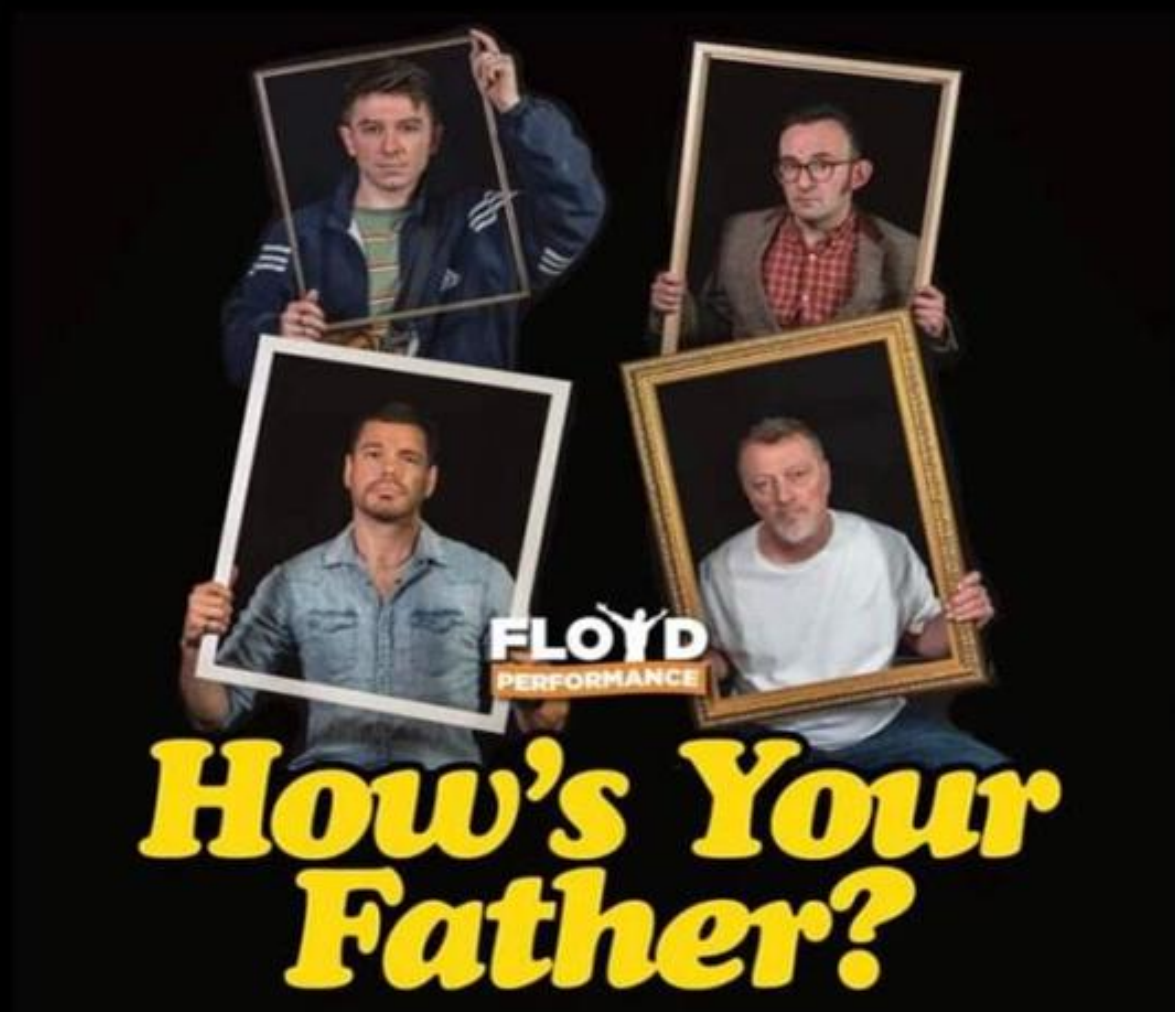


Project Report: Feb 2024

## **How's Your Father? Using research and theatre to change conversations about fatherhood and family services.**



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The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare, and Justice. It also funds student programmes that provide opportunities for young people to develop skills in quantitative and qualitative methods. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-founder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics and the Ada Lovelace Institute. The Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation. Visit [www.nuffieldfoundation.org](http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org)



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## Executive Summary

'*How's Your Father?*' (HYF) is an innovative, creative, and powerful approach to developing professional practice with men and with fathers. It has collaboration at its heart, and this is an integral part of its success. The project combines academic research with theatre in the applied setting of social work practice; it uses live theatre to communicate research findings and directly engage audiences with key messages. It consists of an ensemble theatre show and supporting professional development activities. The project ran from January 2023 to January 2024 and involved working in partnership with Norfolk, Suffolk, and Essex Children's Services to take live performances and related training workshops directly to practitioner audiences, in the workplace.

HYF is a collaboration between Dr Georgia Philip from The Centre for Research on Children and Families (CRCF), School of Social Work UEA, Simon Floyd, creative director at Floyd Productions and The Common Lot, Chris Dickerson and Travis Britton, the facilitators of 'Dads' Matter' a service for fathers delivered by Norfolk County Council, and Andy Wood from MensCraft, a Norwich based charity supporting men and boys.

### Background

The *How's Your Father?* theatre show presents stories of men's lives as fathers, based on findings from two significant research studies, funded by The Nuffield Foundation, on fathers' experiences of adversity, local authority social work and the family courts. The original research comprises the UEA study '*Counting Fathers In – men's experiences of child protection services*' (2014-17) and the UEA-Lancaster study '*Up Against it – understanding fathers and recurrent care proceedings*' (2017-2020).

### Aims and Objectives.

The aim of the project was to use applied theatre to engage practitioners in the challenges of father inclusion and support. The project sought to embed key messages from the UEA and UEA-Lancaster research on fathers' experiences of child protection services and the family court, including:

- Seeing fathers who lose or are at risk of losing children from their care as vulnerable. They may well pose risks arising from these vulnerabilities, but services need to recognise those fathers as also at risk themselves.
- Challenging ways in which fathers can *opt out* of parenting in ways not available to mothers *and* the ways in which fathers are more likely to be seen as *optional* for children (and are thereby overlooked or marginalised).

In line with the research messages, the objectives of the project were:

1. To use theatre, storytelling, and song, as innovative and powerful ways of delivering messages from our research on fathers.
2. To create additional training resources from the script and characters, that can be delivered either alongside the live show or as stand-alone activities.
3. To produce and perform a tour of HYF to professionals working for or with Norfolk, Suffolk, and Essex County Councils.
4. To undertake a small-scale evaluation of the project, including audience numbers and feedback, feedback from workshop participants and focus groups with each local authority.

The main public output from HYF was a month-long tour of the show and the professional development activities in Norfolk, Suffolk, and Essex, from October to November 2023. Alongside the theatre show we developed new content suitable for in-person training workshops, using the script, and involving theatre making techniques. The tour comprised eight events in local authority offices or venues for social workers and other family support/welfare professionals, including the national conference Community Care Live, and six public performances in libraries or local arts' venues. We reached a total audience of c850 with around 450 of these being local authority practitioners and/or managers. We delivered seven training workshops to a total of 60 practitioners.

### Feedback and impact.

The evaluation activities demonstrated that the HYF show, the Q&A discussions, and training workshops were received as hugely impactful. The show was experienced as powerful, thought provoking and memorable. A total of 245 completed feedback forms were received and online focus groups were conducted in each local authority after the tour ended. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with the most prominent audience responses being: *Emotional; powerful mix of light and shade, humour and serious issues; true to life/authentic representation of experience (and services); impactful reflective tool for practice.*

In terms of feedback from professionals, recurring themes were the impact of the show on: Provoking empathy and curiosity; constructively challenging practice, dealing with complexity, and the value of theatre for developing social work practice.

The main feedback from the training workshop was that it enabled social workers to engage with two key aspects of their work with fathers. One was the boundary between their personal and professional identities and roles; and the challenges of managing these, and the other was the recognition of the embodied and emotional aspects of their work with men/fathers.

The 2023 tour demonstrated very clearly that the live show and supporting training resources worked for social workers, and was a highly effective way to provoke reflection, recognition, empathy, and motivation to do better. Whilst there were limitations in terms of the logistics of scheduling a viable tour, the realities of the intense demands on social workers' time, and in terms of the stories of fatherhood we foregrounded, and those we have not (yet) told, the project was successful in its aims and objectives. It was ambitious and challenging but has demonstrated the value of applied theatre in social work education and professional development, perhaps especially for digging into topics that might be perceived as 'hard to reach'. The tour established 'proof of concept', strengthened our relationships with the participating local authorities, and helped to identify a trajectory for potential future work.

## Introduction

'How's Your Father?' (HYF) is a project that combines academic research with theatre in the applied setting of social work practice. It consists of an ensemble theatre show and supporting professional development activities and resources. The HYF project ran from January 2023 to January 2024 and is a collaboration between Dr Georgia Philip from The Centre for Research on Children and Families (CRCF), School of Social Work UEA, Simon Floyd, creative director of Floyd Productions and The Common Lot, Chris Dickerson and Travis Britton, the facilitators of 'Dads' Matter' a service for fathers delivered by Norfolk County Council, and Andy Wood from MensCraft, a Norwich based charity supporting men and boys.

The project received oversight from an advisory group, comprising those with expertise in social work policy and research, practitioners working with fathers in both statutory and voluntary sectors, and a father with lived experience of services. Consultation with other fathers with lived experience was facilitated through an invitation-only preview show.

The main public output from HYF was a month-long tour of the show and the professional development activities in Norfolk, Suffolk, and Essex, from October to November 2023. The tour comprised eight events in local authority offices or venues for social workers and other family support/welfare professionals, including the national conference Community Care Live, and six public performances in libraries or local arts' venues.

## Background

The *How's Your Father?* theatre show presents stories of men's lives as fathers, based on findings from two significant research studies, funded by The Nuffield Foundation, on fathers' experiences of adversity, local authority social work and the family courts. The original research comprises the UEA study '*Counting Fathers In – men's experiences of child protection services*' (2014-17) and the UEA-Lancaster study '*Up Against it – understanding fathers and recurrent care proceedings*' (2017-2020). The show was first devised and created in 2021. The original ambition was to use academic research to provoke and open conversation about father engagement (and the wider/deeper topics of fatherhood, gender and care). Our 10-minute [promotional video](#) summarises the aims and background of the HYF show. We delivered a small run of 9 public performances in October 2021 to wide acclaim and were awarded a UEA Engagement award in 2022 for our innovative and collaborative approach to dissemination and public engagement.

In April 2022, we held a networking event in Norwich to launch the [documentary](#) about the making of the show, which was attended by senior Children's Services managers, voluntary sector and legal practitioners. This confirmed the local appetite for improving father engagement and for using '*How's Your Father?*' as part of this work. To continue the momentum generated by HYF, extend its reach and increase its impact, we sought funding to deliver a second tour to target a professional audience and create additional, supporting professional development resources linked to the show. We secured funding from the Nuffield Foundation and from Arts Council England to undertake this project from January 2023 to Jan 2024.

## Aims and Objectives.

The overall aim of the project was to apply live theatre to engage practitioners in the challenges and importance of father inclusion and support; to open and change conversations about working with fathers. Father inclusion remains a systemic problem across statutory, voluntary sector, and universal services. There is an urgent need for

services to address the unmet needs of the most challenged and challenging fathers and to minimise the corresponding loss of resources fathers may bring to children and families. There are powerful examples of highly skilled, empathic, and strengths-based work being developed for vulnerable and challenging mothers, but there is still simply not the equivalent service response for fathers.

To this end, the project sought to embed the following key messages from the UEA and UEA-Lancaster research on fathers' experiences of child protection services and the family court:

- See fathers who lose or are at risk of losing children from their care as vulnerable. They may well pose risks arising from these vulnerabilities, but services need to recognise those fathers as also at risk themselves.
- Challenge ways in which fathers can *opt out* of parenting in ways not available to mothers *and* the ways in which fathers are more likely to be seen as *optional* for children (and are thereby overlooked or marginalised).
- Convey the importance of seeing fatherhood as generative, and as a mechanism for behaviour change. This offers important alternatives to 'deficit' perspectives of fathers and fathering.
- Demonstrate the need to acknowledge the impact of early life experiences on fathers and how these affect capacities for emotional regulation, maintaining nurturing relationships and family functioning.
- Show the value of taking a gender sensitive approach to address differences between expectations and opportunities for change for vulnerable and challenging women and men with similar life histories.

In line with the research messages above, the objectives of the project were:

1. To use theatre, storytelling, and song, as innovative and powerful ways of delivering messages from our research on fathers.
2. To create additional training resources from the script and characters, that can be delivered either alongside the live show or as stand-alone activities.
3. To produce and perform a tour of HYF to professionals working for or with Norfolk, Suffolk, and Essex County Councils.
4. To undertake a small-scale evaluation of the project, including audience numbers and feedback, feedback from workshop participants, and focus groups with each local authority.

## Description of the project.

The project consisted of three main activities: development, delivery, and evaluation. The core project team were involved throughout, with Georgia Philip and Simon Floyd taking lead roles for different aspects of the work. We also employed a research intern to support the delivery and evaluation activity.

### Development.

The first seven months of the project (Jan-July) involved planning the tour, casting the show, and designing the professional development resources. We auditioned for the five professional actor roles for the show: four male actors and one female. Led by Simon Floyd we worked with the actors to familiarise them with the script and characters to do some improvised filming as part of creating the digital training resources.

Georgia Philip liaised with the training and development managers in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex County Council, and with the organisers of Community Care Live, to book the tour. This involved setting well in advance a series of dates and venues (local authority offices or related venues) to enable a co-ordinated month-long run of the show. Each local authority event consisted of a performance in the morning and workshop in the afternoon, and we offered events in different locations in each county to increase opportunities for staff to attend; Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex are large and largely rural counties. These events were funded as part of the project and came at minimal cost to the local authority (travel/subsistence only). The training and development teams promoted the events and facilitated the sign-up process, and we provided the relevant promotional material and information. Alongside the local authority events we also booked a preview show and four public performances as part of the tour.

The training resources consist of an in-person workshop and a set of short videos and learning activities which can either be facilitated by a trainer for a group or undertaken individually. The digital resources will eventually be hosted on a dedicated website, together with information about the project, character biographies, links to songs/images/footage of the show, the original research, and the partner organisations. The website will first be trialled with the participating local authorities and then made available more widely as a training resource.

The in-person workshop is designed for small groups (between 10 and 20) practitioners to enable a deeper and more direct involvement with the content and characters from the show. The aim is to provoke curiosity and empathy. It includes a warm-up and plenary activity to reflect on the experience and learning and is two hours in total. We used established theatre-making techniques and exercises to devise activities to physically, mentally, and emotionally, engage participants. Each workshop involved two facilitators and one actor.

We set the following learning outcomes for the workshop:

1. To try out creative and reflective thinking tools to support work with fathers.
2. To gain insight into how social work/family support services see 'risks' more than 'needs' when working with fathers.
3. To engage with personal hopes and fears around trying to engage with fathers.

The digital resources are designed to enable practitioners to explore wider issues around father engagement through the biographies of the four fathers in the show. Again, a key aim is to foster curiosity and empathy. For each father we selected four scenarios from their story; three chosen for the practice issues or dilemmas they present, and the fourth a reflection on their relationship with their own father. We worked with local film company Insight Media to film and edit a series of short (2-minute) monologues by each character, related to their four scenarios. For each monologue we also filmed two versions, one giving the father's 'face-to-the-world' response, and one showing his 'internal' thoughts. This set of short films form the heart of the digital resources, providing stimuli for reflective questions or activities that will sit alongside them. Practitioners working with the resources will be able to choose which character and scenario they want to explore and choose to see the 'inside' or 'outside' thoughts of the father.

Having produced and edited the short films during this development phase, we then moved to rehearsal and promotion of the tour. Georgia Philip and Simon Floyd are currently working

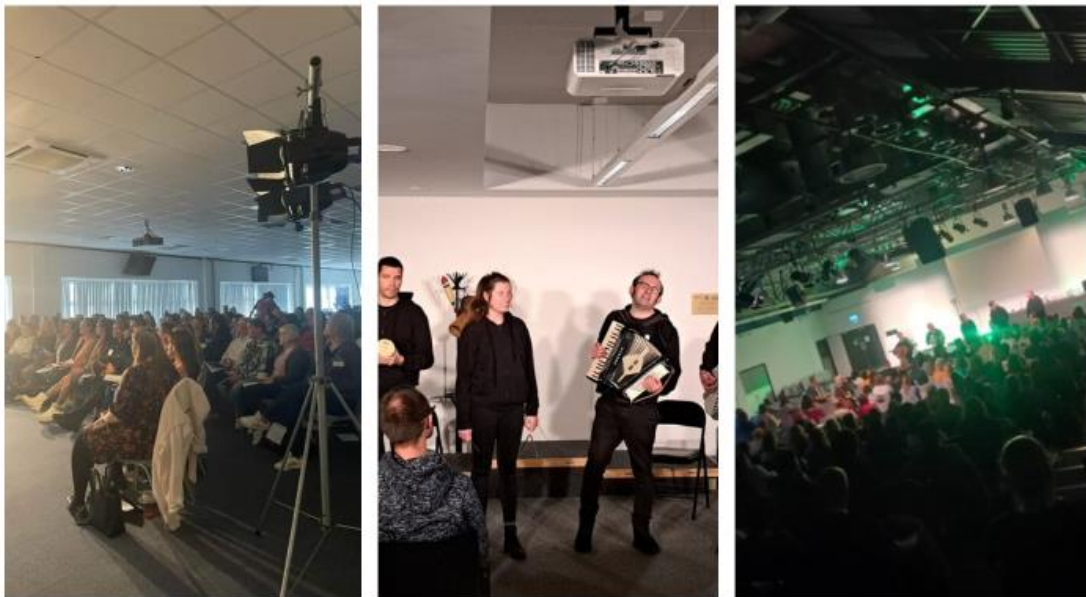
with a web designer to build and test the project website, with an anticipated completion date of July 2024.

### Delivery: The Tour

From September 2023 the cast and project team went into rehearsal and production. There were four weeks of full-time rehearsal for the actors. Georgia Philip and Rosa Chalfen (the research intern) worked to promote the tour and liaise closely with each local authority training and development team to plan the logistics.

The tour ran from the beginning of October to early November 2023.

- 14 performances: 8 exclusively for practitioner audiences, 6 for public and/or professionals.
- Venues: LA offices, community centre, libraries, arts centre, social club, pub, national exhibition centre.
- Audience numbers: total of c850. Approx 450 professionals/practitioners.
- Workshops: total of 7, delivered to 60 practitioners.



Each performance was preceded by a short introduction, given by Georgia Philip to give context to the show and prepare the audience for what they were going to see. After each performance there was also a 20-minute Q&A discussion with Georgia Philip, Simon Floyd and other members of the core team. The audience were invited to ask questions or share their responses to the performance and any wider issues they felt it related to. These discussions were managed by Georgia Philip and occasionally, where appropriate, individual audience members were supported or signposted to other sources of information.

The first performance was a preview-show to an invited audience, including fathers with lived experience of Children's or other statutory or voluntary sector services.



We delivered seven full day events for local authorities: three in Norfolk (Norwich, Great Yarmouth and King's Lynn), two in Suffolk (Ipswich and Lowestoft) and two in Essex (Colchester and Chelmsford).

We also performed at the Community Care Live conference which gave the show a wider national reach.

We delivered six public performances, in Norwich, Gt Yarmouth, Bury St Edmunds, Lowestoft and Ipswich. We live streamed the performance from Norwich Arts Centre and for the final performance at Chantry Library in Ipswich, we had a BSL signer (and a group of deaf and hearing-impaired fathers).

Most professionals seeing the show were social workers (from a range of teams), social work managers, or family support practitioners, but we also had social work students, practitioners from education, legal services, and voluntary organisations (for example working with domestic violence, or parenting support).



## Evaluation.

Georgia Philip led the evaluation activity, and this consisted of audience feedback forms, a reflective activity within the in-person workshop, and an online focus group discussion for each participating local authority. Ethics approval was given for this work, by the School of Social Work Research Ethics Committee.

### Audience feedback

Feedback forms were given in hard copy before the show and collected back as the audience left; **we received 245 completed forms.**

We have been immensely pleased and somewhat overwhelmed by the positive response to the show and the training we delivered. The most prominent and recurring audience comments are *powerful and thought provoking; emotional; powerful mix/use of light and*

*shade, humour and serious issues; true to life/authentic representation of experience (and services); impactful reflective tool for practice.*

*It's the most powerful piece of theatre I have ever watched! You have completely moved me! I felt every emotion and had goosebumps the entire way!*

*A refreshing, innovative, provoking and enchanting show – I felt drive, hope and clarity for future work and sadness, disappointment toward 'the system'. Incredible delivery of research material.*

*Absolutely brilliant. It made me reflect on my own parenting and the parents I support at work. Moving, funny, clever, thought-provoking; very impactful.*

*Incredible! The acting was superb, the blend of humour and music with a complicated subject matter was spot on. Moving and thought provoking, this will stay with me for a long time.*

### Suggestions for improvement.

The feedback forms asked about what was less successful or what could be improved. There were many fewer responses given for this question, and most related to practical issues such as whether the show needed an interval. But the most significant limitation raised was the lack of diversity in the characters presented. This is an issue we address directly in the introduction to the show as part of putting the stories in context. The show does illustrate a wider issue with cultural/ethnic diversity that arguably exists both in research recruitment and in service delivery; in both the original research studies almost all our participants were White British, heterosexual, and from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This meant that the stories and characters we created reflected that, and that other factors shaping men's experience of fatherhood, such as ethnicity and racism, were not explored. We raise this with all our audiences as part of highlighting the gaps in knowledge and the stories of fatherhood that also need to be heard, but it remains a particular feature and limitation of the show and it would be very interesting to adapt the existing show or devise a piece of theatre to foreground, for example, Black fathers' experiences of Children's Social Care. Other suggestions made related to practical aspects of the show, such as the length, and whether there should be an interval.

### Feedback from professionals.

The summary below is a collation of feedback from professionals across all the performances. The responses are organised in terms of relevance and value of the show for professional development.

The feedback form consisted of six open questions and one scaled question. The scaled question asked about the show's relevance to professional role.

Local authority	Responses to question on relevance to professional role
Norfolk	97% of responses given as 'very relevant' or 'relevant'
Suffolk	100% of responses given as 'very relevant' or 'relevant'
Essex	91% of responses given as 'very relevant' or 'relevant'
Community Care Live	86% of responses given as 'very relevant' or 'relevant'

The qualitative feedback was in response to questions on what the show made them think and feel, the show's strengths and limitations, *how* it might be relevant to their work, and key

take away points. Illustrative qualitative feedback, from professionals, is presented under key recurring themes (which have also been used to organise and present feedback from the in-person workshops and the focus groups).

### Provoking empathy and curiosity.

As described, an overall intention for the project was to provoke and support curiosity and empathy around working with fathers. This intention informed the creation of the show itself, and the design of the in-person workshop and the digital resources. Much of the feedback appeared to relate to this, either through reflections on the importance of attending and responding more carefully to fathers' perspectives, or through reflections on the emotional or personal response they had had to the show. For some practitioners, the power, and potential change point, came from how it made them revisit the boundary between personal and professional identity and experience. For others it was the emotional impact of the show that pushed them to reflect on their own practice.

*Incredible show. It raised awareness not only about the importance of relationships and trust building with fathers but made me reflect on my practice and what I can change.*

*Time! Give fathers time - time to reflect and think what they want but also physical time with them. Give them time to talk and really listen.*

*I need to put myself in a father's shoes more.*

*The most intriguing part for me is realising that dads may mask behaviours or may to appear to disengage because of their past experiences or the lack of empathy and understanding of their individual situations'.*

*The show was incredibly moving. It made me reflect on my practice and the system we work within.*

*Steve's story about constantly being assessed and being in and out of court hit home for me about how fathers must feel (I'm a social worker). Dan's story and seeing him in the contact centre made me cry! So relevant.*

*When each of the characters came on, I thought 'I've met you.' It made me think a lot about my own parenting and my own dad.*

### Challenging practice.

The show is designed to provoke critical reflection and to challenge professionals in their work with fathers. The intention was to do this with care and balance, not least in line with social work principles. Each story in the show aims to raise issues and dilemmas *both* faced *and* caused by fathers encountering local authority (or other) services, and to encourage a professional audience to consider father inclusion at an individual, service, and organisational or systemic level. We were very concerned to know how such provocation and critique would be received by the professional audiences and what they might take from it. The quotes selected here are representative of a willingness to think critically (and honestly) and to acknowledge and engage with issues raised by the stories in the show. The Q&A discussions after each performance reinforced this and the sense of the show as a powerful reflective tool to open up conversations about systemic issues that shape the experience of both fathers and practitioners in their encounters with one another.

*It made me feel a lot of culpability and collective professional guilt and ambition to do more. Incredibly thought-provoking.*

*It opened my eyes and challenged perceptions I didn't know I held.*

*"I was vulnerable once, now I'm a risk" [quoting the character Lee who is a care-experienced father-to-be] It was a really powerful statement and what you portrayed is what it would feel like.*

*It was so valuable and relatable. The powerful message was about the vocabulary, like CIN (heard as sin) and LAC (lack).*

*Kept me interested and engaged throughout – uncomfortable at times but anything that makes you think and resonates has to be great!*

*It lifted the consideration of dads being seen as a second option to mums. Always read in court reports and statements that dad will be considered if children can't return to mum, but why aren't dads considered as a primary option?*

*I sometimes forget about dads' experiences, and their voice is often distant in assessments.*

*To consider how we might enable fathers to talk but for that to make a difference rather than sharing only for it go nowhere.*

*Too often we exclude fathers or make judgements. This performance really highlighted this; we need to do better!*

*The stories resonate so much, its real life, it does happen. We have these procedures in place, and they seem ridiculous. It touched so many emotions.*

### **Dealing with complexity.**

Another integral aspect of the show is its portrayal of complexity and its challenge to binary either/or thinking in social work with fathers. In terms of articulating key messages from the research this relates to the need to see *both* the challenges *and* vulnerabilities of fathers involved with services; the need for both challenge and support. The show also raises wider and deeper questions about the persistent gendering of care and parenting and how these may shape personal and professional encounters with fathers. The feedback from professionals spoke to this and suggests that they were able to recognise and engage with such questions. The Q&A discussions also reflected this line of interest, and the willingness to have more open conversations about the challenges of developing father inclusive practice.

*As a children's social worker, it's hard to balance the safeguarding concerns in relation to the children alongside the impact of trauma/previous negative experiences of services of the adults involved with the children, but the show beautifully highlights the push and pull, the 'right and wrong' argument we have in our heads as we battle to be the best parent we can be.*

*It balanced out domestic abuse and conflict training, it helped to show a broader view.*

*Really nuanced insight into cumulative effect of being marginalised and not well supported.*

*It was excellent. It was very nuanced between men and women and dealing with many complex issues.*

*Really important thought-provoking material. Brave exploration of complex issues breaking much needed territory.*

### Value of theatre for developing social work practice.

A final theme across all the performances was feedback about the particular value of live theatre as a mechanism for delivering social work training. Clearly there was an element of novelty to what we offered, and an entertainment value, but the feedback provided other insights into what it was that professionals found useful or impactful about the show. As indicated in some of the other themes, the live show served to engage people more directly and emotionally, as well as intellectually. It seemed to shift people from thinking about the issues in an abstract way, towards a more embodied and intense reflective space. The professional audiences described experiences of 'recognition' of the characters and their stories, in terms of both professional and personal resonances, along with an emotional investment in them. Linked to the feedback about being challenged over practice with fathers, it appears that theatre show, and the Q&A afterwards provided a constructive, motivating space for critical reflection, in which professionals did not feel overly defensive. Some feedback highlighted the value of learning in a different way and/or the impactful nature of the show. Whilst it would not be feasible to routinely deliver training in the way this project did, it nonetheless demonstrates the value of combining academic research with creative arts as an approach to impact, engagement and professional development. HYF provides an important case study of how such collaborations can produce training resources, including the live show, that can be adapted and used in a range of settings.

*I believe the arts is the best way to engage professionals and get them to really think about their own practice from a deep personal perspective.*

*Thought it was beautifully staged and felt like we as the audience were invited into the conversation rather than having it told to us. The use of music was awesome.*

*Fantastic, well executed, and powerful. It's a novel idea to see key messages be dramatised, connecting with all the characters, and reflecting on our practice – the contradictions and irony in our practice.*

*I've been thinking a lot about fathers recently, but this is kind of jumpstarting me to work on this more.*

*I recognized so many of the scenarios and it has left me feeling so motivated to keep fighting for our fathers in social care.*

*As a human being it feels essential and relevant - we could all do with being more compassionate and this show is a clarion call for that!*

*It was so good, wise and clever. It gives us a different way of learning about it. It was so simple; you didn't have any props, and I could see it and visualise these situations.*

*We go on training all the time, but this is the one that's going to stick with us.*

*I do not think I have seen a more positive response for a training session ever – it was brilliant. Universal acclaim!*

Fig1: Word Cloud generated from audience feedback.



### Feedback from the practitioner workshop.

Each of the seven workshops we did for local authority practitioners included a plenary activity to gather feedback. This involved sharing verbal and/or written reflections about what people had experienced, felt they had learned, and so on.

The format for the workshop involved a brief round of introductions; a warm-up game to get physically active and get people laughing; an exercise to recap each character's story, a decision-making activity to explore people's individual responses to each character; a 'freeze-frame' activity to explore and represent emotional/physical responses to working with fathers; a 'hot seat' activity where people can ask questions of an actor in character; and the plenary. All the activities involved physical movement and working with others and are taken or adapted from Simon Floyd's expertise in theatre making. All the workshops were facilitated by Simon and Georgia, with the support of one of the actors.

Despite having provided a brief to local authorities as part of the sign-up process, we found that participants were always surprised (pleasantly) by what they were asked to do. Like the live show, people found the workshop refreshing and different as a way of learning. It also seemed to offer an opportunity to process what they took from the show and explore issues or experiences further.

*Great to have time to reflect on the play and think a bit more deeply about the characters. It was interesting to put yourself in a professional role and imagine how you might be able to make a difference and support.*

*Really insightful to collaborate with others and get different perspectives on practice/ perceptions of fathers/families, biases, lived experiences etc.*

In line with the learning outcomes we set, we wanted the activities to be experienced as thinking tools, that could potentially be transferable to other team/supervision settings. As the workshops progressed and we became able to reflect on them ourselves, our strong sense was that we were enabling people to acknowledge and reflect on two important aspects of their experience as professionals. One was the boundary between their personal and professional identities and roles; and the challenges of managing these, and the other was the importance of the embodied and emotional aspects of being a social worker. The feedback received aligns with this and is a key takeaway point for future delivery of the workshops.

*Felt good to get out of my head/ to stop thinking, and to focus on my body, how I feel and how that presents to others.*

*Made me think about body language and the way we talk to people we support. Often the anxiety of an initial visit is strong on both sides—interesting to visualize this.*

*The workshop offers different techniques to manage our own feelings in our work. I liked the freeze-framed stage picture to show the different emotions that can come across when speaking to families.*

*Connecting back to the personal. The need for humanity, laughter, and space/time - this will stay with me for a long time, remember how it made me feel.*

### Feedback from the Local Authority online focus groups.

In the week following the end of the tour we held a one-hour online focus group (MS Teams) for each local authority. Professionals (social workers and managers) were invited to express interest in attending as part of the training events we delivered, and then direct invitations were sent via this list. Numbers were capped at 12 per focus group, and each group included a member of the training and development teams, to get their reflections on delivering this kind of training to staff. We asked the groups to reflect on what they saw as most impactful about the show and the workshops and identify where and how it could support change. Once again, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and all three focus groups highlighted the unique nature of the events/approach and the engagement it generated.

*It was so unique. The delivery, the actual presentation, the whole idea of doing something different really reaches different parts of your learning.*

*It's not very often that I've come away from training and wanted to research it afterwards, and I did.*

In terms of supporting change, the responses indicated that the HYF project had been challenging but also motivating.

*I was buzzing from it, and I went straight to one of our operational leads and said, 'this needs to be part of our workforce development'. I was so excited about the way that landed on me.*

There were examples of changes made, or directions for change at an individual, team, and more systemic level, that were really encouraging to see. The next challenge for us as a project team is to consider how to support the embedding of such changes for the long term.

*I had a new family this week, mum and dad living at home, and I found myself giving more eye contact to the dad. Whereas before, you might just kind of, oh, he's there, you*

*know you don't mean to feel like that, but you're automatically working with the mum. But I was more aware of his presence than I have been before.*

*I have fed back to my team, and they want me to give a talk at the next county team meeting.*

*I have been more curious about it, and I have been advocating for them. You will be this children's fathers for the rest of their life. You cannot just be forgotten. So, I'm being more conscious about that and being more patient.*

*I am a practice educator, so I support students during their social work education, and this has helped me think about asking about fathers when students are discussing their cases with me.*

*I would like to have some conversations with senior colleagues and see if we can organize something more around fathers. Our new starter training programme, which is the first year of employment for social workers, doesn't have anything specifically related to fathers and parenting. So, I would love to see that change.*

## **Impact and next steps.**

The evaluation activities demonstrated that the HYF show, the Q&A discussions, and training workshops were hugely impactful in terms of how they were received. It is clear that the show was experienced as powerful, thought provoking and that it prompted curiosity and empathy for men's lives as fathers, as we had hoped. We were successful in embedding messages from the *Counting fathers In* and *Up Against It* studies and supporting emotional as well as intellectual/abstract engagement with these. As a team we have since considered what we might claim as longer term impact or routes to impact, from the project. We offer three suggestions.

### **Setting a bar for engagement and motivation.**

The topic of father inclusion is longstanding and persists as an important area for culture and system change. We feel that part of the lasting value of HYF is its ability to engage people in a qualitatively different way. Whilst we recognise that changing 'hearts and minds' is one part of the process; it is nonetheless a part of the process we have contributed successfully to. The feedback from practitioners, managers and those working in workforce development in all three participating Local Authorities, demonstrates that HYF set a high bar for engagement and motivation of staff. Part of this success lay in the quality of the show itself; the script, acting, songs, staging and so on. HYF was experienced as a hugely powerful, affecting, and memorable encounter with credible and recognisable stories of lived experience. In addition, the production of the tour, and specifically the decision to take the show directly to the target audience by delivering the events in local authority buildings/training venues and by offering events in different parts of each county, was beneficial. Despite the practical challenges of getting busy social workers in the room, the tour was seen as a unique opportunity for reflective professional development, and there was considerable buy-in from staff and managers. From the evaluation activities it was clear that HYF was memorable and motivational in terms of both the topic itself and as an approach to engaging people in training. We know that there is now appetite for more training/performances and for the website.

*That's for me the best form of training because that's the one I'm gonna go away and think about not only this year, but next year and the year after and forever.*



## Proof of concept.

The overall aim of this project was to explore the value of applied theatre to social work practice. To create additional training resources alongside the live show and deliver these directly to relevant professionals in contexts that could enable/enhance attendance. Developing applied theatre is, by definition, collaborative, and HYF is a particularly interesting example through its combination of academic, creative arts, practice and lived experiences at every stage of this project. Our own reflections as a project team combined with the overwhelmingly positive responses from the evaluation demonstrate that this collaboration and knowledge exchange was fundamental to us producing something grounded in lived experience and insight, that reflected the complexity and challenges of social work with fathers, to social workers. The embedded messages from the original research, in different ways, argue for greater confidence and willingness to hold and work with this complexity, for offering *both* challenge *and* support for fathers; holding fathers equally accountable and validating them as parents in their own right; challenging where fathers may 'opt out' and where they are seen as 'optional'. We always aimed to show complexity and nuance through our characters, their stories, and the practice issues they relate to. We see this as particularly important for the topic of father inclusion not least because of the challenge of avoiding fixed/oppositional positions between supporting fathers and supporting mothers or seeing this as a zero-sum game. The range of positive quotes presented in this report do speak to this theme, but one final relevant example to offer here is in relation to working with domestic abuse. It was important to note the reflections from the evaluation activities, about this challenging area of work, and our sense is that there is some real or added value from using applied theatre for exploring this, or other 'high stakes' practice contexts where practitioners need safe spaces to engage and do care-ful thinking.

*A lot of the focus on training with fathers is about them as perpetrators, about them being difficult to engage and not actually thinking about, OK, are they difficult to engage or are we making it difficult for them to engage, you know.*

*I currently deliver quite a range of training for children's services, and this has spurred me on to go back to look at the material and see where I can make the explicit points about engaging with fathers. One area of training where I do talk about the father's has a slightly different focus. This is where I deliver training around domestic abuse and when there is domestic abuse perpetrated by the male partner, we often don't speak to them gain their views because of fear of making the abusive situation worse. This is one area for a bit more reflection.*

Overall, based on the responses of managers (including workforce development managers) in particular, the 'product' we offered was recognised as valuable and value for money; unsurprisingly as this tour was externally funded! The project team feel that now we have demonstrated proof of concept, different funding models for a subsequent tour can be developed. Indeed, we have already been approached by operational leads for Family Hubs and Start for Life in Norfolk with a view to funding future events. As part of scoping any next iteration of HYF we will incorporate further follow up work with Norfolk, Suffolk, and Essex Children's Services to explore whether/how any of the motivation and ideas for improving practice with fathers have been enacted and supported.

## Establishing a trajectory.

Based on the evaluation activity we undertook and the conversations with our advisory group, there is also good evidence of a trajectory for HYF. Again, our aim with this project was to test a model of applied theatre for developing father inclusive practice. We focused on local authority professionals, predominantly social workers, as they are so relevant to the focus of the original underpinning research. Clearly the topic of father inclusion has a much wider reach and relevance, and we could develop our work in a range of service delivery contexts. The School of Social Work at UEA is already building interprofessional learning, as well as research, opportunities with the Schools of Health Sciences and of Medicine and working with fathers is an identified area of interest. The evaluation of HYF also identified, from professionals working in or in partnership with education, health, or justice services, that the issues raised are equally pertinent to these settings.

*It would be good for people who work in court, judges, CAFCASS, to see this. There's a lot of barriers to dads getting involved.*

*Do more of it, and more out to the voluntary sector, reach the voluntary sector and the family hubs.*

The view from our advisory group was that supporting multi-agency, inter-professional working is an important direction to take our work and one that is appropriate given the fit with the underpinning work on fathers, child and family safeguarding, and family justice. There is also a sound local starting point for this, as the Norfolk Safeguarding Children Partnership is developing and implementing a father inclusive strategy to raise the visibility and engagement of fathers in Universal, Early Help and Specialist Children's Services. The HYF team (particularly Georgia Philip) are actively involved in supporting this work. As one next step the project team would like to consider building links with other Safeguarding partnerships as the basis for another roll out of the HYF 'package' (the live show, workshop, online resources). There is scope to explore different formats for a tour, such as fewer but larger events, scaling up of the in-person workshops, or to replicate the model we used with the local authorities. We know we have a vehicle for practice development that can engage people in a meaningful way, and which can facilitate difficult conversations about complex areas of practice, and we know there is momentum and useful direction for this.

## Reflections and challenges.

The main challenges we faced in this project were logistical. To produce a live theatre tour with professional actors requires a run of shows, carefully scheduled over a condensed period. To coordinate this with three different local authorities (each covering a large and largely rural area) was difficult and required a long lead in time (6 months). For any future tours this lead in time should be prioritised and not underestimated. Having a direct contact person in each authority was key and having established relationships with the authorities made the coordination process easier. The coordination with the workforce development teams needed to promote the events was also challenging. Whilst we did provide information in the form of text, images, posters and so on, for any future events, providing clearer guidance about promotion, and having more direct oversight of what was shared and how, would be valuable. Reflections and feedback from the workforce development managers also indicated that they would promote such an event differently in future and not necessarily rely on standard/routine lines of communication or cascading of information. Lastly, we faced challenges to actually get practitioners in the room. Caseloads are incredibly high, social work frequently involves responding to urgent crises or events. We were ambitious in our aims and whilst we were pleased with audience numbers overall, some of the daytime workplace performances were not as well attended as we would have liked. This constitutes

a challenge for the local authorities too, as they were not getting the most from these innovative events (being provided at no cost to them). For future events, making changes to how/where these are programmed into local authorities annual training cycles (for instance making them part of all staff conferences), how they are promoted, or how managers might support staff to attend, would be useful to explore.

## Conclusion

'How's Your Father?' is an innovative, creative, and powerful approach to developing professional practice with men and with fathers. It has collaboration at its heart, and this is an integral part of its success. The 2023 tour demonstrated very clearly that the live show and supporting training resources worked for social workers, and was a highly effective way to provoke reflection, recognition, curiosity, empathy, and motivation to do better. Whilst there were limitations in terms of the logistics of scheduling a viable tour, the realities of the intense demands on social workers' time, and in terms of the stories of fatherhood we foregrounded, and those we have not (yet) told, the project was successful in its aims and objectives. It was ambitious and challenging but has demonstrated the value of applied theatre in social work education and professional development, perhaps especially for digging into topics that might be perceived as 'hard to reach'. The tour established 'proof of concept', strengthened our relationships with the participating local authorities, and helped to identify a trajectory for potential future work. We look forward to exploring that trajectory in the coming months and continuing to pose the question 'How's Your Father?'



**Photo of the project team and actors after the final performance.**