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## Article

# Supporting Fathers Experiencing Family Breakdown: Practitioner Perspectives

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**Abstract:** Background: This study explored the experiences and insights of providers who support fathers experiencing family breakdown, separation, and divorce (FBSD). Methods: Nine practitioners who work for organizations in the United Kingdom supporting fathers experiencing FBSD were interviewed using deliberative inquiry. The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify key themes. Results: The findings highlighted four primary themes: ‘Support Needed by Fathers’, ‘Barriers for Organizations’, ‘Best Practice’, and ‘Recommendations’. Conclusions: The results mirror previous findings with fathers themselves and illuminate the immense challenges faced by organizations supporting them. Participants offered valuable insights into the necessary reform and change required to improve the experiences of separated fathers and their ability to support them.

**Keywords:** family breakdown; fathers; support; mental health; suicide

## 1. Introduction

There is a growing body of work examining fathers’ experiences of family breakdown, separation, and divorce (FBSD) (Bates and Hine 2023; Hine and Bates 2024; Hine et al. 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). These studies have explored both the causes of family breakdown as well as fathers’ experiences of abuse both within relationships and post separation. They have also examined how negotiating co-parenting arrangements is fraught with difficulty for fathers and have revealed that their experiences of family court are almost universally negative and profoundly traumatizing. Crucially, these manuscripts have highlighted the profound impact of FBSD on men’s mental and physical health, including suicide ideation.

This work, alongside other studies on both mothers’ and fathers’ experiences of family breakdown, separation, and divorce (FBSD), has consistently recommended increased support for families during and immediately after the breakdown event. While many of these calls are gender-neutral in language, there is growing recognition that the nature, accessibility, and impact of support services can differ significantly depending on the parent’s gender. Specifically, repeated recommendations have been made for gender-inclusive support systems that acknowledge and respond to the unique experiences and barriers faced by fathers—particularly those who are victims of abuse or experiencing parental alienation (Bates and Douglas 2020; Hine et al. 2020, 2025b). Fathers are uniquely positioned within post-separation dynamics, often encountering institutional skepticism, societal stigma, and legal processes that—while designed to be gender-neutral—can function in gendered ways that disadvantage paternal engagement and wellbeing (Hawthorne and Lennings 2008).

Previous research has shown that some fathers do successfully engage with services and speak positively about the support they receive (Hine et al. 2025c). This indicates



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that support for men is possible and can be effective but also underscores the importance of identifying what makes these services work, for whom, and under what conditions. Unlike mothers—whose roles as primary caregivers are often assumed and institutionally supported—fathers may need to actively ‘prove’ their parenting legitimacy and navigate services that have historically focused on maternal needs. This is not to diminish the struggles of mothers but to highlight that fathers’ help-seeking is often mediated by unique challenges such as gender stereotypes, societal expectations around masculinity, and the marginalization of paternal grief and emotional expression in the context of family loss.

Existing work has tended to focus on understanding men’s transition to fatherhood. It suggests that there is a general lack of support available to address psychological, social, and emotional changes that occur with the arrival of a child in a couple’s life. For example, [Baldwin et al. \(2019\)](#) highlight that 8–10% of fathers are affected by depression and up to 18% of men exhibit anxiety in the postnatal period and that the mental health and wellbeing needs of men are largely unmet. Moreover, the same study suggested that men also felt unable to talk about fatherhood and relationship struggles with work colleagues, friends, and family out of fear of being perceived negatively and failed to access formal professional support for their mental health out of fear that they were taking up health professionals’ time.

Indeed, there are several more general social and healthcare barriers against men, including biases around fathering, a lack of gender-sensitive training for healthcare professionals, and pressure for men to prioritize work above family or personal health ([Bateson et al. 2017](#); [Haas and Hwang 2019](#)). This is despite several UK policies aimed to support fathers’ involvement during the transition to parenthood both ante- and postnatally. Indeed, even in societies with a reputation for gender equality, health professionals still do not acknowledge paternal needs, as indicated in a Swedish literature review by [Wells \(2016\)](#). It has thus been argued that if men are not offered the same support as women at incipient points of family life, systems will inadvertently perpetuate gender inequalities in childrearing and treat men like ancillary parents, minimizing their experiences and needs ([Jungmarker et al. 2010](#)).

Even when antenatal classes are offered to men to educate them on the practicalities of caring for a baby and supporting their partner, men are not prepared for the lifestyle and relationship changes that occur after birth ([Deave and Johnson 2008](#)). Expressing concerns about relationship changes accompanying parenthood within a female-dominated parenting group was also reportedly uncomfortable for new fathers, who deemed this type of emotional vulnerability as culturally and socially unacceptable ([Baldwin et al. 2019](#)). Moreover, because parenting groups are usually held during regular working hours, many men expressed their employment obligations as barriers to accessing support, accompanied by the fact that they felt underrepresented within them ([Carlson et al. 2014](#)). A failure to support men in their transition to fatherhood in the prenatal phase sets the stage for men’s perceived lack of importance in the lives of their children from that point onward. Men report feeling excluded by healthcare professionals who perceive mothers as clients and expectant parents but men as bystanders with a symbolic but otherwise invisible role in the new family ([Carlson et al. 2014](#)). As evidenced in other recent research, inequalities propagated by the above experiences are likely to manifest later in relationships and affect, or even cause, FBSD ([Hine et al. 2025b](#)).

Research suggests that non-residential fathers’ wellbeing and continued involvement following divorce are shaped by a constellation of support systems, including those provided by workplaces, new partners, ex-spouses, and extended family members. For instance, [Stone \(2002\)](#) highlights the importance of social support in buffering stress and promoting adjustment, noting that fathers benefit significantly from emotional and prac-

tical support offered by former in-laws and romantic partners. Additionally, workplace flexibility emerges as a crucial enabler of ongoing father involvement, particularly when it allows men to accommodate childcare responsibilities and maintain consistent contact with their children. However, the availability of such support is often uneven, and many fathers report feeling marginalized or unsupported during this transition, especially if societal or institutional expectations around masculinity and caregiving restrict their ability to seek help or express vulnerability.

Beyond informal support networks, structured interventions have also demonstrated promise in addressing fathers' challenges post separation. Braver et al. (2005) found that fathers' engagement with their children was closely linked to their perception of fairness in legal proceedings and the degree of authority they were afforded in parenting decisions. Their work on the DADS FOR LIFE program showed that targeted interventions could positively shift fathers' attitudes, improve conflict management, and enhance co-parenting relationships. Group-based interventions have similarly shown short-term gains in adjustment for both men and women, helping participants process the emotional aftermath of separation and develop adaptive parenting strategies (Vukalovich and Caltabiano 2008). However, such interventions remain underutilized and often fail to address the broader psychosocial needs of men navigating complex post-separation identities. Ashbourne et al. (2013) argue for a more holistic approach, proposing a comprehensive framework of support for separated fathers that encompasses three key domains: reconfiguring family structures, offering sustained parenting support, and attending to men's emotional and mental health needs. However, implementing such frameworks is often challenged by prevailing gender norms, funding limitations, and the lack of integrated services that view separated fathers as legitimate clients in need of tailored support.

When assessing the type of support that is effective for fathers more generally, both *father-centered* and *men-inclusive parenting programs* have highlighted the importance of connection and peer-to-peer support. While the former refers to services specifically designed *for fathers*, often by those with lived experience, the latter describes broader parenting programs that intentionally incorporate and address the needs of men alongside other caregiver groups. In both types of provision, non-residential fathers consistently report the value of practical life-skill assistance, including help with budgeting, organizing children's activities, accessing counseling, and navigating legal systems (Carlson et al. 2014). These needs have become even more acute after the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated financial pressures and disrupted many fathers' contact with their children (Vazzano et al. 2022). Regardless of the program type, the common thread is the necessity of father-specific engagement strategies that validate men's caregiving roles and respond to the structural and emotional challenges they face post separation. Moreover, men involved with child protective services in the Huebner et al. (2008) study prioritized access to a support group (40.7%) as particularly helpful, followed by legal services (38.1%) and family therapy (26.3%).

Although the challenges of creating programs for fathers are complex—owing to the wide demographic diversity among fathers (e.g., residential vs. non-residential; stay-at-home vs. full-time employed)—the rationale for designing men-inclusive parenting and post-separation programs remains strong. These arguments are grounded not only in the positive impact such programs can have on the holistic wellbeing of the family, including mothers and children as recipients of better co-parenting support (Fisher et al. 2018), but also in the psychological and relational benefits experienced by men themselves as they navigate changing identities as partners and (co-)parents. However, despite these benefits, organizations often face structural and attitudinal barriers to delivering effective father-inclusive services. These include persistent gendered assumptions that fathers

are secondary or peripheral caregivers, as well as deeper cultural prejudices that cast men as less emotionally attuned or undeserving of support, particularly in the context of FBSD ([Garcia et al. 2024](#)). Such biases can lead to the under-recognition of fathers' needs, especially when those needs are framed around vulnerability, grief, or emotional loss—experiences that clash with dominant norms of stoicism and paternal resilience. In some cases, fears that acknowledging fathers' post-separation struggles might undermine maternal support can lead to reluctance to extend services to men, even when evidence suggests a more inclusive approach benefits all parties. These barriers highlight the necessity of both attitudinal and structural change within service provision, where the principles of gender inclusivity applied to general parenting programs should be equally extended to services supporting fathers during FBSD and beyond ([Hine 2025](#)).

It is clear that fathers require more support across the entire timeline of their fatherhood, including at critical junctures—for example, right after the birth of a child and, crucially, during family breakdown—than they are currently receiving. The present study, therefore, sought to explore the experiences of providers supporting fathers during family breakdown to establish, in their own words and based on their experience, what works for fathers. Critically, we employed deliberate inquiry (DI) to ensure that discussions were participant-driven and collaborative and that dialogue was ultimately solution-focused. There were several research questions:

1. What are the perceived needs of separated fathers when they engage with support services during and after family breakdown, separation, and divorce (FBSD)?
2. What barriers do service providers identify that affect separated fathers' access to, and engagement with, support services?
3. What are the key challenges faced by organizations in delivering effective support to separated fathers?
4. What recommendations do service providers have for improving the design, accessibility, and delivery of services targeted at separated fathers?

## 2. Materials and Methods

Previous work has examined (a) fathers' experiences of FBSD and associated abuse, (b) their experiences of negotiating co-parenting arrangements, and (c) the impact of FBSD and associated experiences, specifically on their mental health ([Hine et al. 2025a, 2025b, 2025c](#)). This manuscript expands on this work by examining the experiences of organizations seeking to support fathers during and after family breakdown.

### 2.1. Participants

Nine individuals from six organizations took part in this study. Participants were aged between 43 and 70 years ( $M = 51.67$ ;  $SD = 8.06$ ), were mostly men (2 women), and mainly were White British ( $n = 6$ , White Irish  $n = 1$ , White British/South African  $n = 1$ , Asian Pakistani  $n = 1$ ). They had been with their organizations for between 1 and 14 years ( $M = 6.44$ ;  $SD = 4.45$ ) and represented various levels of authority (CEO, content manager, helpline manager, service associate, etc.). Participants personally managed anywhere between 0 and 30 cases a month ( $M = 11.44$ ;  $SD = 12.11$ ).

The organizations represented were based across the United Kingdom, including Scotland, Wales, and England (but not Northern Ireland). They reported supporting between 140 and 1000 cases at the time of the study. Most of the organizations represented specifically supported parents post separation, with one of these organizations focusing on fathers alone. One of the organizations was a domestic abuse helpline specific to men, chosen to participate due to the prevalence of abusive experiences revealed in [Hine et al. \(2025a\)](#). All provided a range of services, including legal assistance (e.g., user guides to law

and legal processes) (n = 7), mental health (e.g., helpline, emotional support) (n = 5), Social Networking (n = 6), education and training (n = 5), and signposting (n = 2).

## 2.2. Materials and Procedure

This study collected data using deliberative inquiry (DI). DI facilitates a back-and-forth discussion between a group of topic experts to understand more about a research topic and formulate ideas for improved practice in the field. What distinguishes DI from other research methods involving group discussion (e.g., a focus group) is the effort to identify whether there is consensus among the group (Kanuka 2010). Participants were recruited directly by the first author based on their knowledge of the challenges of the sector and their suitability to provide meaningful information in response to the research questions. It is common to specifically recruit targeted individuals to participate in deliberative inquiry due to their relevant expertise. This ensures that discussions are informed by deep knowledge and practical experience, enhancing the quality, relevance, and applicability of the insights generated.

The DI took place virtually via Microsoft Teams and lasted approximately 90 min. Before the session, participants were provided with an information sheet. If they were happy to proceed, they completed a consent form and a brief questionnaire via email to capture the sample's demographic characteristics (outlined under 'Participants' above). Subsequent communication with participants established a time and date for the inquiry to commence.

The DI moderator began the session by reiterating the study's purpose, explaining the nature of the DI method, and summarizing the planned topics for discussion. These topics included discussions around the needs of separated fathers approaching services, the potential barriers to their help-seeking, key challenges in delivering provision, and recommendations for improvements. All topics were developed from previous research with separated fathers themselves that had mentioned their engagement, or lack thereof, with services (Hine et al. 2025b, 2025c).

The moderator then confirmed the willingness to be audio-recorded with each individual before posing open questions to the group. The moderator facilitated the group discussion by (i) guiding the group through each of the scheduled topics within the allotted time; (ii) ensuring that all participants engaged in a respectful discussion, providing opportunities for them to defend or modify their viewpoints based on others' contributions; and (iii) reaching a consensus among the group regarding areas of agreement and disagreement, as well as the reasons behind them. Participants were encouraged to share their ideas verbally and via chat.

Due to the potentially sensitive nature of the discussion, participants received a debrief sheet at the end of the session containing signposts to mental health support in case needed.

## 2.3. Analytic Plan

As with the qualitative data outlined in Parts I-III, the DI transcript was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) technique. The transcription service Trint transcribed the audio recordings from the DI. Subsequently, the transcripts were anonymized by assigning a pseudonym the participant chose and omitting any potentially identifiable information. RTA was selected because it represents a modern iteration of thematic analysis, a well-established qualitative method for highlighting meaningful and shared experiences among a population. RTA also emphasizes the importance of disclosing the analyst's relationship with the topic as this inevitably shapes their interpretation of the data.

Firstly, the first and second authors read the transcript multiple times to gain a thorough understanding of the data. Following this, excerpts from the transcripts were highlighted and annotated with coding labels based on their relevance to the research topic. This was conducted in a two-stage process. Initially, a small number of transcripts were coded. The first and second author then met to discuss their coding, agree on codes, and discuss and attempt to resolve disagreements. Then, once all data had been coded, this process was conducted again, with codes then organized into themes representing common patterns across participants' accounts. The names of the themes identified and the codes they encompassed were refined through an iterative process of shifting focus between the themes and the raw transcripts to ensure the final list of themes comprehensively captured the depth and breadth of participants' experiences. This analysis was aided by NVivo 12.

### 3. Results

Analysis revealed four main themes, each with several subthemes: 'Support Needed by Fathers', 'Barriers for Organizations', 'Best Practice', and 'Recommendations'.

#### Theme 1: Support Needed by Fathers

Upon approaching services following FBSD, fathers were identified as having several differing support needs, ranging from practical advice to emotional support.

##### Subtheme 1: Practical support

Participants discussed several types of practical support when asked what their service users needed from their organizations. One participant raised that fathers wanted "signposting/access to local services" (PA1, Chat Entry) to help navigate them towards support embedded in their local authorities. Several participants also highlighted that a popular request from fathers was for support through the court process:

"I think from a lot of the calls I take, either on the helpline or locally, is a lot of fathers [...] they just don't understand what the court process involves." (PA2)

Participants also described fathers as being "lost in the process" (PA3) due to a lack of awareness and understanding of the system and processes. This was said to be hindered by there being so little information available about "how an actual family court hearing operates" (PA2), particularly in "comparison to the criminal side of the law, which does confuse things quite a lot" (PA4):

"A lot of people know how the criminal courts work because we see it represented on TV, [...] so we sort of have an idea of how the criminal courts operate. What people don't realise is the family court operates in a completely different way to what one expects." (PA2)

To address this, participants from one organization explained how they connect service users with legal professionals to guide them through that process:

"We run our own legal service, family court service, as well. So, we have barristers who represent our guys. And so, there is a lot around what's the family court, what's the process etc., etc." (PA4)

One participant mentioned that fathers need this practical support and information "in bite-sized parts so that they can process that" (PA5). This is important considering the potential complexity of the information and formal processes they are being introduced to and given how emotionally overwhelming the experience of family breakdown can be (Hine et al. 2025a).

## Subtheme 2: Emotional support

Participants also emphasized their service users' need for emotional support. This often presented as a need to talk through and process what they were experiencing with someone who could provide a listening ear and an objective outsider perspective on the emotional complexities of their situation:

"When I used to be on the helpline, it was all about, 'How could this happen to me? How can she do this?' Or, 'Why is this happening? How do I get to see my children?' It's that existential crisis where they absolutely love their children. They want to spend time with their children." (PA4)

This could also emerge as the need specifically for mental health support, particularly given fathers' heightened risk to suicide following a family breakdown:

"And obviously, then we get those suicides and all those, sort of, really what seem quite dramatic outcomes, but regular outcomes that we see each and every week." (PA1)

"Suicide ideation is high. I think ours is tracking at 44% of people we speak to." (PA5)

Moreover, it was discussed that fathers typically require urgent emotional and mental health support because they arrive at the service in question in their most desperate time of need. It has been well established across a variety of domains that fathers typically only request help following a long period of trying to cope independently with their growing difficulties, rather than requesting support when they first needed it immediately at the onset of a family breakdown:

"A lot of the people, when they coming to us for support, they're at crisis point. They've gone through many, many months, sometimes years. Men don't seek help early." (PA5)

There was also consensus that emotional support was fundamental to getting fathers "in the right headspace" (PA5) or "in the right state of mind" (PA4) so they were capable of engaging with the practicalities involved in the aftermath of a family breakdown, such as legal processes and co-parenting. In this way, providing fathers with the tools to regulate their emotions healthily and effectively was a necessary ingredient to supporting fathers with their requests for practical support through court and other processes:

"We need to help them get court-ready. Because there's no point going through that court process if they're not mentally in the right headspace to do that." (PA5)

The prevalence of these emotional needs sits against hegemonic masculinity tropes (Connell 2020) and what we might 'expect' men need in terms of support. Participants also shared how they offer this emotional support through a variety of services such as a helpline, mentoring, local groups, and responding in person to "people [who] have been threatening suicide on the call" (PA6). They also expressed a need for their organizations to adopt "early intervention models [...] and strategies that help men regulate themselves" (PA4) that would enable their organizations to assess needs and track the progress of fathers' emotion regulation. One participant responded with how their service offers tools to facilitate this:

"We have a tool that measures emotional readiness. It is well researched and it's pretty robust. And so it's a useful kind of triage, I think, for the kinds of services that people are talking about [...] If you're not emotionally ready, you might need to do some individual emotional support, therapy, that kind of thing." (PA7)

However, a challenge raised by some participants was that “sometimes [service users] don’t actually know what they need” (PA5):

“[fathers] do need a lot of emotional support [...] men don’t understand that’s what they’re looking for” (PA6)

This added a layer of complexity to organizations’ approaches to providing support to fathers as they must be “good at [...] listening to what the clients are saying, but also pulling that information from them so that we’re really able to identify their true needs.” (PA5).

## Theme 2: Barriers for Organizations

Participants discussed several interrelated barriers they experience in providing adequate support to fathers going through family breakdown.

### Subtheme 1: Capacity, funding, and support

Firstly, organizations were described as experiencing “an immense demand and we do not have enough capacity to meet that demand” (PA4) and that “The number of guys calling us every week is increasing exponentially” (PA4). Crucially, this high demand for their services existed despite the numerous barriers that stop many fathers from coming forward, such as feelings of disappointment, embarrassment, or shame (Hine et al. 2025b).

The challenge to offering support to everyone who needs was largely due to a lack of funding:

“We’ve got big ambitions and very, very small bank balances.” (PA6)

The lack of funding was partly blamed on insufficient government support, which could be, at least in part, attributed to a lack of recognition of the urgency of the issue at a societal level. This manifests as inadequate acknowledgment in strategies, policies, and plans relevant to fathers and family breakdown, along with unconscious bias surrounding gender roles in parenting and masculinity. The group reached a consensus on the need to gather a large coalition to demonstrate to society and the government that family breakdown is “a societal issue and [a risk of] harm to children” (PA6):

“We’ve got to work much harder at to get people to understand: Family breakdown isn’t just, ‘Oh, you’ll get over it, oh, plenty more fish in the sea’ nonsense. Family breakdown has a corrosive and caustic effect all the way down to the child and the extended family. And we are failing those children and we are failing those families. And until we can get our s\*\*\* together and tell society, ‘We’ve got to do something about this and manage this process better’, we will not be succeeding at anything.” (PA4)

This last quote really captured the strength of feeling behind participants’ frustration at the barriers they face to providing the support that is needed in this area, particularly around funding, which is mirrored across many sectors (i.e., domestic violence, Cannon et al. 2021).

### Subtheme 2: Lack of coherency and collaboration

However, participants did argue that it was possible that the economic and ideological barriers could be somewhat alleviated through the unity of services. However, participants acknowledged there is a lack of coordination between the “whole diaspora of different organizations for fathers in the UK” (PA8), partly due to creating breakoff organizations:

“The landscape on the men’s side is so diverse. If you put in a Google search for helping fathers and so on, the list is tremendous. Whereas if you were, I think if you’re a mother looking for support and so on, you kind of know where to go and

they can signpost you into certain directions. So, it's just the lack of coordination amongst all the different organizations" (PA6)

They then argued that if organizations were able "make a more concerted effort to be more coordinated" (PA6) and "work together [...] to rally around something" (PA8), this may bolster the message they send out to society and governmental bodies while facilitating a more efficient use of the funds currently available to them and improve fathers' awareness of their services.

These quotes may initially appear paradoxical because, on one hand, fathers argue that there is a lack of services available to support them (see [Hine et al. 2025c](#)) while providers contend that the problem is an oversaturation of small services. This highlights a gap between supply and effective delivery, where several small organizations may be underfunded and unknown to fathers and thus unable to assist them when operating in isolation.

### Theme 3: Best Practice

Several examples of best practices and what the organizations 'did well' were given throughout the discussion.

#### Subtheme 1: Moving away from fathers' rights activism

Several organizations spoke about the importance of reframing the debate away from a 'men's rights issue' and focusing on the harm and suffering experienced by fathers, mothers, and, most importantly, children:

"And that's what we need to focus on here above everything else, above fathers, [...] it's the children." (PA1)

This was highlighted to be particularly important in relation to the mental health of men because without this pivot, men would continue to be left to face their struggles alone:

"We've got to do better for men to make sure they don't want to kill themselves. And we've got to do better for children to make sure that they have a safe relationship with both parents." (PA4)

Some participants also sought to highlight the benefits for women of increasing the focus on parental equality rather than fueling a gendered debate:

"It's not a dads' campaign. It's not a fathers' pressure group. [...] I've really tried to focus on the fact that it's for the kids. That this, having a rebuttable presumption of a shared care in law, it will benefit women as well." (PA8)

These quotes reveal a powerful shift in the discourse around fathers, parenting, and post-separation conflict—one that seeks to de-escalate gendered rhetoric and instead center children's wellbeing. While this reframing may serve as a pragmatic tool for advancing reform in a climate often hostile to men's narratives, it also inadvertently underscores a chronic lack of empathy for men's struggles in their own right ([Hine 2025](#)). That men must position their pain as secondary or as valid only through the lens of its effects on children is both telling and troubling. The instinct to center children is, of course, deeply human and ethically sound. Yet, if we cannot hold space for men as victims and survivors in and of themselves—of mental health crisis, of alienation, of systemic disbelief—then we risk compounding their invisibility. Justice for children and justice for men should not be mutually exclusive goals; in fact, they are deeply intertwined. A truly empathetic framework would allow the honoring of both.

### Subtheme 2: Raising awareness

Participants felt that their organizations had carried out excellent preliminary work on raising awareness around fathers' needs and that they had done so through a variety of means, including, for example, online platforms:

"Providing a platform for men [and] boys to raise awareness of the issues faced[,] through our webinars, social media and through the various forums that we sit on. We open eyes [and] ears through training throughout the UK." (PA1, Chat Entry)

But again, participants were keen to point out that this was about raising awareness around the suffering of not just fathers, but also their children:

"Demonstrating and raising awareness that fathers are suffering because of family breakdown, vis-a-vis, therefore, their children are suffering. And we have been able to really push that Sisyphean problem to the fore where we've been able to get [...] understanding and awareness with some significant organizations to say we've got a problem here. [...] I think we've done really, really well on that." (PA4)

They were also eager to emphasize the complex consequences of awareness-raising—foremost among these is the rise in demand for services that are already stretched thin. Many observed that while visibility is essential, it also highlights the fragility of a landscape filled with small, often isolated organizations striving to meet growing needs with limited capacity (as noted above in theme 2). Furthermore, raising awareness involves challenging deeply rooted cultural narratives about men, fathers, and their value within families. For these participants, the work was not only informative but also transformative, aimed at shifting perceptions that have historically marginalized men's pain and obscured their relational worth, and was therefore hugely challenging.

### Subtheme 3: Credibility

There was also a clear focus on the necessity of having 'credibility' as organizations so that they could put forward a strong case around their cause. For example, this participant describes how difficult it was to be heard initially:

"I think that over the last 12 years, we've established credibility. Credibility with institutions. That they have gradually learned to take what we say on a whole range of issues seriously. We used to get, I'm not kidding, when we used to go into some events, we would get hissed at when we started, but we don't get hissed at anymore. So, I take that as a positive." (PA3)

Participants highlighted how this involved both listening to their service users to make their service more effective and using data to lend legitimacy to their message:

"We have a lot of data and I think that helps us to shape our service. [...] And we will share that data to sort of help other people understand, kind of, what we're doing. [...] It, sort of, builds our credibility as an organization with the data that we are, kind of, collecting." (PA5)

Credibility, then, emerged as a hard-won but essential foundation for meaningful influence. Participants spoke of a journey from marginalization to recognition, one built through consistent engagement with service users, a commitment to evidence, and a refusal to be silenced. For these organizations then, being taken seriously required not only perseverance but also a strategic blend of empathy and empiricism—listening deeply while speaking authoritatively. In doing so, they carved out a legitimate voice in spaces where, not long ago, they were actively dismissed.

#### Subtheme 4: Being data-driven

Participants argued that the importance of data was not just about informing credibility (as above) but that it also helped individuals and services to evolve and engage with their client base dynamically. It also allowed them to be leaders in the field by using data to help others understand what they were doing in the sector and to help shape other services:

“The other thing we’re very good at as an organization is collecting data. We have a lot of data and I think that helps us to shape our service. [...] And we will share that data to, sort of, help other people understand, kind of, what we’re doing. And also. [...] It, sort of, builds our credibility as an organization with the data that we are, kind of, collecting.” (PA5)

A few participants highlighted that only by being evidence-led could they enact meaningful behavior change:

“Behaviour change. [...] We deliver evidence-based interventions that are proven to reduce harmful conflict behaviours and increase [...] positive communication behaviors” (PA7)

They also used those data to perform rigorous evaluation, again to the benefit of users but also to the sector at large:

“We do evaluation very well. . . We’re gathering good data that suggests that people are able to change their behaviour as a result of having gone through these interventions. And you know, we listen to feedback and where things aren’t working, we develop them and test them again. So, we’re constantly adapting to what we think people need.” (PA7)

Taken together, these reflections underscore a broader sectoral shift toward evidence-based practice—one that not only legitimizes service delivery but actively enhances it through continuous, data-driven refinement (Fixsen et al. 2005).

#### Subtheme 5: Government links

Participants also made it clear that almost no change is possible without leadership from the government and associated policy change. Indeed, several of the organizations had attempted and succeeded in getting their message to policy leaders:

“I think the third thing that we do quite well is that we’re quite connected into Westminster. So, we get invited to do, so, to give oral evidence and so on. We do a lot of work with the Family Justice Forums, with Cafcass and so on.” (PA6)

This had sometimes translated to funding, demonstrating that making links with those in power was effective at enacting change:

“What I think we’re very good at and what I’m really proud of as well, is the fact that we’ve got government funding for our domestic abuse service for Kent and Medway, for male victims. I mean, that’s quite unique, which I’m very proud of.” (PA4)

These examples illustrate how strategic engagement with policymakers can yield tangible outcomes—not only in terms of visibility and influence but also in securing the vital resources needed to turn advocacy into action.

#### Subtheme 6: Centralized, digitalized, tailored support

Finally, participants spoke about some more general aspects of their work and organizational set-up that they felt made them effective. First, they spoke about the importance of information being collated and more easily accessible because of this ‘centralization’:

“All the information, all the arguments about shared parenting [are] in one place. That can be used by campaigners like me, and it can also be used by people going through the family courts as well.” (PA8)

Most of the time, this was through a digital portal or location, which again allowed materials to be more easily accessible and at the fingertips of clients:

“Although I raised it as a barrier earlier, I think it is also the thing that we’re doing well, which is distribution. So, by using digital interventions, we’re able to reach a much wider audience than we would be otherwise. We’d like it to be wider. But, you know, I think we’re doing all right given the resources available.” (PA7)

This digital element was also critical during COVID-19 and beyond:

“The other one is our national support groups, which are extremely effective. During COVID, they almost decimated [...] because we couldn’t hold face-to-face meetings. But we quickly moved to online meetings and, you know, face-to-face are coming back. So that support network is quite good as well.” (PA6)

Finally, participants were keen to point out that services had to be bespoke to be effective:

“One thing we’re very good at is listening to what the clients are saying, but also pulling that information from them so that we’re really able to identify their true needs. [...]” (PA5)

This also meant being completely open and not discriminating in any way or turning anyone away:

“Our helpline. We support a significant number of people on our helpline. No one gets turned away. [...] It’s not a case of being a member, non-member, male or female, or so on. No one gets turned away. And that’s a really good area.” (PA6)

Together, these reflections point to the value of accessible, adaptable, and client-led service design. From centralized resources to inclusive, digital-first approaches, participants emphasized that flexibility and responsiveness were key to effective, equitable support.

#### **Theme 4: Recommendations**

Following the central methodological tenets of deliberative inquiry, participants also came together to provide core recommendations for moving forward. Importantly, this involved a consensus-targeting discussion about which recommendations were most important.

##### **Subtheme 1: Centralized ‘triage’**

In recognition of the need to keep couples out of family court in the first instance, participants suggested that some kind of national ‘triage’ community support system would be helpful:

“There needs to be a national network akin to citizens’ advice bureaus. Let’s call them divorce centers or something like that, where people can refer themselves to in the event that they’re thinking of divorce rather than running to a lawyer and trying to get legal advice and all that sort of stuff. So, just to de-escalate the process.” (PA6)

Encouragingly, there were existing systems that participants believed could be utilized in this way:

“Family Hubs are already using ‘single point of contact’ language for family support, so that person could be attached to separation too.” (PA7, Chat Entry)

Participants thus envisioned a triage-style model as a powerful tool for early intervention—one that could prevent conflict from escalating and families from becoming

adversaries. By offering a neutral, accessible point of contact at the outset of relationship breakdown, such a system could guide families toward constructive pathways before legal entrenchment or emotional polarization takes hold. In this sense, triage is not just about logistics—it is about preserving relationships, reducing harm, and reshaping the very culture of separation.

#### Subtheme 2: Rebuttal presumption of shared Co-parenting arrangements

For couples that then unavoidably had to go to family court, participants argued that there should be a rebuttal presumption of shared co-parenting arrangements:

“There needs to be a legal change, that there is a presumption of shared care where safe and appropriate.” (PA6)

“I think, probably, there’s a general consensus that a rebuttable presumption of shared parenting would take the heat out of the overall situation.” (PA3)

It was argued that doing so would put parents on a more equal footing when separating and not put fathers in a disadvantaged position from the outset:

“But they have this idea that they are the underdogs. And who wants to start a fight with one hand behind tied behind your back.” (PA8)

They also discussed how shared parenting was fundamentally better for the children involved:

“I think the root of that has got to be the benefits to children that come from shared parenting. And there is plenty of research around the world that shows that children do better when there is shared parenting, even in what would be considered to be high conflict situations where the parents are not communicating well.” (PA3)

However, there were also warnings that this recommendation was set against current movements within the family court system, and that this was a worry:

“There’s actually the debate going on at the moment in England, Wales, that the presumption of shared care should actually be removed from family law. So, it’s, we are diametric opposed to a lot of things that are happening within the family justice system at the moment.” (PA6)

Participants, therefore, strongly advocated for the introduction of a rebuttable presumption of shared care in family law, viewing it as a vital tool for reducing post-separation conflict and promoting parity between parents. They suggested such a presumption would help de-escalate legal disputes by shifting the starting point away from adversarial positioning (Baude et al. 2016). It was also seen as a way to symbolically and practically affirm that fathers are as integral to children’s lives as mothers, thereby challenging persistent inequalities in family court proceedings (Nielsen 2011). Importantly, the participants’ views echo research showing that when shared parenting occurs in contexts of low conflict and cooperative co-parenting, children tend to experience improved behavioral and academic outcomes (Modecki et al. 2015).

#### Subtheme 3: Court reform

In addition to these legislative changes, there was a clamor for court reform on every available level:

“The system is ripe for transformation. And, I think, there’s got to be something that we can do together to have a conversation around how do we improve the family court system to therefore improve outcomes for children and families.” (PA4)

This was mainly in recognition that the issues and challenges that the organizations in this study faced were both repetitive and hugely damaging to fathers and their children:

“But the issues that come to us again and again and again about [...] the obstacles to that are the cost of court proceedings or even non-court proceedings where you involve lawyers. The time it takes and the damage it does to relationships between parents and children [...] during that time and the distress that it causes to everybody.” (PA3)

Participants also gave indications of where this reform could be targeted, including consequences for those who abuse the system:

“In the event of false allegations being made, they must be dealt with. Because I think it’s too easy knowing that you’re probably not going to be punished to raise false allegations, drag out litigation, and cause more emotional harm to the other person as you’re going through it.” (PA6)

A review of legal aid processes:

“There needs to be more accountability. There needs to be more transparency and better knit-in with the family court system as to how legal aid is allocated and when that’s reviewed. Because, actually, just because you got legal aid five years ago on a false allegation that you made against somebody, it doesn’t mean to say that you should continue to have that. That free pass to continue not only abusing your ex-partner, but your children, for a number of years.” (PA1)

And more mediation in the first instance to reduce court demand and non-molestation orders:

“The government’s got this great aim that we should all be doing mediation. [...] But the problem comes, is they’ve set up a system that’s bound to fail. Which is, you just have to make allegations of domestic violence and the mediation is no longer appropriate. . .” (PA2)

These concerns closely mirrored previous research highlighting the structural disadvantages faced by fathers in family court, including delays, high legal costs, and the emotional toll of prolonged proceedings (Bates and Hine 2023; Hine et al. 2025b). Calls for reform—including addressing false allegations—reflect longstanding critiques of a system often seen as insufficiently responsive to the needs of non-resident parents.

#### Subtheme 4: Recognition of the importance of fathers

Finally, participants felt that there was also a more fundamental societal change that needed to occur—a greater recognition of the importance and value of fathers:

“This is really difficult to do, but I think everything we’ve been talking about is, kind of, symptoms of an underlying problem, which is the kind of cultural attitudes that we mentioned before. [...] On the wish list, you’d have some sort of a campaign of awareness or just a means of publicizing the benefit of fathers as parents. Because I think all of the problems that we’re encountering, sort of, stem from the fact that they’re undervalued and undervalue themselves. [...] How you do that, I don’t know. But it does feel like there’s a cultural change needed behind all of this.” (PA9)

As argued by scholars such as Lamb (2010), the cultural recognition of fathers as competent, nurturing, and essential caregivers remains a critical barrier to truly equitable family policy. Echoing this, participants called for a broader societal shift—one that challenges entrenched attitudes and affirms the value of fatherhood not just in legal or policy terms, but in the cultural imagination itself.

## 4. Discussion

This study was among the first to explore the experiences and insights of service providers who work with fathers facing family breakdown, separation, and divorce. By employing deliberative inquiry, this research aimed to investigate existing practitioner knowledge of the issues and encourage participants to collaborate in formulating their recommendations for change.

The first two themes to emerge from this study related to the needs of fathers who engage with these services and the barriers they encounter in receiving support. Participants spoke about various needs, from emotional support to practical advice. This echoed previous research with men who were survivors of intimate partner violence, demonstrating that the assumption that men seek only practical advice is inaccurate; they primarily seek validation and support (Hine et al. 2021; Machado et al. 2016). It may be that men are more willing to discuss their emotional and psychological needs if they feel the service is designed and delivered inclusively and acknowledges their lived experiences as men (as argued in Hine et al. 2021). Participants in this study also noted that men seeking their services were often at their most vulnerable, partly because they had waited until a crisis point to reach out—drawing parallels with organizations that support male IPV survivors (Hine et al. 2020, 2021).

When discussing barriers, most organizations cited funding as the primary challenge. It has been well established that organizations in this sector, as well as more broadly, face significant underfunding (Bates and Douglas 2020; Ishkanian 2014). However, participants in this study emphasized that what was lacking in their case was statutory funding, which they attributed to organizations that addressed an under-recognized issue (family breakdown) and an under-recognized population (men).

When encouraged to focus on best practices, participants identified several principles they followed, including moving away from fathers' rights, raising awareness, building credibility, being data-driven, establishing government links, and providing decentralized support. Interestingly, some of these principles apply to any organization (such as government links and being data-driven). However, some distinctly highlight sector-specific challenges, such as the need to distance themselves from being perceived as 'only' for fathers or supporting fathers' rights. While organizations in this field need to prioritize children and children's wellbeing as the primary concern, it is curious why a focus on fathers is seemingly taboo. This may reflect an overall lack of compassion for men and their issues (Hine 2025) and a systemic undervaluing of the fatherhood role that hampers organizations from pursuing their key objectives.

Reassuringly, participants were also clear on what needed to change, including providing centralized early support for separating couples. This is supported by previous evidence demonstrating the positive impact of early intervention on children's and parents' adaptations following divorce and their likelihood to engage in legal proceedings (McIntosh and Tan 2017; Pruett et al. 2011). Moreover, all participants called for a serious review of the family court system and the introduction of a presumption of 50:50 shared care within legislation across the United Kingdom. Such calls are likely underpinned by a growing body of evidence demonstrating that children tend to experience more positive outcomes in shared physical parenting arrangements following divorce, particularly in terms of emotional, behavioral, and academic adjustment (Baude et al. 2016; Braver and Votruba 2021; Galbraith and Kingsbury 2022; Mahrer et al. 2018; Nielsen 2011, 2017; Steinbach 2019). However, it is important to note that these findings are not universal, and all cited authors have provided cautionary notes about the influence of interparental conflict. Specifically, the benefits of shared parenting are significantly moderated by the co-parenting relationship quality: high-conflict or coercively controlling dynamics can

negate or even reverse the positive outcomes typically associated with shared care. In contexts involving ongoing hostility or abuse, especially intimate partner violence, shared arrangements may place children at greater emotional and psychological risk and may undermine stability and safety. Thus, while the evidence generally supports shared parenting as beneficial, policy and practice must remain sensitive to the complexity of post-separation family dynamics and ensure that such arrangements are not presumed beneficial in all cases without thorough risk assessment.

The recommendation for 50:50 shared care reflects fathers' desires for greater involvement and their belief that such arrangements yield the best outcomes for their children (Hine et al. 2025a). While the empirical literature presents mixed findings on the effects of father involvement post separation, there is emerging evidence that, under certain conditions, children benefit from ongoing paternal engagement. Some early studies found limited associations between father involvement and children's academic or psychological outcomes (Furstenberg et al. 1987). However, more recent work has demonstrated that when paternal involvement occurs in the context of low interparental conflict and cooperative co-parenting, it can contribute to better long-term academic achievement and fewer externalizing behaviors (Modecki et al. 2015), as well as to enhanced cognitive and socioemotional development (Diniz et al. 2021). The quality of the co-parental relationship is a key moderating factor, with cooperative dynamics generally associated with more positive child outcomes (Bronstein et al. 1994). That said, the evidence base also cautions against assuming uniform benefits of shared care as outcomes are highly contingent on contextual variables such as the presence of conflict, the time elapsed since separation, and the nature of paternal engagement (Modecki et al. 2015; Bronstein et al. 1994). Thus, while fathers' advocacy for shared care often stems from a genuine concern for child wellbeing, policy discussions must remain attentive to the complexity of post-separation family dynamics and the importance of safeguarding child safety and emotional stability.

This study also had significant policy implications for the provision and reform of family support services, particularly those aimed at fathers. Our findings underscore the urgent need for gender-inclusive services that not only recognize but also actively respond to the emotional and psychological needs of fathers during family breakdowns, separations, and divorces. Fathers typically engage with support systems at crisis points, yet those systems are persistently under-resourced and shaped by gendered assumptions that marginalize paternal experiences. This reflects a broader cultural and institutional devaluation of fatherhood and a policy gap that leaves many men unsupported. To secure public credibility and long-term funding, participants emphasized that services must shift away from adversarial "fathers' rights" framings and instead center on child welfare and cooperative parenting. The study also contributed to ongoing calls for legal reform, including introducing a statutory presumption of 50:50 shared care in UK family law. However, as the data reveal, legal reform alone is insufficient: systemic change requires a parallel cultural shift that reframes fatherhood as a core component of child wellbeing and positions paternal involvement not as a privilege to be earned but as a right for children and a normative expectation for families. These insights support a growing body of evidence that calls for intersectional, inclusive, and trauma-informed approaches to family policy and practice.

There were two limitations to this study. First, and as with all deliberative inquiries, the organizations involved in this study were specifically chosen for their expertise and experience in this area. Consequently, while the testimony was valuable in addressing the specific issues of interest, the range of views may have been different or more diverse had the study employed a more open recruitment process for a focus group rather than a deliberative inquiry. Future research might consider this approach. A further limitation

concerned the cultural specificity of the findings. The organizations and participants were primarily situated within UK-based, Western service contexts, with predominantly White clients. As such, the cultural norms, values, and structural dynamics shaping fatherhood, help-seeking, and family breakdown may not have been representative of other cultural or ethnic communities. Future work should aim to explore how cultural backgrounds influence experiences of service provision, understandings of parental roles, and the social acceptability of seeking help, particularly among racially minoritized and immigrant fathers.

## 5. Conclusions

This study highlighted the urgent need for gender-inclusive support services that recognize fathers' emotional and psychological needs during family breakdowns. It pointed out systemic underfunding and societal biases that marginalize fathers, restricting their access to adequate support. Participants stressed the importance of transcending a "fathers' rights" narrative to prioritize child welfare, advocating for legal reforms such as a presumption of 50:50 shared care. However, meaningful change will necessitate a broader cultural shift that values fatherhood as integral to children's wellbeing. Future research should investigate a broader range of perspectives to refine best practices in this field further.

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