jordan, non-resident birth father who lost previous children to care, aged 27).

The focus group discussions also suggested that it is difficult to become conscious of, or question such mind-sets within the 'heat' of individual cases, and also that the organisational attitude to risk will influence the approach that social workers and managers are prepared to take. One local authority felt that their organisational culture was changing and that this allowed them more confidence to manage risks, and often reconsider men who had previously been strategically excluded from their children.

We work with risk rather than putting risk to one side, we will work with it and we will try and manage that. I think Judges are saying you are engaging with the dad and you are giving responsibility and you are taking a risk if you like away from that position of the organisation, but we expect the organisation to back us with dad, support us (Manager).

One further point, which again relates particularly to the sub group of men who had lost a previous child to care, is about 'rehabilitation'. We found that important forms of gatekeeping are likely to occur when a man appears in a child protection case having had a previous child removed; he may be excluded, assessed ('tested'), or have his involvement restricted or monitored. Our findings emphasise that what matters is *how* such gatekeeping is done, and that child protection professionals need opportunities and support to reflect on this process. Gatekeeping is discussed in more detail in Chapter 9.

We also found that the paucity of services for men who have lost a child to care is relevant to the issue of reconsidering men's involvement as fathers. Whether they had taken up a more combative, or fatalistic stance, men in our study who had lost children to care or adoption expressed their sense of being 'finished with' by the local authority and cut off from potential sources of support. Dale described his experience after the conclusion of proceedings, as being "*written off*", and felt that he had not been helped to move on, and did not know how to do this alone.

I hate Social Services they have ruined my life from the minute I turned fifteen...It is not that I don't see where they are coming from, it is just like being stuck in this way for ages, no one has helped me since, no one ever tried (Dale, birth and stepfather who lost previous children to care, aged 27).

While they're trying to take the children away from you, you get to see them... But as soon as it all stops ... If you remove people's children... there should be referral services for afterwards (Cody, birth father who had lost previous children to care, aged 34).

This sense of ambivalence, of feeling both angry with and abandoned by, social workers seemed to evoke very powerful, painful feelings for men like Cody and Dale. Their experiences are reflected in wider literature on the experiences of parents of children placed for adoption (Neil, Beek & Ward, 2015; Neil, 2013). Whilst these men may be seen as struggling to take 'responsibility' in the ways sometimes expected by professionals, and have little sense of self efficacy, they raise the important question of how social work as a profession responds to men in recurrent proceedings. Our findings here are relevant for understanding rehabilitative challenges faced and posed by this group of men.

When the chips are down and my life's really bad, you're expected to act like the smartest parent in the world. Can't be both can it? That's why there are so hypocritical... They say you should know this is wrong, you should know not to do that... But if I'm as mixed up as fuck as you say I am, why should I know that? (Cody, birth father who had lost previous children to care, aged 34).

I think I have left it too late. I have no qualifications, I have no experience of anything and unless I am doing an odd job for a family member then I don't really see myself doing anything. I can't even get a job as a driver to be honest, Social Services have just taken everything out of me the last fifteen years (Dale, birth and stepfather who lost previous children to care, aged 27).

7.7 Chapter summary

This chapter draws together certain key findings related to how time and timing shapes men's experience of the child protection system. We have indicated that different, or clashing, perceptions of time between men and social workers, can disrupt or undermine men's confidence in the process and/or the social worker. In addition, the timing of when, and how social workers decide to seek a man's perspective, or include him in an assessment can have not just practical, but also relational consequences for the direction of the case (and so, the child) and the working relationship between social workers and men. Child protection practice engages social workers in complex decisions about men's pasts, as well as their current and future capacity as fathers. Without comprehensive knowledge of men's lives, such decision-making is likely to be limited, and this makes the need for persistence and flexibility in relationship building with men hugely important. The interactive, responsive nature of men's encounters with social workers, indicates that both men and social workers can be seen as accountable and act as triggers for change.

Chapter 8: Gender difference in child protection practice with men

Introduction

In this chapter we focus on interrogating the question of gender difference in child protection practice. We consider which aspects of men's experience relate specifically to their position as men and as fathers, within an organisational and societal context where cultural ideas about gender, care and equality are complex, contested and slow to change. Our starting point is to highlight evidence suggesting that parenting is gendered, in that it is experienced differently for men than women. The participating men and social workers recognised and talked about this, identifying contexts in which such gender difference may have an impact on men involved with the child protection system. It is clear that taking account of men's perceptions of 'fairness' in relation to ways in which mother and fathers are constructed, understood and evaluated by child welfare services is important for improving father engagement.

8.1 Being 'difficult' and 'saying the wrong thing'

You haven't got to do a lot as a male to be seen as being difficult when interacting with services and then when you are seen as difficult then it is 'well we need two people to see you' we need this, we need that and it further pushes dads out of the picture (Manager).

An important recurring theme across the study was men's talk about emotions. More specifically the men talked about how their encounter with the child protection system generated difficult emotions for them, which could often then jeopardise their involvement with the process and with their child's life. The context in which men experienced this sense of jeopardy most strongly was in meetings and it was here that they also perceived gender differences in how their feelings were interpreted by professionals. A significant minority of men in our study (seven) felt that they had quickly become seen as 'difficult' by social workers: *"they have already labelled me as a person they can't work with"* (Anthony, non-resident birth father who came to have shared care, 45). The men responded differently to this 'label', for example by removing themselves from the process altogether, by attempting to change social workers' views of them, or by 'fighting back'. The mutual mistrust between men and social workers appeared to stem from men's conduct in meetings and the way social workers' handled their behaviour:

Yes, I can be aggressive and hostile and everything like that but that is because they are not listening,

you know I am banging my head up against a brick wall (Anthony, non-resident birth father who came to have shared, aged 45).

They thought I was going to punch Terri, but I wasn't, I was just upset cos they took the baby (Shane, non-resident birth father who lost a previous child to care, aged 45).

Then they cancelled the meeting, said I was aggressive...I said 'I talk the way I talk mate. I can't help it. I'm not aggressive, I'm just pissed off (Greg, resident birth father and non-resident step-father, aged 37).

It is interesting to note that some social workers appeared to share men's perceptions about 'labelling'. Across the focus groups, there was recognition of the challenges for practice around managing and responding to, men's expressed emotions. There was also recognition that men and women's expressed emotions are likely to be interpreted and also tolerated differently, for a mixture of both cultural and pragmatic reasons.

I think sometimes women's aggression can be associated with emotions more and their difficulties you know, it is such an emotional experience having a child as well as having then a social worker. (Social Worker).

It is also about the label you give as to how people present because a mum can present as passionate about her children but dad can present as being angry (Social Worker).

The examples above illustrate the men's different explanations or justifications for expressed anger but also their common feeling of a lack of understanding, or misunderstanding, by social workers about what might lie behind these feelings. In the following examples, Anthony talks about his underlying sense of loss following his divorce and David raises the issue of 'fairness' in relation to his situation as a non-resident father:

Why they can't understand why I am angry is totally beyond me. You know for me it is, the kids have been sort of taken away from me and they don't understand how much that is to me. You know they say 'oh you still see them' but three evenings out of a two-week period isn't enough (Anthony, non-resident birth father who came to have shared care, aged 45).

All you have to do is be fair with me...be fair to me and I am fair to you. If you think you can muck about with me, I am not having it and you might not like the way I react to it but, see what I mean, I will tell you and you can never say that I didn't tell you (David, non-resident birth father, aged 46).

Greg's case provides insight into how his feelings of anger and shame manifested themselves differently over time, and also how he found ways to regulate or adapt his behaviour. Greg was in a relationship with partner Tricia, who had had four previous children taken into care, and three moved to the care of their birth father. As a couple they were under a high level of scrutiny over the care of new baby Alisha. Within his reflections, Greg

sought to emphasise how social workers needed to better understand the impact of the child protection process on him and his efforts to prove himself as a father:

I suppose if you like, I was putting on a false bravado for some of these people because you are trying to, you are trying to make them believe that you are not a bad person...I have calmed down a lot with the swearing but I used to swear every other word...I had to change the way that I spoke and the way that I dealt with things because I was hot headed, I would just fly off the handle and raise my voice and everything else.

Just because I am saying I am struggling to deal with something doesn't mean 'oh I am not dealing with it' but it means that I am having trouble handling the emotions that go with it. It is getting me down; it is stressing me out but that doesn't mean I am not doing it.

The issue of regulating or managing emotions was also prominent in other men's accounts of meetings; again with the accompanying sense that showing emotion (particularly anger) was risky in formal child protection meetings. William, who at 21 was the youngest father in our study, felt very cautious about how to present himself in meetings. He and his ex-partner Hannah attended the ICPC following concerns about Hannah's care of their two-year-old son Tom, and an incident where Hannah had slapped Tom. Whilst William was not the focus of the particular child protection enquiry, he felt shamed by the social worker for not having reported his own concerns sooner. He also felt that his (weekend) care of Tom was under scrutiny, alongside the difficult co-parenting relationship he had with Hannah. Here, William describes his dilemma in terms of how to express what he felt about the incident and his sense that certain feelings would simply not be tolerated by social workers:

When I am there I am frustrated because I feel like I want to say stuff but I tend not to, I just tend to hold back, I don't want to make an idiot out of myself... If I'm chill then people think I don't care but if I really blow up they'll think I'm aggressive (William, non-resident birth father, aged 21).

The men presented, arguably justified, concerns over how to manage their emotions in child protection meetings. The dilemma, as expressed by William, may be how to demonstrate 'passion' or commitment to children, without appearing 'difficult'. There is an apparent jeopardy for men, stemming from different levels of tolerance for anger and aggression. For some men, emotion management was a required strategy for coping with the child protection process, and this included not speaking, or not showing any emotional response. In the following quote, Jordan describes his decision to remain silent for the last hour of the ICPC.

Somehow I make it worse...they try and belittle you...it makes you feel that the whole thing is pointless (Jordan, non-resident birth father who had lost previous children to care, aged 27).

However, it is also the case that a man's decision to "hold back" in meetings may backfire, in that being reticent can sometimes be interpreted by social workers as a lack of engagement.

Within the focus groups, the issue of gender difference in relation to destructive or painful emotions was often explored as a debate around men and 'responsibility'. In one local authority, men's anger was most often associated with defensiveness and the issue for social workers was seen as how to enable men to accept personal responsibility, or demonstrate remorse, without feeling stigmatised. In the following extract two social work managers illustrate some dimensions of this debate, in terms of how far personal responsibility is seen as a condition for working with men, and again, the way in which gendered reactions to men's anger can become reinforcing (and excluding).

If you are not prepared to take responsibility for anything how can you ever move on because everything is always someone else's fault (Manager).

But what they are better at is demonstrating the problem initially, so they will get angry with us and then we get police interested, so it is a reinforcement for us of the difficulty and perhaps the unsuitability of trying to draw them in because they demonstrate their anger and their lack of emotional regulation...that may be down to us (Manager).

Our findings reveal the 'trouble' with men's emotions. Within the child protection process, men's emotions are often problematic and constitute something of a flashpoint in how gender difference can affect their experience of services. This has relevance for social work practice in terms of thinking critically and reflectively about masculinity. In the broader context of men's mental health, it is important to consider not just the trouble with difficult men in child protection, but trouble for men in dealing with painful feelings in socially prescribed ways.

I should give the impression of a strong man but everyone has feelings. Sometimes you can't lock them out of your life, no matter how strong you are. Because I am finding some things - I can keep to myself but then they destroy me even more. Sometimes I need just maybe a bit of guidance; sometimes you know, just a little bit of help just to- sometimes- just to feel wanted you know (Jesse, non-resident birth father, aged 29).

8.2 Getting a 'fair hearing'

It is such a powerful cultural thing that children stay with their mothers and fathers leave! (Social Worker).

Another flashpoint in terms of where gender difference appeared to affect men was in relation to how men's and women's perspectives were sought out and considered as part of the child protection process. Here, we have drawn together evidence relating to circumstances in which men's accounts were contested, either by mothers, social workers or children. In such circumstances, men made particular connections between gender and

'fairness' and often felt that powerful cultural ideas such as children staying with mothers and men leaving, meant that they were less likely to receive what they viewed as a 'fair hearing'. This initial point is important in that, despite the Children Act 1989 language of 'enquiry' (s47) attached to the child protection assessment and to reports for a child protection conference, men tended to view the process as an 'investigation', in which issues including the timing or prioritising of different accounts took on particular significance.

The investigation has to be as thorough from the father's perspective...you know you should feel you have had a fair trial for want of a better word and at no stage did I ever feel that (Seb, non-resident birth father, aged 46).

This suspicion over how enquiries were handled was more heightened where men were non-resident fathers, and/or where they were in dispute with the child's mother. A relevant insight here, comes from the minority of men who experienced a particular organisational strategy for managing the initial child protection conference. Sometimes described as a 'split' conference, fathers and mothers can be asked to attend separately, in order to contribute without risking direct contact or conflict. In principle, such a strategy might be assumed to constitute an inclusive approach to working with men but in practice it may be perceived differently. Seb, Anthony and David were asked to attend the conference separately from their ex-partners. In all three cases, their allotted time was after the meeting with the child's mother, and this was interpreted from the outset as prioritising the mother's perspective.

Seb was the focus of the child protection concern, having slapped his teenage daughter during a row. Whilst Seb claimed to accept responsibility for his actions, he felt that he had quickly been strategically excluded from the family and invited to the conference on a false premise. Anthony was not the focus of the child protection concern but due to ongoing conflict between him and his ex-wife Gayle he was asked to attend after the meeting with her. Anthony accepted this, but felt that his views were not taken seriously and that this was evidenced by the content of the child protection plan.

I said, you are asking me to come at 5 o'clock so I won't be seeing the panel, so you are actually not asking for my views, you are actually asking me just to listen to the outcome...I said, you know why can't you be honest about it? (Seb, separated birth father, aged 46).

This is the plan...this is the bit that I got them to add in, but it was just the way they noted it down and everything it just strikes me that all that was in place before I even got in the room, if you know what I mean, and so my input is very limited. (Anthony, separated birth father who came to have shared care, aged 45).

Seb's case illustrates a particularly challenging circumstance, for both a father, and the

social workers involved. Where the child protection enquiries involve the alleged abuse of a child and the man either contests or contextualises the child's (or mother's) account, then the stakes for 'hearing' and deliberating over different accounts are very high for all concerned. As we have discussed above, from the man's perspective, if allegations lead to charges or convictions, this constitutes one route to his identity becoming 'marked'. Seb showed an awareness of this and of the professionals' prioritising of his daughter's perspective but still felt shocked, and then angry, at the way his attempts to explain the incident were interpreted. In what followed, Seb was reading from the social worker's report, and then challenged the judgement he felt was made. He went on to try to reconcile his acknowledgement of the role of child protection professionals, alongside his sense of entitlement, as a father, to be heard and included:

'This demonstrates that Seb shows no remorse for what he has done & blames Claire for everything'...I never said it was her fault, I said she is challenging to manage and cope with...You know how do you show remorse for something like that? You know what is the correct way to show it to a social worker?

I thought I would feel able to speak freely and honestly with the social workers and talk about the entire situation, I don't feel that is the case at all and that is the piece that I am most disappointed and frustrated with - in my case the father's voice is irrelevant and you know I get the fact that is about child protection so the child has to be respected, I am not naive in that respect, I totally get that piece of it but if you are working in social services to help a family, then why are you not actually helping? (Seb, non-resident birth father, aged 46).

Seb's case raises several important questions about social work practice with men. He raises the issue of 'remorse'; whether, and how, as a father, he will be able to have an account of his actions accepted as remorseful. His experience was that any attempt to explain his family history or cite his daughter's behaviour as a factor was interpreted as an avoidance of responsibility; contextualisation was seen as minimizing. He also raised the issue of a potential tension between 'believing the child' and 'hearing' the perspectives of parents; he called on social workers to help the family as a whole rather than removing the father from the family and then leaving him feeling isolated. Whilst there can be clear cases for strategically excluding a highly dangerous man from his child's life, there also has to be room to explore and manage, or work with, the risks and resources presented by men who may not fall into this category.

Seb's working relationship with the allocated social worker did not improve. He attended a series of supervised contact sessions with his youngest son and was told there were no concerns about his relationship with him, or his eldest son (who was 19). Seven months after

the ICPC, Seb and his wife were going through a divorce and Seb had only minimal indirect contact with his daughter. He had limited contact with the social worker and then withdrew completely from the process. He explained this in terms of an attempt to exercise some control and to show his contempt for the organisation. Seb was very worried about his daughter, who was now receiving a service from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), but felt he had no support to try to rebuild a relationship with her. At the end of the twelve months, Seb was still seeing his sons regularly but only had indirect contact with his daughter. The case was still open, though now had a child in need plan. Seb continued to see the child protection process as “*unbalanced and unfair*”.

Other men in our study, whose father and moral identity was not as threatened as Seb’s, expressed a similar sense of there being different, gender-based, responses or interpretations of mothers’ and fathers’ actions. This perception of gender difference in how child protection concerns were framed but also in how the child protection plan was implemented, was again linked to questions of ‘fairness’. Non-resident birth fathers William, Jesse and Mitchell all found the initial child protection conference difficult because they heard more and sometimes for the first time, about concerns over their child’s care. What they also shared was a sense of surprise at how, often serious concerns (including, in William’s case, physical harm) were presented and responded to by social workers and other professionals. These fathers all expressed this in terms of making a comparison between how they felt they would have been treated had the concerns been directly about them.

If I’d done what she’s done, I’d be slaughtered” (William, non-resident birth father, aged 21).

It’s ok for her to put a child in danger, but if I done it... (Mitchell, non-resident birth father, aged 28)

A mother has a lot of power. She has to do something drastically wrong to lose those kids. They always stick with the mother, really (Jesse, non-resident birth father, aged 29).

The wider point illustrated by these and other fathers, is that mothers’ care and also mothers’ behaviour in relation to the child protection process, is tolerated and supported in ways that are not so available to fathers. For example, for Anthony, this tolerance was linked, again, to the more general perception of social work as ‘rushed and slow’ where, a crisis in the mother’s care is followed by an extended period of supporting her to cope or improve. As Anthony described it:

There’ll never be enough danger to get more involved, but never enough confidence to get less involved.

Paul, a birth father who had care of three of his four children expressed his sense of a greater tolerance for women's parenting in terms of mothers being able to 'get away' with things. Paul felt that his ex-partner Bex was not held to account for her parenting or for her non-compliance with the child protection plan and this undermined his confidence in the social worker and the process as a whole.

Repeatedly Bex broke what was written in the child protection plan and there is no, it says obviously you agree to it blah, blah, blah, but there is no consequences of breaking the plan.

All of the fathers discussed here also acknowledged the importance of mothers in children's lives and did not appear to be seeking an overly punitive response from the social workers. However, what they perceived was that the child protection process held mothers and fathers to account in different ways and to different degrees and that, for them, this could constitute unfairness within the system. Social workers also reflected on the issue of tolerating or persisting with mothers, and acknowledged this as a point of gender difference. The comment below shows how this issue is directly connected to how social workers interpret and respond to anger and aggression.

If a woman is angry towards you and she is the sole carer of those children you don't really have a choice but to continue trying to engage with her, so I think it is a lot easier to cut a man out of that process at that point than it is to cut a woman out (Social Worker).

Finally, men's sensitivity to gender difference and getting a 'fair hearing' was prominent in cases where men had some experience of domestic abuse. An important feature of our study is that it offers insight into the range and complexity of circumstances in which men talk about being involved in domestic abuse. Our sample contained men who had past convictions for domestic violence, who had been acknowledged as past or current victims of abuse; men who experienced allegations of domestic abuse and who raised concerns about mother's abusive behaviour. It included men who acknowledged fault and those who did not; men who were separated, and who were in couple relationships; men who had received services and those who had not. Whilst a more detailed discussion of men's experiences can be found in Chapter 5, the more general point is that this group of men perceived and sometimes experienced directly, a clear gender difference in how allegations of domestic abuse are handled by social workers and other professionals.

The most specific examples come from men who were in a position to contrast experiences of making allegations or raising concerns, with those who have allegations made against them. Separated fathers Henry, Kyle and Corey all described their relationship with their children's mothers as conflicted, with additional problems including the mother's drinking or

mental health. Each spoke about raising concerns with police or social workers either prior to or as part of the child protection process (or both) and each claimed to have been subject to physical or mental abuse from her. As the child protection process moved on, all three found themselves subject to allegations of domestic abuse from their ex-partners, which resulted in a range of consequences including obstructing them from being considered as alternative carers for their children. These experiences generated or confirmed their sense of unfairness and gendered thinking by professionals which often exacerbated already fragile working relationships with social workers. Corey recalls his anger at being disbelieved over his account of an alleged fight with his ex-partner, and Kyle and Henry refer to wider gender stereotypes that prevent them getting a fair hearing.

I said 'you called me a liar, called me a liar' - 'it is pointless you talking to me because you don't believe me' (Corey, non-resident birth father who became the main carer, aged 37).

People take the woman's side...how many men end up with their children living with them? They automatically assume that the children will live with their mum (Kyle, non-resident birth father who became the main carer, aged 30).

Everyone assumes it's the father's fault. They don't even ask. They assume he is bullying...That should change. (Henry, birth father who became the main carer, aged 46).

Kyle, Henry and another father, Brandon (who also felt disbelieved over accusations of DVA), did become main carer for their children, with varying degrees of support from Children's Services and the Family Court. In two cases (those of Kyle and Henry) official support only followed the presentation of incontrovertible video evidence of their experiencing domestic abuse. Whilst the national picture of domestic abuse demonstrates that men such as Kyle or Henry are in the minority, their experiences illustrate the impact of allegations against fathers within the child protection process. For these and other men subject to allegations of abuse or harassment, the consequences are often swift and far-reaching and can significantly delay or prevent men's parenting being considered or taken seriously. Their perception was that allegations of abuse often produce a reactive response from social workers (instigating a 'rushed' period of social work practice) in which men can find themselves in an isolated position from which it is hard to return. This isolation and mutual mistrust between men and social workers is also likely to be exacerbated if men react with anger, or if social workers are unwilling to reconsider his involvement.

When the child protection process involves allegations and/or counter-allegations of domestic abuse there may be a tendency towards a more gendered and binary approach in which men are easily assumed to be 'perpetrators'. This demonstrates the need for a more nuanced understanding and analysis of domestic abuse as complex and varied (Ali, Dhingra

& McGarry, 2016). Such an approach does not set the rights and protection of women, children and men against each other. Our argument here is that recognising men's experiences of domestic abuse does not detract from or deny those of women or make them collective adversaries in seeking fair and equal treatment from child protection services or the law.

I had a case the other day where a mum has got bail conditions for not having contact with the children's father and we are having a child in need meeting and the social worker is arguing that mum needs to come to the meeting and I am like 'wait no, switch it, she is the guy, she has assaulted mum, switch it, he wouldn't be there would he? I might see him after, I might see him before but he would not be there' (Manager).

8.3 Being a good enough father: 'I want the best for my kids'

I think, for me our focus should be less on whether you call yourself dad but more on what that stuff is that your child could get usefully from you (Manager).

One final demonstration of how ideas about gender and parenting shape men's experience of the child protection process is in relation to the 'practice' of fatherhood (Morgan, 2013). Doing fathering was something men in our study talked about continually, both in terms of their own moral identity as fathers, and how they thought social workers saw (or judged) them as fathers. As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, (and from the wider case file analysis in Chapter 3) a general finding from this study is that men were not 'absent' in the ways that are often assumed or feared (Centre for Social Justice, 2013) and were engaged in practical, emotional and relational work to sustain some sense of being a father. However, the question of how such activity can be recognised and evaluated often produced tensions between men and social workers.

One context for such tensions is in how children's needs and parenting responsibilities are defined and understood. Social work and child protection is shaped, not least, by theory and research relating to child development and by prevailing cultural or political discourses around good enough parenting, or the role of the state in family life (Parton, 2012). As part of the significant harm criteria, child protection arguably also has a particular mandate to oversee what constitutes reasonable or good enough parenting and our study indicates that this aspect of child protection can leave men feeling overlooked or belittled. In part, this issue is linked to how both men and social workers understood the 'breadwinner' role and the way in which 'providing' could shift from being a marker of responsible fatherhood, to an indication of a lack of availability or commitment. Barry's case illustrates this, as he talks

about his (mixed) feelings on being asked to cut his working hours as part of the initial child protection plan.

I could sort of understand where they were coming from, that I was all work and no family as such but we still have days out, we go all over the place...I hardly feel I am an absent father and I do feel that it is one of the ways I provide for the family with my work (Barry, resident birth father, aged 57).

In general, fathers tended to describe their parenting in terms of its practical or material dimensions, and to lay claim to the value of 'doing things'. This was particularly the case for separated fathers who had limited time to spend with their children, and who were perhaps more likely to have their fathering role questioned.

That is how I am with the kids, if they have got a problem, you know we sort it, there isn't anything I can't sort out for them (Anthony, non-resident birth father who came to have shared care, aged 45).

I just say to him 'where do you want to go?' 'What do you want to do?' And that's what we do. I have been to the Tropical Wildlife Park with him, I have been swimming, I have been bowling, whatever he wants to do really (Jesse, non-resident birth father, aged 29).

I had not done anything wrong, I look out for him, we would go out and do stuff not just sit in (William, non-resident birth father, aged 21).

However, despite being able to account for their fathering activity to us, men in our study often felt that claims to meeting children's material needs could be discounted, or were overshadowed by social workers' focus on more emotional or affective aspects of parenting. Some men felt that this focus was unnecessary or intrusive, and others seemed to struggle with reconciling this demand alongside roles such as discipline, which they also felt fell to them as fathers.

'Parents to acknowledge Amy's feelings in a positive way' so I have got to acknowledge Amy's feelings in a positive way, now I don't think at any point I have ever not acknowledged her feelings in a positive way (Anthony, non-resident birth father who came to have shared care, aged 45).

Yeah there is probably a few things I need little tips on and stuff, like I said they were telling me off about calling it 'a naughty seat' instead of calling it a 'time out seat' but that does express that at least I am doing something (William, non-resident birth father, aged 21).

A significant tension existed where the child protection process appeared to be challenging a man's parenting style, or where a man did not understand, or in a minority of cases, rejected the model of good parenting being presented by social workers. This raises two important broader questions for social work practice. Firstly of how to understand 'fathering', and how to recognise this as different from, but not necessarily inferior to, mothering. As discussed in Chapter 6, many fathers may simply be doing parenting differently, and by measuring fathering only against mothering, there may be a danger of applying (consciously or

unconsciously) a 'deficit model' of men's parenting (Doucet, 2006). However, a second question is how to determine when a father's failure to respond to a child's emotional needs, or to empathise, does constitute a danger or form of abuse, and from this how to move them towards first recognising and then changing their parenting. A minority of men in our sample did openly challenge the model of good enough parenting that the child protection process sought to implement and as a result were either excluded, or removed themselves from the process. Asif completely denied an allegation of mental cruelty by social workers and rejected their assessment of his parenting as invalid.

The social worker says we have to show respect to our son, the son does not have to earn respect and I said 'that is absolute rubbish' I said 'in all my years of growing up, respect is earned'. Social worker says 'No I don't agree with that this is the kind of view that causes a child to be hurt' I thought what crap are you coming out with? I'm not there to be his best friend, I'm there to protect him (Asif, resident birth father, aged 53).

Shane, put himself at odds with his child's social worker by rejecting an offer of contact with his baby son whilst in foster care.

I don't want to 'bond' with the baby or the foster carers because they are going to take the baby away (Shane, non-resident birth father who lost a previous child to care, aged 45).

In both of these examples, the question of what was 'best' for the child was at stake, and the father was, in part, being asked to prioritise the child's perspective and needs. In relation to this, our findings also indicate that some men's perceptions of 'direct work' with children can produce a particular flashpoint for the kinds of tensions described. Plans for children to be seen individually by a social worker or other professional were often questioned by men whose parenting was under particular scrutiny, particularly in cases involving highly conflicted separated parents. For some, such as Anthony, there was an apparent scepticism about the validity of what was being proposed. Anthony's chief objection was what he saw as an inappropriate focus on his children (rather than his ex-wife) as 'the problem'; he felt that the child protection process pathologised them.

I have said that I don't like the way they do this 'wishes and feelings' work because they are, they are leading questions...in my eyes they are lying to the children because they are saying 'oh we are just coming for a quick chat' but they are not, they are coming to assess and, seeing what the children are like (Anthony, non-resident birth father who came to have shared care, aged 45).

Other fathers, such as Seb, and David also struggled to understand the objective of social workers talking to their children, but also perceived it as a form of provocation or challenging of their own knowledge of and relationship with, their child.

I came out of the first meeting 'what the hell was that about?' I had gone into a room and they have put bits of paper up on the wall and said we are following this Australian method of hopes and dreams and fears or something, we have put these things up and we will show you 'Josh wants to be an artist' 'Yeah I know so why are you telling me all that, should you not be talking to me about what happened?' (Seb, non-resident birth father, aged 46).

They tried to make out that I am not in contact with my children, or the children are saying things sometimes. I know my kids, I know them (David, non-resident birth father, aged 46).

Clearly, these views are not formally representative beyond our sample. However, it is important to draw attention to the potential for differences in the way social work tools, like the 'Signs of Safety' model referred to by Seb, are understood by professionals and by fathers. It should also be noted that the clear value of such tools, which were relatively new in two of the authorities, may not be shared by the whole family. The findings do however offer a powerful insight into the complexity of men's feelings about and experiences of doing fathering. They also reveal ways in which fathering can be, at times supported, but at other times undermined by the child protection process. Attempting to assess parenting capacity and prevent child maltreatment is clearly a primary function of child protection, but there is a need to be cautious of reactive or purely risk-management approaches in relation to men's parenting. Social work practice may need to incorporate, in a more systematic way, reflective thinking about gender and parenting, and more specifically, about masculinity.

We want them to do all of this emotional stuff, they want to do it, they don't know how to do it, they weren't raised to do it because they are men, they weren't raised to be carers like women and that is where I think some of this service stuff really falls down (Manager).

A lot of the way we respond to men I think is a societal response, so unless you have those environments where you can reflect on how you work with men and your own perceptions of men...if you don't kind of challenge your own views and society's views then you might not necessarily notice when we are doing these things (Social Worker).

8.4 Chapter summary

This chapter highlights the ways in which men experience or perceive gender difference as a form of unfair treatment in child protection practice. We have examined three prominent examples from our findings; the ways in which men's emotions are interpreted, the investigation and handling of allegations or concerns about domestic abuse (of partners or children), and ways in which men's parenting is recognised and evaluated. These examples are also supported by our focus group discussions with social workers and managers. Based on our analysis, our wider argument is for a gender-sensitive approach to child protection practice, in which differences in the way men and women are constructed by and experience

services are recognised and actively reflected on. Gender sensitivity, as opposed to gendered thinking, is likely to enable rather than inhibit more effective relationship building with men in child protection.

Chapter 9: Child protection as a form of gatekeeping for men

Introduction

This chapter examines and highlights the gatekeeping function of child protection services. Our intention is not to challenge such processes per se, but to raise the question of how and when such gatekeeping occurs, and encourage social workers to actively reflect on their practice. We suggest that understanding child protection services and processes as generating particular gate-opening and gate-closing moments for men, offers a more nuanced picture of the longstanding ‘problem’ of father engagement. Considering child protection practice in this way therefore provides a useful mechanism for critically evaluating and improving elements of practice or factors influencing that practice.

Our 12-month study began at the point at which a child protection plan had been made (notwithstanding the fact that there may have been prior or ongoing involvement from children’s services for some families). We were able to track procedural time points in the process, such as core group meetings or review conferences, but through our regular contact with each participating man, we were also able to identify and explore other factors that affected either the child protection process, or the man’s life, or both. Our analysis looked at the trajectory of each individual man’s experience of child protection practice over the 12 months, and at how the whole group of men experienced particular points or ‘waves’ of time; for example, the first three months of the case.

9.1 Gatekeeping and child protection

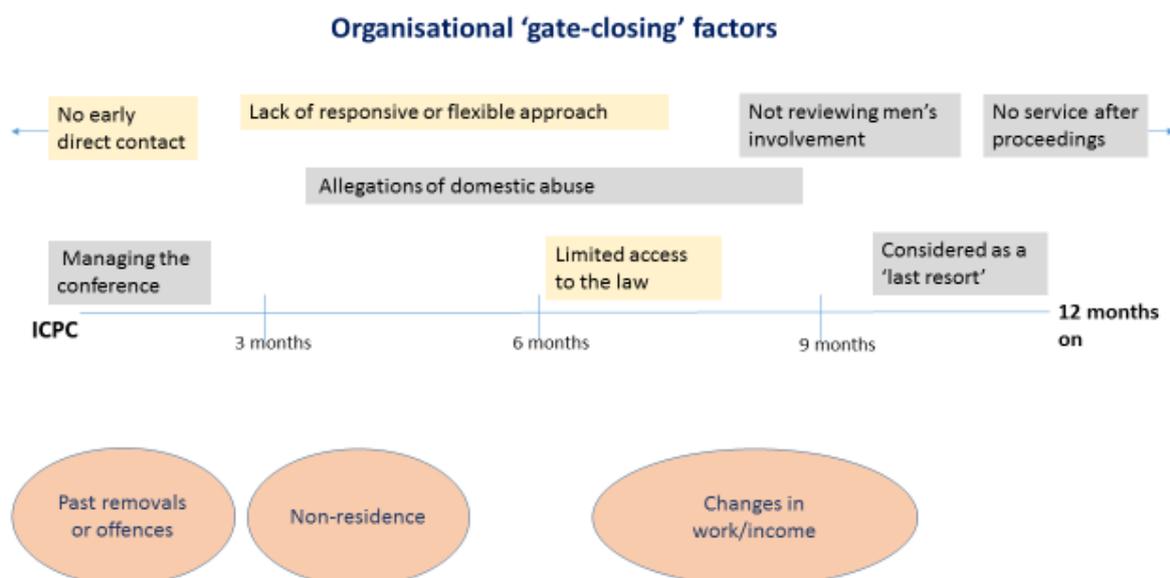
From our analysis of child protection over time, we have generated a model of child protection practice as a particular form of gatekeeping for father engagement. That is to say, child protection practice generates both opportunities and constraints for men as involved fathers and as participants in safety or care planning for children. The concept of gatekeeping arises within literature on parenting after divorce, as a way of identifying and interrogating the role of mothers in mediating and influencing fathers’ involvement with children following separation (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). Initially, research focused on maternal gate-closing, sometimes used in legal and political arguments about co-parental conflict (Pruett, Arthur & Ebling, 2007), but has since developed into a more dynamic understanding of ‘gate-work’, involving facilitation and limitation of father involvement (Trinder, 2008;

Moore, 2012). The work of Trinder in particular demonstrates the interactive or relational process by which mothers and fathers negotiate father involvement in separated families. Gatekeeping also includes a recognition of the significance and influence of cultural ideas or norms relating to gender and parenting. It is this dynamic understanding of key ‘actors’ with an ongoing and reciprocal influence on each other to negotiate caring roles and relationships with children, that we find useful for understanding child protection practice. In this context, the local authority intervenes in family life, with more or less collaboration with parents, to become a key gatekeeping figure for fathers. Following Trinder’s work, we suggest that child protection practice can produce both gate-opening and gate-closing mechanisms and that these are based in large part on the interactions between men and social workers.

9.2 Gate-closing for men in the child protection process

The discussion and figures below summarise our findings on significant gate-closing moments for men in the child protection process. In each figure, recurring issues from the study are mapped along a 12-month timeline, starting with the ICPC, to illustrate when they tended to occur, or had most significance, for our sample of men. Figure 9.1 identifies organisational and individual social worker practice issues, and Figure 9.2 illustrates where cultural attitudes to gender have an impact. In each figure, beneath the timeline, we also indicate underlying or ongoing factors that appear to restrict the inclusion of men in child protection.

Fig 9.1: Gate-closing related to organisational and individual practice issues



Underlying factors: In terms of the material circumstances of fatherhood, non-residence and employment status produced particular ongoing challenges for men, and barriers to their engagement by social workers. Previous removals, offending histories and allegations of domestic abuse (either past, or current) were also factors that consistently made the process of building working relationships more difficult and less likely.

Organisational and individual practice issues: Overall, the men's accounts indicated that certain aspects of the child protection system could limit or stall their involvement in their child's care, and these were also related to particular time points.

No early direct contact: In the early stages of a case, some form of direct contact with a father is critical, both for considering his involvement, and for any working relationship with a social worker. We suggest that not persisting with early direct contact constitutes a gate-closing moment for men, for two key reasons. Firstly, it removes a critical opportunity for validating fathers, and for demonstrating fairness, which in itself is an important aspect of building a constructive working relationship. Secondly, without a dedicated meeting, or opportunity to talk separately, an assumption of 'non engagement' is more likely to be accepted. Once established, social work practice can risk drifting into a form of 'passive inclusion' for men, which may not be routinely reviewed or challenged. Whilst offering fathers the opportunity to talk separately with a social worker may be increasingly embedded within organisational structures and regulation, the level of persistence, flexibility and imagination shown in terms of how to achieve this early contact is also dependent on the individual worker.

Managing attendance at conferences: We draw attention to a particular mechanism for 'splitting' a conference where there is family complexity or conflict. Whilst in principle this may constitute a means of including fathers, in practice, split conferences can be experienced as sending a clear message about the relative value of fathers' and mothers' contributions. Whilst only a small number of fathers experienced this method of managing the conference, their interpretation of this important early element of the child protection process warrants consideration as it challenges professional assumptions about inclusion and engagement.

Lack of flexibility: A lack of responsiveness to the material and social circumstances of fatherhood can operate as a form of gate-closing for men. We see this as a factor related to individual social worker practice, though it can clearly be more, or less, facilitated via

procedures and case management. The issue is also linked to the broader themes of time, or timescales, and of gendered thinking in child protection. In a formal sense, the process is designed as a schedule of encounters (mostly meetings) within a framework of professional working hours, limited resources, and wider cultural ideas about gender, earning and caring (Zanoni et al., 2013). Our findings showed that men were at particular risk of being seen as 'disengaged' if they could not attend conferences or core group meetings, or comply with schedules generated by the child protection plan. What we highlight is that, for men, the label of 'disengaged' has particular consequences; it can be too readily accepted or left unquestioned, can too easily render a man peripheral to the process and to the child, or be used strategically to restrict or exclude him. In summary, a lack of flexibility, coupled with lower expectations for men's involvement can foster a reciprocal disengagement and/or mistrust between men and social workers.

Allegations of domestic abuse: Allegations of domestic abuse can quickly become a powerful gate-closing moment for men in child protection. Our intention here is to emphasise this as a particular flashpoint, where fixed or reactive thinking in relation to men as perpetrators can take hold. In our study, men's perceptions of reactive (or gendered) thinking in child protection included the assumption that men are aggressors in any report of couple conflict, different thresholds for investigating and accepting men's and women's allegations or concerns, and different, often long term, consequences arising from allegations being made. The range of experiences and accounts of domestic abuse within our sample of men illustrates the complex, multifaceted nature of violence (physical, emotional and psychological) in intimate relationships. This in turn suggests that social workers need both the confidence and opportunity to think critically and reflectively about their practice around this difficult and high stakes issue.

The need for review: As cases move beyond the first few months, the issue of whether and how a man's involvement, with the child protection process and his child's life, is reconsidered takes on increasing significance. Factors involved here are the overall attitude to risk taken by the organisation, alongside that of managers, and the formal mechanisms for reviewing the role and capacity of men. Our study illustrates how the apparent presence or absence of an active manager, or a change of manager, can often act as a turning point in the direction of a case. The use of formal or peer supervision can function as important gatekeeping mechanisms and without an openness to reconsideration, and, often, the confidence to work with risk, thorough and fair analysis of men's involvement with children is likely to be limited.

Men as carers of last resort: Men's involvement or consideration as an alternative carer is often postponed. Men in our study described being included in assessments or requested to take on the care of children only in a moment of crisis or when a case entered care proceedings. Social workers and managers acknowledged that this tendency existed and was linked to both organisational and cultural risk averse practice with men. We suggest it also relates to enduring gendered thinking about parenting, which positions men as secondary carers, and that taken together these factors can constitute a powerful aspect of gatekeeping in child protection practice.

Limited access to the law: A further factor, linked to social worker knowledge as well as practice, that was prominent across the group of men, was that of access to legal advice or representation. In the context of the 2012 LASPO regulations, it is important that professionals working in child protection are aware of the exceptions where a man can apply for legal aid to pursue a child arrangements order (CAO). Our findings suggest that local authorities may be overlooking the potential to use existing legal resources under LASPO to strengthen child protection plans, address chronically poor care, and avoid reinforcing the notion of fathers as carers of last resort.

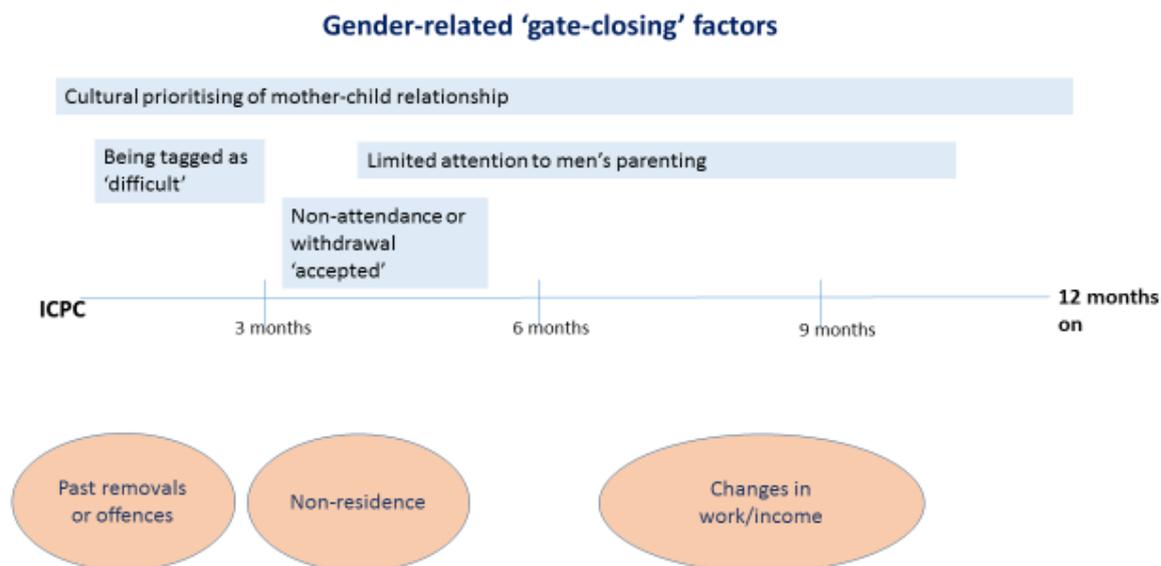
Lack of services following child removal: Lastly, we suggest that the lack of any service for fathers who have had a child removed from their care be seen as a further gate-closing moment for men. Previous removals are stigmatising for both fathers and mothers, and reduce the chances of keeping any subsequent child. The men in our study who experienced recurrent proceedings, expressed varying levels of culpability and risk, and displayed varying levels of coping, but none of them appeared to receive any offer of support or signposting beyond the closing of the case. Whilst there is currently a policy focus and concern about mothers in recurrent proceedings, and the development of post-removal services for women (Broadhurst et al., 2016), there is not an equivalent interest in understanding the factors shaping fathers' reappearance in care proceedings.

9.3 Cultural issues and gendered thinking

The accounts of men's experiences of the child protection process and of being fathers, partners, husbands (and sons) demonstrate prominent or enduring ideas about gender and parenting, both in relation to the culture of social work, and to the men's own identity and actions. Here we distinguish between gendered thinking, which appears to produce gate-closing moments in child protection practice, and gender sensitivity, which as discussed

below can generate gate-opening. Our broader argument is for greater sensitivity to gender difference and greater differentiation in how services are designed and evaluated.

Figure 9. 2: Gate-closing related to cultural attitudes to gender:



Being 'difficult': As discussed in Chapter 8, social workers' handling of men's emotions illustrates an important point about gender difference; and one that both the men and social work professionals identified. This relates to social workers' interpretation of and response to expressed emotions including anger, pain or humiliation, and the particular consequences this has for men in child protection. Different levels of fear and confidence in relation to containing men's anger, along with differing tolerance for male and female aggression, means that a gate-closing mechanism exists whereby men's involvement in both the child protection process and the child's life may be more likely to be restricted or ended.

The issue of non-attendance: Whilst the way in which non-attendance at key child protection meetings is responded to is clearly related to social worker practice, we want to emphasise the gendered dimension this appeared to have. Whilst there seemed to be a focus on men's attendance at the initial conference (although in the case file analysis discussed in Chapter 3, only a minority of men were invited to the ICPC), expectations for sustaining their active involvement appeared to be low and were linked to gendered thinking about both work and caring roles. Our findings showed men feeling increasingly disillusioned with the child protection process over time and that their withdrawal was often anticipated and rarely explored. Our suggestion is that assumptions about men's employment and/or non-involvement in childcare, coupled with the issue of non-residence, can produce a

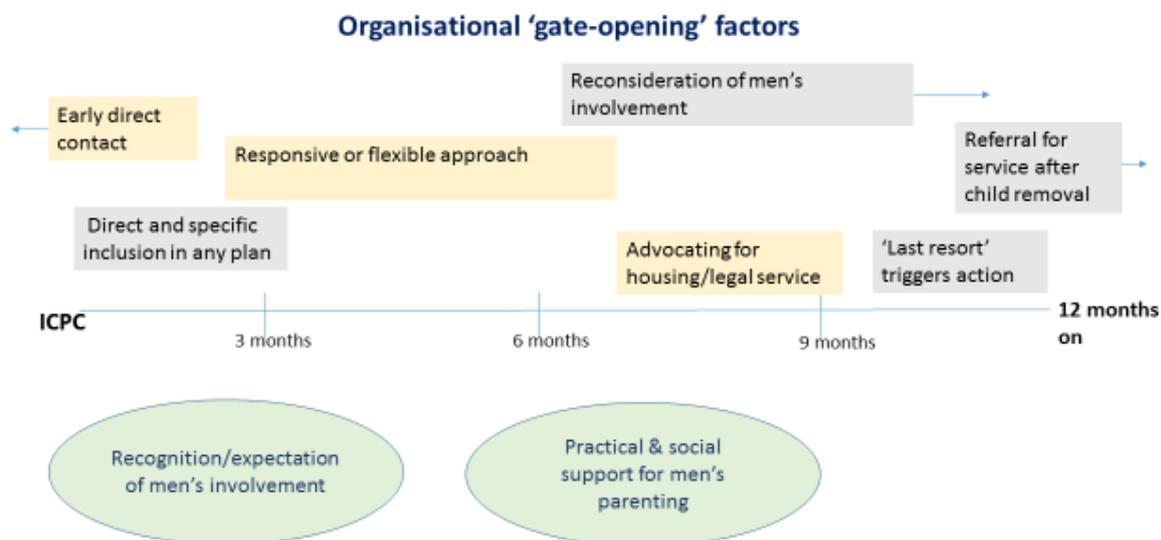
generalised and gendered picture of men's availability (or lack of it) which militates against their more effective inclusion. The movement in and out of temporary or insecure work experienced by the men in our study, together with the range of fathering and relational activity they were engaged in, challenges social workers to think and do, differently in facilitating men's active involvement in child protection over time.

Limited focus on men's care: Gendered thinking around men's role and capacity to care for children was present both in the accounts of men themselves and in the focus group discussions with social workers and managers. Despite significant shifts in ideas, norms and practices for sharing the care of children and the range of, often conflicted, feelings expressed by individuals, we suggest enduring beliefs about the primacy of the mother-child relationship exert an influence on social work practice with men. This may manifest itself in the tendency to overlook men as possibly different but equally important co-parents, in terms of both capability and accountability and arguably contributes to the phenomenon of men as carers of last resort. It also raises the question of how men's parenting is perceived and evaluated in social work practice and whether by measuring it only against 'mothering', a deficit model of fathering is in play. We argue that the issues of the 'visibility' and interpretation of men's parenting are particularly pertinent in the context of prevailing interest in strengths based working with families.

9.4 Gate-opening for men in the child protection process

The discussion and figures below summarise significant gate-opening moments for men in the child protection process. In each figure, recurring issues from the study are mapped alongside a 12-month timeline, starting with the ICPC, to illustrate when they tended to occur for our sample of men. Figure 9.3 identifies individual social work practice issues and organisational issues. Figure 9.4 illustrates where increased gender sensitivity appears to have an impact. In each figure, beneath the timeline, we also indicate underlying factors that appear to enable the inclusion of men in child protection.

Fig 9.3: Gate-opening related to individual and organisational practice issues



Underlying factors: Our findings show that a man's position and identity as an involved father is highly influenced by the material, social and emotional support systems he encounters. Men who fared better in their encounter with the child protection system, tended to have some form of validation as fathers, either from their wider lives, or from social workers, or both. Where social workers appeared to both recognise and expect men's active involvement as fathers, this could positively influence their engagement with fathers.

Organisational and individual practice issues: From our analysis of the men's accounts of child protection, it is also possible to map certain opportunities or gate-opening moments for men to become more involved fathers. In relation to organisational and individual practice, some of the issues identified below are the counterpoint, or reverse, of gate-closing moments discussed above. This means that in what follows, we are highlighting different, or more effective ways of operating within organisational structures, or adapting individual practice.

Investing in early direct contact: Men in our study generally acknowledged individual meetings with social workers as indicating some recognition of their importance to the child (even where a constructive working relationship with the social worker did not develop). Central to this, and particularly pertinent to non-resident fathers, or where there was co-parental conflict (whether separated or not) was the need to see social workers

demonstrating 'fairness'. Feeling listened to, and taken seriously emerged as a critical element in establishing some basis for a working relationship, and for social worker credibility. This means that without a timely and comprehensive direct discussion with fathers, constructive and sustained involvement is likely to be much harder. Persistence in pursuing early direct contact with fathers, we suggest is an important investment in more effective working with men. In addition, we argue that attending to the full circumstances of men's lives and hearing their stories is crucial for developing an analysis of the child protection concerns and assessing the balance of resources and risks men may present.

Direct inclusion in plans: Whilst the prevailing interest in strengths based approaches, such as 'Signs of Safety' is, in part, based on the use of more personalised and collaborative strategies for addressing child protection concerns, the benefits for families, or for fathers, cannot be taken for granted. From the child protection plans we saw, and the discussions of plans that we had with men in our study, it seemed that explicitly allocating tasks to, or identifying a resource for them, had at least the potential to encourage the man's investment in the process. What is also important though is the specificity, clarity and nature of the tasks or action points, in order to make them meaningful, and feasible, for fathers (the case file analysis in Chapter 3 showed that tasks were very rarely specifically allocated to fathers). As discussed in Chapter 7, the men in our study tended to prefer 'action' to 'just talking' in meetings, and this is relevant to how child protection plans are agreed and expressed. Again, whilst strengths based approaches claim to include practical problem solving in principle, it is the issue of how this is implemented in practice that is at stake, particularly in the context of reduced services and economic hardship. Nonetheless, generating plans which differentiate fathers' and mothers' roles and accountabilities, and demonstrate a responsive approach to the material and social circumstances of men's parenting, do present a gate-opening opportunity for their involvement.

Responsiveness and flexibility: Our findings demonstrate the particular relevance of flexible and imaginative social work practice for working constructively with men. Where men in our study spoke positively about social workers, or child protection practice, it was most often linked to examples of where some recognition or adaptation, or both, had been made, to respond to a particular circumstance. Being seen to be responsive, alongside being seen to be 'fair' and honest, or 'straight' were key aspects of what constituted a good, or 'bearable' social worker.

Advocating for and ‘triggering’ resources: Men’s experiences of being considered as carers of last resort linked to their perception of social work practice as rushed *and* slow’. Within this context, a gate-opening moment for men existed when, and if, a social worker or manager decided to advocate for a resource or service. In our study, examples included supporting men to obtain parental responsibility, accessing legal advice, housing or welfare benefits. Such decisions were sometimes taken as a result of a change of allocated worker (or manager) and sometimes because a case was on the brink of care proceedings, but the significant point is that, in these circumstances, assessment of and support for men as carers could be forthcoming. This again raises the question of time and timing in relation to child protection practice with men. If there is the capacity and ethos for active or creative helping, advocacy or signposting, then why does this appear to take time, or to be ‘triggered’ only once a case has reached a particular procedural or legal threshold? We suggest then, that whilst there are moments in the trajectory of a case that serve as important gate-openers for supporting men’s parenting, consideration should be given as to the timing or timeliness of these in terms of improving both father engagement and outcomes for children.

Reconsideration of men’s involvement: Part of our analysis of men’s encounters with the child protection system over time, involved identifying moments of, or opportunities for, change. Whilst we see child protection practice as a dynamic interactive process between men and social workers, it was clear that another gate-opening moment exists in the reconsideration of a case, and the man’s position within this. Whether by formal supervision, peer supervision, or changes of worker, the potential of reconsidering or reassessing a case can present important opportunities for reflective practice (Munro, 2011; Zanoni et al., 2013). We suggest that this is particularly relevant for working with men, where binary thinking in relation to risk, and/or gendered thinking in relation to parenting, can wittingly or unwittingly go unquestioned.

Services for fathers following child removal: The accounts of men who have experienced recurrent care proceedings reveal a common experience of profound loss and different strategies for coping with stigma, shame and a ‘marked’ moral identity (Clifton, 2012; Philip, 2013). Their accounts also contained desires for a future family life, or for reunification with children but often in a context with little material or emotional support that might make such aspirations viable. We suggest that within the prevailing interest in preventing recurrent proceedings, there is at least the potential for a gate-opening moment for men. The development of a gender sensitive or differentiated approach to post-removal support services, to both hold men to account and build on any strengths or resources they may offer

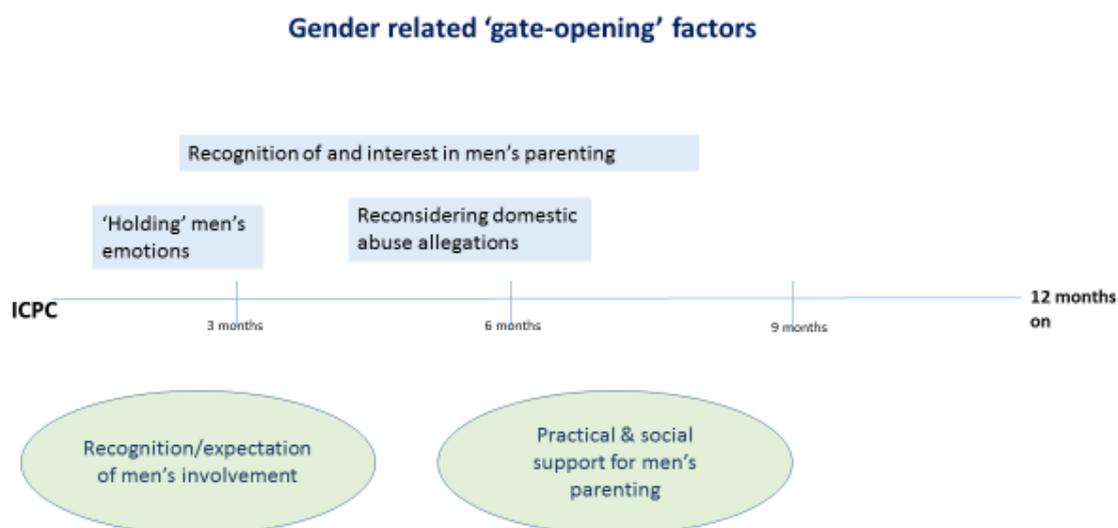
could represent a significant opportunity for change. Existing services for men are far from consistently available, and there is little or no provision targeted specifically at fathers.

9.5 Cultural issues and gender sensitivity

There were moments when an apparent openness to considering (or reconsidering) the particular circumstances and experiences of men, as fathers, made a difference to their involvement in the child protection process. Whether this was related to developing a working relationship, encouraging cooperation with the local authority or seeking a fuller, more nuanced analysis of the case, our suggestion is that gender sensitivity can facilitate gate-opening. The value of holding in mind that the experience of parenthood is gendered, and that fathers and mothers encounter different expectations, sanctions, opportunities and constraints, is important to emphasise, despite social work's longstanding concern with gender equality.

Our point here, is that the established approach of gender 'neutrality' may have the unintended consequence of ignoring important differences in men and women's experiences of parenting, leading to, or perpetuating inequalities in how mothers and fathers fare within local authority services and systems (Clapton, 2009). Our focus group discussions with social workers and managers indicated a level of awareness of cultural ideas and stereotypes about gender, but also recognition that this was often harder to apply in their individual casework (see also Bywaters et al., 2015 on social workers' response to structural inequality). Considering gender sensitivity or the strategic challenging of gendered thinking, as a gate-opening mechanism may therefore be useful in terms of highlighting practical as well as ethical relevance to practice.

Fig 9.4: Gate-opening related to gender sensitivity:



'Holding' men's emotions: The majority of men in our study spoke of experiencing intense, painful or destructive emotions, arising from their encounter with the child protection system. Whether and how, such emotions are expressed, regulated and responded to, in the interactions between men and social workers, had a particular bearing on their involvement with the case and with the child. We identified examples where men's expressed anger, in particular, was likely to produce a gate-closing response from professionals. However, we also found examples where there was both a willingness and capacity to accommodate men's emotions in ways that enabled, rather than jeopardised their involvement. 'Holding' men's emotions appeared to involve a combination of openness, clarity, boundary setting and empathy, but importantly some recognition of their particular situation, as men, and as fathers. To some extent, there is overlap here with the small number of programmatic interventions aimed at men, such as 'Caring Dads' or 'Mellow Dads' that employ a strengths based approach explicitly linked to fatherhood, as a means to facilitating change (Scourfield et al., 2016). Responding in a gender-sensitive way to angry, aggrieved or aggressive men could still involve limiting or imposing conditions for their involvement but it afforded more opportunities to avoid a negative cycle of mistrust becoming entrenched. More effective containment and acknowledgement of men's emotions as part of child protection practice is no guarantee of a constructive working relationship but our findings suggest that important gate-opening possibilities arise from critical and reflective thinking about this point of gender difference.

Recognition of men's parenting: As indicated above, default gendered thinking about parenting can render men's fathering activity less 'visible' or produce a deficit model whereby men's parenting is (often implicitly) found 'lacking'. By contrast, there were examples in our study of men who experienced proactive and, often unexpected, support to sustain or increase their level of direct care for children. This took the form of both practical support (enabling a father to combine earning and caring) and/or social or emotional support (encouraging the transition in identity from provider to full time carer), and we suggest that both these aspects can be significant for 'seeing' and responding to men's parenting. Where men felt their parenting to be recognised in its own right, this seemed to have a bearing on them feeling 'helped' or considered. Acknowledging men as fathers is related not only to role, but also to activity (Lamb, 2004) and our findings illustrate a second important practice-related point here.

In Chapters 5 and 6, we presented the range of fathering and family practices that men in our study engaged in, including practical, emotional, relational, moral, and identity work, across households, geographic distance, and over time. Men in our study were 'doing fathering' (Hobson, 2002) in a range of challenging circumstances, including non-residence or being permanently separated. Our point is not that all such activity was constructive or protective, but that it was happening, and was therefore relevant to any assessment of the case. Generating a holistic view of men's parenting as multi-layered and dynamic, is important both for child protection practice, and more widely to challenge the assumption that fathers are 'absent' and/or without influence.

Reconsidering domestic abuse allegations: Domestic abuse is a complex phenomenon, with many precipitating and exacerbating factors (Ali, Dhingra & McGarry, 2016). This includes recognising the diversity in circumstances, types, levels, and consequences of abuse that men, women and children experience, and with which child protection and other services must engage. The timely and full investigation of allegations of domestic abuse is critical, and the prominence of believing a disclosure of abuse is rightly seen as a cultural and institutional advance. Yet, it is important to remember how both the experience of, and societal response to, abuse remains another flashpoint for gender difference and inequalities. This means that professional responses to domestic abuse have to be able to accommodate the complexity of domestic abuse and be alert to fixed thinking in what is a complex, emotive and high-stakes problem. Our findings offer important insights into men's experiences of committing, being accused of, and subjected to abusive behaviour, within couple and ex-couple relationships. It also indicates men's perception of gender differences

in the investigation of abuse, and instances of self-awareness of their own collusion with gender-stereotypical ideas around masculinity, femininity and violence. We suggest that the issue of domestic abuse is one where fixed or binary thinking about men is likely to occur, and where a balanced assessment of the risks and resources a man may present is both much needed and challenging to achieve. In our sample, there were a significant minority of men who experienced a shift from being accused of abuse to being accepted by professionals as the victim of abuse. This happened only once incontrovertible evidence emerged and whilst it arguably constituted a gate-opening moment, in terms of their involvement as fathers, what it also confirmed for these men, was a form of gender bias in the investigation process.

Examining men's perspectives on the issue of domestic abuse can shed valuable light on social work practice, both in terms of where it may be 'reactive', rather than deliberative, where ideas about gender can become fixed and how this can disadvantage women, children and men in different ways. Political, legal and policy debates on this issue can also be limited by an adversarial approach, where advocating the particular needs or rights of men is seen as necessarily reducing those of women. Such an approach is unlikely to be compatible with strengths based work, or with addressing gender inequalities in how accountability and opportunities for change are distributed, or with improving outcomes for children.

At the same time, adopting a more holistic approach to investigating domestic abuse may also be seen as incompatible with the focus on risk management and risk aversion (Featherstone et al., 2016). Our study therefore highlights a key challenge for child protection practice, related to gender difference and the 'problem' of engaging more effectively with men. Local authority policy and practice guidance need to respond to the complex pattern of domestic abuse, in which men commit the majority of abuse, *and* a significant minority of men are victims. Such complexity also means that assessment procedures, case analysis, and interventions relating to both changing and surviving abusive behaviour, have to attend to gender difference in terms of design, delivery and relationship building (Clapton, 2013; Scourfield, 2014; Zanoni et al 2013).

9.6 Chapter summary

This chapter presents child protection practice as a particular form of gatekeeping for father engagement, in which the *interaction* between men, social workers and other professionals is crucial. We suggest that child protection practice generates both opportunities and

constraints for men as involved fathers and as active participants in safety or care planning for children. In seeking to explore both gate-closing and gate-opening, we identify organisational or individual practice related factors, but also highlight the influence of, often deeply rooted cultural ideas and expectations about gender and parenting. Our analysis also identifies the importance of strategic or structural change, and the need for greater flexibility and critical reflection in procedural terms but also at the level of ideas. Our model of gatekeeping offers opportunities for pre-emptive and reflective thinking about casework and about the actions and circumstance of fathers themselves, as they encounter child protection services. It therefore offers a more nuanced and multi-layered picture of the longstanding problem of father engagement.

Chapter 10: Understanding change in men's encounter with the child protection process

Introduction

In this chapter, we summarise some important patterns of change and movement in the encounter between men and the child protection system. We aim to draw together key findings from previous chapters and offer some more general insights and models for developing social work practice with men. We present and discuss change in four important ways.

Firstly, we highlight the importance of understanding contemporary fatherhood in order to work more effectively with men when there are child protection concerns. We present a model that demonstrates the contextually sensitive nature of fatherhood and how men's material, social and emotional resources affect their ability and motivation to negotiate involved fatherhood within the child protection system.

Secondly, we explore tensions between the formal child protection system's 'timeframes' and those of participants. Using the concepts of transitions, trajectories and turning points, we reflect upon fathers' lived experiences as they moved through the child protection system.

Thirdly, we analyse the movement or progression of men through the child protection system, based on the perceptions or judgements of social workers.

Lastly, we consider the potential of working relationships between social workers and men, and how such relationships operate, in conjunction with other factors (including men's own agency) to influence the gate-opening and gate-closing process set out in Chapter 9.

10.1 Understanding contemporary fatherhood as contextually sensitive

A core concern for this study has been to interrogate the ways in which men respond as *fathers* to the crisis brought about during the transition into the formal child protection process and whether they come forward in a way which expresses radical agency or whether their actions suggest retreat. We have been exploring the extent to which our participants were able to assert themselves as fathers in the face of numerous personal and

structural factors limiting their involvement.

As reported in Chapters 6 and 8, our analysis suggests that social workers, mothers and even fathers act on the basis that, all things being equal, it is best to *'let the woman get on with it'*, treating the relationship between mothers and children as more fundamental than that between fathers and children.

The findings of this study suggest that the primacy of the mother-child relationship remains a powerful limiting factor for the exercise of fatherhood. Little seems to have changed since 1998 when Doherty et al suggested that this factor was what made fathering *"a more contextually sensitive process than mothering is"*,

... fathering can be conceptualized as a more contextually sensitive process than mothering is. Not that mothering is not also contextually sensitive, but the cultural norms are stricter on the centrality and endurance of the mother-child dyad, regardless of what is happening outside that relationship. Father-Child relations, on the other hand, are culturally defined as less dyadic and more multilateral, requiring a threshold of support from inside the family and from the larger environment. Undermining from the mother or from a social institution or system may induce many fathers to retreat from responsible fathering unless their own individual level of commitment to fathering is quite strong (Doherty et al., 1998 p28).

The persistence and impact of the principle of the primacy of the mother-child dyad has been apparent at various points in the data collection. It pervades our account of men's experiences of gate-closing practices in Chapter 9. There, we noted the lack of early contact with fathers, gender imbalances with regard to the tolerance of challenging behaviour by mothers and fathers and taking fathers seriously as possible carers only as a last resort. There have been some notable examples of inclusive or gate-opening practices. But these appear to swim against the prevailing tide. The primacy principle can also be detected in the data regarding fathers' personal lives where, for instance, the cultural assumption persists that when relationships end, fathers leave home and mothers become the children's main carer. Many participants with no paid work or insecure work still seemed to understand their own identity primarily as workers, or struggled to see how they might combine employment with caring for their child. Whilst most fathers in the study were active as fathers in various ways, up to half of the participants seemed to display a limited sense of their own efficacy and entitlement when pitched into the crisis of the child protection process.

Much as implied by Doherty et al.,(1998), we have detected evidence of the maternal primacy principle operating at personal, familial, professional, organisational and societal

levels. As many previous studies attest, both mothers and fathers encountering the child protection system find it problematic and challenging. However, fathers in this study claim that they faced the additional barrier of unequal involvement. The persistence of the maternal primacy principle at all levels perhaps accounts for the modest progress made in placing fathers and mothers on an equal footing in procedures, before the law and in social work practice in spite of a decade or more of research demonstrating the need for more gender inclusive practice. These are political, organisational and cultural as well as practice issues. As Connell (2005, p86) commented,

We are all engaged in constructing a world of gender relations. How it is made, what strategies different groups pursue, and with what effects, are political questions.

Chapters 5 and 6 describe aspects of fathers' personal lives that have relevance to their ability to engage with the care and protection issues identified by a child protection investigation. Many participants were facing significant health, employment, housing and relationship difficulties and economic marginalisation. Many participants reported high levels of stress, anxiety, depression and a number were contending with substance misuse. However, Chapters 5 and 6 also depict the fathers not just as passive casualties of social forces but as 'doing things'. They were often at the centre of complex networks of relationships surrounding their children in which they were attempting to maintain some sense of stability, strategising to balance home and work, communicating with ex-partners and children whilst trying to keep current partners onside. There seemed to be a realisation that being a breadwinner (where that was possible) was not enough to be able to claim to be a fully involved, contemporary father. So most participants claimed with more or less conviction to be spending time with their children, building bonds and accepting some responsibility for their care, though a few fathers who were 'in the frame' or 'marked men' who had lost children had relinquished, for the present at least, the aspiration to be an involved father.

Both in the case file analysis reported in Chapter 3 and in the qualitative longitudinal (QL) study discussed in subsequent chapters, there was little evidence that fathers were being assessed in a holistic way. Files lacked detailed information about fathers' and father figures' relationship networks, health, employment, housing and economic status. Where they were assessed the focus tended to be exclusively upon whether or not they posed a risk to their child. A consequence of such focussed practice is a lack of curiosity about fathers' lived experiences (see the following section) and what they are actually doing and a lack of attention to them as people with needs and concerns of their own which may be highly relevant to their ability to be effective fathers.

Figure 10.1 Fatherhood as contextually sensitive

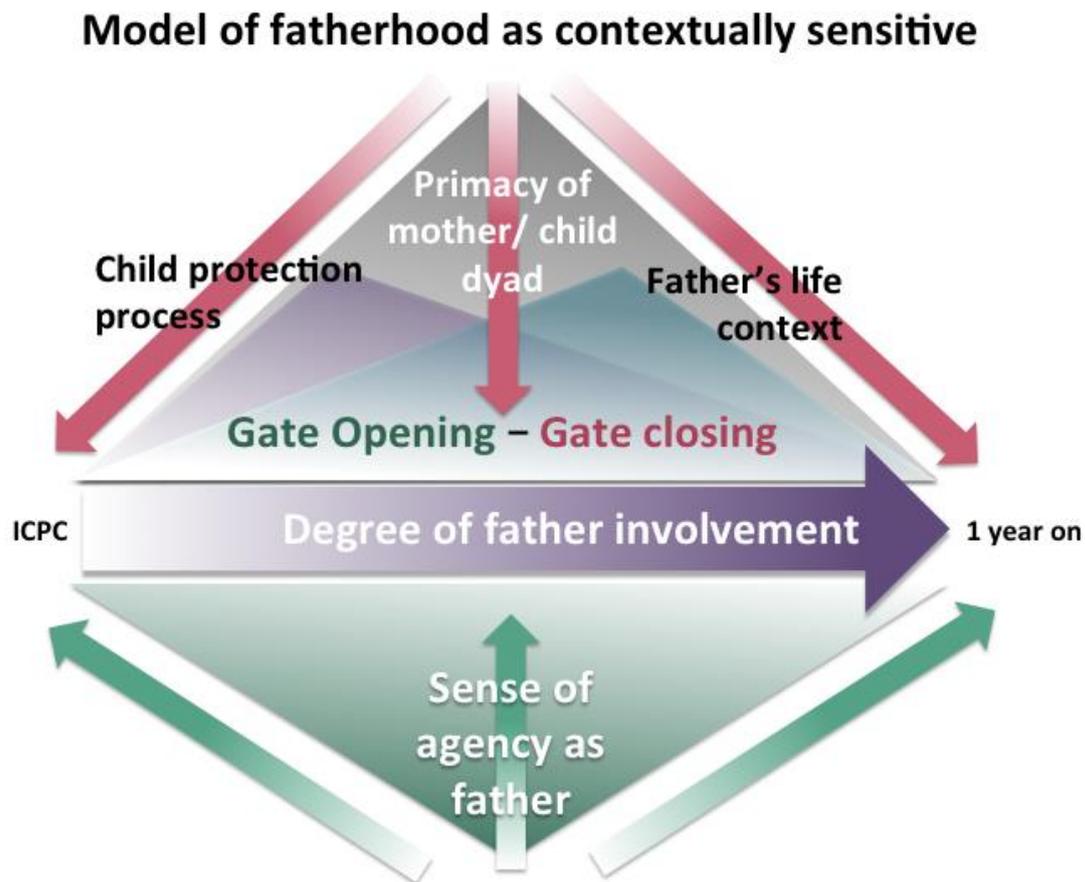


Figure 10.1 presents a model of the way in which father involvement in child protection in this study was shaped in the year following the initial child protection conference (ICPC). The degree of father involvement (represented by the central arrow) was modified throughout the year by events taking place in the process of child protection and in the context of the father's life outside of that process. These two domains are represented by downward facing fan shapes extending throughout the year. Behind and above them another fan shape represents the context of the pervasive belief in the primacy of the mother/ child dyad previously discussed. Throughout the year, events occur either as a result of deliberate gatekeeping decisions by social workers or as the unintended consequences of organisational procedures or as a result of planned or random life occurrences or transitions. Whilst in most cases, events pressing down from above tend to close gates to involvement, some provide a gate-opening moments, that is, opportunities to draw the father into greater involvement.

Potentially counteracting the forces from above, the lower fan shape in Figure 10.1 represents each father's sense of agency. Doherty et al (1998, p287) when writing about the

dynamics fatherhood in the general population, described “*the individual level of commitment to fathering*” which is similar to what we have called a sense of agency. However, in the model above, we are discussing something more specific, namely, public expressions of involved fatherhood in the context of the child protection crisis. In Chapter 6, we suggested that a father’s sense of agency is related to four factors: The father’s persistence, sense of entitlement, his self-efficacy and the strength of his relationship with his child. A minority of fathers (n=11) displayed a robust sense of individual commitment to take on not just a fathering role but to do so under scrutiny and in the context of the encounter with the child protection system.

The model we propose is interactive in the sense that the increase or decrease in factors in one domain is likely to modify the degree of father involvement. We believe the model has potential for use in practice and policy development. Action could be taken at an organisational level to challenge the culture that assumes the primacy of the mother/ child dyad. Children’s services could use the model to examine the intended and unintended consequences of policy, procedures and practices in relation to men, which may close the gate to involvement and support practices which open gates. A similar approach could be taken to consider how assessments of fathers could be made more holistic. This would involve not just an acceptance of ‘good practice’ suggestions (see Chapter 11) but organisational commitment to enabling social workers the time needed to undertake this level of assessment. Finally, the model raises the possibility of helping to create the conditions in which more fathers feel empowered to take an active and safe part in the child protection process.

10.2 Conflicting time frames and men’s personal journeys through the child protection system

The study findings feature the existence of competing ‘timeframes’ between the social workers and their organisation on the one hand and fathers on the other. The concept of timeframes is one developed by the sociologist Barbara Adam (2004). She proposed a distinction between ‘clock time’ and ‘lived time’. Clock time is abstract and supposedly “*objective*”. It is “*applicable anywhere anytime*”. Clock time is seen as a “*controlled resource*” which has economic value. It is “*commodified*” (Adam, 2004, p124). Public organisations and their officials’ working worlds are dominated by ‘clock time’. In contrast, lived time concerns experiences such as bodily and diurnal life rhythms, the ebb and flow of relationships and naturally occurring life transitions. Clock time creates “*hierarchies*” (Adam, 2004, p122) whenever there is tension between official time and lived time. Official clock time, because it

is paid for, has more 'value'; its objectivity prevails over the subjectivity of lived time and *"deviance from the norm [of clock time] means sanctions and low status"* (Adam, 2004, p124).

Applying this theory, children's services departments and their social workers managing child protection inhabit clock time. Timescales are set down for tasks and processes from investigation, initial and full assessment, the calling of ICPCs and review conferences and core groups. Visits must be scheduled; recordings and reports must be filed in at set intervals. Plans must be produced and approved. There is hierarchical accountability for task completion. The main resource in social care is workers' time. Time represents the money provided by tax and council taxpayers. It is scarce. At several points in the findings we encounter an acute lack of synchronicity between social workers' official time and fathers' lived time. In the findings from the file audit, very little was found in the records about the lived experiences and perspectives of fathers and father figures. In Chapter 7, fathers are depicted as experiencing social workers' actions as both too fast and too slow: Too fast when a procedure must be followed that seems premature to participants; too slow when the father waits anxiously for action which never seems to come. In Chapter 9, planning milestones in the child protection process come and go (gates open, or more often close, to involvement) often with little connection with the fathers' lived experiences. In the following section of this chapter, we discuss how fathers are sorted and processed in the child protection system. In all this, there is a sense of time being rationed with the lived experience of fathers rarely receiving acknowledgement.

Drawing upon the detailed chronological case studies (see Appendix 5 for our discussion of analysis by case and wave) it was possible to trace each participant's progress through the child protection system gaining insights into their lived experiences and decision making. Following Thomson (2007) we found it valuable to investigate our participants' key transitions, their trajectories over the year and any turning points or critical moments in relation to the child protection process.

Transitions: There were several ways in which fathers made a significant transition from one state to another during the year. One transition with far reaching implications was intimate partnership cessation. This process occasioned personal emotional loss and possible homelessness. It commonly affected employment, contact with and therefore the father's relationship with his children. If his children remained cared for by the separated partner, the father was obliged to renegotiate their relationship under stressful conditions as

parents rather than as romantic partners. Also, interestingly – and perhaps this should be a more ‘recognised’ contemporary life stage – the phenomenon of ‘second family-hood’ (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards & Gillies, 2003). We see a sizeable proportion of our men moving into a stage of life where they have both current and ex-partners, children (birth or step) in more than one household.

In the study, there was evidence of fathers moving in and out of ‘health’. Some experienced chronic conditions, but with new or unanticipated symptoms, accidents, new diagnoses, new investigative or treatment options and making choices as to whether to seek or accept help. As a result of their own choices or as a result of official compulsion, men moved in and out of the purview of official agencies (including local authorities, DWP and police). Some men were cooperating and seeking help; others were deliberately removing themselves from view in order to evade either scrutiny or to defend their privacy and moral identity. For others, a key transition was moving in and out of holding some recognised social status such as resident fatherhood. For example, in the transition from resident to non-resident father, fatherhood was deemed irrelevant for social housing waiting lists. Several experienced the change in status resulting from moving into or out of work. A number of men experienced changes in their moral status as a result as being seen as feckless or being ‘marked’ as a dangerous father. This transition, which seems to be associated with increased shame and stigma, appears to be one of the hardest changes to reverse (see section 10.3).

The contextual sensitivity of fathering discussed in the previous section also underlines the greater sensitivity of fatherhood to transitions such as those identified above. In the course of life -

The more contexts he [the father] has for connecting everyday interactions, functions, roles and contexts to fathering, the ‘more of a dad’ he becomes (Palkovitz & Palm, 2009 p18).

On the other hand,

The more of these contexts he has that compete with his involvement with his children, the more fragile his fathering identity becomes, unless he bolsters his stand against those things (Palkovitz & Palm, 2009 p18).

In Palkovitz and Palm’s terms we note that there were various major and minor fatherhood transitions taking place in the lives of the study participants. Some are the result of professional decisions but many arise from unrelated life events. Some of these open but many seem to close gates to a stronger father identity and weaken the sense of agency of all but the most committed.

Trajectories: The analysis of individual case studies enabled us to trace upward and downward trajectories in participants' fortunes during the year sometimes related specifically to the child protection process but also to the state of their relationships, employment, financial, health and housing issues. Although carried out for a limited period with 'live' information the chronology undertaken with participant men was prefaced with related events from their previous histories. This enabled longer patterns and fluctuations to be identified. Although a year is a short period for analysis, it was clear that many participants' life course had been dislocated or diverted in unpredictable ways. When prompted with a 'timelines' exercise (Hanna & Lau-Clayton, 2012) in which participants were asked to share important events from the past and anticipated future events, insights were gained into how the child protection process was affecting participants' 'life plans' or their sense of the bigger picture of their lives. Not all of the men had (or could articulate) a life plan. Participants' apparent time perspective (Zimbardo & Boyd, 2012) seemed to govern the nature of any life plan. Several fathers facing the most challenging circumstances seemed to inhabit a present time perspective characterised by fatalism. Living in such a reality made it hard for them to think beyond the needs of the moment and imagine a future for themselves and their children. Others had been firmly focussed on future plans for career and family and experienced the child protection process keenly as an unwelcome interruption. We noted a variety of kinds of fathers' trajectories. Some were adaptive (seeking to adjust the life plan to get it back on course); some men made a new plan; some attempted to defend their existing plan; some, as suggested above, saw no point in planning. It appeared participants' trajectories were closely related to their sense of self as narrated, self-efficacy and agency (see Chapter 6).

Turning points: We identified key moments when the nature of our participants' control of their lives was put to the test sometimes with important consequences for their future as fathers. We refer to turning points as junctures at which the participants were confronted with the need or opportunity to do something differently. These moments often arose from events outside the participant's control as the catalyst for such a decision. The decision made at such moments might be to step forward and take some new initiative. In contrast, the decision might be to resist taking a particular action or indeed to take no action. An example of a father stepping forward at such a moment was Brandon's decision, in the light of his ex-partner's increasingly neglectful care of their son to obtain his own social housing, mobilising all his support systems in readiness for the moment when his ex-partner's care finally became unviable. The decision made to pursue housing was crucial in his becoming his child's sole carer. In contrast, Jesse, faced with a similar dilemma and feeling under pressure to decide whether or not to intervene, made a definite decision not to try to offer an

alternative home for his son, to support his ex-partner's as main carer and to define himself in future as a 'weekend dad' whose role it was to 'be there' for his son.

The contexts in which turning points occurred were of particular significance. In the case of the most vulnerable fathers in the study, turning points relate to the process of becoming a 'marked man'. Actions and/ or consequences, such as convictions, prison sentences, diagnoses, removal of children, losing jobs or benefits or homes, could be seen as key (and cumulative) factors that limited options or made certain 'choices' either more likely or even more 'rational' (e.g. it makes sense to avoid certain agencies once you have a criminal record).

More positively, turning points were also linked to 'helping'. So where a service or an individual is seen to 'help' it can produce an opportunity or motivation for the father to change his mind, to engage and develop trust. For example, Greg was initially sceptical about being referred to a group for men to address domestic abuse issues. However, he had sufficient trust in the social worker to decide to attend. The decision proved to be a turning point in the sense that over the succeeding months, his participation in the group enabled him to 'turn around' his whole approach to relationships and the management of anger with positive consequences for his partner and child. Beyond being useful for the analysis of data, the notion of turning points is a potential resource for working with fathers who feel that their own lives are beyond their control and that they are determined by the decisions of others.

Regarding the lack of balance between the timeframes of the child protection system and fathers' sense of lived time, critiques of managerialism in social care (such as Munro, 2011; Wastell et al, 2010) suggest the possibility of releasing social workers from imprisonment within official timeframes. The model presented in the last section of this Chapter advances another possible model to promote fathers' active involvement. In this context, social workers could be well placed to smooth out the hard edges of official timeframes and help bring the official timeframes into closer synchronicity with fathers' lived experiences of time.

10.3 Capturing the movement of men through the child protection system

Our findings provide insight into how men appear to have been perceived by social workers at the start of the child protection process, and whether or how this changed over time. The picture revealed comes from a combination of men's accounts of the perceptions of social

workers, borne out by our knowledge of the trajectory of each case, in relation to meetings, decisions or actions taken about the status of the case, the child’s care, or the man’s involvement. Six main categories emerge. The categories were also developed from our early work on the file analysis of 150 child protection cases (see Chapter 3). The child protection enquiry and early stages of the case appeared to involve an initial positioning of men in terms of their role in relation to the child and to the child protection concern. This positioning also involved social workers’ perceptions of a man’s culpability and his history (where it was known, or sought). Our analysis across and between the groups of participants allowed us to categorise a number of different positions a man could occupy. Figure 10.2 sets these out and provides a brief definition of each category.

Figure 10.2 Social workers’ positioning of men in child protection at Time 1 (at ICPC) and Time 2 (12 months later)

Category or sub-group	Time 1 N=35	Time 2 N=28	Definition
Safe pair of hands	1	3	Men whose care is deemed positive and protective and/or is tried and trusted.
Good enough	3	8	Men whose care is seen as acceptable, though there may be a perceived need to monitor over time
On trial	7	1	Men whose care is seen as needing to be tested. The concerns may be more or less serious.
In the frame	10	2	Men who are under suspicion for the child protection incident and who are the main focus of concern.
On the fringe	5	7	Men who are seen as peripheral to the case, and whose involvement is not the focus of the child protection plan.
‘Marked men’	9	7	Men who have past removals and/or offending histories in relation to DVA or other violence. Seen as high risk. The term ‘marked’ is used to denote the stigmatising effect of such histories and their impact on men’s futures as fathers.

Mapping change over time: The majority of children’s cases no longer had a social worker involved by 12 months after the ICPC. A child protection plan remained in place in only five cases and in eight further there was a child in need plan. However, as well as mapping the trajectory of the child’s case, we were also able to look at any change in how the men were

perceived by social workers, either across the 12 months, or for the duration of time the case had an allocated social worker. Our findings show that the amount of movement and the direction of flow between the categories varied, with some being more dynamic than others.

Moving towards involvement: The greatest flow of movement occurred in a positive direction, in terms of men coming to be recognised or accepted as ‘good enough’ fathers, or as a ‘safe pair of hands’. Eleven men experienced some positive shift in social workers’ perception, with most moving from being ‘in the frame’ or ‘on trial’, but also including two who moved from being ‘on the fringe’ as separated non-resident fathers, to taking on full-time care of their child. Whilst it might be expected that assessment in child protection would facilitate this process, it is also important to reflect on what our findings indicate about how or when such shifts occur.

Key factors that appeared to contribute to men moving through child protection in this positive direction were the recognition of protective or positive aspects of men’s parenting and/or the acceptance of men’s concerns over mothers’ care of the child. Making a positive assessment of men’s parenting happened both within the context of an ongoing couple relationship, and for two men, in relation to separated parents. Yet, what was also striking, and as we have discussed in Chapters 7 and 8, the recognition of men’s parenting as protective or competent often only occurred with an accompanying negative evaluation of mothers. Where social workers appeared to change their view of fathers, or to work with him in a different way, this was often linked to some change in their view of the mother’s needs, capacity, or culpability. Related to this was men’s reported experience of the difficulty in having their concerns about the mother (either in terms of her care of the child, or behaviour towards the father) taken seriously. In the six cases where fathers became the main carer for their child, three men talked about previous periods of child protection and longer histories of raising concerns with social workers or other professionals (with little happening as a result). Two of these men (Henry and Kyle) described how filmed evidence of mothers’ abusive behaviour was what changed the direction of the case and the way social workers interacted with them. Also, included within the group of men who moved into the category of ‘good enough’ were the three fathers who felt they were considered only as a ‘last resort’ once the case was on the edge of care proceedings.

Moving to the periphery: A second notable pattern was the movement of men away from involvement in the case and potentially from the child. Five men had moved into the category

of being 'on the fringe' during the time their child's case was open to a social worker. Three further fathers remained on the periphery for the duration of the case.

Again, the reasons for this varied, but a significant issue was that of being a non-resident parent. Separated fathers were more likely to feel peripheral as time went on and whilst most cases were closed to a social worker by the end of the 12 months, some fathers felt that their ongoing role and relationship with the child had not been considered as part of that process. A second route to being 'on the fringe' arose from antagonistic relationships between men and social workers, where a cycle of mutual suspicion and mistrust had become entrenched. Two men who experienced this (Asif and Seb) expressed ambivalence towards social workers, challenging their credibility whilst also feeling let down or excluded, and had decided to detach themselves from involvement with the case as an act of resistance. As discussed in Chapter 9, once a man is considered peripheral, either via non-residence or by being seen as 'difficult', the chances of his involvement being reconsidered or engaged with differently are often slim, and may be dependent on gate-opening within social work practice.

Staying 'marked': The group of men least likely to experience any positive change in their relationships with social workers and involvement with the case and with their child were the 'marked men'. Men with a history of losing previous children to care, or of violence or domestic abuse offences, were unlikely to move out of this category over the duration of the case. Nine men entered our study and the child protection process as 'marked' and by the end of the 12 month study period we knew that seven did not feel there had been any positive shift in how social workers' perceived them. Four of these fathers experienced the removal of a subsequent child (two placement orders and two special guardianship orders had been made), and two had continued to resist or side-step attempts to restrict their involvement with the child. Two men who were 'marked' at the start withdrew from the study after the first three months, and one man died from complications linked to his drug misuse.

Despite the lack of movement out of this category, all but one of the men did describe some kind of assessment process or conditions for his involvement set by the child protection plan. However, whilst this suggests that 'marked men' were given some opportunity to demonstrate change or capacity as a father, most felt that their chances of 'passing' assessments were slim, and as discussed in Chapter 7, some felt threatened or 'goaded' by the process. For this group of men, it appeared that a working relationship with the social worker was never established, and this tended to produce two different strategies or

responses in the men. One was to resist the process, either by open challenge (Kenny) or by avoidance (Jordan). The second was to submit to the child protection process, as further confirmation of failure as a father and as a man (Dale).

The one exception to this was Mark. Mark was unusual in that despite experiencing the child protection process many times in his life (including, possibly, as a child who was adopted) and having a second child removed from his care, he managed to sustain a viable moral identity. Mark showed and talked about his abilities to manage his emotions, capitalise on his (extensive) social and practical support networks, and narrate his culpability in a way which did not render him shamed or entirely guilty (Gibson, 2015). Following the conclusion of proceedings and the making of a placement order for his son and step-son, Mark moved to a different part of the country and was able to get accommodation and a job. Mark showed the greatest resilience in the face of his own actions and his encounters with child protection and the court system. So whilst he was not able to move out of the category of 'marked men' within these systems, he moved himself on, towards a new life, with clear strategies for avoiding scrutiny from such systems in the future.

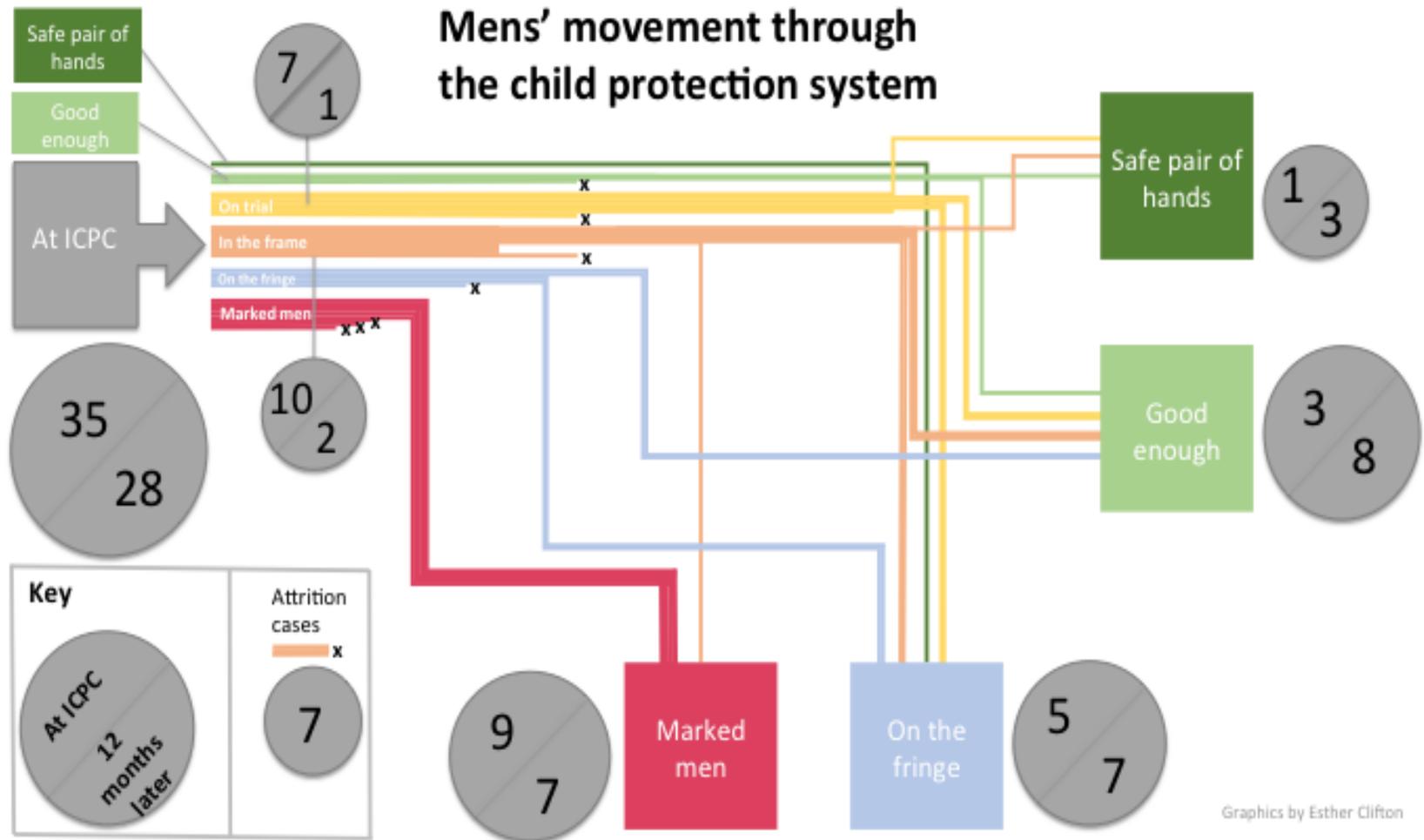
Towards a model of men's movement through child protection

Our findings suggest that, as fathers, men may experience more or less progression through the child protection system, resulting in more or less involvement with the process and with their child. Whilst there may be a steady flow of fathers coming to be accepted as 'good enough', the experience of how, and when this process occurs is different for different groups of men, and can be facilitated or stalled by the actions and interactions between social workers and men. Birth fathers, who live with their children and the child's mother are more likely to be included in assessments (and included early). Separated non-resident fathers are much more likely to either move to or remain on the periphery of the case (unless they are highly active and possess a strong sense of entitlement to fatherhood, as discussed in Chapter 6). Fathers who face and pose the greatest challenges for involved fatherhood are the least likely to experience any progression through the system, and are most likely to actively reject the process or absent themselves from it. The result of this is often that the rehabilitative issues for such 'marked men' are rarely addressed by children's services, and their appearance in child protection and care proceedings can become cyclical.

Based on our findings, we offer a model of movement into the child protection system and the potential routes through, or out of it, as another tool for practice with fathers. Raising awareness of patterns, potential directions or points where progression is particularly

difficult, may prove useful alongside the practice issues regarding the time and timing of social work actions, discussed in Chapter 7. Figure 10.3 illustrates this model, with the width of the arrows indicating the level of movement from one category or sub group to another.

Figure 10.3 Men's movement through the child protection system



Graphics by Esther Clifton

10.4 Relationships and gatekeeping as key change factors: a typology of engagement

Chapters 7, 8 and 9 set out in detail how our analysis of men's experiences of the child protection system raises a number of important issues for social work practice. We have identified how perceptions of time, clashing time frames, and the timing of a man's inclusion in enquiries and assessments have an impact on his involvement in the process and with the child. We also demonstrated where and how gendered thinking about parenting, family and social roles continues to permeate how social workers (and men) respond to child protection concerns. Having combined this analysis with our mapping of the trajectories and progression of the men's cases, we have suggested that child protection can be understood as a particular form of gatekeeping for men. Using the term gatekeeping emphasises the interactive nature of the encounter between men and social workers, but also recognises the power relations that shape this. Social workers are able to generate, or act on 'gate-opening' and 'gate-closing' opportunities for men's involvement as fathers, and men are able to influence the likelihood of such opportunities arising, or consider their own response to these.

This means that alongside gatekeeping as a key mechanism for whether and how change occurs, one further issue highlighted by our findings is the centrality of the working relationship between social workers and fathers. As discussed in Chapter 9, gatekeeping is defined as a relational process and one in which positive change cannot be achieved without the participation of both parties (Trinder, 2008). Our findings show that when men described their experiences of the child protection system, the presence or absence, development or deterioration of a working relationship with the social worker featured heavily. This relationship was often what also revealed the impact of the process on the man's moral identity or exposure to difficult emotions such as shame or anger (Gibson, 2015; Clapton, 2013).

Our findings also show that, in general, men did want a relationship with a social worker and acknowledged the two-way nature of the encounter. The men in our study wanted to be listened to and to be taken seriously. They wanted some level of negotiation and reciprocity and they wanted (often practical) support. A 'bearable' working relationship with a social worker, which did exist or emerge for some men, was one with enough mutual respect, receptiveness, flexibility and reliability to generate some shared understanding and some basis on which to discuss the child's life and the man's involvement in it. Often highlighted were the often mutual barriers to forming working relationships. Men and social workers

appeared to mirror a sceptical view of each other, with each often describing the other as 'hard to reach', evasive or defensive. However, as we have discussed, things could, and did, change for most men. Whilst only three men described a sustained positive relationship with a social worker, the majority either described 'ups and downs' in their relationship, or could describe at least one previous social worker with whom they had worked better. A significant minority of men (including some but not all of the 'marked men') experienced this mutual scepticism and mistrust as reinforcing, and did not develop any constructive relationship with the social worker.

Taken together, our findings from the qualitative longitudinal (QL) study and the focus groups with social workers and managers, indicate that both fathers and social workers can recognise accountability in terms of relationship building. Either, or both, can be agents for change in terms of how working relationships are developed or stalled. We suggest that focusing on this interactivity and dynamism is important for practice because it can challenge longstanding assumptions about father 'absence', 'difficulty' or 'disengagement'. In Chapters 7 and 8 we identified factors that may help or hinder the development of working relationships, including 'opening gambits', the capacity of social workers to 'tolerate' men's emotions, flexibility and reliability. In Chapter 9 we indicated how the combination of organisational and cultural factors (child protection professionals' actions and attitudes) contribute to the gatekeeping mechanisms for men in child protection. By drawing together these different aspects of our analysis a more general model of interaction between men and social workers can be developed, which indicates how different types or degrees of father engagement may emerge.

Active involvement: where a constructive (or at least 'bearable') relationship exists which facilitates men's direct participation in the child protection plan and a mechanism for negotiating and, where possible, supporting men's involvement with their child. Active involvement constitutes a strengths based approach based upon an understanding of the whole context of men's lives where honest communication about child protection concerns does not preclude recognition of any positive contribution a father can, or could make. Active involvement can be sustained by a 'virtuous circle' of mutual recognition or acknowledgement between the social worker and the man.

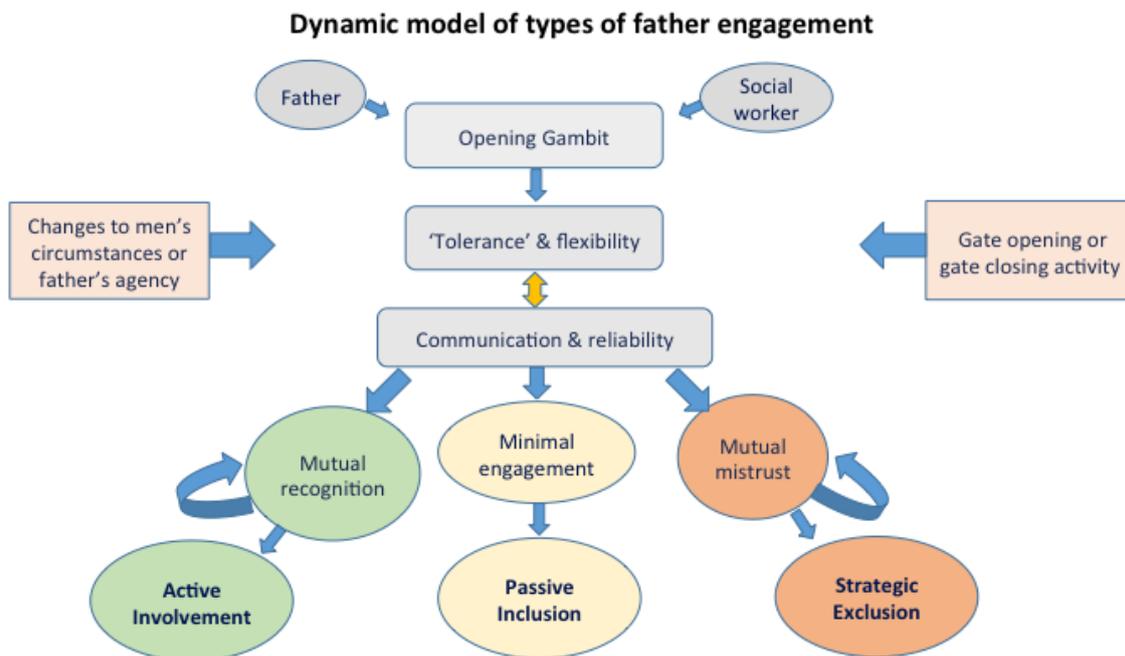
Passive inclusion: where only a nominal relationship exists which facilitates minimal or indirect participation in the child protection plan, and where a lack of knowledge about men's lives limits any capacity to negotiate, manage or support their involvement with their child.

Passive inclusion often involves indirect communication with men and is less likely to question or negotiate strategies for father engagement. Passive inclusion is arguably sustainable in that both social workers and men may continue with minimal and guarded interactions, but achieving positive change for men as fathers is much harder.

Strategic exclusion: where a defensive or avoidant relationship exists which produces restriction or prevention of men's participation in the child protection plan and involvement with the child. Whilst such exclusion is necessary and appropriate in some cases, our point is to highlight the wider potential for mutually antagonistic relationships to close down opportunities for holding men accountable, for addressing rehabilitative possibilities or reviewing their involvement. Strategic exclusion often involves fixed thinking or reactive responses to domestic abuse allegations, and men's anger. When men feel excluded they may exacerbate the antagonism by challenging the process, or remove themselves from it as an act of resistance. Strategic exclusion can be reinforced over time by a 'vicious circle' of mutual suspicion and mistrust, and where such entrenchment occurs it can be very difficult to change.

Figure 10.4 below illustrates our model of different types of father engagement. This model attempts to capture the interactive nature of encounters between men and social workers, the processes that shape relationship building, and how both positively and negatively reinforcing patterns of interaction can occur. The three types of engagement shown here were apparent across the project as a whole, i.e. from the in depth QL study, and the quantitative analysis of the 150 children's case files. One general pattern we observed is the (ongoing) tendency for professionals to settle for some form of passive inclusion rather than persist with relationship building or reviewing the involvement of men in child protection.

Figure 10.4: A typology of father engagement



10.5 Chapter summary

In this chapter we offer an analysis of change over time relating to fathers' involvement with the child protection plan for their child from four complementary viewpoints. The first section sets out from the findings an **overall model of fathers' encounter with the child protection system**, which is intended to inform discussion regarding practice and policy. We suggest fathers' engagement with the care issue surrounding their child is influenced by the child protection system and fathers' own life events and issues operating in parallel. Underlying these factors is the presumption by all involved of the priority of mothers' relationships with their children. This makes fathering particularly sensitive to context. The actions of social workers and unfolding life events mediate these factors in gate-opening and (more frequently) gate-closing moments. Counterbalancing these forces is each father's sense of agency.

The second section highlights the **conflicting 'timeframes' between those working in the child protection system and fathers** where official timeframes can lead to the undervaluing of fathers' lived experience. Fathers' lived experiences, reveal their **life trajectories and how key transitions and turning points played out in their lives**. These processes and events affect men's capacity and ambition to engage in the child protection process and to commit to involved fathering.

In section three, we present a model showing **how men may be positioned by social workers, and the routes they subsequently take through the child protection system.** We examine the outcome of gatekeeping in the way fathers are processed and categorised by the system. Certain fathers progress relatively freely through the system whilst others, particularly non-resident fathers and ‘marked men’, find themselves ‘on the fringe’ of involvement and strategically excluded respectively.

Among the many implications for practice, (see Chapter 11), in section four we place particular emphasis on **the key role of social workers’ as gatekeepers and as those with the opportunity to build better relationships with fathers.** Our model of three kinds of engagement with fathers identified in the data shows that although ‘strategic exclusion’ may be necessary in some cases, opportunities can be lost for fresh thinking and rehabilitative possibilities. Although there is a tendency for social workers to settle for ‘passive inclusion’, when there is ‘active involvement’ the results can be transformative.

Chapter 11: Implications and messages for policy and practice

Introduction

In this final chapter, we present a series of messages and implications for policy and practice. Whilst our focus has been on social work, many of the points identified here have relevance for other child welfare, health and education professionals. Our aim is to highlight ways of working more effectively and inclusively with men as fathers or father figures, and in particular to emphasise the crucial need for relationship building as part of this. We have argued throughout, for a 'both-and' approach, where effective engagement involves both authoritative and empathic interaction, to hold men accountable, and to directly value their parenting in its own terms. We also argue the importance of working with both mothers and fathers, in all/any child and family welfare services. Whilst there is currently a prevailing organisational interest in 'strengths based' work with families, we suggest that this does not necessarily offer the solution to the arguably entrenched problem of poor father engagement. One general argument we have developed from our findings is the value of a more gender differentiated approach in order to understand the experience of motherhood and fatherhood, and in turn, design or adapt services that can respond supportively to this. We have organised these practice messages in relation to a number of aspects of practice that our project has been able to examine, through the in-depth QL study and the case file analysis, and tested via the focus group discussions and interactions with the three partner local authorities.

11.1 Case recording and mapping men in families

Expect to identify multiple ('orbiting') men in the child's network. Do not assume that either birth father status or residence are the only or overriding factors in terms of who is important to the child or who is actually/potentially involved in their lives.

Persist with identifying a child's birth father. This will often involve building trust with mothers (as gatekeepers) and being creative, empathic and persistent with the wider family network which should also be routinely expected.

Identify birth fathers and the paternal network early. Our findings highlight timely direct communication with fathers as a factor that improves the chances of building a constructive

relationship with him. Paternal relatives can also be important for helping to sustain or re-establish contact with fathers.

Responsive recording systems are needed to enable practitioners to identify and log information for multiple men accurately and independently, so that, for example different birth fathers are recognisable and contactable.

Persist with recording as full a picture as possible of men's lives and circumstances, including family history, past and current involvement in the child's life, physical and mental health, and current housing/work situation.

Persist with updating men's contact details and changes in circumstances.

Review processes for recording men's attendance at meetings or conferences. Minutes or Quality Assurance documents which rely on the term 'parents' may not accurately capture which parent, or which man, attended. Recording reasons for men's non-attendance may also be valuable for reviewing flexibility in practice and efforts to include him.

11.2 Including men in assessments and child protection planning

Our findings suggest that social workers, organisations, mothers and even fathers often still assume that the mother-child relationship is primary or overriding. We have argued that fathering is therefore *more contextually sensitive* than mothering and that, as a result, encouraging responsible fathering requires *additional* support and validation from institutions, welfare agencies and families. If that is not forthcoming, then fathers may retreat unless very well motivated.

The inclusion of fathers, from the outset, needs to be a routine organisational and cultural expectation. Persistence is needed at the social worker level and time should be allowed and invested at policy and organisational level to facilitate this. Time and timing is central to the engagement and inclusion of fathers.

Acknowledgement that men may face additional barriers to becoming involved fathers and that existing arrangements to engage fathers are limited, will help to achieve greater equality of expectation and opportunity. This is even more pertinent for certain groups of men, such as young fathers.

The culture of children's services should be reviewed to promote greater father engagement by offering flexibility and responsiveness. This includes the timing of meetings in relation to men's work, or adapting the means or frequency of communication.

Our findings showed the tensions caused by conflicting timeframes between those working in the child protection system and fathers, between 'clock time' and 'lived time'. Social workers have opportunities to bridge these two time worlds to enable fathers to be involved in child protection planning more effectively and to sustain their involvement over time.

Our findings demonstrate the importance of early, direct contact with men as a key aspect of engagement. This refers to the importance of communication and relationship building outside of formal meetings, and relates not only to birth fathers, but also to all/any men connected to the child. This needs to be an expectation from managers and social workers, but social workers need to be supported in being persistent and creative in their practice.

Where there is a child protection plan (or an 'in need' or 'early help' plan) set clear expectations for fathers to contribute and share responsibility and accountability. Such expectations have to include explicit recognition of the value of each specific father to his child, based on the resources he offers, or could be supported to offer.

Ensure that men are directly and explicitly included in a child protection plan with specific, fair and feasible (in the context of his circumstances) action points, that are formally reviewed in subsequent child protection conferences, as a mechanism to both hold men to account and acknowledge positive change.

Including fathers has to involve holding them directly to account for abusive or harmful behaviour, whilst, where possible maintaining some level of involvement and access to appropriate services or intervention. Adopting an authoritative and empathic stance in which men are directly challenged *and* given genuine opportunities for change is one of the most pressing and difficult issues for social workers and managers. Our study indicates that such an approach is more likely to be successful where a working relationship has been established. Without some level of mutual trust and recognition, authoritative communication is more difficult and men are more likely to be defensive or avoidant. Again, social workers need time, organisational support and confidence to build relationships with men.

Alongside this, men's needs and capacities as parents must also be explicitly considered and resourced as part of any child protection plan. Without this men's roles and responsibilities as parents are likely to be overlooked, and mothers are likely to continue to be unfairly held solely responsible for the care and protection of children.

Identify concrete or practical support for men's care of children, including supporting them to combine caring and earning, either as part of a couple, or as an alternative carer. Our findings showed that creative and responsive practice with men, to support their fathering was rare, and often lacking in comparison with that offered to mothers.

Social workers and other practitioners need to be attuned to ways in which men can opt out or be excluded from the formal child protection processes and be denied a social work service, more easily or quickly, than is the case with mothers. Our findings showed how social workers can, more or less wittingly, generate gate-closing points for men, by, for example accepting or not following up non-attendance, not offering flexibility or not being persistent in attempts to sustain men's involvement.

This can contribute to a form of passive inclusion of men, in which they may be nominally but not meaningfully involved in the child protection process; for example copies of minutes are posted to the last known address. Our findings suggest that where social workers settle for such passive inclusion, there is little or no opportunity for a working relationship to develop, and the social worker's knowledge and understanding of the man's life and circumstances are limited.

Social workers need to question the tendency to postpone the inclusion of fathers, or to assess them only as a 'last resort'. This has implications for fathers, mothers and children. Mothers may miss out on support from the father and paternal network or may be given protracted 'chances' to address child welfare concerns. Children may experience poor care and continue to have a child protection plan for longer than may be necessary. Fathers may feel disenfranchised and frustrated by the process, and/or then find it impossible to take on full-time care in a moment of crisis or without time to address housing or work issues.

Social workers, as the lead professionals, also need better knowledge and understanding of how and when fathers might need access to the law. Local authorities appear to be overlooking the potential to use the current exemptions and legal resources under the LASPO Regulations (Legal Aid, Sentencing & Punishment of Offenders Act 2012) to

strengthen child protection plans or to enable fathers to access legal representation. Our examples of where fathers were disadvantaged in relation to Child Arrangement Order applications in cases where the mother's care was deemed unsatisfactory but the case had not reached the Section 31 threshold, illustrate these problems and potential solutions.

In addition to legal representation, fathers, where necessary, should (like mothers) be offered access to independent advocates to support them through the formal child protection or court processes and increase their sense of confidence and self-efficacy in relation to their child.

11.3 Building a picture of men's lives as fathers

One of the overall points we make is to emphasise the relevance to social workers, of understanding men's lives as fathers, in order to assess and evaluate the balance of resource and risk they may present. Our message here is for social workers to seek the fullest picture possible of the background, relationship dynamics, well-being, and current circumstances of the child's father or father figure. Social workers, and managers, need to be curious about men's lives, and their perspectives, and be willing to respond to the resources and constraints these produce in relation to the child protection plan and to children's lives.

Listening carefully to fathers' life narratives is important for social workers to make more nuanced and balanced assessments of fathers. Empathic listening is arguably accepted as an effective way of engaging mothers, helping to reclaim identity, or improve self-efficacy. Social workers may therefore need to apply the same curiosity and skill to facilitating and hearing men's stories.

Material and social circumstances of fatherhood

Our findings showed that a significant group of vulnerable or 'precarious' fathers are likely to remain peripheral without some form of help or support. Poverty will affect men's ability to be involved fathers to their children whether resident or non-resident and social workers need to bear in mind the material basics needed for 'good enough' parenting. Part of recognising and supporting men's parenting is to respond to the particular issues they may face, and our study highlights access to suitable housing, and navigating insecure, often geographically mobile, work are pertinent examples.

Fathers (and couples) in our study were also directly affected by recent welfare reforms and cuts or changes to social security benefits, which had a direct impact on their functioning as parents. This suggests that social workers may need to directly support or facilitate access for men, to benefits, employment rights or debt advice, housing and childcare providers.

Our findings also revealed significant levels of, particularly chronic, physical health problems and mental health issues across the sample of men, alongside a tendency to self-medicate or rely on high levels of prescription drugs. Assessments and child protection planning should routinely include multiagency plans and 'whole family' approaches to helping as well as assessing, in order to address such health issues to ensure that fathers are as able as possible to contribute as fully as possible to their children's safety and welfare.

In assessing a man's capacity as a parent, social workers need to take time to tease out the meaning of work for him. Men's feelings about paid work and being a 'provider' will vary, as will the reality of their economic situations but unless these issues are considered, men may be at risk of either having their parental contribution overlooked or being seen as uncommitted to their child. Our findings suggest that men may need particular or different kinds of support to combine earning and caring or to take on full time care of their child.

We found a significant number of men with gaps in their formal education or with low achievement and attainment. Again, part of supporting men to be involved fathers may involve encouraging a return to education, encouraging their own child in school and facilitating links between (particularly non-resident) fathers and their child's school.

Men's intimate and family relationships

Many men are at the centre of a network of complex relationships including partners, ex partners, blended families, their own parents or concerned relatives, birth and step-children. Social workers need to understand how they are managing these relationships and the implications for the child at the centre of the child protection plan. Social workers should also be alert to the *emotional work* often being undertaken by fathers in holding together their network of relationships and balancing different priorities. This may include being guarded or protective about granting access to his wider relationship network.

Men are much more likely to become the non-resident parent as a result of separation or divorce and this cannot just be explained by recourse to unfavourable stereotypes of fathers. Non-residence places particular constraints on involved fatherhood and social workers need

to actively address or take account of this, and of the significance of the ongoing co-parental relationship for mediating men's parenting after separation.

Our findings point to the value of exploring fathers' parenting and relationship with the child with a child protection plan, and with any other children, in detail and on its own terms. Many fathers are engaged in fathering activity that may be unseen or unrecognised by professionals. Whilst such activity may not necessarily be considered constructive, it is likely that most fathers (including those not living with, or permanently separated from their children) are *doing something*. In this way assumptions about father 'absence' can and should be challenged.

Many fathers described their relationship with their child in terms of provision, protection, and practical action rather than emotional closeness (although that may be implicit). Social workers need to consider whether a deficit model of men's parenting is present within organisational or individual practice, whereby fathering is evaluated against mothering and found lacking.

Dealing with domestic violence and abuse

Child protection policy and practice guidance (and that of other public agencies, including the Police service) needs to be reviewed in the light of increasing evidence that although most domestic violence and abuse (DVA) is committed by men against women, a significant minority of men are victims of abuse from their female partners.

Alongside this, DVA is increasingly understood as a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon. This means that more sophisticated assessment procedures and tools and related training are needed for social workers and other professionals.

Even more pertinently, the range of interventions offered where there is found to be DVA needs to reflect what is known about the greater variety of causes, types, degrees and consequences of abuse on all family members. Programmes for addressing men's DVA are often limited or reliant on short-term funding.

A more proactive approach is needed for men who have lost more than one child to public care, who often, but not always, have offending histories related to domestic violence. This group of men present complex combinations of vulnerabilities and risk factors, and both

pose, and face, the greatest rehabilitative challenges. Currently such men are offered fewer services than mothers who have experienced recurrent care proceedings.

Child protection professionals also need to bear in mind that where fathers are incorrectly held responsible for DVA, this may delay or even rule out the possibility of otherwise viable fathers taking on the care of their children.

11.4 Building working relationships with men

This final set of practice messages have been generated from our analysis of men's accounts of relationships with social workers (both past and current). We present factors identified by men in the in-depth QL study as being more productive or useful, or which increased confidence or trust in social workers. Some of these reflect points already made above, but we reiterate or offer more detail here in order to emphasise the combination of practical and relational or interpersonal activities that may support more effective working relationships with men.

Importance of early direct contact: Investing time in making direct contact with fathers or father figures from the outset should not be underestimated. Taking men's perspectives and circumstances seriously produced important opportunities for building a working relationship. This is particularly significant for non-resident fathers, and can be a mechanism for demonstrating even-handedness and recognition from the start. This includes gaining a full picture of a man's life, the circumstances in which he is attempting to do fathering, and the resources available to him. A man's capacity to be an involved father is highly dependent on this material and social context, and without knowledge and appreciation of this, assessing the balance of risks and resources he presents is likely to be limited.

Persistence: Achieving direct contact often takes time; this is well known. However, our findings demonstrate two things; that men are present, and that that they may be less 'hard to reach' than is often assumed. Persistence needs to be expected at an organisational level, and workers need to be supported in achieving direct contact with, particularly non-resident, fathers. It may not always be possible to meet in person (though men in our study valued this), and regular phone contact may be more effective for some men, but achieving some means of hearing a man's story should be seen as valuable rather than as an additional or unmanageable set of tasks.

Consistency of allocated worker: Our findings add to the existing evidence demonstrating that multiple changes of worker undermines the potential for developing working relationships. Where men in our study experienced consistency, they tended to have both the opportunity and receptiveness to building trust with the social worker. Where men felt aggrieved or resentful, changes of worker added fuel to the fire.

Mirroring constructive interaction: The mutual nature of some of the scepticism between men and social workers was striking and pointed to the need for producing change in these relationships. Men noticed when social workers were reliable, responsive or flexible in their approach, and these perceived qualities (or changes) could generate opportunities for relationship building. Building and testing out trust takes time, but we found evidence that there could be reliability or responsiveness on both sides.

Time, timing and timeliness: Our analysis of child protection over time revealed certain 'clashes' between men and social workers in terms of how they experienced and understood the process; for example men's perception of social work as 'rushed and slow'. Time and timing is a factor in whether and how working relationships are developed. Greater attention needs to be paid to the impact of differences between organisational time and 'everyday time' in child protection. Greater clarity or transparency over when things happen and how long they will take (and why) may also be useful in managing men's expectations and sustaining good faith. Persistence in involving men from the outset, and avoiding approaching them only as a 'last resort' are also issues about timing and timeliness that have an important bearing on working relationships.

Flexibility: Flexibility in social work is also an issue that has to be addressed systemically at a strategic and organisational level, as well as through individual practice. We found evidence of the value of offering some flexibility as a means to establishing or building a working relationship with men. Flexibility can go beyond the recognised issues over timing and location of formal meetings, and can include methods of communication, regularity of communication, clearer or more open discussion of the process; management of men's expectations and responding to a man's particular circumstances. Being responsive and flexible also needs to include recognising the range of men's fathering activity and attending to how this is evaluated or could be supported.

Negotiation: Flexibility and negotiation are linked in that offering flexibility can be seen as a means of brokering a relationship with men who may be suspicious or defensive. We saw

that a social worker who was prepared to negotiate, or at least to be clear about what was, and wasn't up for negotiation, was more likely to be seen as someone a man could work with. For men in our study negotiation also meant the social worker being willing to engage with, rather than simply react to, issues in their lives, or their accounts and perspectives. Men did not expect to reach agreement with the social worker but there seemed to be more or less effective ways to manage disagreement without jeopardising the possibility of any kind of relationship.

Importance of 'being straight': Men told us that decent social workers were open, clear and straightforward in their communication. There was a consistent request for openness about the child protection concerns and about potential local authority actions. However, there were also particular areas of sensitivity for men; consistency between what is said in person and what is written in a report; and the balance of criticism and praise. Social worker reports submitted to the ICPC had particular impact and perceived unfairness at this stage was very damaging to any potential working relationship. Despite the implementation of strengths based approaches in the participating authorities, the majority of men felt that the focus of the child protection process was on their failings.

Gendered thinking versus gender sensitivity: Our study illustrates ways in which longstanding ideas and ideals about gender roles impact on how men and social workers engage with each other. Working with men in child protection requires that attention be paid to parenting as a gendered experience, and to how assumptions can be made or left unquestioned. Men were sensitive to when gender difference amounted to unfairness, such as how allegations of abuse are handled, where different levels of tolerance, support or sanctions are afforded to mothers, or where fathers' involvement is stalled or discounted. An important finding is that, overall, the men did not generalise about gender bias in social work. Our findings support the view that it is not the gender of the worker per se that can improve working relationships with men. We also found that if relationships deteriorated, then a language of gender discrimination was readily available as a powerful justifying mechanism, which could further entrench mutual antagonism.

Importance of 'helping': The term 'helping' was most prominent where men spoke positively about social workers. Helping, or not helping was a key way in which men talked about what they felt social workers are supposed to do (but often don't). What counted for them as 'help' varied but was most commonly associated with some combination of direct or practical support and being non-judgemental and responsive. Again, 'paying attention' to

men's lives was seen as a key component in whether a social worker would, or could, help. For non-resident fathers in particular, practical support and most commonly access to suitable housing was a key factor in their capacity to be involved fathers, or to take on the care of children. Some men also valued signposting to other organisations and talked positively about children's centres in particular. Men's picture of good social work as 'helping' echoes a historical interest in family support. However, the current context of political austerity, cuts and restructuring of services, and arguments over individual or structural explanations for poor parenting, produces new challenges for retaining the "creative helping" function of social work (Thoburn, 2017).

11.5 Conclusions

Overall, the study illustrates the possible benefits for fathers and their children of countering gender inequalities in the child protection process and developing a deeper appreciation of the unique circumstances of each father's life and what he may contribute to his children's future. Our findings highlight the need for a 'both-and' approach. Social workers must work with *both* mothers *and* fathers and effective engagement with men must involve *both* authoritative *and* empathic interaction, to hold men accountable and to directly value their parenting on its own terms.

We suggest that improving child protection practice with men involves, firstly, the development of a gender sensitive approach to practice, supported by organisational and strategic mechanisms and management support. The value of holding in mind that fathers and mothers encounter different expectations, sanctions, opportunities and constraints around their parenting, is pertinent, and fits with social work's longstanding concern with equality and social justice. The established approach of gender 'neutrality' may have the unintended consequence of ignoring important differences in men and women's experiences of parenting, leading to, or perpetuating inequalities in how mothers and fathers fare within local authority services and systems.

Secondly, we emphasise the relevance of understanding men's wider lives as fathers, as a necessary part of any child protection enquiry and assessment. The need for professional curiosity, persistence and time to create opportunities for hearing men's stories is crucial for decisions about their competence and safety as parents but equally, for building a working relationship out of which such decisions may be 'fairly' reached. Responding to fathers as people with needs and concerns of their own, through a curiosity about their lives and what

they are actually doing, is also likely to improve their agency and ability to be effective, involved, fathers.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Recruitment and sampling for the Qualitative Longitudinal (QL) study

Recruitment process

Men and mothers were recruited in a staged process, with each participating local authority in turn, from April to September 2015. The strategy for recruiting participants was carefully adapted in negotiation with each local authority and we are very grateful for assistance from senior managers, administrators, social workers and conference chairs. A strategy for identifying which teams and areas would produce the participants was agreed with our partner authorities. The information provided for men and mothers about the study was also agreed in advance with our partner authorities and approved by their individual research governance processes. We produced an information leaflet and permission form for men, an information sheet for mothers and also an information sheet for professionals who might be involved in helping us access participants. The permission form was designed to obtain initial permission from a man for a research to make telephone contact, and for him to provide the best contact phone number.

Sampling frame for men

For a man to be eligible as a possible participant in the QL sample he must have been a father or father figure for a child at the time the child protection plan was made for the child. In order to achieve maximum variation in the sample we aimed to recruit, where possible, across the range of the following:

- Birth fathers who are resident or non-resident
- Stepfathers to the child and/or birth mother's current partner
- Other male relatives of the child acting as a parent figure (for example grandfather where the child is resident with grandparents)
- Men believed by the local authority to be implicated in abuse or neglect and those *not* believed to be implicated in the abuse or neglect. This is often known by the local authority before the ICPC
- Men from a range of ethnicities, ages and socio-economic groups.

Other sampling principles for men and mothers included:

- Men who are not resident and who have no contact with the child will not be eligible

- Men who professionals felt presented current and serious concerns in terms of his mental health, substance misuse or risk of harm to the general public would not be eligible
- Men who are not present at the initial child protection conference but are resident with the child or in contact with the child are not excluded from participation
- Men will be the primary focus of our recruitment, and the mothers will be recruited via the fathers
- Men's permission to contact mothers will be sought. Where this is not given, we will aim to discuss and consider his reasons carefully, but will not persist if he objects
- Where a child protection plan is discontinued at the first review conference (i.e. after six months) men/ fathers will continue to be QL participants for the whole year of the study
- If a birth father *and* a social father are both in contact with the child, then either or both are eligible, and would be allocated separate researchers to work with.

Details of the recruitment process

Although there were variations in the recruitment process, each local authority was able to notify a named researcher about initial child protection conference (ICPC) bookings, from selected parts of their authority, giving us advance knowledge of the conference, the name of the allocated social worker and the conference chair. The researchers then sent a briefing email to the allocated social worker and to the conference chair (including the information sheet about the project) explaining the sampling frame and requesting their help with identifying potential participants. The next stage of passing the study information on to men varied. In one authority it was predominantly the conference chair who passed on the research information leaflet and permission form as part of their pre-conference meeting with the parent(s), while in the other two authorities, information was passed on by either the conference chairs or social workers. Where the man gave permission to be contacted, a researcher phoned him as a potential participant to discuss what participation would entail and if he was still interested, to agree an interview date. We also took the decision to delay seeking men's permission to contact mothers until the first interview. This was to maximise our chances of recruiting the men and to make clear to them that their perspectives were the primary focus of the study. We felt that waiting until some trust had been established with each man, before discussing access to mothers, would demonstrate our commitment to them as participants.

Appendix 2: A descriptive overview of the 35 participating men and the individual profiles of mothers who took part in the QL study.

Table 2.1 Overview of the participating men, at the time of the ICPC (n=35)

The table below provides an overview of relevant demographic characteristics and circumstances of the 35 men who took part in the QL study, at the time of the ICPC (and thus the beginning of the study period). All names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Father status	Residence with child	Age of child with CP plan	Employment	Housing	Health issues	Position in the CP enquiry
Tim	41	WB	Birth father	Resident	12	Unemployed	Social	Chronic condition	In the frame
Will	21	WB	Birth father	Non-Res	3	PT work	Social	Anxiety Depression	On trial
Chandra	51	Asian	Birth father	Resident	Under 1	FT work	Private rented	None	On trial
Jimmy	29	WB	Birth father	Resident	Unborn	Unemployed	Social	Chronic condition	Good enough
Paul	31	WB	Birth father	Both	12,7 4,1	FT work	Private rented	Stress Insomnia	Good enough
Anthony	45	WB	Birth father	Non-Res	12, 9	Self employed	Private rented	None	In the frame
Barry	57	WB	Birth father	Resident	8, 3	FT work	Social	Previous breakdown	On trial
David	46	White Other	Birth father	Non-res	13, 11	Unemployed	Social	Depression, physical disability	In the frame
Graham	59	WB	Maternal grandfather	Resident (temp care)	Under 1, 3	Self employed	Owned	None	Safe pair of hands

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Father status	Residence with child	Age of child with CP plan	Employment	Housing	Health issues	Position in the CP enquiry
Luke	40	WB	Birth father	Resident (main carer)	15, 12	PT work	Social	None	In the frame
Dale	30	WB	Birth and stepfather	Resident	8, 4	Unemployed	Social	Chronic condition, Depression	Marked man (previous removal)
Seb	46	WB	Birth father	Non-Res	16, 12	Self employed	Staying with family	None	In the frame
Fred	35	WB	Birth father	Resident	Under 1	Unemployed	Social	Autistic spectrum, mobility, hearing & sight impairment	On trial
Shane	45	WB	Birth father	Resident	Unborn	PT work	Private rented	Learning disability	Marked man (previous removal)
Kenny	45	WB	Birth father	Non-Res	Under 1	Unemployed	Other [bail hostel]	Anxiety	Marked man (convicted of harm to a child)

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Father status	Residence with child	Age of child with CP plan	Employment	Housing	Health issues	Position in the CP enquiry
Tom	46	WB	Maternal step-grandfather	Resident (carer with SGO)	1	PT work	Social	None	Good enough
Brett	48	WB	Birth father	Separated & seeking residence	13, 12	FT work	Staying with family	None	On trial
Henry	46	WB	Birth father	Resident (main carer)	13, 11, 8	PT work	Private rented	Stress heart condition	On trial
Gary	26	WB	Birth father	Non-Res	Under 1	FT work	Other [work accom]	Anxiety, Panic attacks	Marked man (previous harm to a child)
Drew	32	WB	Birth and stepfather	Non-Res	9	FT work	Private rented	Stress	On the fringe
Mark	27	WB	Birth and stepfather	Both	9, 5, 2	Unemployed	Social	ADHD	Marked man (previous removal)
Nick	42	WB	Birth father	Resident	Unborn	Unemployed	Social	Anxiety/ sleep apnoea	In the frame
Asif	53	Asian	Birth father	Resident	12	FT work	Owned	Heart condition	In the frame

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Father status	Residence with child	Age of child with CP plan	Employment	Housing	Health issues	Position in the CP enquiry
Aaron	23	WB	Birth father	Resident	Under 1	PT work	Staying with partner's family	Chronic asthma	Marked man (previous harm to a child)
Jamie	22	WB	Birth father	Non-Res	Under 1	FT work	Staying with family	None	On the fringe
Derek	54	WB	Birth father	Both	16	PT work	Homeless [hostel]	Acute untreated lesion	Marked man (past trauma & substance misuse)
Jesse	29	WB	Birth father	Non-Res	8	FT work	Private rented	Anxiety Depression	On the fringe
Jordan	31	WB	Birth and stepfather	Non-Res	4, unborn	Unemployed	Homeless [car]	None	Marked man (previous removal & DVA)
Mitchell	28	WB	Birth father	Non-Res	4	PT work	Staying with family	None	On the fringe
Brandon	24	WB	Birth father	Non-Res	2	Unemployed	Staying with family	Physical injury	In the frame

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Father status	Residence with child	Age of child with CP plan	Employment	Housing	Health issues	Position in the CP enquiry
Kyle	30	WB	Birth father	Resident (main carer)	9, 4	Unemployed	Private rented	None	On trial
Cody	34	WB	Birth father	Resident	Under 1	PT work	Social	Anxiety, panic attacks	Marked man (previous removal)
Greg	37	WB	Birth and stepfather	Resident	Under 1	FT work	Social	None	In the frame
Corey	42	WB	Birth father	Resident (main carer)	2, 6	FT work	Owned	None	In the frame
Harry	29	WB	Birth father	Non-Res	2	Unemployed	Private rented	Anxiety Depression	On the fringe

2.2 Individual profiles of the six mothers who also took part in the QL study.

The purpose of recruiting these mothers into the study was to gain some comparative insight and perspectives of child protection processes and some sense of the mothers' views on how fathers were treated by social workers and other professionals. It was not our intention to seek to corroborate the men's perspectives.

Louise. Louise is 31. She is married to Barry and they have two children. There is a substantial age difference between Louise and Barry and Barry has three adult children from his first marriage. They rent their home from a housing association. Louise works part time as a cleaner and at the time of the ICPC was receiving Disability Living Allowance (DLA). She has Aspergers and also experiences night time enuresis. Louise's parents were in the army and they divorced when she was eight. Louise was bullied at school but did go complete a further education course. She lived in supported housing when she reached 18, until she met Barry. The child protection plan was for neglect and whilst both parents were held to account, Louise was the focus of concerns over the appearance and hygiene of the children. It was accepted that her Aspergers condition affected her capacity to parent. Louise agreed with this view and also accepted that the children's care needed to improve, though she saw things as "*an honest mistake*". She saw Barry's role as predominantly one of provider but said that he did cooking and cleaning in the evenings and at weekends, which she valued. She also saw Barry as having a supervisory role over her care of the children, citing things like phoning to check she was up in time to get them ready for school. Louise and Barry presented a united front and were appeared reconciled to the child protection process and the subsequent monitoring of their parenting.

You have to be careful what you do, that is what it is. Because all you have to do is for someone to say the wrong thing if you are out and about and you are back in [to Children's Services].

Twelve months later, several things had changed. The family were struggling financially due to Louise being transferred from DLA to a Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and then having this removed. Barry had been promoted at work so was earning, but also working more. Their eldest child was attending a young carers group and the youngest was having speech therapy. A further referral to Children's Services about the children's hygiene then led to the case being reopened and another assessment was taking place.

Sandra. Sandra is 27. She is married to Jimmy and at the time of the ICPC they were expecting their first child together. Sandra had a history of depression and anxiety. She had her first child at 18 and spent time in a mother and baby unit. Her daughter was later

adopted. Her second child was placed with his birth father, again due to Sandra's depression and a period of hospitalisation. At the time of the ICPC Sandra was receiving a Personal Independence Payment, and Jimmy was in receipt of Employment Support Allowance and a carer's allowance. Sandra's parents divorced when she was quite young and she was later bullied by her step-siblings and at school. Sandra and Jimmy described referring themselves to Children's Services in an attempt to improve their chances of keeping their baby and putting mental health support in place for Sandra. Jimmy was quickly seen as a protective factor and the couple wanted him to be equally involved in the child protection plan (and care of their baby).

We had always said you know we will split everything you know and he was just expected to, if I took a kind of downhill kind of thing he would step in and look after Jade first

Sandra was offered a Perinatal and Infant Mental Health Service (PIMHS) and through this was able to access counselling, which continued over the full 12 months. Sandra's mental health remained stable after the birth of their daughter and the case was stepped down after three months and closed after six.

Twelve months later, Sandra was still able to access the counselling and local wellbeing service, despite the case being closed. The couple were enjoying parenthood, but were struggling financially as they had had some benefits withdrawn and were asked to apply for universal credit. Jimmy had been declared fit for work despite having chronic but undiagnosed knee and joint pain, and was looking for part time work. Sandra and Jimmy were philosophical and broadly positive about their experience of child protection, and Sandra was very conscious of the difference between this current, and previous experiences.

I am now getting all the help now that I should have got when I had my son four years ago, so, and then if I had got it all then I might have all three of my kids here you know but it is the way it has happened and I have to deal with it.

Kelly. Kelly is 26. She was married to Fred, and at the time of the ICPC they were expecting their first child. Kelly had moved into Fred's flat but the child protection plan then stipulated they move temporarily to stay with Fred's mother whilst this flat was cleaned and adapted as part of preparing for the baby. Kelly has spastic paraplegia, which affects her mobility and balance. She had also suffered from depression and anxiety in the past, and had undiagnosed OCD. Kelly was bullied at school and referred to a traumatic event that happened to her at age 11 (she did not want to discuss this). She has limited contact with her extended family, who live some distance away. Kelly and Fred were both in receipt of disability benefits and Kelly was attending courses at her local children's centre with a view to working part time in the future. The child protection concerns were largely due to the

couples' disabilities but also because of the poor and cluttered condition of Fred's flat. Kelly also felt that her capacity as a mother was under suspicion due to her apparent lack of appropriate response during an antenatal group.

They said about the amount of stuff we had which was mostly Fred's...and then they were all worried that I wouldn't have a bond with Oliver...yeah because they showed a DVD at one of the groups and I didn't react but they showed it on a day I was having bad Braxton Hicks.

Kelly felt that although her ability to bond with Oliver was questioned, she was able to prove herself. Kelly was also conscious of differences in how professionals interacted with Fred, and that his commitment to their son continued to be challenged.

It felt somehow they ended up treating me totally different to how they treat Fred, because like me they weren't kind of picking arguments with or trying to, taking the digs out, but they were at Fred.

Twelve months later the couple had split up, at Kelly's instigation. Kelly and Oliver were living in a privately rented flat in a neighbouring town and Kelly was still in receipt of welfare benefits. Fred remained in his flat but was deeply hurt by the separation and his mental health had deteriorated. He continued to see Oliver at weekends, with the contact facilitated by Fred's mother at her house. The case had recently been closed to a social worker, but Kelly had a family support worker from a local children's centre. She described her mental health as up and down; she continued to take anti-depressant medication and was struggling with insomnia. Kelly described her relationship with Fred as loveless and now saw him as a less competent and committed parent than herself.

It is because he never interacted with him, never done anything with him, didn't do the nights or anything.

Michelle. Michelle is 29. She was married to Mark and they had a young child together. Michelle also had two other children from two separate previous relationships. The youngest of these children looked on Mark as his father, but the eldest child had regular contact with her father and was rejecting of Mark. The couple rented a housing association property and were in receipt of benefits due to their disabilities and mental health. Michelle had scoliosis and also a non-fitting form of epilepsy. She had experienced a chaotic childhood and her dad was an alcoholic. Michelle's parents separated and her mother suffered from depression. Michelle was bullied at school and described being sexually assaulted twice as a teen. Michelle says that as a result of this she began self-harming. The child protection concerns were focused on Mark. Mark had ADHD and had had a previous child removed from his care. This was the family's third episode of child protection due to concerns about neglectful care of the younger children and an allegation of physical harm from Michelle's daughter against Mark. Michelle felt that her daughter's behaviour was unmanageable and

that Mark was unfairly blamed for physically restraining her. Michelle defended Mark and also felt highly criticised for her own parenting and stigmatised by her past.

She would go and say certain things about me or my husband and nine times out of ten it would be completely misconstrued and turned out to be false allegations but obviously because the child has stated what they have stated, they have to follow that up which we all understand.

I have been in Social Services as a child too and it just seems that from the time you get in there, they are always there, in the background somewhere and no matter how much you try to break out of it, you always seem to be back and that is because you are known in the system.

Twelve months later, life for Michelle was very different. The local authority initiated care proceedings and both the younger children were placed in foster care after six months in child protection. Both parents attended monthly contact sessions and went to LAC review meetings. A placement order (PO) was made four months later. Michelle's daughter went to live with her paternal grandmother, under a special guardianship order. During the months of the care proceedings Michelle and Mark separated, in part as a strategy to try and enable Michelle to retain care of her younger children. Mark moved away but continued to attend contact session, including the final contact following the making of the PO. Michelle did not attend the final contact and also did not respond to the researcher's attempts to contact her. Mark told us that after the final court hearing Michelle could not face returning home, and spent time staying at her aunt's caravan.

Laura. Laura is 28. She was in a relationship (less than 1 year) with Jordan, and was also the ex-partner of Mitchell. Laura and Mitchell had a son together and at the time of the ICPC she and Jordan were expecting a child together. Laura lived with her son Jake in a housing association property and was in receipt of benefits. Laura's parents were in the armed forces and the family moved around a lot during her childhood. Her parents separated when she was 11. Michelle described herself as having low self-esteem and was bullied at school. The child protection concerns were focused on Jordan. Jordan had a history of domestic violence convictions and had had four previous children removed from the care of him and his ex-partner. At the time of the ICPC Jordan was homeless and was on licence from his most recent prison sentence. The child protection plan prevented Jordan from living with Laura or having any unsupervised contact with her son Jake. Laura rejected the social workers' view of Jordan and saw the child protection process as an unwarranted intrusion.

I didn't agree because he hasn't shown that way towards me and obviously they just keep saying 'it's the Honeymoon period he is not going to show it' and I said 'well if he is what you say he is then surely he would show it by now because it has been nearly a year'. I felt their concerns weren't needed because I can keep my child safe and that's the main thing.

Twelve months later, Laura's circumstances were very different. Shortly after their baby was born she and Jordan separated and Jordan withdrew from the process (and from the study). However, Laura's ex-partner Mitchell continued as a participant and reported that 10 months after the ICPC it came to light that Laura and Jordan had concealed their ongoing relationship. It was Mitchell and Laura's son Jake who disclosed this, first to Mitchell and then to a social worker. Laura, Jake and the baby were then moved to a refuge. Laura did not respond to attempts to contact her, so we were unable to speak to her directly.

Emma. Emma is 47. She is married to Asif and they have one son together. Emma also has a 19-year-old daughter, Katie, from a previous relationship. Emma and Asif own their family home. Asif works full time and Emma is a full time carer for their son James. Emma suffers from chronic back pain. Both Emma and Asif are estranged from their extended families. Emma says she experienced violence from her mother and one of her brothers. She also escaped a violent and abusive relationship with Katie's father. Katie had been in foster care for three years and was now living semi-independently. Emma and Asif described Katie's behaviour as increasingly challenging and violent over many years. The relationship between them and Katie was very poor and they blamed her for James's increasingly challenging behaviour also. The child protection concerns involved both parents although Asif was seen as more directly implicated in what social workers saw as emotional harm of James. The incident that triggered the child protection process was an argument between Emma and James and allegations against both parents that James later disclosed at school. Both parents were angry and rejecting of the child protection process, and also felt betrayed by Children's Services over what they perceived as a previous lack of support with Katie. *Social Services keep on slagging us off and running us down endlessly...it is always the parents' fault, even though we were the ones, we were victims for years and years all of us and it is still our fault.*

Asif refused to attend the ICPC or any other meeting, and was seen by social workers as intimidating and overly punitive as a father. Emma continued to negotiate with the social worker but no mutual goodwill was established and she continued to feel aggrieved. The couple presented a powerful united front, although Emma did show some ambivalence to Asif's parenting style.

What do I think of him as a dad? I think he is old school and he finds - how to put this...dealing with the difficult behaviour he finds quite stressful. I am not saying I don't find it stressful but after having my daughter James's behaviour is not as bad.

Twelve months later, Emma remained angry and disappointed with Children's services. The case had been closed although James continued to have problems socialising at school and had spent a period of time staying with Katie (without Emma and Asif's approval). Both parents felt that the local authority had offered no help, and they were now seeking a diagnosis of Aspergers for James. They claimed that his behaviour improved when he was prevented from having contact with Katie, and she remained the focus of blame for the family disruption.

Appendix 3: Managing the research interviews and ongoing contacts with the 35 men

Research interviews

The first in depth, face-to-face interviews with the men took place shortly after the ICPC. The first interviews with the mothers took place later, but within the first three months of the child protection case. These interviews involved a semi-structured schedule where topics included the participant's history, current family roles and relationships, and feelings and perceptions regarding the child protection concerns and the unfolding process. The interviews with the men incorporated a life-history element and involved constructing a genogram and timeline for each man, to map his family history, biography, key relationships and significant life events. The use of the timeline and genogram is another recognised aspect of a QL methodology and such tools are seen as valuable for exploring how individuals make sense of lived experience and revealing the complexity of relationships (Hanna & Lau-Clayton, 2012). These techniques are also known to work well where participants have literacy or language limitations (Sheridan, Chamberlain & Dupuis 2011, p554). As well as using the timeline to generate reflection on the past, the men were also asked about their anticipated or imagined futures (Zimbardo & Boyd, 2008), as men and as fathers. The majority of the interviews, with the men, and with the mothers, took place at the participant's home. All the interviews were audio recorded and each participant gave verbal and written consent to taking part. All participants received a £20 store voucher, in recognition of the time given to the study.

Ongoing contacts

As well as a face-to-face meeting at the mid-point stage for most of the men, ongoing contacts were predominantly via SMS texts and phone conversations with some use of email and occasional Skype conversations. In general, the method we adopted involved the researcher sending a text to ask to arrange a convenient time to call. For some men, we used the dates of forthcoming meetings or review conferences as markers to plan when the next 'catching up' contact would be made. The majority of men found this method of combining texts and phone calls manageable and many commented positively about our negotiated approach. We also tried to be responsive and flexible with the ongoing contacts, attending to each man's particular circumstances or preferences for timing and means of contact whilst retaining clear boundaries around our own role and availability as researchers. Examples of this flexibility included: phoning in the evenings or on specified days/times, visiting rather than phoning one man, to support his participation (as English was his second language), planning dates in advance by email. In some cases men initiated contact with the researcher, and a minority wanted (at some points during the year) to speak to their researcher more often. Overall, the

men's reliability and commitment to keeping in touch with us was much higher than anticipated. Many men retained (and answered) the same mobile phone number for the duration of the study and in three cases, the researcher was informed of a change of mobile number, or offered an alternative number to contact him on. By this means, the researchers sometimes came to have contact with the man's mother, or his partner (usually the child's mother), and these alternative contacts were useful in sustaining contact with him over time.

In addition to the individual ongoing contacts, all the participating men also received copies of a project newsletter, and a final research summary through the post. We produced the newsletters at four points over the 12-month study period, and they contained updates on how the project was progressing, numbers of men and mothers taking part, information about how the project would be disseminated, and contact details for the research team. There were two main aims of the newsletters. One was to embed the idea of the wider research project in the men's minds, as a way of encouraging their investment in participating. The second was to serve as a reminder of the nature and boundaries of the research relationship and provide a context for reflection or asking questions about the project with their researcher. All of the men responded positively to receiving this material and our view is that this strategy was beneficial in helping to sustain and manage men's participation over time (Patrick, 2012).

Final Interviews

The second and final interviews with the men took place approximately 12 months after the first interview. We were able to conduct interviews with 28 of the original 35 men. Six men had withdrawn or did not respond to our attempts to contact them, and one man had died. Again, the majority of the interviews took place at the participant's home, but in one or two cases it was at a partner or relative's home, or in a public place. The interview involved one final 'catching up' on developments in the man's life, in the trajectory of case (where it was still open to a social worker), and any ongoing involvement with children's services or other agencies. Each man was also asked to reflect back on the year, to revisit any changes or outcomes of the child protection process, to consider any aspects of the process and of their relationships with social workers that had been more, or less, helpful (Henwood, Shirani & Coltart 2011). In addition and using the original timelines, the men were invited to reflect on their own actions, hopes and fears, in part to consider how far earlier expectations had been lived out. The interviews were also designed to provide opportunities to reflect in a summative way on the experience of taking part in the study, and to explore with each man the consent process for archiving their research material after the end of the project. All of the interviews

were audio recorded and again, each man received a £20 store voucher and a thank-you card in recognition of their commitment to the study over the year.

We also conducted second interviews with four of the six mothers who had participated. The other two mothers did not respond to the researcher's attempts to make contact. We know that one of these mothers had been placed in a refuge with her young children, and the other had had two of her children removed and placed for adoption. The interviews with the four mothers who did take part were conducted in the woman's home, and followed the same structure as the men's interviews. The mothers also received a £20 store voucher in recognition of their time.

Appendix 4: Ethical issues and managing the research relationship

Informed consent

Informed consent to taking part in a QL project differs from agreeing to a one-off interview. It is important that participants understand what it is they are consenting to, and that they understand their ongoing right to withdraw. We treated consent as a process rather than as a one off event (Saldaña, 2003) and revisited the issue of participation and withdrawal as part of the ongoing contacts with the men. One outcome of the project as a whole is to deposit the qualitative material from the men in a data archive. We felt that this issue was too complex and onerous to discuss with the men as part of the first interview, and that to do so would be unfair and off-putting at a time when the research relationship was in its early stages. For this reason, we used two consent forms at different stages of the project. Participating men were asked for written consent to taking part in the 12-month study, as part of the briefing for the first interview. The issue of archiving our project was then introduced and discussed as part of the ongoing contacts, and/or the mid-point visits, so that the men had time and opportunity to think or ask questions. Then, as part of the briefing for the second and final interview, each man asked for consent to their research material (interview transcripts, their timeline and genogram, and their individual case study) being anonymised and stored in the Timescapes Qualitative Data Archive, at the University of Leeds. This consent form included written explanations of what the archive is, its purpose and the conditions under which other researchers might access our project. All the men who completed a second interview gave their consent to archiving. The men who had withdrawn from the study had not given this consent so their material cannot be archived. Overall, the staging of the consent process was a constructive strategy, facilitated of course, by the duration of the study over 12 months. As the research relationship developed we found that men were able to retain information, to think things over, and did ask questions about the project, the process of research, and how their material might be used and shared.

Managing the Research Relationship.

The research relationship that evolved over time was crucial to the success of the in depth study, and again, was different to a one-off interview encounter between researcher and participant. As part of seeking ethical approval for the study we developed a protocol for managing this relationship; this is an example of a pre-emptive or proactive ethical strategy. This protocol set out a process for managing the early stages of the research relationship (including negotiating how to keep in touch), the ongoing contact and developing research relationship, what would happen if we lost touch with a man, and managing the ending of the research relationship. We anticipated that it might be necessary to find ways to remind

participants of the nature and limits of the researcher's role. Whilst being friendly and interested, the researcher was not a friend, social worker, counsellor or advocate for the participant. In the event, several men did directly comment on the value of being listened to, and we acknowledge that an ongoing research relationship can be experienced as cathartic or 'quasi-therapeutic' (Newton, 2017). However, our experience has been that participating men were able to recognise the limits of the research relationship, and that these could be explicitly reinforced in an honest and fair way, for instance through references to the project, and our role as researchers in our communication with men and through the project newsletters.

Issues or ethical 'dilemmas' did arise during the course of the study, such as, a man being very depressed or angry, or where we were asked for help in navigating other public agencies, or bureaucratic processes. Where possible, our strategy was to be explicit about the need to discuss the request, and agree a (short) timescale for getting back to them. As a research team, we would then attempt to find a way to respond in an ethically appropriate and fair way. Often the action required was some kind of signposting, or the provision of contact details for local or National services. Other examples of issues encountered include responding to men's immediate emotional distress, offering encouragement or advice with application forms, and being asked to vouch for their participation in the study. These examples illustrate moments where we necessarily had to apply a reactive ethical approach.

Overall, as a research team, we applied a high degree of reflexivity to all stages of the in depth study and the resulting research relationships, using supervision and team meetings to debrief and/or interrogate any ethical issues as they arose. Other QL studies suggest that the frequency and continuity of contact does encourage a listening relationship, which may be experienced, by the participant, as supportive (Neale & Hanna, 2012). However, whilst such a relationship prompts consideration of the 'impact' the researcher may have on outcomes for the participant, the prevailing view is that providing a listening ear, in the wider context of the participant's life, does not constitute a significant 'intervention' either for the participant or for research findings. The ethos of QL research is to walk alongside participants as their lives unfold; our experience has been that giving men the 'courtesy of serious attention' (Back, 2016) did not lead them to take a different path.

The limits of confidentiality.

We also had clear protocols regarding the limits of participant confidentiality, and the circumstances in which we would pass on information the men had shared with us. It was

explained, as part of the initial consent process that the researcher would have to report to the authorities any information suggesting immediate risk to a child or any other person (including the participant themselves). Again, the ongoing and developing nature of the research relationship meant that this issue could be revisited and/or reinforced with participants over time.

Potential harm or benefits from participation.

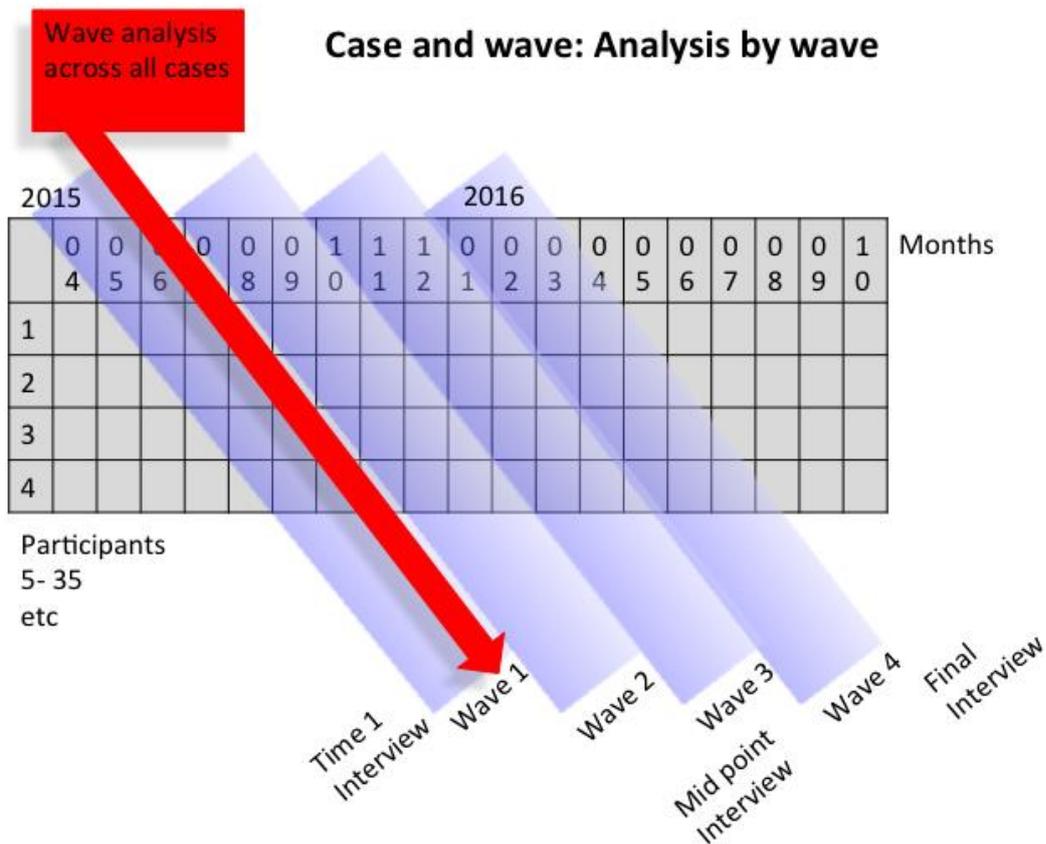
Being involved in child protection or court proceedings is emotionally stressful for parents and this study inevitably involved emotive issues. Our position throughout has been that the sensitivity of approach through the interviews and ongoing contact and the opportunity to be heard at length and over time is likely to outweigh possible emotional or other harm. Again, it was notable that a number of men offered positive reflections on taking part: “*it has been a really good process to get it off my chest*”; and from a father with learning difficulties: “*I glad I help you research*”. Perceived benefits according to men taking part, aside from being listened to, included being able to potentially help other fathers, potentially shaping future social work practice, and feeling that other men had similar experiences.

Some men (particularly those who had lost a subsequent child to care) remained vulnerable, distressed or aggrieved (or a combination of all three) and continued to have, sometimes apparently unrecognised needs, and to present rehabilitative challenges. The impact of taking part in the study, and the ending of their involvement with it, was particularly poignant for these men. As researchers, we often felt troubled by what might lie ahead for them and recognised that the ending of the research relationship constituted the removal, for some, of a source of support. This raises the issue of the emotional impact of the in depth study not just on the participants but also on the researcher, and this was another aspect of our ethical practice.

As a research team we had to consider, and respond to the practical safety and emotional welfare of ourselves as researchers throughout the QL study (Bahn, 2012; Falconer 2017). In this respect we were guided by the Social Research Association’s Code of Practice for the Safety of Social Researchers. We also used regular supervision and team meetings as a way to manage the emotional demands of the developing research relationships with participants and monitor our personal reflexivity or ‘critical distance’ from the study. Overall, our range of ethical strategies, level of researcher reflexivity, and consultation/supervision from the project PI meant that we were able to manage the inevitable ethical dilemmas that arise in QL research with vulnerable or marginalised participants (Farrimond, 2013).

Appendix 5: Analysis of the QL data by case and wave

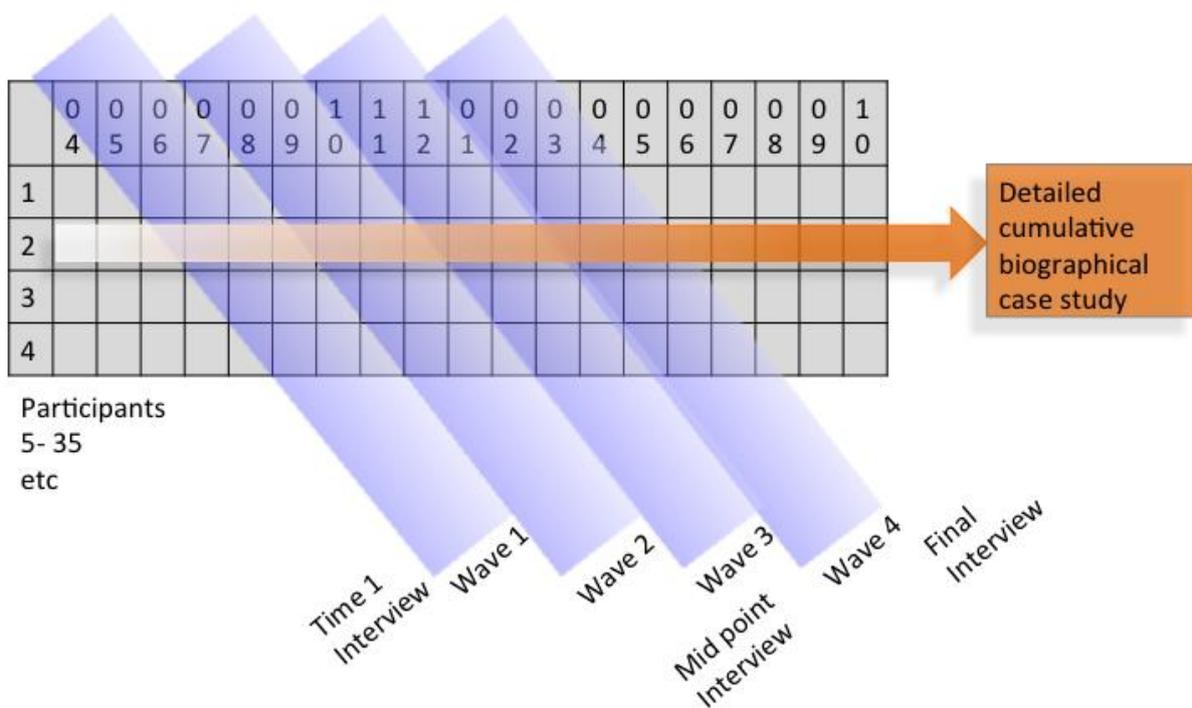
Two parallel methods of data analysis were used with the rich QL data. Firstly, major themes were examined cross-sectionally for each of the four three month waves of data using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). This analysis was undertaken with a number of predetermined questions and themes or domains, corresponding to our research questions and existing literature on men and child protection and care proceedings. For example we selected all data relating to the men’s encounters with support and assessment practitioners and services and searched these for common and atypical experiences. In addition, we have coded the data *inductively*, being alert to new themes and ‘participant terms’.



As well as analysis by time wave we also compiled a detailed longitudinal *case study* for each participant examining his step-by-step progress including interactions, feelings, actions and chosen pathways as they unfolded. The aim here has been to move beyond a description of what happened next for the participant and what he subsequently did, to an exploration of the reasons for his actions and perceptions (Thomson, 2007 p573). To achieve this, we adapted the methods of Henderson and colleagues (2012) for capturing the developing stories of individual participants in “biographical fields” such as “work”, “partnership”, “identity as father”

and so on, condensing and analysing the data, combining the fields into one coherent case narrative in which key themes, motifs, crises and turning points are highlighted. We examined how the unfolding of the participant’s story intersects with the unfolding of the child protection process and other processes outside the participant’s immediate control. We provide a commentary (Chapter 10) upon how the participant negotiated these challenges and how “the self is made and remade over time” (Henderson et al, 2012 p1). Individual case narratives are also compared and contrasted in Chapter 6.

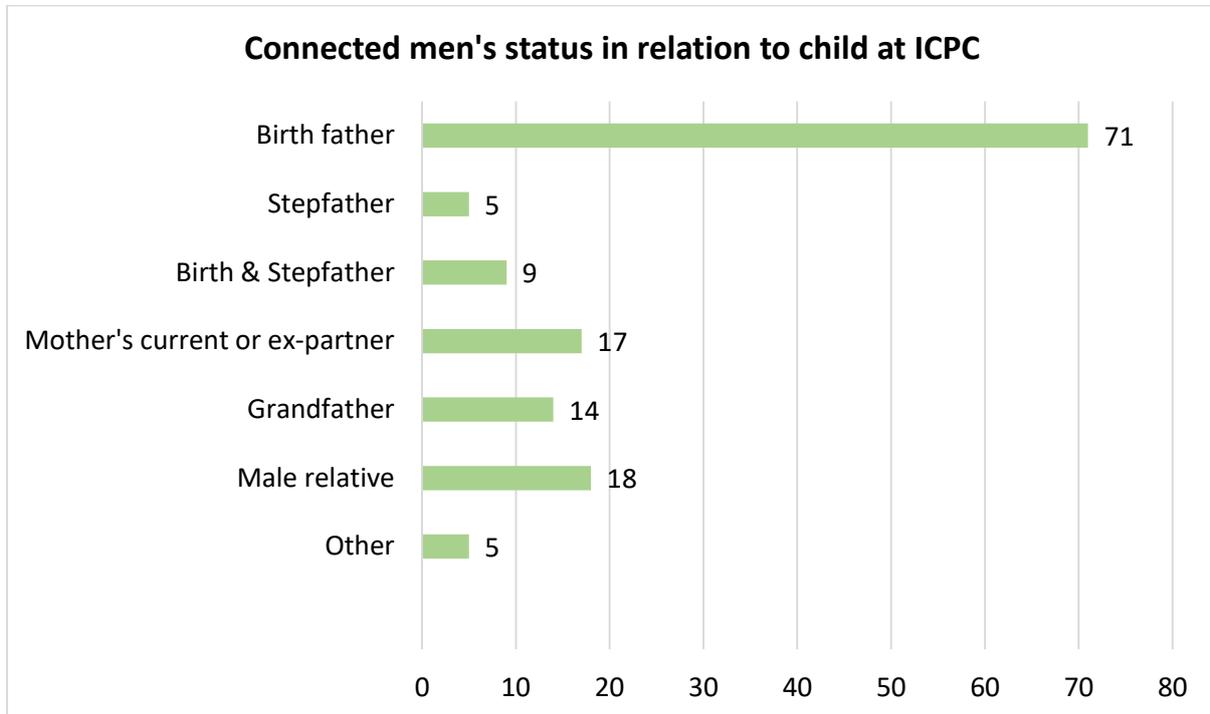
Case and wave: Analysis by case



Wave and case analyses were combined and compared. The process of analysis was highly dynamic and iterative and new themes emerged as the study progressed. The team met approximately monthly to review the process of data gathering and to seek to understand the developing cumulative picture, adjusting the key questions to be put to QL participants in the light of these discussions. Each researcher analysed the data they collected personally but team members also shared and compared coding and analyses to promote inter-rater reliability. In addition, each researcher took the lead in analysing one of the two main domains of data, namely regarding men’s encounter with the child protection process and their lives beyond that process. This required the researchers to consider all participants’ data (not just those known to them personally). It also required later integration of the two analyses.

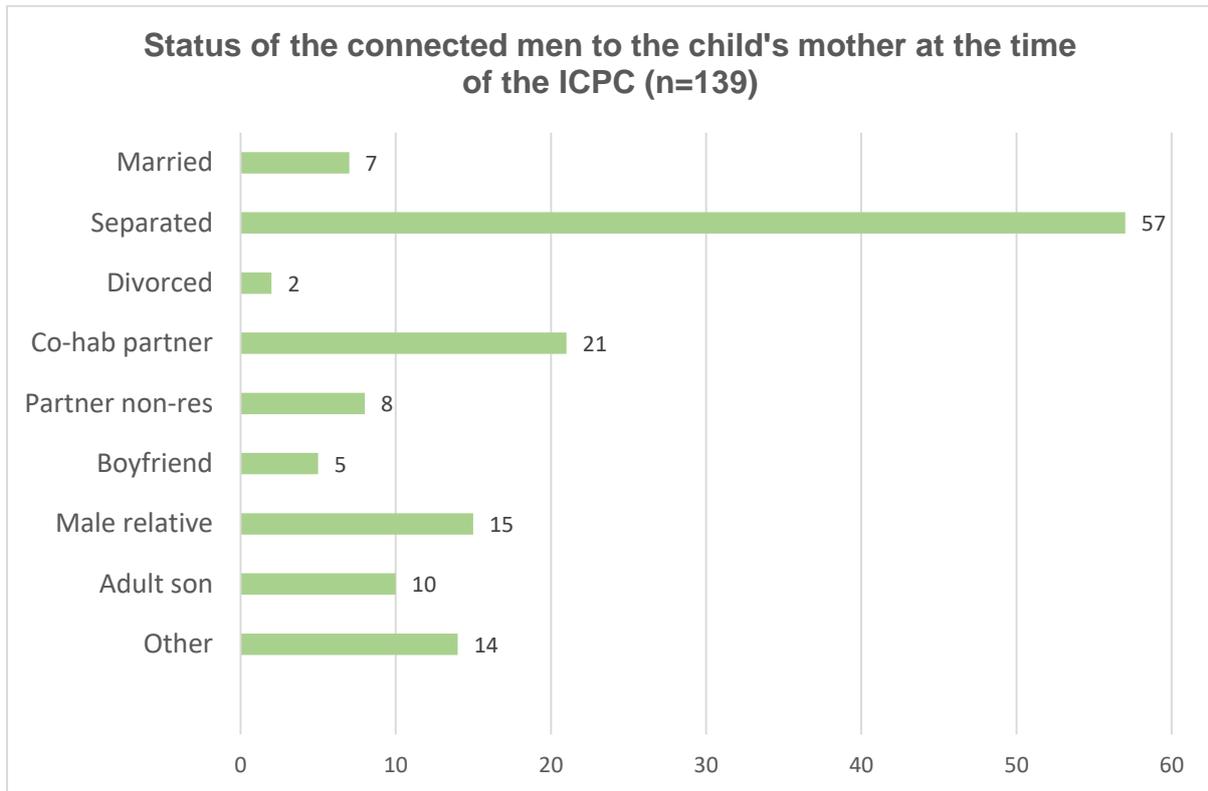
Appendix 6: Figures and tables relating to the case file analysis presented in Chapter 3

Figure 3.1. The status of the connected men in relation to the child at the time of the ICPC (n=139)



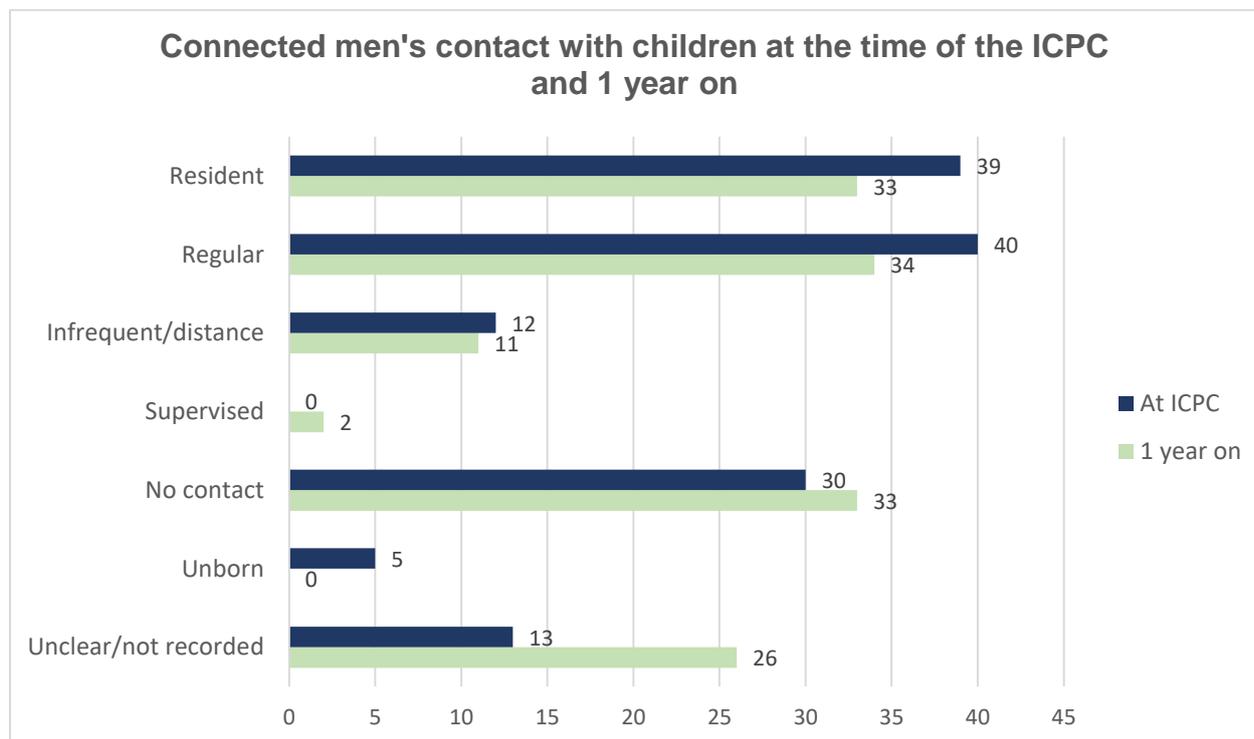
We identified 139 men who were connected as a father or father figure to a particular child. Just over half of these were birth fathers while the others included stepfathers, mother's current or former partner, grandparents and other male relatives. The five men who we defined as 'Other' were not linked to the child by an intimate or family relationship; for example, one was a resident landlord, and another the child's Godfather.

Figure 3.2. The status of the connected men in relation to the child's mother at the time of the ICPC (n=139)



The majority of the men were connected to the child through either a current or past couple relationship with the child's mother. The figure shows, interestingly, that by far the majority of connected men were separated fathers. Other men were connected to the child's mother as a male relative or an adult son, or through a non-familial association such as being a landlord or a lodger.

Figure 3.3. Contact between the 139 connected men and the 150 children, at time of ICPC and one year on (n=139)



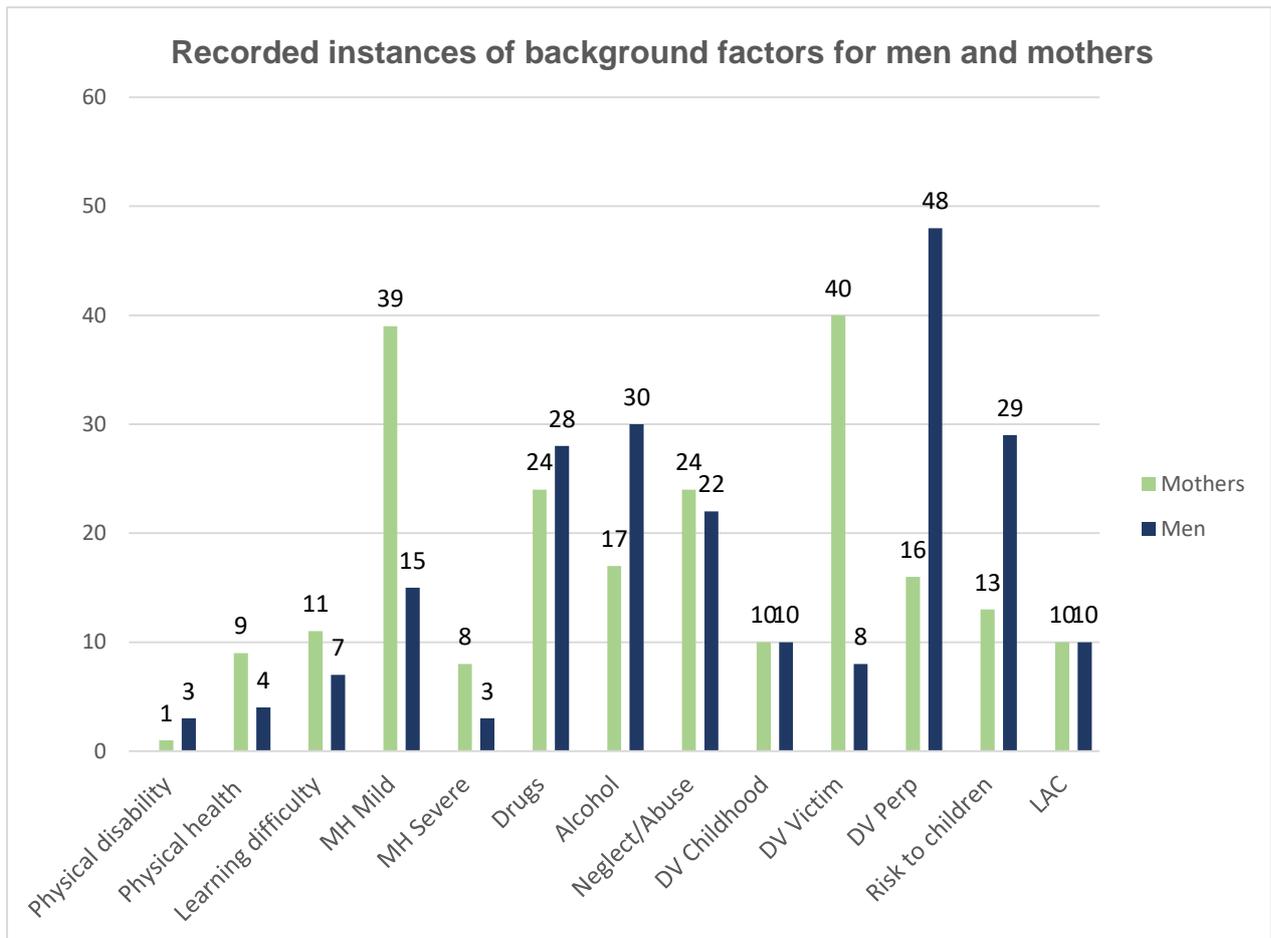
The figure shows that from the point of the initial child protection conference to twelve months on the overall level of men’s contact with children stayed relatively steady. The categories of contact depicted are drawn from the work of Poole et al (2016) where regular contact is defined as seeing the child at least monthly while distance or infrequent contact means seeing the child less than monthly.

Most connected men continued to have some contact and one year on only 33 of the 139 men were not in touch with the child at all. There were different reasons for men ceasing to have contact, including being excluded from the child’s life, moving out of the family home/network, and sometimes moving away from the area. There were also three men who were no longer alive one year on from the ICPC.

Table 3.1 The connected men’s employment

	At ICPC n=49	12 months later n=34
Full time	14	13
Part time	6	9
Self-employed	4	2
Unemployed	25	10

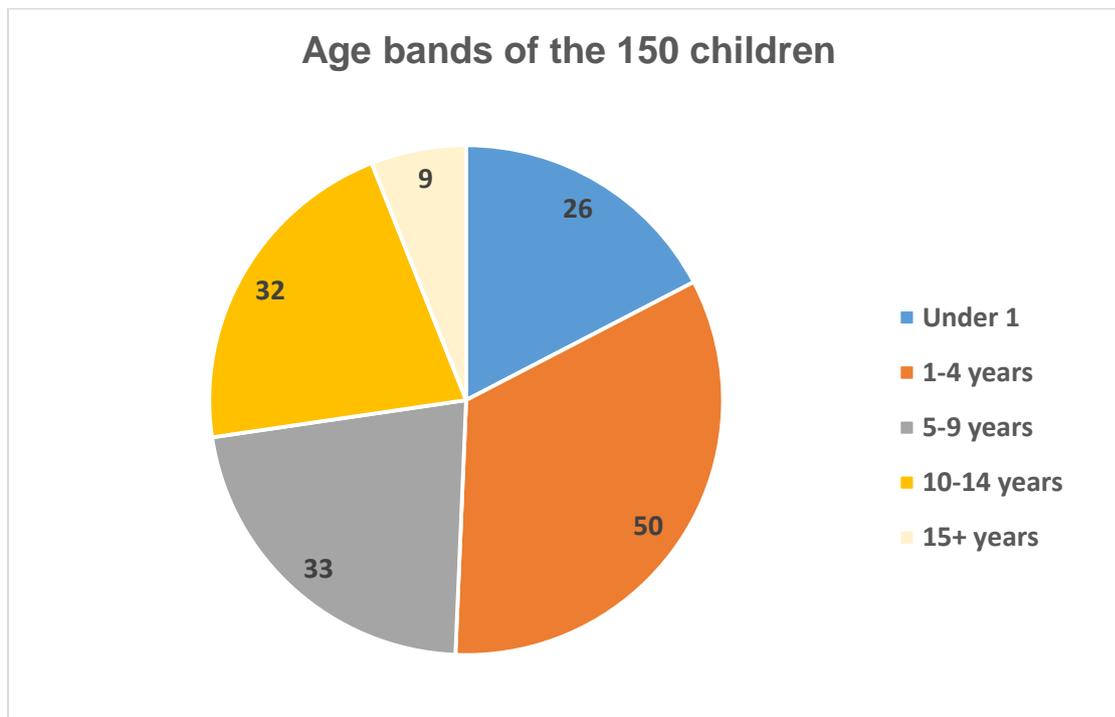
Figure 3.4. Case recorded instances of background factors for connected men and mothers



Clear information on many of these background factors was rare and was either not recorded or unclear or difficult to establish (for both the men and mothers), his figure shows recorded instances of each factor, rather than reflecting the background factors for each of the connected men.

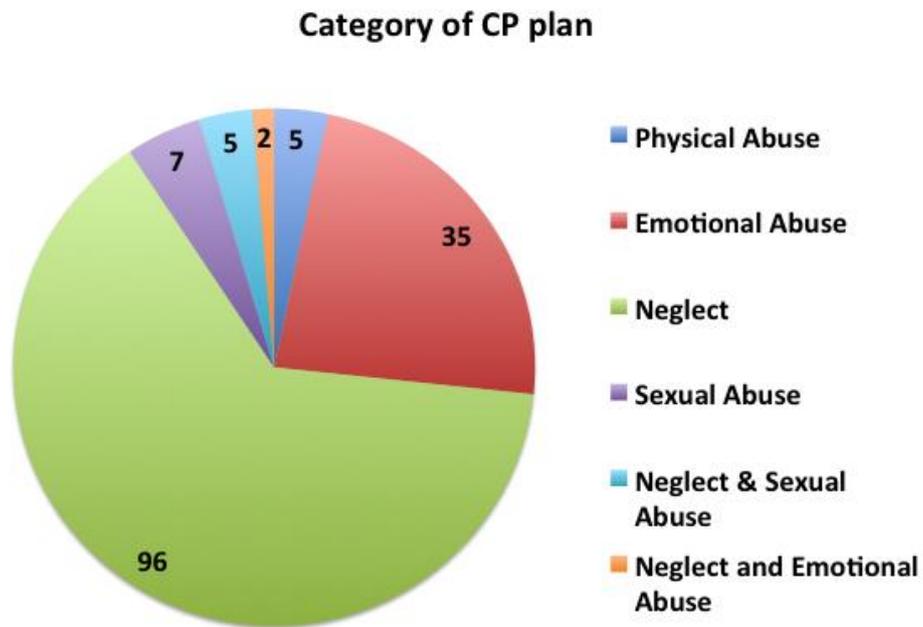
We also compared recorded instances of background factors for the men with those recorded for the children’s mothers, which indicated certain patterns. Most notably, mothers appeared more likely to be recorded as having experienced mild mental health problems and as having been the victim of domestic violence, and men appeared more likely to be recorded as having had problems with alcohol and as having been the perpetrator of domestic violence. The total number of men and women linked to these recorded instances cannot be accurately counted because of overlaps (some may be counted in several categories) and inconsistency of recording.

Figure 3.5. Age bands of the 150 children (n=150)



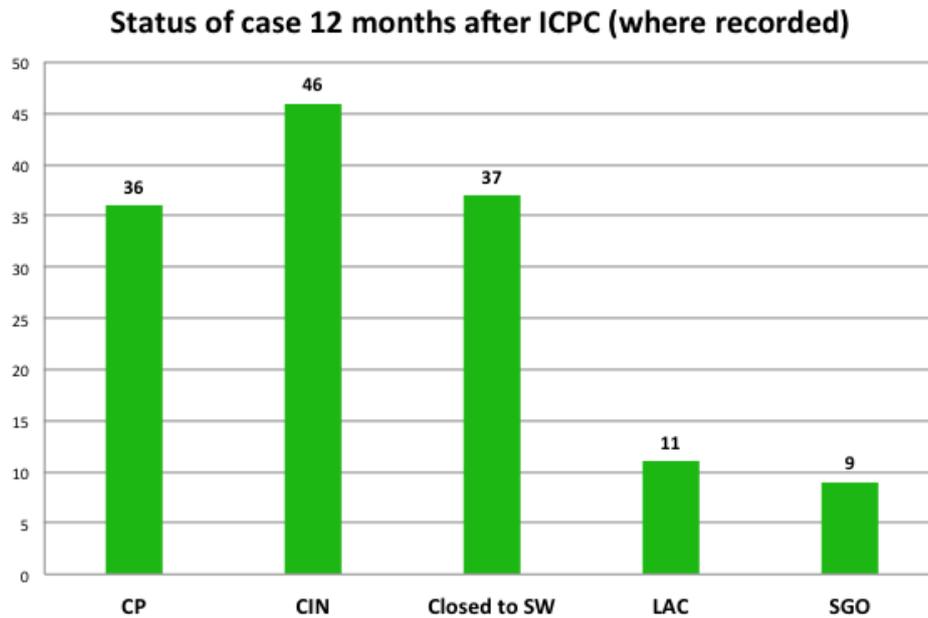
The figure shows the breakdown of the 150 children by age band. The recent national trend to include older as well as younger children on child protection plans was evident in the case recording, and not all of the children were young. The largest age groupings were for pre-school (n=50) and junior school aged children (n=33) but there were also nine adolescents aged 15 or 16 as well as 26 infants.

Figure 3.6. Category of child protection plan for the 150 children



Neglect dominated as a category of child protection plan in these cases in all three authorities. This is consistent with the national trend for England year ending March 31 2015 (DfE,2015; Jutte, et al. 2015) although our file analysis showed an even higher proportion of children with plans for neglect than nationally (64% in comparison with 43.2% nationally). This emphasis on neglect categorisation had the effect that all other categories of plan were lower than the national figures at the time. Given known local variability and the specific points in time that we were collecting our data, no conclusions can be drawn from these differences.

Figure 3.7 Status of the 150 children's cases 12 months after ICPC (n=139)



Within twelve months of the ICPC, just under three quarters of the children no longer had a child protection plan and were not receiving help from within the child protection system. One in four children (n=36) still had a child protection plan in place, and 46 (almost a third) were receiving services as a child in need (CIN). Just over a quarter of the cases (n=37), were listed as 'closed' (for two cases this was due to the child having left the local authority), while in a further 9 cases a special guardianship order (SGO) had been made and closure was imminent. Eleven children had some kind of looked after status, nine of whom were living in foster or residential care. The status of the case at this one year stage, was not clear in 11 cases.

Table 3.8 Legal Orders for the children at the time of the ICPC and one year on (n=150)

Legal order	At ICPC	One year on
No order	146	108
Care Order	0	2
Supervision Order	0	8
Interim Care Order	0	6
Special Guardianship	1	9
Residence Order	2	3
Child Arrangement Order	0	7

At the time of the ICPC, three of the 150 children had a legal order relating to their care.

Twelve months later, this had risen to 35 children.