Circle facilitated a focus group in which eight fathers participated. All of these men are supported by our Fathers Worker and all but one also attends our Dads Community Group. Seven of the eight fathers have or have had statutory social work involvement in their families. It was apparent within the conversations that there are conflicting personal views around their identity and their roles as men who are fathers and that these perceptions are fluid, dependent upon the situations/circumstances that they find themselves in.

- The fathers all expressed frustration that their willingness to be involved/more involved in their children’s lives was often viewed by professionals and statutory social work, in particular with suspicion. Further, that their motivation was questioned rather than being viewed as a default position that “they were fathers who had rights and responsibilities.”
- The men’s perception of themselves as “good fathers” was lessened due to the financial circumstances that they found themselves in. All of the fathers are in receipt of benefits, and this impacted on their ability to meet the additional cost of contact with their children, particularly travel cost.
- Accessing information on benefit entitlement was difficult.
- Fathers who only have weekend contact have to fund this from their benefits as a single person. This often led to feeling of inadequacy and stringent budgeting so that they could ensure small treats and on occasions sufficient food and heating when they’re child was with them.
- The men often have a lower sense of self-efficacy probably due to their own personal childhood experiences. They can find it difficult to access resources within their own community. This appears to be a result of their high expectations of what a father should be able to provide and their lack of confidence in entering new situations.

Questions

1. What day to day challenges do you experience as a lone parent or a father who has shared care of his child/ren

The fathers all identified the need for somewhere safe for the children to play. Local resources are in a poor state of repair. Money spent on travel to appropriate activities can often be more than the cost of the event itself.

The lone parent fathers who have the day to day care of their children stated, “it is challenging as you are trying to fulfil the roles of both a mum and a dad.”

All agreed that money/finance is always an issue.

2. Do you experience any particular challenges in a specific aspect of your life for example – work/family/social?
School

The number one issue for the lone parent fathers was getting the children to bed and out to school on time. (The children have often had adverse childhood experiences, feelings of loss and rejection and inconsistency which make it particularly difficult to establish and maintain appropriate routines). They felt that this was significantly more challenging within a single parent household.

Other than this, relationships with the local schools appeared to be very positive.

Work

The fathers felt that it was difficult to enter the workforce in a meaningful way which they all aspired to. They identified issues around childcare, the number of hours that they could work and how they would manage if the children were sick.

One lone parent father, who was unable to attend the focus group as he has moved into employment, identified the support of his employer, children’s school, family and a neighbour as being key to him being able to take up and sustain his employment.

They also felt that the support and advice that they were given from advisers at the Job Centre was often dependant on the particular advisor who was on duty that day. This was especially important to prevent sanctions being put in place if the father could not attend on time due to your child being sick and not having appropriate child care. One father spoke of the excellent support and advice that he had received from the general advisor, but that he had felt that his relationship with the 'lone parent advisor' had been judgemental and unhelpful.

Family/Social

The trauma of separation from their children’s mother often resulted in a breakdown of social networks. The men seldom had supportive family networks of their own and described a feeling of “alienation.”

One father who supports a child with mild learning difficulties simply said “What social life”?

The father’s did identify that their relationship with this organisation,(Circle) including the local Dads Community Group it supports, and others such as One Parent Family Scotland was their only outlet for social activities.

It is to be noted that even within this locality there are other opportunities which the men do not make use of. They identified barriers of class, gender and financial constraints as reasons why they did not attend these opportunities.

3 Do you experience any particular challenges dealing with specific subjects for example - finance or dealing with access or care arrangements?

Finance

The fathers advised that it wasn’t easy to identify what they are entitled to or how to access some benefits. The process then took so long that the men got into debt with budgeting and crisis loans. One dad was left with £40 to last 14days with 4 children.
The dad who cares for his son two days a week, felt discriminated against because he and his son were not entitled to a two bedroom flat. This restricted when he could have his son stay overnight.

When the fathers were engaging in weekend contact with their children they struggled to meet the children's expectation. Father's particularly struggled with basic travel costs. This was connected to their reliance on single person's benefits, without child benefit. The fathers’ previous experience of child protection procedures showed an inequality in how travel expenses were offered to the parents. In one family's experience the children's mother was rightly offered support to visit their child in care within the first week, while the father had to request this and wait longer for support.

Many fathers felt they had to exert more effort than the children's mothers to maintain their parental rights. They described the need to persevere, requiring great energy to get their voice heard by social worker's and the court system. In the organisations experience this can be a re-occurring narrative.

4. What kind of support and/or services is available to you and do they meet your needs?

One father felt that social workers failed his child by not recognising his role and potential as a single father early on. He felt that there should be help made available as soon as the baby is born. The fathers felt that it was often left to them to approach the social worker and ask for what they wanted or needed. One father poignantly reflected “If you are not involved in the beginning, there is nothing to inform you about [your child’s] development and needs when you later gain custody”. In the organisation's experience this reflects the experience of many fathers that we have supported. They are less likely than mothers to assume parenting will come to them by some natural ability. This means that once they are engaged in the life of the child they will often recognise the need for guidance in their role as a parent, particularly if they are to be a lone parent father.

One Parent Family Scotland was a great help to one of the focus group fathers. Other fathers reflected that this organisation's individual support and group work were of great value. One father described looking in shop windows and community venues for flyers or leaflets offering parenting advice. The others felt that speaking to other parents had been their main source when they need to find support and guidance on parenting. The Dads Community Group, run by Circle's Haven Project, was described as a positive experience. This group brings together a group of local fathers with a wide range of experience and children of various ages and stages.

The fathers feel that without targeted support to fathers such as Circle’s Haven Project, they would have very little knowledge of what support services are available, or how to access them.

The fathers perceived a lack of communication between services. They felt that there was no support available until the situation became a crisis. Social workers were perceived by the fathers in the focus group as favouring the mother over the father.

In service language the fathers felt that 'parent' equated to 'mother'. When fathers did attend parenting groups they felt intimidated by the female focus. They suggested that a parenting group solely for fathers would be helpful.
5. Do you feel you get equal access to all types of public facilities when out with your children?

The fathers felt that most groups are still held for the mother and child. There is a need for more groups to focus on the relationship between fathers and their children. Of the current groups and actives available in the local area there were two main barriers identified by the focus group fathers. Class was a barrier to attending some dads groups. The fathers described feeling uncomfortable when "other dads turned up in their 4x4's". The fathers felt socially excluded from these groups.

The fathers were able to describe specific experiences of stigmatisation by other remembers of the public when they took their young children to the local swimming pool. This left them with the uncomfortable feeling of being observed with suspicion, as a single man with a child, rather than a father with his son or daughter.

6. If you said that you experienced challenges, what are your thoughts on public perception and general awareness of the issue that you identified?

Families who have had statutory social work involvement described their presence as a father to be automatically viewed as dangerous. The men felt that they hadn't had a fair or transparent assessment, at least initially. This left them feeling alienated and without a voice. Where there had been an assessment of risk and factors had been identified, the fathers felt that the changes they had made to address issues were not always acknowledged. In the context of Child Protection and Children's Hearings processes, the fathers experienced decisions being made based on historic reports being revisited and which did not take account of changes the dads had made in their lives. To get their voices heard the fathers felt they needed the advocacy of support workers within meetings before other professionals would listen to them. Even then it was felt by the fathers that social workers and other professionals would always prioritise the views of the children’s mother over those of the father. One dad said it was only down to 'persistence that I got custody'.

There was a consensus that

- ‘Attitudes [are] starting to change towards how the public views dads with their children, albeit slowly.’
- The men felt that once they were established as a lone father they have been respected within their immediate community of friends and neighbours.

Pete Cloke
Family Support Worker- Fathers Circle
24 February 2014