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Lost Dads: The Fathers and Family Breakdown, Separation, and Divorce (FBSD) Project

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Acknowledgements

First, I thank all the men who contributed to this project, and for sharing their stories and making themselves open and vulnerable to us. So many of the men were talking about such deeply painful experiences, some for the first time, and I only hope that we have delivered a report which accurately and powerfully reflects their experiences.

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Finally, I would like to thank my own father. This was for him.

This project is dedicated to all of the dads we have lost; may we yet save many more.

Language & Terminology

Family Breakdown – Family Breakdown refers to the ending of a relationship with a partner with whom one has children, including separation and divorce proceedings, as well as experiences following immediately and in the longer term.

Children – When referring to a 'child' or 'children', we are referring to a child or children of any age, including adult children, for whom a parent has responsibility. In most instances, this will refer to children who are socially and legally recognised as a child (i.e., those under 18).

Parental Responsibility – In relation to children, we will be using the term parental responsibility/ies to describe arrangements relating to contact with children. We will not be using the term 'custody' or 'child contact' to describe parenting arrangements, as these are judicial terms, and some respondents did not speak about court proceedings.

Domestic violence and abuse (DVA) **–** Many participants spoke about abuse from their (ex-) partners. They would often use the broader term 'abuse' meaning DVA. DVA is defined as an incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening, degrading and violent behaviour, including sexual violence, in the majority of cases by a partner or ex-partner, but also by a family member or carer. It can include, but is not limited to, the following: Coercive control (a pattern of intimidation, degradation, isolation and control with the use or threat of physical or sexual violence), psychological and/or emotional abuse, physical or sexual abuse, financial or economic abuse, harassment, and stalking, and online or digital abuse. Where authors or participants use the term 'abuse' we/they are referring to DVA unless otherwise specifically stated.

Parental Alienation – A common form of abuse described by fathers was when children were used 'against them' as a form of emotional abuse and/or coercive control. This is increasingly described as parental alienation, defined as a situation whereby one parent has a negative influence on a child's relationship with the other parent and makes a deliberate effort to intervene and prevent the relationship from developing/continuing or improving.

Structure

This report begins with an executive summary, followed by key findings and interpretation, and then recommendations. The more detailed aims of the report are then presented, and the methodological structure is outlined. Comprehensive findings from across the three studies are then provided, before a general discussion and conclusion. The appendices contain a detailed literature review on fathers and FBSD, more information on the chosen methodology for each study, and references.

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1. Executive Summary

The Samaritans report that in the UK, around 800,000 people make contact every year because they are considering taking their lives. **5000 people will complete suicide**. Men are 2.4 times more likely than women to do this; equating to **11 men every day**. Suicide is also the **leading cause of death for men under 50** and men are particularly **vulnerable to suicide after separation or divorce**; they are **11x** more likely than women to engage in suicide ideation at this time.

There have been many studies looking at the impact of family breakdown on women; however **relatively few about men; and about men *as fathers***. To address the question of why men are more likely to take their lives following family breakdown, we need to understand much more about the impact of breakdown and its aftermath on the mental health of fathers. And to look at these issues holistically.

This **multi-study, multi-method project** utilised a quantitative client case review (Study 1), a qualitative survey and interviews with fathers (Study 2), and a deliberative inquiry with organisations supporting men (Study 3) to provide the most **comprehensive examination** of the experiences of separated fathers to date. This study brings together material and new research from over **1,000 clients, 130 fathers, and 6 organisations** which reveals a clear trajectory for fathers following FBSD.

Our most crucial finding is the ***extremely*** negative impact on the mental health of fathers when they (most often) become the **non-resident parent (NRPs)** and are therefore much less likely to have **continued and stable contact with their children** compared to mothers. Fathers are also **less likely to seek help for their stress and poor mental health** related to separation, and culturally and in the workplace, far less support is available to men as fathers. And should domestic abuse be part of the equation in the breakdown, fathers are even more overlooked **and may face further helplessness**, as services and society often **fail to recognise them as likely victims**.

Fathers also reported that they were forced to engage in **extensive and draining processes even to be able to see their children** (including adult children over the age of 18.) This frequently **involved alienation, often through family court processes**, which further traumatised men and was accompanied by further invisibility and a lack of support.

All of these experiences were shaped by **negative stereotypes about both fatherhood and masculinity**, which limited men's ability to seek and receive effective support.

The results from this report, alongside yearly suicide and attempted suicide figures suggest that, for a disproportionate number of men as fathers, **these experiences simply become too much**, and they can no longer cope; leading to **suicidal ideation, attempted suicide, or, tragically, suicide itself**. It is the bereaved children who then suffer from the **irrecoverable loss** of when their parent takes their own life.

We believe it impossible that anyone reading the testimonies recorded in this report will not be moved by the **misery, devastation, and pain** expressed by the fathers who courageously shared their experiences with our research team. They urgently need more understanding and support.

The resulting recommendations, therefore, recognise that, as a society, we need to ***act***, not only to support already separated fathers but to **change and reshape attitudes and stereotypes** that produce such experiences in the first instance. Most importantly, we must urgently recognise the impact on the child when the presence of their father is lost, including

through suicide. Put simply, we need to urgently appreciate the **value that fathers have on the lives of children, regardless of whether parents stay together or separate and divorce.**

Such a change would not only **save the lives of thousands of men but greatly enrich the lives of our children.**

2. Key Findings

There are **six key findings** from this project.

1. FBSD is a **deeply traumatic experience** for fathers, accompanied by a wide variety of mostly **negative emotions**.

Fathers described various circumstances to the breakdown, from abusive behaviours on the part of their partner to relationships that had simply 'drifted apart'. Several of the fathers mentioned pregnancy and the birth of children as sources of significant strain, and the precursors of FBSD (Bateson et al., 2017; Carlson et al., 2014). This has been shown in previous research on men's experiences of domestic violence and abuse (DVA) and parental alienation (PA) (Bates & Hine, in press; Hine & Bates, 2022; Lee-Maturana et al., 2022), suggesting that greater support for parents both during and after their reproductive journey would be beneficial (Wells, 2016). Following FBSD, they detailed an array of negative emotions, including sadness, anger, shame, guilt, and despair, all of which have been previously evidenced (Millings et al., 2020). Due to the mixture of emotions, men described this time as a 'rollercoaster', suggesting a struggle to manage several competing feelings (Baldwin et al., 2019). This finding should be considered within the context of masculinity values such as stoicism and suppression of emotion (Connell, 2020), which may have implications for help-seeking and coping (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Oliver et al., 2005)

2. Many fathers experience abusive behaviour both during the FBSD event and beyond as a form of **post-separation abuse**; much of which involves the use of **parental alienating behaviours** as a form of emotional abuse and coercive control.

Some fathers reported abusive behaviour, both within their intact relationship and post-FBSD. This was reflected in client case data, with around 40% of men reporting abusive behaviour post-FBSD when approaching a support service. Critically, this supports a growing body of literature on men's experiences of post-separation abuse (Bates, 2020), particularly around legal proceedings relating to parental responsibility, otherwise known as legal and administrative abuse (Tilbrook et al., 2010). Indeed, men spoke frequently about how their children were utilised to exert control over them and their behaviour, again reflecting previous work in this area (Bates, 2020), and with severe consequences for both men and their children.

Several fathers spoke specifically about their children being 'weaponised' against them, describing behaviours reflective of so-called parental alienation (PA; Harman, Warshak, et al., 2022). Specifically, fathers detailed several recognised parental alienating behaviours (PABs; Harman, Warshak, et al., 2022), such as control of contact time, denigration, and manipulation of the child's opinion of the parent. This again supports growing recognition of PA as a form of family violence (Harman et al., 2018), and of the enactment of PA behaviours against fathers (Bates and Hine, in press) particularly due to their role as a non-resident parent (NRP; Bates and Hine, in press). Again, many of these experiences were specifically linked to the profound negative impact described by fathers.

3. Fathers' experiences of negotiating parental responsibility are **overwhelmingly negative**, especially when this involves **family court processes**.

The worst experiences for fathers following FBSD came from negotiations around parental responsibility and contact. Indeed, supporting men through these processes was the predominant reason for the fundamental existence of most of the organisations contributing to this project. Specifically, fathers described their all-encompassing despair resulting from their 'fight' for time with their children, particularly in cases involving the family court system, and where children had been purposively alienated from them. Fathers were particularly damning of family court processes and associated organisations, which they believed to be biased

against them as fathers, reflecting previous work with fathers and the courts. Subsequently, several of the recommendations provided by fathers and organisations relate to fundamental reform of the family court system, and wider legal and societal change, including a rebuttal assumption of shared care, and a revolution in thinking around fathering. Therefore, a multi-agency approach is required around societal structures and fathering both for intact and ruptured relationships, as some fathers identified the pregnancy and postnatal period as the origin of many stressful identity shifts for men, as well as added responsibilities and tensions in the relationships with their partners. Specifically, fathers argued that a lack of extended paid paternity leave or recognition of parental responsibility from health care providers set the tone for how, after FBSD, their partners and the legal system acknowledged their paternal rights and awarded them the opportunity to participate in their children's lives (Pearson & Fagan, 2019; Threlfall & Kohl, 2015). Echoed by professionals, men's testimonies suggest that the lack of gender-inclusive training for healthcare professionals working with fathers or social policy frameworks targeting both resident and non-residential fathers puts men at a disadvantage from the very beginning.

4. FBSD has a hugely negative impact on fathers, including **significant mental health issues** and **suicidal ideation**.

FSBD had a profound impact on fathers, both in relation to themselves, but also their children, and the parent-child relationship. Indeed, it is hard to state the profundity of this impact, beyond the power of the testimony provided directly by fathers themselves. However, what is evident is that this impact occurs across a variety of domains (i.e., financial, emotional, health, and mental health) and results in various 'needs'. Crucially, as noted above, fathers directly identified specific sources of anguish beyond the general distress of the FBSD event, specifically court processes (which also caused huge financial strain) and abusive behaviours by their ex-partners (specifically when these were alienating behaviours).

The biggest impact was on men's mental health, reflecting previous work on men's elevated risk following FBSD (Affleck et al., 2018; Kruk, 1991). Specifically, results highlighted the severe mental health difficulties experienced by men and pointed specifically to an increased risk of suicide (Scourfield & Evans, 2015). Study 1 showed that approximately 40% of men approaching the service had experienced suicidal thoughts, almost all fathers from Study 2 mentioned severe mental health issues and suicidal ideation, and the organisations in Study 3 spoke about the emotional support required by men to deal with these issues and thoughts. There is now, therefore, substantial support to identify separated men as an ***extremely*** vulnerable group in relation to mental health, and one which requires a dedicated system of support.

5. Fathers **struggle to seek help** following FBSD, as they face both **internal** and **external** barriers to seeking support.

Significant help-seeking barriers exist for fathers experiencing FBSD, both internal and external, many of which were also mentioned by fathers. Most *internal* barriers related to either constructions of masculinity which encourage independence and stoicism (Connell, 2020) or negative and dismissive stereotypes about fatherhood (Baldwin et al., 2019), both of which limit men's ability to recognise their a) emotional and mental health needs and b) forms of victimisation (i.e., as a result of DVA or PA). Indeed, organisations suggested that challenging these stereotypes is probably one of the most important ways to improve the circumstances of men after FBSD and many men also highlighted how things 'needed to change'. Indeed, these were also reflected when organisations and men discussed *external* barriers, as these stereotypes also affected the commissioning of services to support men and their ability to reach out to friends and family.

Fathers did still disclose various ways of coping, including both informal and formal support. However, these men routinely reported difficulty in accessing services. Those who were fortunate to benefit from legal, social, or mental health support – either through private

healthcare plans from their workplace or from the public healthcare system - claimed they felt huge improvements in their physical and emotional landscapes. When support was not available, this meant that men often chose other forms of coping, including increased alcohol and drug use, bad diets, and smoking. More positively, men also reported 'healthy' coping mechanisms, but these had to be developed and enacted by men themselves, rather than under direction.

6. A **holistic, life-course** approach is necessary for addressing the issues facing fathers and their children following FSBD.

Due to the comprehensive assessment provided across studies, data types, and populations, a more holistic view of fathers' experiences is now available for the first time. Specifically, by looking at the data provided by fathers and organisations, we can now start to identify common experiences for these men and create a broader experiential picture. Firstly, it is clear that fathers feel at a disadvantage *within* their intact relationships in relation to fathering, as a result of societal structures *and* stereotypes which minimise and limit their roles as caregivers. Subsequently, when FBSD occurs, fathers are placed 'on the back foot', as their involvement in children's lives and their contact with them is neither assumed nor legally enshrined (Haas & Hwang, 2019; Hakovirta et al., 2019). Fathers then feel 'forced' to 'fight' for involvement and contact with their children, leading to enmeshment in hugely draining and negatively impactful court processes, with subsequent mental and physical health implications (on top of the 'regular' strain of FBSD as a life event for either parent).

Crucially, when abusive behaviours (including alienation) are involved, all of these experiences are *further* exaggerated, leading to a 'perfect storm' of impact on an extremely vulnerable population. Moreover, the stereotypes that disadvantaged fathers within their intact relationships then influence their experiences at every turn post-FBSD – minimising their post-relationship fatherhood role, their experiences of abusive behaviours, and shaping their extremely negative experiences of court processes. Social support networks and organisations attempt to support these fathers, but this support is limited by the very same stereotypes above, as men are discouraged from seeking support, and support itself is limited due to a lack of recognition and subsequent funding. See Figure 2 for a visual representation of this process, and indications of what we need to decrease (red pathways) and increase (green pathways).

Men experiencing FBSD are often left powerless, frustrated, and hopeless. Many of them end up lost – not just circumstantially and emotionally, but sometimes from existence, as they complete suicide.

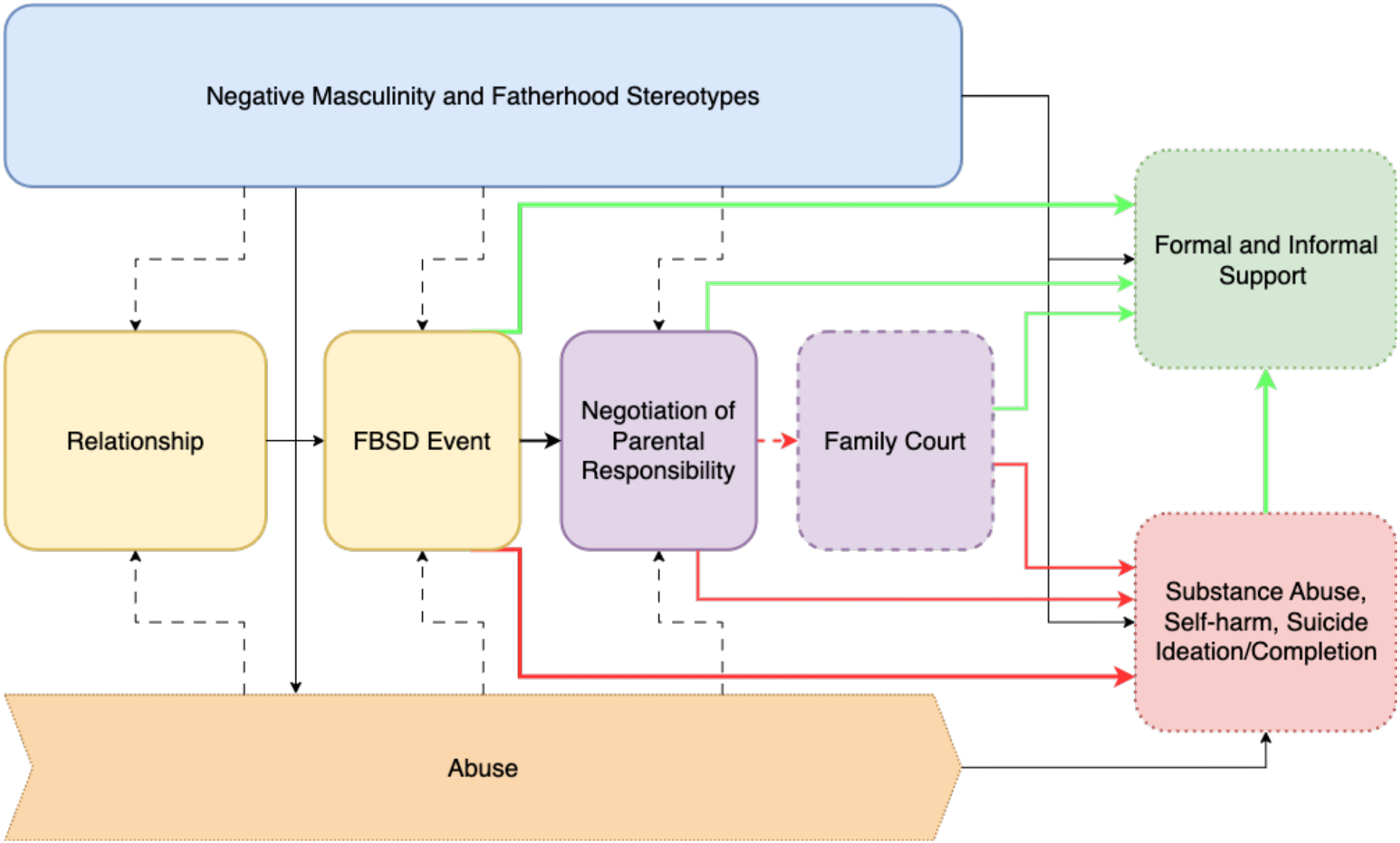

Figure 1. A holistic view of father's experiences of FBSD

3. Recommendations

Recommendation 1 – FBSD 'Triage'

- All studies showed that men are **devastated following family breakdown** and **desperately require support**, which is often not readily available, that they do not feel comfortable using, or that is not identified as being needed by men.
- They are left to deal with **crushing mental health issues in isolation**, which frequently progresses to **desperation and suicidal ideation.**
- There is therefore an urgent need for **immediate intervention and care**, for fathers and the family as a whole, following FBSD in the form of **'Triage'** services within the community.
- Whether these are **specific FBSD centres, part of the new so-called 'family hubs' network[1], or a comprehensive online resource (or all of the above)**, greater intervention is clearly necessary.

Recommendation 2 – Rebuttal Presumption of 50/50 Shared Responsibility

- As shown in Studies 2 and 3, most of the issues following FBSD came from **negotiations around parental responsibility.**
- This was exacerbated when **domestically abusive behaviour was involved** from the ex-partner, including through **alienating behaviours**, which were hugely mentally distressing to fathers and their children.
- Many fathers and organisations argued that much of this stress (and the opportunities for post-separation abuse) would be greatly reduced if a **rebuttal presumption of 50/50 shared parental responsibility[2]** existed in the UK and Ireland.
- This would place mothers and fathers on **'an equal footing'** following FBSD and lead to fewer distinctions between parents (i.e., who is the 'resident' parent) and financial disputes.

Recommendation 3 – 'Root and Branch' Reform of the Family Court System

- In Studies 2 and 3, **opinions of the family court system were overwhelmingly negative.**
- This related to several areas, including **a lack of ramifications for false allegations, inequality relating to legal aid,** and **a lack of mediation of a first port of call.**
- There is therefore a need for a **'root and branch' reform of the family court system,** which addresses the issues outlined above and fundamentally attempts to remove the adversarial and acrimonious positioning of separation wherever possible.

Recommendation 4 – Increased and Reshaped Societal Recognition

- In Studies 2 and 3, fathers and organisations reported that **men are chronically overlooked**, not just in relation to FBSD, but accompanying experiences **such as domestic abuse and parental alienation.**
- They are also overlooked in relation to **mental health and service needs**, and both by **informal and formal support networks.**
- One reason for this are **negative masculine stereotypes** and the belief that men 'can handle things on their own', as well as **negative stereotypes about fatherhood**, which devalue the role of fathers in children's lives.
- Increasing recognition of men as **valuable parental figures** in children's lives and as potential **victims of abuse and alienation** would prove both directly impactful in men's lives and aid in the commissioning and delivery of effective services.

[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/family-hubs-and-start-for-life-programme-local-authority-guide

[2] In common law and civil law, a rebuttable presumption is an assumption made by a court that is taken to be true unless someone proves otherwise.

4. Aims, Objectives, Research Questions, and Outcomes

4.1 Aims

1. To understand the impact of family breakdown, separation, and divorce (FBSD) on fathers and their children.
2. To understand how we can best support fathers and their children when experiencing FBSD.

4.2 Objectives

1. Analyse and interpret quantitative information provided on post-family breakdown experiences.
2. Survey and conduct interviews with fathers on their and their child(ren)'s experiences of family breakdown.
3. Conduct a deliberative inquiry with third-sector providers on their experiences of supporting fathers and their child(ren) through family breakdown.
4. Identify the impact of experiences (including parental alienation and post-breakdown abuse) on fathers and children.
5. Identify current mechanisms (or lack thereof) of support for fathers and children experiencing FBSD.
6. Identify opportunities for improvement in the provision and the societal understanding/awareness.
7. Disseminate project findings to stakeholders/partners and the funding body.
8. Create a nuanced and dynamic reservoir of journeys, stories, and narratives that might better inform public policy in this area, and to make associated recommendations.

4.3 Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of fathers and children experiencing FBSD?
2. What is the impact of these experiences on fathers and children, particularly in terms of mental health (including suicide)?
3. What support is available, and what are the challenges of providing support within the sector?
4. What improvements can be made to ensure that fathers and children get appropriate support?

4.4 Anticipated Outcomes

1. Improved understanding of the behaviours which characterise fathers' experiences (including parental alienation, isolation, and coercive control).
2. Improved understanding of the impact of FBSD on fathers and their children.
3. Improved understanding of current provision and support mechanisms available for fathers and children experiencing FBSD.
4. Improved insight into sector challenges in supporting fathers and their children.
5. Increased insight into societal and policy-based issues (i.e., awareness and recognition).
6. A robust UK empirical evidence base on all of the above to help: the commissioning of support mechanisms for fathers and children, improved legal practice, and enactment of intervention opportunities.

5. Research Design

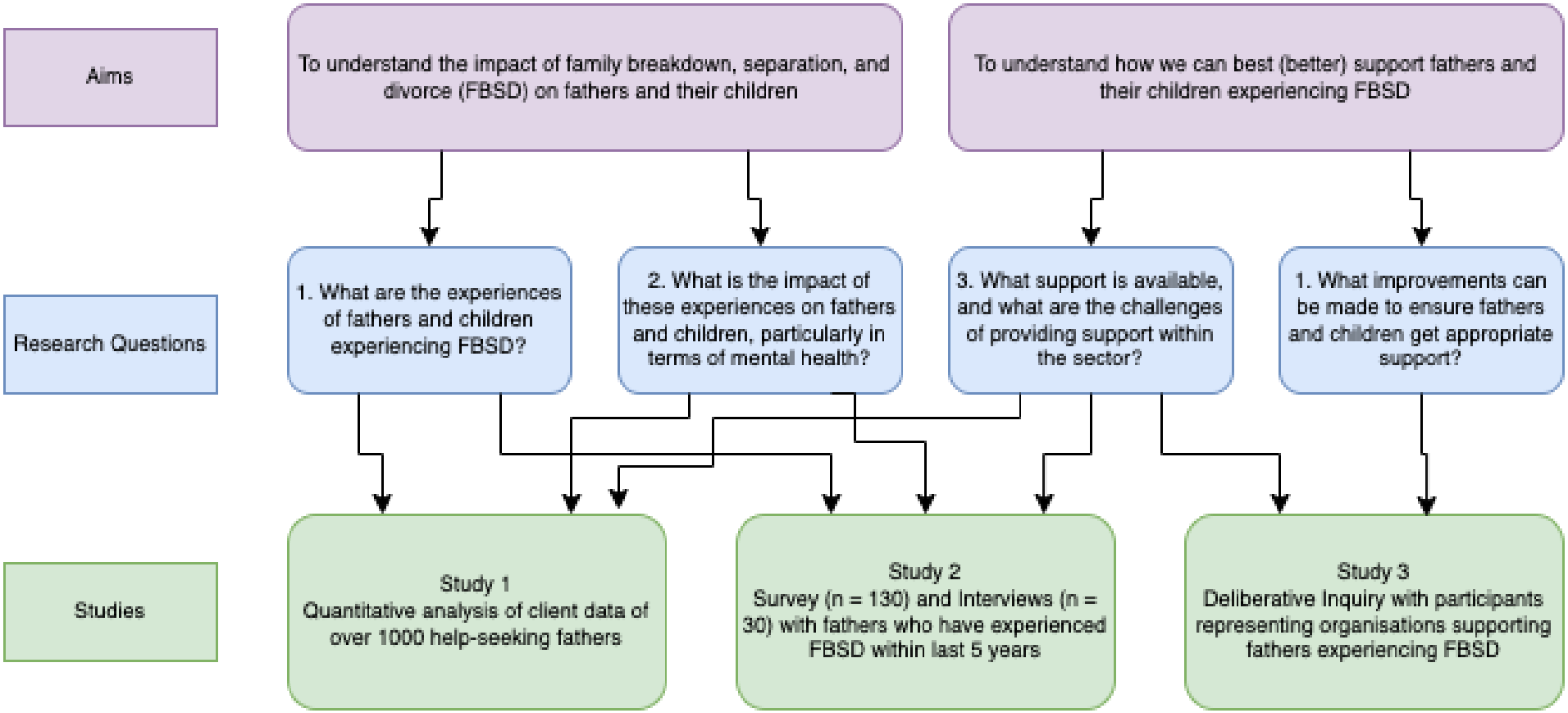

Figure 2. Research Design for this Project

6. Study 1 – Client Case Review

The first study sought to provide a 'baseline' understanding of the experiences and needs of men experiencing FBSD, by examining a large-scale dataset provided by a charity supporting fathers in this position.

6.1 Results

6.1.1 Demographic Characteristics

1,030 cases were analysed. The mean age for the sample was 38.76 years old (min = 18, max = 77, SD = 9.04). Most participants identified as heterosexual (97.5%) followed by bisexual (1.1%) and homosexual (1.1%). Furthermore, 15.6% of participants described themselves as having a disability, while only 10.3% noted that they had served in the armed forces. In relation to ethnicity, most participants stated they were White English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, or British (74.1%), with the next largest category being African (4.3%), followed by Indian (3.5%), or any other white background (3.5%).

6.1.2 Context of Help-Seeking

Regarding employment status, 52% of participants stated they were employed full-time, 5.5% were employed part-time and 18.8% were self-employed. The remaining 23.1% were unemployed or retired (0.6%). In relation to financial status, 52.9% of people said they were not in debt while the remaining 47.1% stated that they were in debt, with most reporting their debt to range between £0 to £5,000.

42.7% of participants reported that they live on their own, while 22.5% lived with their family, and 18.9% lived with their new partner. The remaining 15.9% of participants reported that they lived with their ex-partner, in shared housing, with friends, were homeless, or other. The majority of participants were from counties in the South-East of England, specifically Kent (46.8%), Greater London (9.4%), and Essex (4.7%).

The mean number of years participants had been separated from their partner was 2.66 (min = 0, max = 48, SD = 3.23, median = 2). The mean number of children participants had was 1.85 (min = 1, max = 7, SD = 0.97, median = 2). 78.5% of participants' children lived with their mum exclusively, and only 9.7% lived exclusively with their dad. 10.4% were split equally amongst their mum and dad, with the remaining 1.4% living on their own or with their siblings, with a guardian, or "other".

Regarding legal procedures, 43.4% of participants said they were currently part of a court proceeding, while 56.6% were not. From this, only 19.9% of participants had instructed a solicitor or barrister, while the remaining 80.1% had not. Table 1 outlines which participants had a conviction, caution, or warning against them (including driving under influence, drug charges, actual bodily harm, arson, and theft) or were a victim of another crime themselves, including domestic abuse. Importantly, 46.9% of participants claimed to have been a victim of domestic abuse, with 0.9% currently at risk of abuse and 10.4% of participants not sure whether they had been a victim of domestic abuse.

Table 1. Crime Descriptive Statistics		
	N	%
Conviction, Caution or Warning?		
Yes	150	15.6%
No	814	84.4%
Whole Sample	964	100%
Victim of Another Crime?		
Yes	131	18.7%
No	571	81.3%
Whole Sample	702	100%
Victim of Domestic Abuse?		
Yes	455	46.9%
Yes - Currently at Risk of Harm	9	0.9%
No	405	41.8%
Not Sure	101	10.4%
Whole Sample	970	100%

6.1.3 Client Needs

Table 2 highlights the breakdown of services which participants were looking to access via Dads Unlimited, with 71.8% looking to access the mentoring service, 14.8% looking to access court support (including court child arrangement support, court support without a barrister, and court financial support).6.5% of participants were looking to access mental health counselling.

Table 2. Service Uptake Descriptive Statistics		
	N	%
Dads Unlimited Service Uptake		
Mentoring	882	71.8%
Court support	182	14.8%
Mental health counselling	80	6.5%
Support group	40	3.3%
Pastoral support	25	2.0%
Co-parenting workshop	7	0.6%
Face-to-face clinic	6	0.5%
Independent domestic violence advisor	4	0.3%
School family liason	1	0.1%
Community activities	1	0.1%
Whole Sample	1228	100%

In relation to other needs, 18.1% of participants reported that they had increased their drug and/or alcohol consumption to cope with their situation. Importantly, **41.9%** of participants noted that they had struggled with suicidal thoughts, as highlighted in Table 3.

Table 3. Drugs, Alcohol and Suicidal Thoughts Descriptive Statistics		
	N	%
Increase in Drugs or Alcohol		
Yes - illegal drugs	48	6.5%
Yes - abused alcohol	54	7.3%
Yes - both	32	4.3%
No - neither	607	81.9%
Whole Sample	741	100%
Suicidal thoughts		
Yes	371	41.9%
No	515	58.1%
Whole Sample	886	100%

6.2 Study 1 - Brief Discussion

The case review provided above highlights several areas of interest in relation to men seeking support for family breakdown. A substantial proportion of the men lived alone, did not live with their children on a permanent basis, were part of ongoing court proceedings, and reported being victims of domestic abuse. Most of the fathers in this sample needed mentoring and emotional support, most likely due to significant and severe mental health issues represented by alarmingly high levels of reported suicidal ideation. Taken together, these statistics present the picture of an extremely vulnerable population.

7. Study 2 – Survey and Interview of Fathers

To expand understanding of some of the issues outlined in Study 1, Study 2 sought to gather detailed qualitative information from fathers who had experienced FBSD in the last five years, to create a rich and nuanced picture of this time in their lives.

7.1 Results

During analysis, six themes were generated, each with several subthemes. These were 'The FBSD Event', 'Domestic Violence and Abuse (DVA)', 'Negotiating Parental Responsibility', 'Impact of FBSD', 'Coping', and 'Reflecting on Past, Present, and Future'.

7.1.1 The FBSD Event

The FBSD event itself often occurred as the culmination of general relationship deterioration and resulted in a large array of negative emotions.

7.1.1.1 Stressors during the relationship

Although some fathers described previously having a "really good... really strong relationship" (WD17SC) with their ex-partners while together, others recall a "rocky" (GR21TO) relationship that was "quite antagonistic" (K12CO) and "conflictual from the very start" (AS24AI).

Fathers often commented that their relationships with their ex-partners "early on was good, like really good" (AL17KL) and "the first year and a bit were pretty good" (KI09BE). However, tensions started to mount because of stressful life events or their partner's growingly abusive and/or controlling behaviour:

> "And for the first six months to a year, everything was going really well, and as the last year kind of moved on, there was kind of changes in the dynamic of the relationship and maybe some of the behaviours that my ex was kind of displaying in terms of controlling behaviours" (HH18DU)

Many fathers cited various life challenges as having created tensions in the relationship, including "pregnancy" (AS24AI, HH18DU), "the birth of each child" (AS24AI), "post-natal depression" (AL17KL, DU10PA, LO02BA), raising the children, "a big family move" (AR25DU), "property development […] maintaining the property and kind of doing it up" (LO16PL), "money woes" (EL12DU), financial insecurity due to the COVID-19 "lockdown […] we were both furloughed" (SP22WI), and "working lives became incredibly stressful" (WD17SC).

> "I would say that post-natal depression stepped in after the second child. Absolutely. […] All three were in very quick succession. It was three children under three years. So I think there was quite a lot of physical effect on my ex partner from having multiple childbirths and such thing. Her character totally transformed." (DU10PA)

> "And then dealing with a small baby was a big source of additional conflicts relative to […] how to take care of them, what strategy to adopt, what activities, when, how all that. That was all a source of conflict." (AS24AI)

> "And then because we were in lockdown and then with the uncertainties of finances and lack of work and not knowing the future, big factors that were affecting the dynamic of the relationship." (SR23WO)

Some reflected that the relationship was fast-moving, creating a “high pressure” (EL12U) and “relatively intense relationship” (AS24AI) having “got pregnant fairly quicky” (WC14MO):

> “I think it was quite quick, like from getting together to getting married to having children and things like that seem to progress fairly quickly” (LO16PL)

7.1.1.2 FBSD onset

Among fathers who mentioned which person initiated the end of the relationship, roughly the same number reported that “I ended the relationship” (KI09BE) as those who reported “she called an end to the marriage” (AR25DU). The ends of the relationships were typically triggered by "affairs" (RU02CA), “constant arguments” (AS24AI), one “big conflict” (LO16PL), or the “unsustainable” (WI13FA) culmination of abuse.

> “But the official kind of divorce [...] came when she attacked me with a knife in the house.” (LI26PE)

More fathers than mothers were reported to have “moved out” (AL17KL, KI09BE, LO16PL, RY05ED, SR23WO) and “leave the family home” (EL12DU, SR23WO), although this difference was not drastic. Nevertheless, in almost all cases, the father “lost the […] resident parent status” (WI13FA) either by the children staying “in my ex’s care” (BE03WI), in the family home, or the mother having “left the family home with the children” (AR25DU). For several fathers, this was caused by the mother deciding that she would be “taking the children” (CO19EX) followed by a prolonged period of the father not seeing their children.

> “She took the children away from me […] and she took them up to her parents and I did not get to see my children for two solid months.” (DU10PA)

> “She'd moved out to her parents, which was about an hour away. And from that point on, I didn't see my daughter for about nine months, ten months.” (WD17SC)

The period that followed, whether in contact with their children or not, was described by several fathers as a disorienting, “elongated” (AL17KL) “rollercoaster” (CH09KI, HH18DU, PO219PO, WE04GL) of “being pulled in every direction” (DU10PA) while “your whole life’s […] completely turned upside down” (PO219PO).

> “It's always a moving thing. […] You're always kinda waiting for the calm before the storm. […] It's a constant, you're always on edge, […] Yeah, it's a rollercoaster. It doesn't seem to have a stop or a start. You're always on the rollercoaster and can't get off.” (WE04GL)

> “And I'll find myself close to late forties, nearly 50 before I might actually be able to start living a life again. It will have been on pause since I was like 44 or 45. It's a big chunk of your life that [...] you're powerless. You're just a leaf in the wind. […] You don't really have much determinism in that. You just have to roll with the punches and try and hang in there.” (DU10PA)

> "There's too many things for one person to be all happening in the same time frame: solicitor's costs, child maintenance, potentially having to pay your spousal aliment [...]. And you're still trying to cram in your own working day. And you don't have anywhere to live so, you now need rent or a deposit or something to get things together so you can just have a roof over your head. [...] There's too many things. That's five things I've just listed there that, in my case, were all happening concurrently. There's potentially more. Every situation is different.” (DU10PA)

> “That's one of the big problems is just there's so much uncertainty. You don't know what's going to happen. And you don't know if you're going to stay at your house. You don't know if you're going to see your child anymore. You know, you don't know if you're gonna be robbed blind by your ex and lose all your life savings. So there's just so much uncertainty.” (HA11GL)

7.1.1.3 Negative emotions

The family breakdown event was described as “emotionally charged because it was really tough”. (EL12DU):

> “I mean, you go through a real rollercoaster of emotions. Particularly in the acute stages which are at the breakup, but also then at every kinda touch point, which would be like a court battle or something like that. And what I find is […] as you build up to one of those moments, you know, like a court case, you'd go through real stages of stress. You'd have to manage the impact on your sleep. [...] You'd ruminate a lot about things. And then you kind of have to manage yourself and be very calm and controlled when you're in those moments. And then afterwards, you kinda feel like a wave of relief afterwards. What I'd also find that wasn't until maybe the last year or so, that every interaction I would have with my ex would create a similar kind of wave of stress and worry and anxiety and things like that.” (HH18DU)

As a result, some fathers recognised they had difficulties regulating their emotions and that this was important when engaging with necessary post-separation processes and communication with their ex-partner.

> “I get very emotional. I find my emotions are very, very hard to keep under wraps sometimes.” (KI09BE)

> “I’ve become more aware of not letting emotions get in the way of communication, become more business-like in communication. Being very aware that something could be misconstrued. Be very careful with my wording. Be very careful with what I say to any individuals that are involved.” (SR23WO)

Overall, the fathers cited predominantly negative emotions following the family breakdown, particularly associated with reduced or eradicated contact with their children. These included anxiety and fear:

> “So, there were times when I was in a constant state of anxiety […] there’s always something round the corner but you kind of got to be prepared for it, so it made me become more vigilant” (SR23WO)

> “There's also a certain amount of fear [...] because I'm worried about losing what I've currently got with our daughter. And there is that certain fear that always lies in the back of my head that my ex could possibly just come in and ruin everything […] I still hear horror stories from the shared parenting group where that has happened for some people. And there's always that fear in my mind that it could happen to me too. And it doesn't feel like there's too much legal protection without a lot of uphill battles for that to be reinstated to what I've already got.” (BE03WI)

Confusion:

> “I can't believe that other someone that you love could be so instantaneously evil towards you and not care one bit in the slightest. So that, that's hard to get your head around.” (PO219PO)

Frustration and anger:

> “I was completely out of control dealing with my ex. She controlled everything. She decided what information to release. She decided where the birth happened. She decided on the naming. She decided I wasn't going to be on the birth certificate. She decided she was moving to England. So, I was completely out of control and that doesn't sit well with me. So, I think that was the main cause of the frustration and anger and anxiety.” (CH09KI – relationship ended before the birth of their child)

Guilt:

> “I really felt good about not being in the relationship, but I also felt extremely guilty, like really, really guilty for years. To an extent I still do. I haven't been able to shake the guilt of leaving” (KI09BE)

> “The guilt I felt for leaving those two little creatures unprotected or me away from […] being under the same roof.” (CR21VI)

Pain and hurt:

> “I feel like I have been totally, I feel like I've been put in a sack and kicked by about 20 burly men. My insides are painful as hell because of what's happened and what she's done to me.” (CO19EX)

> “The kind of heartbreak and stress of not seeing our children” (LO16PL)

Sadness:

> “There's been loads of weeks where I've dropped them off and come home and just broken down. Because like under the situation, I knew that I wasn't going to see them for another ten days.” (EL12DU)

> “To kind of go back to when the separation occurred, I was sad. It was something that I didn't want. It was feelings of betrayal" (RU02CA)

Shock:

> “And she informed me on New Year's Day that that was it, the relationship was over without any great explanation or, you know, without any good reasoning. […] The relationship breakdown took me by surprise. I wasn't expecting it. Because my ex changed from behaving in a certain way to behaving in a different way, so that took me by surprise.” (CH09KI)

> “That's when she started the whole divorce proceedings and stuff like that, which came as a shock because I just thought, you know, we're just going through a bit of rough patch” (SP22WI)

> “When I had to go to court [...] And that's when I started discovering all the lies, all the planning, everything that was going on behind the scenes. It's quite a shock.” (ST03ST)

And stress:

> “And it's only now that I'm really starting to process just how difficult that year was. It was extremely stressful. It was very painful” (KI09BE)

> “Stress. Yeah, lots of it when I'm trying to communicate with my ex-partner and getting very, very little in return. And it all seems very, very one sided. Very frustrating.” (WD17SC)

7.1.2 Domestic Violence and Abuse (DVA)

Many of the fathers in the sample reported experiencing abusive behaviour during their relationships and after they had split from their partner.

7.1.2.1 During the relationship

A considerable number of fathers described experiencing emotional and psychological abuse inflicted by their ex-partner. This typically came in the form of “belittling […] emasculating behaviours” (GR31TO), "downplaying” (AS24AI), “name-calling, humiliating” (WC14MO), and “being criticised […] on a daily basis” (WC14MO) sometimes “in front of family, friends, children” (AS24AI):

> “Her language towards me in front of the kids was using insults [...] and then the children were starting to repeat it as they heard it from the other parent. [...] When I was trying to tell my youngest not to do something, [...] she was even entering the nursery and she, in front of other parents, she said, "Shut up, you stupid." And that is exactly the way the sentence would be heard at home. You cannot be angry at the child. But when you go home and you say with embarrassment to the other parent, you say what happened, and she actually laughs [...] that was a wake-up call.” (CR21VI)

Several fathers described feeling as if they were always “walking on eggshells” (WI13FA, WE04GL) in fear of the “volatile” (WI13FA) environment created by their ex-partner's unpredictable behaviour:

> “What happened is that when she got quite abusive, at some point things would flip and she would be out of control. That was the feeling anyway, that she's out of control. Anything could happen. […] It was ultimately the worst part, it was psychological abuse because I ended up being, I was really, really afraid. I was unable to sleep.” (WC14MO)

A number of fathers also experienced “gaslighting” (ST03ST, WC14MO, AS24AI) whereby their partners at the time “played down” (PO219PO) their own behaviour or tried to “confuse you” (ST03ST) by manipulating the narrative of past events, which then further obscured the fathers’ ability to recognise that they were the victim of abuse and/or coercive control:

> “There was a lot of undermining what I was thinking was happening. And ‘No, I didn’t say that’. ‘That never happened’. ‘Oh, I didn’t hit you’. ‘Oh well I hit you, but it was your fault. And it's because you provoked me’.” (WC14MO)

The emotional and psychological abuse described also co-occurred with receiving verbal abuse from their ex-partners, typically in the form of "shouting” (AS24AI, LI26PE, WC14MO), “provocation” (WC14MO), and “swearing in front of the children” (LI26PE).

Several of the fathers were also victims of “a whole host of physical abuse” (LI26PE), such as “hitting” (FE19LU, WC14MO), “punching” (WI13FA), “beating” (WI13FA) with objects, “throwing things” (WC14MO), and “chasing me around with a knife” (LO14AB). This physical abuse varied in intensity depending on the level of injury incurred:

> “There was an argument, a verbal argument over something. [...] She didn't like what I had said. She straddled me and began to strangle me. Now she was really going for it, actually. And it was only I managed to grab a mobile phone and phone the police that she let go.” (PO219PO)

> “I woke up and found that she'd handcuffed me to the bedframe. And she then proceeded to torture me for about [...] 40 minutes. […] in the most appalling way. I still have scars. She poured hot oil and candle wax on my chest. I've got scars there. She inserted things where nothing should be inserted. She did all sorts of horrible things. Stabbed me all over with a craft knife. [...] And when she finally let me go [...] I went downstairs and the first thing she said to me was, ‘What's for dinner?’” (LO14AB)

A number of fathers described that during their relationship, their partner at the time was “using family resources for her own benefit” (AS24AI), for example “using my cards to pay for things” (WC14MO):

> “She'd managed to max out all my credit cards progressively over time. [...] Always, ‘Oh, you know, can you transfer this to your credit card? You've got a better rate of interest. I'll pay the minimum payments and then, you know, it'll all be fine. Blah.’ But it ended up with, it was over 50 grand.” (LO14AB)

> “She was diverting money away from the family […] I don't know who would do that. But, you know, she was stealing money from us. And we had some times where financially it was really difficult. We could have lost the house” (RU02CA)

Although not occurring nearly as often as after the relationship had ended, some fathers reported their ex-partner making “false allegation claims” (WE04GL) against them while they were still in the relationship, often to a health visitor or social services, for example:

> “I was being accused of all sorts of things. I was watching a couple of documentaries on true crime, and I was accused of researching murder. And it got really silly and out of control. [...] Social services got involved. And I was being accused of being an abuser. And it was getting so extreme that I had to move out.” (SR23WO)

> “My wife falsely accused me of having tried to commit suicide in front of the children.” (Crabby Dad)

> “My ex-partner basically took this as what I would say is very much an excuse to team up with the NHS to try and say that I was like an abusive parent. She got the health visitor in. [...] And the health visitor came in and told me about how I would have no chance of ever seeing my daughter again, about how I was a part-time father, and about how I love my cat more than I love my daughter. Absolutely throwing all sorts of abuse at me. And you know, it was that sort of. It was a really, really wrong situation.” (HA11GL)

More than half of the fathers interviewed reported experiencing some level of coercion or manipulation during the relationship with their ex-partner while they were still together, often summed up as “her way or the highway” (DU10PA, GR31TO, WI13FA):

> “She'd assert ways that should be done. Things like you must have 2 showers a day. There was no choice in that. It was just asserted this is how it will be, and there would be an argument if it wasn't done. […] You must do this because this is

> how I think things should be done. Washing up must be done with the tap running rather than with water in the sink. This is my way. It's my way or the highway." (WI13FA)

Fathers described their ex-partner as "very controlling and very dominant and ordering around" (AR25DU) to the extent that there was only "one person ruling the relationship" (CR21VI) and they "couldn't do anything without her approval" (KI09BE). Consequently, the fathers felt they "didn't have a voice" (AR25DU) because "it was just her narrative that I wasn't in a position to really discuss" (AS24AI):

> "I had no impact. I had no voice. I had if I dared speak out or speak up about anything, if it didn't align wholly with what her expectations were in her head, I would have absolute hell. I would be shouted down […] I've lost my sense of identity. And the sense of the person I once was vanished through the control aspect of how I had to behave during the marriage." (DU10PA)

Fathers felt pressured to "comply on several occasions to make things work for the family" (CR21VI). Most commonly this presented as "being isolated from family and friends" (SR23WO), but also came in many other forms, including, but not limited to, the ex-partner's "control over my devices" (HH18DU), restricting activity like "not [being] allowed to have hobbies and interests" (DU10PA), "financial control" (SP22WI), and exerting "control over the way the kids were brought up" (AS24AI) and parented by the father:

> "My role in the children's life has always been a bit limited by my ex-partner to the extent that [...] she was taking the lead and putting herself the in the role of the main parent. And when she wasn't there, she was putting the nanny in that role of the main caretaker. [...] And and I always felt in competition with the nanny. She told me many times that the nanny was playing a better parental role than I did." (AS24AI)

> "I had no access to any funds. I was actually buying clothes and and items from charity shops because I didn't have access to my funds. You know, all the credit cards and everything else. She'd taken hold of that." (LI26PE)

> "She would be very controlling about money. You know, there's email records going back where she queries why I'd buy a coffee at certain times. Why do you have a Spotify account? Why do you have these memberships? [...] She would query everything I did with my own money on the basis that, you know, I earned less than her, therefore she was justified in querying such things." (WI13FA)
> "My social life when I was with my ex-partner was curbed under her control." (PO219PO)

> "As a by-product of marriage, my friends had been pretty much isolated from me. My ex-partner was very disapproving of anyone that was in my life, even my colleagues. [...] She could not have made them feel less welcome if she had tried. […] [...] I was left with no support and really very little chance to discuss this with anybody" (DU10PA)

A couple of fathers described how their children were used "as a means of keeping me under control" (KI09BE), particularly for guilt-tripping the father into staying with their partner at the time.

7.1.2.2 Post-separation abuse, coercive control, and parental alienation

A large proportion of the fathers reported experiencing some form of abuse and/or coercive control from their ex-partner following their divorce or separation. For some, this was a continuation and/or escalation of what they experienced during the relationship. For others, it was only after the end of their relationship that the abusive and/or coercive controlling behaviour began.

> "Nothing that I can foresee during the relationship. It was when I asked for the divorce and then we separated and then everything else. That's when the side of her I didn't know or didn't think about actually emerged." (AL17KL)

> "Even after separation, even after I'm out of the house, even after divorce, it's still there, it's still present and it's still, you know, she's still absolutely gunning for me." (DU10PA)

> "But even now, the partner does what she can. I mean, she said to my friend, I'm going to give this guy hell. I'm going to give I'm going to cause him so much misery, he's going to you know, he's going to give up on life essentially. My friend actually told me that. And she does what she can. […] So, these are the kind of things that I'm dealing with on a daily basis. Daily basis. And there's no let down to her relentless pursuit of trying to cause me misery. […] She's constantly trying to figure out what it is that I'm doing with my life, just constantly trying to disrupt it in any way she can." (LI26PE)

The types of abuse inflicted on the fathers by their ex-partners largely mirrored those reported to have occurred during the relationship, including emotional, psychological, verbal, physical, and financial abuse. However, the means through which the fathers' ex-partners perpetrated this abuse evolved with the changing nature of their relationship. For example, most of this abuse occurred through necessary post-separation contact, such as through the children or through legal and administrative processes.

A number of fathers explained that their children were being used "as pawns" (WE04GL) or "a weapon for getting at me" (WI13FA).

The method by which this was achieved was primarily through the ex-partner "putting barriers between them and me or the other way round" (AL17KL) or altogether "preventing access to them" (LI26PE). Fathers commented on the success of this tactic because of how important their children were to them and because of the mother's power for gatekeeping access (very commonly due to her status as the resident parent):

> "Money, whatever, this materialistic stuff would never have bothered me but the children. Yeah." (AR25DU)

> "It's the only thing now that she has left to keep beating me over the head with, that she can withdraw access to children at the drop of a hat with the flimsiest of reasons. […] So, my boys love being with me, they want to spend time with me. But we can't do it because one person has absolute sole veto power and she uses it as the weapon to upset me. And they're stuck and they're affected by it, but she doesn't care. She doesn't care about that." (DU10PA)

This tactic was used to effectively inflict various types of abuse on the father. Several fathers described how access to the children was used by the ex-partners as a form of emotional and psychological abuse to "mentally/emotionally hurt me" (AL17KL):

> "She's used the children again and again and again to cause, you know, misery, consternation, anxiety. And it really does take a toll just mentally." (LI26PE)

Some fathers recalled their children were “weaponised” (DU10PA) as retaliation or leverage for when their ex-partner was unhappy with how separation or divorce proceedings were progressing.

> “So as part of the separation I had said, “Look can I have that deposit back? Because dad gave that to both of us.” […] So her reaction to that was three days later I got [...] a very loaded text message that basically said - because at that point we'd been doing seven days on seven days off for our shared parent time - It basically said I was only getting to see the kids four days out of a fortnight, and if we didn't like that, we could go to court. And that was it.” (EL12DU)

Several fathers also recognised the “financial incentive for her to keep diminishing the level of contact” (DU10PA):

> “It is all for financial gain, all of it. So, she claimed that I cannot have them overnight, which then makes the child maintenance support payments go up through the roof for her.” (CO19EX)

> “Certainly, there was a financial motive then for [our daughter]'s mum to act as she did, because there was the fear that if [our daughter] lived with us, she would lose access to a lot of her benefits that are sort of gatekept through having parental responsibility and having [our daughter] more often. There's a real perverse incentive to cut off custody to benefit from child maintenance. […] It just creates a scenario where equitable access to the child and a good positive co-parenting relationship are met with barriers.” (KI09BE)

> “If she can diminish my contact by about 30 days per year, then it's a huge financial benefit for her. It means I've got less options to, you know, furnish my children's bedrooms or to buy them clothes or to buy them food or go on holiday. It takes away from the possibilities that they could have better time with me.” (DU10PA)

> “The gall then to ask for child maintenance [...] when I've had my child stolen from me. Absolutely outrageous. [...] It's like someone stealing your child from you and then demanding that you pay them for the privilege. It's absolutely insane. But that's what can be done. And because you're not seeing your child at all, you have to pay the maximum amount.” (HA11GL)

The legal and administrative systems involved in the family breakdown were cited by the fathers as another vehicle through which their ex-partners could continue or begin to inflict their abuse.

By far, the most common form of abuse reported by fathers to have occurred after the family breakdown was “false allegations” (Crabby Dad, KI09BE, LO14AB, PO219PO, WC14MO) made by the ex-partner often in an attempt “to reduce contact” with the children (CH09KI). Although a few fathers reported that they had false allegations made against them during the relationship, this was far more common post-divorce or post-separation:

> “What makes me angry is there's women out there being in horrible abusive relationships. And my wife is trying to class herself as one of those poor women. Like shame on her, absolute shame on her. That there's women there in horrific situations. And my wife is trying to jump on that piggyback and try and make herself to be some sort of victim when she's actually the instigator. […] How dare she do that to other women?” (AR25DU)

> “They started off, I think, they were just informal accusations to me. So, something simple like, you didn't change her nappy. And then I think she started making them to the health visitor, which was that I wasn't feeding her. And then... it was then reported to GP that I wasn't letting her use the toilet. […] And then she had to go to hospital to investigate a recurring thing that she'd been to the GP with. And when I eventually saw the hospital notes, I was quite concerned because there was things in there that, accusations that I'd hit my daughter. Those accusations were then raised with the police who then reported it to social work. […] But she's upped the ante and she's now accused me of sexually abusing our daughter. So, she's gone from quite low-level misbehaviour to an extreme quite quickly.” (CH09KI)

> “I'm mature enough and sensible enough to know that if I'd abused my children and abused my wife, I'd deserve this. I'm that sensible. I'm not just saying it, but it's true. But I haven't. I don't deserve this. It's completely and utterly unjust.” (CO19EX)

> “Her defences were just littered with complete garbage. It was totally made up like I've been through timelines on my phone, photographs, everything, I've got all the information. And, basically, disproved everything” (EL12DU)

> “And the police come to the door. The police said your ex-partner and her partner have accused you of assaulting them and we’re arresting you. So, I ended up in a cell that night.” (FE19LU)

> “The effect it has on people and their family and everything is huge. I had to sit in a police interview room for 4 hours by myself with no solicitor present [because during COVID you weren’t allowed solicitors present] and answer questions and stuff that I know for a fact didn't happen. Like, the impact that has on you is profound, like wondering what that's going to happen with my career. You know, what effect is that going to have on my relationship with my partner? How is my daughter going to view that when she's older? What happens if the cops don't believe me? All of that is very, very, very difficult to go through.” (KI09BE)

> “My mum had a very, very violent relationship and we saw a lot of that growing up. And lots of the stories my partner would have been aware of from my own childhood, you know, things that I had experienced and things that I'd seen and the things that had happened to my mum and my sisters suddenly became her experiences. [...] my mum was in tears because my mum said, you know, I told her this in confidence and she's using it against you.” (KI09BE)

> “The social worker left the room and rang her and asked her, you know, “Are you making an allegation of sexual abuse against your ex?” And she said, “No, she wasn't.” Yet, you know, a year later, whenever it suits her, there is an allegation of sexual abuse against me. So, you know, it's basically my ex is working the system.” (LO02BA)

Participants explained how they now engaged in thorough record-keeping of their lives to protect themselves from any potential false allegations made in the future:

> “And I started, I started recording all the contact sessions. […] Why be in that position to actually have to record your time with you children like you're on CCTV all the time, because you're frightened that you're going to lose access to your own children? That they're going to lose access to their own dad and that you're going to find yourself being arrested and imprisoned for something you haven't even done.” (Crabby Dad)

> “I record the audio on my phone during the contact so that I could be protected against allegations that I was abusive.” (LO02BA)

> “I keep a diary now of events, and any little thing, I write it down.” (SR23WO)

> “She'd make up all sorts of false allegations and I've actually had to live my life by keeping evidence” (WE04GL)

> “I was getting accused of not feeding him properly. I had the police at my door umpteen times. There's no hot water in the house. There's no cooking facilities in the house […] I've always had to keep either factual evidence or the photographic evidence” (WE04GL)

Court orders were also used to antagonise the father and further restrict them from seeing their children.

> “I would also say they need to really be careful about how they issue out these non-molestation orders. […] It just seems to be like a free way to stop or prevent someone from seeing their child with no actual need to do so. […] And there isn't really any way to fight against it. And even if you do, it takes months and months to do it.” (GR31TO)

> “There was another non-molestation order thrown in along the way. I regularly get threatened with non-molestation orders if something happens that she doesn't like.” (LO02BA)

Fathers also argued that their ex-partners would work with their solicitor to use tactics to keep the process going as long as possible to stop the fathers from seeing their children and/or emotionally and financially hurt them. The fathers would have to keep paying thousands of pounds or the ongoing court process while the mother had legal aid and could therefore drag out the process with no (or less) cost to her:

> “Maybe it's just my ex's solicitor. But they're very, very good at stretching things out, that end up costing me a lot of money and I'm like, well, I just want to get these things sorted” (EL12DU)

> “To allow, perhaps, my ex to continue to control and abuse me through the financial abuse of having to take her to court where I have to pay and she does not.” (HH18DU)

> “I was self-funding. I've got over £10,000 legal bill. My partner doesn't work, so got legal aid. That certainly made it very, very easy, I think, for her to drag the process out. […] That created a very asymmetric experience where she could throw out allegations and avoid, you know, cancel hearings at the last minute. […] So, hearings were postponed to three, four weeks and each of those hearings were postponed, we had to pay for.” (KI09BE)

> “And effectively, like, the other person can try and drag the proceedings out to basically coerce you out your life, or the children out your life because you don't have the finances to sustain it.” (LO16PL)

Coercive control after the relationship had ended was achieved via various methods, including isolation from social networks (typically through defamation), threats and, most worryingly, using the children:

> “I think she went into the whole divorce thing with this enormous sense of entitlement. Everything had to go her way or there would be hell to pay. That's just her character.” (DU10PA)

> “My ex-partner told a lot of lies and a lot of untruths to people. My mum and my sisters, a lot of my friends. Some of my friends didn't talk to me for a few months because they were under the impression that, you know, I had been this sort of philandering playboy. […] she tried really, really hard to undermine a lot of relationships” (KI09BE)

> “Friends and family were turned against me.” (WC14MO)

In some cases, the children were used as a vehicle of control, e.g., using contact as leverage or using them as informants on the father’s activity:

> “The controlling behaviour was continued until that day, but just with a different instrument which is my son” (HH18DU)

> “She also said, ‘If you don't like it, you can see me in court and I'll keep the kids until we've settled this’. Despite knowing the fact that the court case would take at least a year. So basically, it was it was a gun to my head to say, ‘Accept this or you won’t see your children.’” (EL12DU)

> “Just as we'd split up and I had requested a photo of, you know, the scan. At that stage she was like 20 weeks pregnant. And, basically, I was given a, you know, a quid pro quo that I wasn’t going to get that picture unless I slept with her. […] I think she started to realise that ‘Oh, I have something that he wants so I can play to that’. […] I have to be nice to my abuser because she's got something I want. […] More recently now, it's more in the form of stopping contact or disrupting contact. Making assertions around what I can do during my contact with my son. […] I have a contact order in place, and [she is] kind of putting barriers in place to stop that or limit that.” (HH18DU)

> “Her mum was very aware of that I would do anything for [daughter], so that was used in order to try and bring me back to the home.” (KI09BE)

> “She was leveraging the children to sell the house, sort of saying that if I didn't sign the papers, like, you can't see the children and things like that.” (LO16PL)

Approximately a third of participants alluded to some degree of attempt at parental alienation from their ex-partner:

> “She's trying to sabotage the image that they have of me, and and the role that I can play.” (AS24AI)

> “Of course, you try to please the resident parent. And I see my children having to do the same where they're having to please mum because mum is not happy about dad.” (Crabby Dad)

> “But the reality is that for as long as my children, or me, or my ex-partner are alive, she's going to do her damnest to make life a living hell and to diminish, minimise, and destroy whatever relationship and contact I have with my children. I can’t do anything about that.” (DU10PA)

> “I know there’s a lot of debate from some circles whether or not parental alienation’s a thing, but I can tell you, hand on heart, it absolutely is a thing. It's absolutely something that happened.” (KI09BE)

> “Up until that time, we had a really good relationship. [...] He's just been dragged over to one side. He doesn't speak to his grandparents, aunts, uncles, anyone else. His friends have been triangulated as far as I can make out. […] His only safety is with Mum, or that's what he's been made to feel. […] Obviously pulling the strings with the children as much as she can to try to get back at me. And there's no need for that.” (RU02CA)

> “But clearly, there was the element of, I'm going to undermine your love for your dad. […] It's almost evil trying to destroy a child's relationship with their parent just to hurt the parent.” (WC14MO)

Many examples of alienating behaviours were provided, for example, badmouthing and fed negativity:

> “There was quite clearly evidence that my ex was badmouthing me to our children, that she’d been using contact arrangements - the lockdown and things - to try and prevent the children having contact with the father, to denigrate me in front of the children, to sow seeds of anxiety and fear in the children” (Crabby Dad)

> “The atrocities that their mother has been saying while they are in her care. And then the children, sometimes they were even telling us some of the comments that she was making to them.” (CR21VI)

> “My daughter literally came away with a couple of weeks ago, ‘Mummy sometimes calls you a bad word that begins with a’. And I was like, ‘So your mum thinks I'm an asshole in front of you. That's good’.” (EL12DU)

> “She accused me of stealing one of their piggy banks at one stage out of their house. And that was said in front of the children. She has said in front of the children that she doesn't want me to have any contact, which is abuse itself.” (LO02BA)

> “And my son would come up to me, and he would actually, because he's the older one, several times, ‘Dad, mum said something, that you did something that doesn't sound like you. Did you really do that?’ And I would have to say, “No, no, no, I didn't.” So that was tricky. And there is parental alienation.” (WC14MO)

Instilling fear of the father:

> “But [son] said at contact me, [...] ‘Mummy says that we are not to be alone with you in case something happens.’ Now that is abuse of children” (LO02BA)

> “Her mother had told her that I killed our dog. And if little one told me about mum's new boyfriend, I'd come round and kill their dog. […] It was all complete and utter rubbish designed to make her scared.” (LO14AB)

> “She makes it very clear to my son. She tells him that it's not safe for him to be with me.” (WI13FA)

Having a secret phone:

> “Some of the things that she would do is just trying to have continual communication between her and our daughter. So, one of the things she did was bought a cheap phone, gave it to her so that they could text all the time. And, you know, she put in our son's number, her number, one of our daughter's friend's phone number, and that was it.” (RU02CA)

Withholding medical information about the children

> “The winter of 2020, our eldest daughter was hospitalised with an autoimmune response to COVID. She was seriously ill. And my ex-wife didn't tell me that the day before she called an ambulance. […] She kept withholding information ... And she then revealed that she'd been - that our daughter had been - in A&E for 4 hours before I'd been phoned. […] No one's telling me that our daughter was out of hospital. I didn't receive a word from my ex. And the next day I texted and said, you know, ‘Iis it possible for me to see our youngest again?’. [...] And they said ‘Oh, well, she's back at home.’ (Crabby Dad)

> “The only information that will be passed to me is information she wants to tell me, which is usually virtually nothing. If I ask any questions, for example, medical things […] I've subsequently found out that my eldest has been put on to a Ritalin derivative medicine with no consultation, with no discussion. I find out this about three months after taking place second hand.” (DU10PA)

Creating dependency on the mother:

> “There were times where [daughter] was awake at 2:00 in the morning, you know, because she was really worried about her mum, because her mum was always crying, her mom was always upset. And [daughter] didn't know how to cope with that. […] I felt quite alienated from [daughter] because [daughter] loved being with me, but she was so worried about her mom, she couldn't relax. Her mom would constantly send over little keepsakes and not in a way to help soothe [daughter], but in a way to constantly remind her of where loyalty should lay.” (KI09BE)

And commanding the children not to interact with the father:

> “If there's any sports or any things like that, I go there to support him, and you can see he can only give me a little quick wave or something unless she tells him to come over to me. Otherwise, he's, you can see he's not allowed to. And I don't want to push it because there's going to be repercussions for him.” (ST03ST)

A subset of fathers still reported some direct and indirect physical violence. This would often occur during interactions in which they were still required to interact with their ex-partner, for example during handovers with the children or when their ex-partner requested they come over to help with childcare:

> “And on handover, his mum refused to hand him over and actually assaulted me” (HH18DU)

> “When I was over collecting the children, who were very young at the time, […] she went in and got a kitchen, big kitchen knife, brought it out and stabbed three of the tyres of the car with the kitchen knife and said, ‘You'll not be able to go anywhere in it now.’ [...] And she then said, ‘Oh I'll tell the police that you done that’.” (LO02BA)

> “I would be called over because [our daughter]'s not feeling well and then I would leave after she's calling me names and throwing glasses and things at me.” (KI09BE)

7.1.3 Negotiating Parental Responsibility

One of the main necessities after FBSD, and indeed one of the key stressors, was negotiating parental responsibility.

7.1.3.1 Negotiating process

A small minority of fathers negotiated a child arrangement informally between them and their ex-partner. Two described it quite positively, stating that it was effective and reasonably amicable. One father said it was quite difficult, as it brought about a fair amount of conflict and he would have preferred mediation:

> “We just did it between ourselves. […] I think we came to that fairly amicably really. […] We haven't felt the need to get anyone else involved. […] I think as an arrangement it works. […] I'm probably quite satisfied.” (KI12CO)

> “We never went to mediation on child responsibility. It's been arranged between us. […] It's really difficult. […] A process that has involved a lot of conflict. […] Having gone through the mediation process with the financial situation, I think there is, there's a real benefit for mediation [...] and I think it would probably be something that I would recommend for people to use.” (RY05ED)

Another small minority negotiated through formal mediation, either solely or in addition to court proceedings. Mediation, overall, was spoken about positively, and mediators were praised for being unbiased and for their resistance to the ex-partner's attempts to exert manipulation, abuse, or coercive control:

> “I think it's good. Rather than wasting time and money going directly to court, and emotions as well, it's a good starter for ten. […] Having a formally trained, experienced third party who is neutral in the conversation, it is good.” (AL17KL)

Several fathers expressed a desire to avoid court if at all possible:

> “I think when we total both parties' money, there was more than one-quarter of a million thrown at solicitors. I never wanted that. I'd have been quite happy to sit down and just sort it out over a table individually.” (DU10PA)

> “I feel like it should only really be going to court in an exceptional circumstance rather than the standard. And it seems like right now, it's the standard. You know, maybe if it's like really, really complicated, it should go to court. But my case isn't complicated. It's quite straightforward, actually.” (HA11GL)

> “I was very reluctant to go to court, I really, really, really didn't want to go to court. It happened to my sister and it's extremely difficult and I wanted- I tried my best to avoid it.” (KI09BE)

> “I just tried to keep things friendly at first, but it's clear that she was sat there dealing with it on a very different level, just trying to turn things against me. She would make it difficult for me to see [my son]” (WI13FA)

A number of fathers recalled attempting to initiate mediation as an alternative to court, but their ex-partner either didn't engage properly in the process or outright refused to attend.

> "I wouldn't say the mediator chastised her, but kind of tried to put the rules down on the table. And I don't think she could accept that. She kind of, she kind of went in, in my opinion, with the attitude that she was going to dominate the meeting and the mediator wasn't. So, after meeting once, she just pulled out, she went straight to a solicitor and initiated legal proceedings. I pleaded with her not to go down that kind of route, that I was more than amicable to try sort something out, and just there was no kind of listening, just kind of bulldozed ahead with that legal process." (AR25DU)

Ultimately, for the majority of fathers, court was inevitable given their ex-partner's resistance to co-operate or negotiate, and due to the high conflict between them and their ex-partner:

> "I've been trying to negotiate with her and through her solicitors for the past two years, for some extra time, and it's just been blocked constantly. So, I'm finding that impossible. And that's one of the reasons that I felt I had to raise court action." (CH09KI)

> "I contacted a solicitor and basically the solicitor said, 'Let's go to court.' And I said, 'I'd rather not. Can we maybe try to go back to mediation? See if mediation will solve it.' So, we wrote to her through our solicitor to go to mediation. And the response we received was a visit from the police and I was accused of sending abusive messages. So then after that, you know, the solicitor was quite frustrated and said right straightaway then, 'Court is the option.' So, we submitted our paperwork." (KI09BE)

Many fathers described the mother as the parent who gatekeeps the father's contact with their children. Mothers were often able to do this as the resident parent:

> "You get no contact: you get no communication. You get very firm kind of: 'No you're not in charge. This is what you're getting and that's all you're getting.' […] His mum made the decision, because of COVID, to not have face-to-face contact. And the guidance wasn't really that clear. Plus, courts weren't running because of COVID, and it meant you as a dad was, you were stuck. There was nothing you could do. And, so, it really was up to mum to decide what level contact you would get. […] More recently now, it's more in the form of stopping contact or disrupting contact. Making assertions around what I can do during my contact with my son. You know, yeah, being difficult in terms of stopping the, I have a contact order in place, and kind of putting barriers in place to stop that or limit that." (HH18DU)

> "Our hearing about that is going to be in December. So, since then, she's been basically in charge of how much I'm able to see the children." (WC14MO)

The mother often achieved this gatekeeping in various ways, such as placing barriers between the father and the children during their contact together.

> "She was adamant that they only had to be in this one place. She wouldn't, she would not cooperate or discuss any alternatives. […] My ex insisted that it had to be at this place and that was it." (Crabby Dad)

> "She arranges get-togethers for my young one with her friends during my time. But I won't know about this. So, when the children are meant to be with me, she'll kind

of arrange things so that they are busy doing activities somewhere, so they won't have time with me. She won't do it when they are staying with her, which is when they should be." (LI26PE)

By trying to reduce or minimise contact between father and child:

"I was getting very scant access to the children. 2 hours here, 2 hours there. All last minute, all very ad hoc." (AR25DU)

"I get a text message saying, 'You're not getting them tonight. Try again at 8 o'clock tomorrow morning.' Try again? You know, there's no explanation." (DU10PA)

"My little one, she, she had a birthday last week and as per the child arrangements order the children should have been with me. But she, she, she didn't bring them back and I missed out on a birthday" (LI26PE)

Or by cutting contact completely:

"For the first year, because my ex-wife was quite vindictive. She was refusing to do things or refusing visitation rights, my parental responsibilities and everything else. And then, when she moved up to the northeast, she completely cut contact with me. […] I think I got to the point where I was feeling the lowest of my entire life." (AL17KL)

"She had said that she wasn't able to facilitate contact because she couldn't bring the kids to the social services building. To be clear, the social service building is a five-minute walk from [her] house." (FE19LU)

"But my ex became very distant, stopped communicating almost completely. And then, this culminated round about the end of January with her not responding to any messages, and also not coming round with my daughter anymore. I learned later, through discussions with social services and stuff like that, that they had told her- that social services had told her - that she had no legal requirement to give me any contact with my daughter." (HA11GL)

"Once I left the house, communication completely stopped. [...] And really, since from that moment I didn't - as much as I tried - I didn't have any communication with her until about three or four months after our son was born. So I didn't know when our son was born. I didn't know it was a boy. […] I didn't know what his name was, what she named him and that was all very deliberate." (HH18DU)

Several fathers reported the mother as having breached contact arrangement orders:

"I think I'm up to about six or seven occurrences where my ex-partner has now directly acted against the sheriff's court order. […] If you don't follow the sheriff's orders that's contempt of court, and, in theory, that's a pseudo-criminal offence. I know from speaking to other fathers it never gets prosecuted or pursued, so there's no penalty." (DU10PA)

"I'm thinking of going back to court now to have a relook at the child arrangements because she's constantly breaching them." (LI26PE)

"She'd done proposals to the court of what I should get, they kind of gave it to her. And then she decided to break those same orders that she asked for." (ST03ST)

Despite consistent barriers and lack of cooperation from the mother, most fathers declared a preference for a shared custody arrangement, if it were their choice, as they saw this as optimal in the interests of the children:

> "The most I would really want would be 50/50 time, because that's what they need. It's not about taking them away from her. […] All I want is for my children to have access to both parents freely that they don't feel that they have to ask permission from Mum to see Dad. […] I want them to have their parents in their life and I want them to be able to love their parents without any issues and for their parents to be able to put aside the past" (Crabby Dad)

7.1.3.2 Dissatisfaction with the system

A handful of participants reported being, to some degree, "satisfied with professional involvement" (CH09KI), however, this was overwhelmingly outweighed by accounts of extreme dissatisfaction with aspects of 'the system', including the courts, the police, and social services.

One of the most popular criticisms from fathers of professional authorities was a perceived bias towards their ex-partner. Some attributed this bias to their status as the resident parent:

> "It's very frustrating how inequitable this process is and how it very much benefits the resident parent. The resident parent basically can do whatever they want and get away with it." (HA11GL)

Others remarked that "the person with the most money has a huge advantage", especially in court. Many fathers identified an "asymmetry of funding" (KI09BE) which equated to "a power difference" (HA11GL) between them and their ex-partners. This was demonstrated in the fact that their ex-partners often benefitted from legal aid or "got her parents to pay" (HA11GL), while most of the fathers were "self-funding" (KI09BE). This consequently enabled their ex-partners to create "a never-ending battle" (GR31TO) without suffering the same financial loss as the fathers. This also paved a way for post-separation abuse, whereby the fathers' ex-partners could "continue to control and abuse me through the financial abuse of having to take her to court where I have to pay and she does not" (HH18DU)

> "Whilst I don't have an issue paying lawyers money for doing things that are going to benefit my kids, it seems to be a bit unfair that someone can just sit behind the legal aid lawyer slinging any mud they want and there's no comeback for that." (EL12DU)

> "Effectively, like, the other person can try and drag the proceedings out to basically coerce […] the children out your life because you 'on't have the finances to sustain it. And ultimately, like, the position I'm in, I'm paying for the mortgage still. I pay the child maintenance: I pay nursery fees and then I was paying £480 for the contact. And I was in deficit each month and having to borrow money off a family member. I think, like, it's just unsustainable, especially for, like, the length of time it's gone on for. And so, obviously, that adds to the stress and the emotions of it." (LO16PL)

As well as self-funding, some fathers were self-representing, which one father identified as another potential factor for discrimination in the courtroom:

> "When you go to court as a litigant in person and when you go to court with a lawyer or whatever, the way that you're treated is so different. […] If you do it yourself, well, certainly in my experience, you just get dismissed and discriminated against because you're not a lawyer." (LO14AB)

Most fathers, however, attributed the systemic bias to gender, perceiving the system to be inherently "sided towards the mother" (CH09KI):

> "I'm left feeling like […] less than a parent because it all just really does seem to be focussed on the mother. The mother, the mother, the mother." (FE19LU)

> "They will never look at both parties equally. You know, the word of the mother will be tenfold, you know, higher and mightier than the innocent father." (LI26PE)

Social services were seen to be treating mothers more favourably by "not taking my concerns as seriously as they took hers" (HH18DU) when the father reported the mother's abuse towards the children, and by consistently consulting mothers on matters while simultaneously disregarding the voice of the fathers:

> "During the whole process, they were very reluctant to act on anything I had told them about my ex. Yet, my ex made some false allegations against me to social services, and they were very quick to act on that." (PO219PO)

> "I think the court was very biased against the Section 7 report which was written. My ex-partner was interviewed by Cafcass in person and my daughter was interviewed in person, but I wasn't. Mine was literally a two-minute phone call. So, at that point, I felt Cafcass was very, very wrong. They witnessed my daughter on their own, my daughter and my ex-partner, but they didn't see me and my daughter together at all." (WD17SC)

> "I had the talk with Cafcass […] she wants to see it in practice. And I guess what she means by seeing it in practise is waiting until my ex-partner tells her that I'm now a perfectly calm and loving father who can see his children as much as possible, which is never going to happen." (AS24AI)

It was suggested that social services were immovable from "a lot of biases, probably against men" (HA11GL) due to their previous experiences having "probably seen some horrible stuff in her time as a health visitor" (HA11GL):

> "Certainly, all the social workers that I was on at the wrong end of who just think that domestic abuse doesn't happen to a man […] That's down to people's unconscious bias. […] People should look at things dispassionately, evidence-based, don't prejudge, you know, all that stuff. And that doesn't seem to happen. Well, certainly not in my experience." (LO14AB)"

> "The best way to describe it was confirmation bias. It was a snowballing scenario of confirmation bias from the health visitor involvement, to then the social worker involvement. And it felt as if I had no voice whatsoever and I just wasn't being listened to. No matter what I was saying, it was like I was talking to a brick wall." (SR23WO)

Fathers also commented on how favourably mothers were treated in the courtroom compared to fathers:

> "I do think there's a double standard in terms of the way that you are spoken to and engaged with in court. You know, my son's mum […] it's all very empathic towards her. It was very much like, 'Oh, this is the behaviour of a first time, nervous mum. She just wants to make sure her son is safe' and all that. Whereas for me it was, as a dad, as a man, I feel like you navigate such a fine line in the court process between showing interest and looking aggressive" (HH18DU)

Several fathers suggested this reflected the “antiquated” (EL21DU), “gendered narratives on child arrangements and domestic abuse” (Crabby Dad) which are still rife among social workers and legal professionals today:

> “I don’t feel like they really value both parents’ involvement” (HH18DU)

> “The whole presumption is around ‘they’re better off with the mother’. […] I have to prove that I’m a decent dad as opposed to... you almost have to disprove that she’s a decent mum, you know, and it creates an adversarial atmosphere. […] But she doesn’t have to show I’m an unfit dad. All she had to do was, right at the start, tell a lie. And all along the time, that will never catch up to her.” (FE19LU)

This meant fathers felt “at a disadvantage” (AL17KL) when it came to countering false allegations and negotiating parental responsibilities, rather than starting on an equal footing:

> “It seems swayed to the mother a lot. And yeah, they say it's, it's a starting point of 50/50. I don't know. It didn't feel as though it was at all. It felt as though it was 80/20 in her favour to begin with, and then that's where it ended up at. […] It just doesn't feel as though fathers are advocated for as much as mothers within the UK law system.”

> “In theory, I have got equal rights in Scotland. […] My honest summation of this is that that's just lip service and wrong, [...] The harsh reality is, in Scotland as a father, you start in at zero. And you fight with the sheriff for every minute that you get. And the best that you're going to get is likely every other weekend.” (DU10PA)

Many fathers commented on how the system has “endorsed” (WI13FA) and “encourages” (LI26PE) their ex-partner's abuse towards them:

> “The court has handed her all the weapons. […] The legal system has created utterly perverse incentives against being able to co-parent" (WI13FA)

The system was reported to enact this facilitation in a multitude of ways. Many fathers described the system as facilitating their ex-partner's abuse simply by being blind to it:

> “And I do get if somebody makes an allegation, that has to be investigated. But you'd think after the third or fourth, they might start maybe taking things with a little bit of a pinch of salt, maybe? Social work just doesn't see it as a pattern.” (LO14AB)

> "All this emotional and mental abuse […] social services are not interested in any of that. They want to see scars. They want to see, you know, blood and all of that before they take any action.” (LI26PE)

Part of being blind to the abuse is not being aware that it exists, like this father’s observation in relation to parental alienation:

> “If you go to the police, they don't know it. […] Schools absolutely don't know anything about it. […] When it happens, there is nobody to turn to because nobody knows anything about it in a position of power. That's my biggest gripe about this, because it's where do you go from there? You know, you're just seen as somebody who's moaning that they're not seeing their kids. [...] That's how people get away with it.” (RU02CA)

More worryingly, there were many cases where the court, social services, and the police had actively ignored evidence of abuse reported to them by fathers:

> “[Daughter] came over to us one day [...] and she had bruising on her shoulder from self-inflicted bite marks, which we reported to the social worker […] And this was then presented as a false allegation by her legal team to the courts, despite the fact we had documentary proof of this, you know, we had photographs [...] And the judge effectively said, I'm sick of the both of you. […] We had ten months of very demonstrable, hostile behaviour that was very deleterious to my daughter's mental health and my [daughter]'s well-being. And the courts weren't really interested, they just wanted to get it over the line and get it done with.” (KI09BE)

> “The two children got out of her house and were essentially wandering the streets. And this is a four-year-old and a three-year-old, both non-verbal, both with autism, and it required the intervention of neighbours and her family to come and get the kids. And I alerted social services of this, but they said that her story was that the kids had managed to open the back door by a key she'd left in the back door.” (FE19LU)

> “When I told them about the knife incident that I had [...] I showed them a picture. You believe it? I had a picture of her with a knife coming at me. And they said, ‘Well, this picture could be anything.’ [...] I've got a picture. It's not just a statement. If a woman made a statement that: ‘This guy came at me with a knife’, I'd be in cuffs right now. Right? But they just didn't want to know.” (LI26PE)

> “She attacked me and I was holding the little one on my left hip, so I couldn't protect myself. So, I got quite severely damaged on the right-hand side. The neighbours heard the commotion, called the police. Police came and arrested her, took her away, took photographs of my injuries. But then they brought her back to the house in the middle of the night, because they released her without charge, because, they told me the CPS had said the jails were ‘too full of looters and rioters.’ That's a direct quote.” (LO14AB)

An outright dismissal of abuse was exemplified in the most literal sense when one father recalled a Cafcass officer “refusing to listen by covering her ears” (LO14AB) while he testified to the severe physical abuse inflicted on him by his ex-partner who was refusing him access to his children.

Despite this dismissal of fathers’ evidence against the mothers, on the flip side, the system has been reported to endorse the mothers’ false allegations against the father without evidence or verification:

> “I've been accused of doing things which I've never done. I've gone to police, they've written it off, they say that nothing's happened. However, she can take that into a family court and it can still be upheld. […] I haven't done anything, but because she's made the allegation against me, they've taken that as truth and that's now affected how I see my son.” (GR31TO)

> “She'd moved to a different area and she'd been to see that area's Children's Services Department, repeated all her historical allegations that had been proved to be false. They believed all of it, hook, line, and sinker, didn't check. Appeared at court with a piece of paper which basically said I was a risk to humanity. Child was removed.” (LO14AB)

> “She spread all sorts of rumours and lies and all these organisations listened to her. They didn't think of doing their own research and just going double-checking it.” (ST03ST)

Fathers commented on “the easiness with which the system in place can be used by women who want to secure maximum contact with their children” through false allegations because the system is not “set up to actually say, you know, these allegations are nonsense” (LO02BA):

> “But there needs to be a way of getting the truth out of people. And I don’t know how you do that” (EL12DU)

> “Every allegation that was made against me is flagged as a genuine allegation. There's no, there's nothing there to flag those up as false.” (KI09BE)

Another way the system facilitates the abuse of fathers is that professional authorities fail to administer sanctions to the ex-partners who abuse the legal and administrative systems by falsifying testimony or breaching court orders:

> “The problem is that I don't think my ex ever had kind of, like, a reality check from a third party. And effectively I think she feels that she got away with it and now she can just get away with it.” (WC14MO)

> “I'm certainly getting held responsible for things I've not done. So why my ex-partner can't be held responsible for the damage she's caused […] There's no culpability for people just slinging mud, and just making up stories” (EL12DU)

As a result, “bad faith actors” (KI09BE) are incentivised to continue abusing the system because it is a strategy that brings success without any cost or punishment from professionals with the authority to prohibit this behaviour:

> “There's no backstop that stops the other parent that doesn't want to facilitate that contact. There's nothing that will actually make them do that. It's not how the law is supposed to work.” (DU10PA)

> “The social worker said to me, ‘Oh these claims will go on for years’. Of course, they'll go on for years. There's no downside of making them. [...] She only gets benefits. [...] The kids get the fallout and they don't see me. And, you know, they don't have a normal relationship with their father” (LO02BA)

> “There's such perverse incentives built into it that, you know, for her, there's no reason not to be an arsehole. It's in her interest to not agree to anything. So why would she ever agree to anything? It's in her interest to be as difficult, obstructive, and lie as much as she can. […] Even if I somehow get a child arrangements order, it seems absolutely clear that she's going to ignore it. She will breach it on every opportunity and that the courts will once again do absolutely nothing to enforce it.” (WI13FA)

It is not only the fathers that suffer as a consequence, but also the children who lose time with a parent, and the legal system as a whole, which continues to be burdened and delayed unnecessarily by the ex-partner's abuse of the system:

> “We know the system's overburdened and can't cope. So why not make things efficient and effective? Because, actually, by putting penalties down, by making those penalties enforceable, including by police action, we'd start seeing far more compliance with people. And then the issues that have led to us being in a situation

> now [...] that wouldn't have happened because she would know that if she started mucking around with the court order like she's been doing, that the police could walk in, take the children out of her hands" (Crabby Dad)
>
> "And at the end of it you can be missing out on your child's life for years and no one ever faces the consequences of that." (GR31TO)
>
> "I lost a year of my daughter's life from the court process simply because no one could tell the mum to get her act together." (KI09BE)

A highly concerning finding was that the system was not only facilitating the ex-partner's abuse, but that professional authorities were contributing to the re-traumatisation of fathers who had suffered abuse. In the courtroom, this occurred when a couple of fathers were tasked with "cross-examining my own abuser" (WC14MO):

> "Having to cross-examine my ex, I couldn't do it. [...] I had to leave the court and go and just melt down in the toilet for a while. And when I went, eventually went back in after about 20 minutes […] I told the judge, 'Look, I cannot do this'. He said: 'Oh just do your best'. [..] I just, I could not. It was just not happening. There's something called Practice Direction 12J apparently. And that wasn't followed." (LO14AB)

A number of fathers recalled encounters with the police that "probably traumatised me even more" (LO16PL) because they were dismissed when reporting their abuse experiences:

> "The first time I went in to report the common assault, which was an extremely difficult thing to do because this was somebody that I had children with, I'd lived with for ten years. […] Part of my first interview, the officer that I was speaking to at the station left the room and I could hear him on the phone saying like, 'Oh, I think he's making it up. I think he's just trying to get his foot in first'. I ended up making a complaint about him." (WC14MO)
>
> "I eventually was encouraged to report the sexual abuse to the police. […] So, I went along and I'd been assured in advance that it was going to be trained officers, I'd be treated with respect. […] And finally she […] said: 'It says here and she handcuffed you and squeezed your testicles. Well, you must have enjoyed it or you'd have reported it sooner.' And at that point, I just I couldn't say anything else. I was just speechless. And I left." (LO14AB)

Many of the fathers reported that the system unfairly treated them like "a criminal" (AS24AI) and labelled them as "the guilty party" (WC14MO) without due cause or evidence. Due to its "adversarial" (AS24AI) nature and the ease in which their ex-partner's false allegations were believed, several fathers reported feeling "ganged up on" (GR31TO) "as though I was the bad person" (AL17KL):

> "I was guilty in everyone's eyes." (CO19EX)
>
> "I'm still deemed as a risk to our children, with no evidence at all. I've never harmed our children, never done anything to the children. I've got really good reports to say that I'm, like, child-centric and the children have fun around me. […] Nobody's actually come forward apart from my ex and said I'm a risk. They've just literally labelled me and gone: 'Yeah you're a risk." (LO16PL)

Fathers felt unable to refute this demonised image as they “didn’t have a voice in any of that process” (AR25DU) to “try and show the real person that I am” (AR25DU), for example to Cafcass officers or court judges:

> “I have not been heard. My statement wasn't read and the court hasn't heard me. They've only heard her. So, in a court of law, would someone go to jail on the prosecutor's evidence and no defence?” (CO19EX)

> “My ex-partner was interviewed by Cafcass in person and my daughter was interviewed in person, but I wasn't. Mine was literally a two-minute phone call. [...] They witnessed my daughter on their own, my daughter and my ex-partner, but they didn't see me and my daughter together at all.” (WD17SC)

Without the opportunity to be heard, fathers felt “powerless” (HA11GL, KI09BE) and "completely abandoned by the system” (EL12DU) that should be protecting them. Fathers felt “resigned” (DU10PA) to the unjust process because “the legislation isn’t set up to help dads” (KI09BE) and “the more they fight, the less they get” (AS24AI):

> “I've come to the stage of kind of acceptance of where I am. I can't change anything. I can't change anything in the court. I can't change nothing. Like all this stuff that's coming at me, I just can't stop it.” (AR25DU)

> “The nondomicile parent is instantly on a back foot and can literally have anything happen to them. And there is no support net there. [...] The feeling of hopelessness at times is massive” (EL12DU)

> “Because it feels like you're fighting a losing battle. Everyone's pointing their finger at you, you're throwing money away in the wind. And you're still not seeing your son […] I don't think people understand that's essentially how easy it can be. They can literally take your child away from you.” (GR31TO)

A number of fathers commented on the lack of transparency, updates, and clear communication from authorities, such as social services, the police, and Child Maintenance Service. Often, they “never got called back to understand what was actually happening” (DU10PA) with regards to their cases and would “never answer phones” (GR31TO) when fathers sought an update, so a father often “wasn’t even informed” (AR25DU) about the outcome of investigations into allegations made against him.

When fathers did manage to make contact, these services were described as “extremely hostile [and] extremely rude” (KI09BE):

> “She was quite hostile to me as well. [...] She was like, ‘Well what do you want me to do? Wave a magic wand and fix it?’” (KI09BE)

> “And I spoke to the court afterwards and the clerk was just like, ‘Well, I don't know what your problem is. You already get to see him on alternate weekends. Yeah, you have to have a family member there. We've got people in worse situations than you.’” (WI13FA)

Regarding the legal setting, a few fathers narrated instances where their solicitors made errors due to their inaccurate knowledge of the law or by incorrectly completing their client’s legal aid application which negatively impacted their court cases:

> “When I said to him that I am entitled to see this report. He's no, no, no, you're not. [...] I quoted the law to him. He told me that was old law. And I took it out of my briefcase, said there's the law, this is on this is what's on the Irish Statute book.

> This is the law. And he looked at me. 'Oh, so you want to see the report?' Yeah. So basically, I gave him a lesson on law that day." (AR25DU)

> "My legal aid, originally that got stopped because my solicitor, who was very inexperienced, had put my gross income in the childcare costs box and vice versa. […] You'd have thought that legal aid would have noticed it was a simple mistake, but no, no it took them five months. […] And during that time, I was what was called 'technically represented', so I couldn't get anybody else to represent me. Even if I had had the money to do so. I couldn't get advice from anybody. I had to do it myself." (LO14AB)

> "The solicitor messed up the paperwork for the legal agency. So, it took me seven months to get legal aid. Seven months because the guy didn't put the information in." (WC14MO)

Several fathers criticised the delivery of "extremely inaccurate" (LO02BA) and unverified reports by social workers and health visitors, whose assessments they described as "amateurish" (AR25DU) due to practitioners' high workload and oftentimes little experience in investigating the family dynamic. Consequently, fathers claim this resulted in gross errors in reporting and "once they're in the system, they're in the system" (LO14AB), with little chance of correction. Ultimately, these are the same reports which hold the power to influence judges' rulings and deny fathers contact with their children:

> "So, I go and read the report and I have to say, my daughters would've done a better job than she done. She's talking about one of my daughters when she should have been talking about the other. The names are mixed up and scenarios are mixed up and it's just absolutely horrendous. It's so amateurish." (AR25DU)

> "It's also something that cannot be removed from your medical records. It's completely immutable I discovered to my horror when, you know, the health visitor actually made a mistake in it." (HA11GL)

As a culmination of the issues previously discussed, many fathers described their experiences with the legal and administrative processes as "a lengthy, lengthy process" (GR31TO) and "a tiring process" (CH09KI) that "moves too slowly" (DU10PA). This was linked to a variety of reasons, including "there aren't enough judges" (LO14AB), "a lack of continuity of judges […] of social workers" (KI09BE), and having an ex-partner "who is clearly acting in bad faith, who's clearly antagonistic and clearly hostile […] and slow[s] the whole process right down" (KI09BE).

This can have serious implications as it results in "lost time" (AR25DU) between the father and their children:

> "Still waiting on family law proceedings, which is horrendous. […] I haven't seen my children in two and a half years." (AR25DU)

Most fathers remarked specifically on how the court system was hugely taxing in many respects:

> "Mentally, it's draining. Physically, it is also draining as well. Financially, it's draining." (GR31TO)

Fathers reported spending "thousands and thousands" (AR25DU) on the court process to the point of being "ruined" (DU10PA) in some cases:

> "I don't mind saying that it's cost well over £100,000, which no one's got, and absolutely shouldn't be the case. […] We went interest-only on the mortgage for a

> while to be able to pay for this. I've had inheritances that have just been wiped out. I've had bonuses from work have been wiped out. I've had my family giving me money. And at least I've got that to fall back on." (RU02CA)

The financial burden of hiring a solicitor was considered an obstacle to participation and achieving a preferable outcome in court:

> "I don't have sufficient training in the process and the various forms and the time scales. [...] In theory yes, you could go and stand in front of a sheriff and make your own case. But realistically, you'll never get there because the sheriff, if he doesn't outright offer contempt towards you as a person self-representing and going against his trade and discipline that he's come from, that you're likely to trip yourself up on some minor paperwork issue and the whole lot just gets kind of pushed aside." (DU10PA)

> "Without money, you're basically powerless. And without money, I would have had to self-represent from the start to see my daughter. [...] I'm not sure how well it would have went" (HA11GL)

Fathers also likened the court process to having "a separate job" (DU10PA) given the amount of time and energy it demanded:

> "You're pouring all of your time into trying to understand the legal system and it's just so time-consuming." (WI13FA)

As well as the investment of time and money, the legal process often came at an emotional cost:

> "The breakup was bad. Don't get me wrong. But what's actually messed up my mental health is going through this court system" (GR31TO)

> "I had never in my life dealt with any court or any anything like this. It was all new to me. And to me, it was all very traumatising." (LI26PE)

Despite investing an enormous amount of time and money into the process, many fathers considered this to be "throwing money away in the wind" (GR31TO) as they achieved "zero results" (AS24AI) and were "stuck in the process for years where nothing is really resolved" (DU10PA):

> "I've spent nearly ten grand in court fees only to still be told […] I'm not allowed to see my son" (GR31TO)

> "I spent all my pension on it for nothing" (AS24AI)

In some cases, the family court was not only described to be ineffective but was in fact accused of having "made things worse" (GR31TO) and "done more harm than good" (LO16PL):

> "How the system operates doesn't lend itself to solve problems. It seems to exacerbate and elevate minor problems" (HH18DU)

Overall, many fathers considered the family court system to be "not fit for purpose" (DU10PA) as "it has nothing to do with justice" (AS24AI) "in any way, shape or form" (HA11GL). Fathers reported feeling "I have to prove myself innocent" (CO19EX) and that it was too easy to have "your children taken from you quite unjustly and there not be any real recourse at all" (HA11GL)

In many cases, fathers felt the family court “haven’t helped the family at all” (LO16PL), partly because "the solicitors’ own interests are entirely financial and self-serving" (DU10PA) rather than “what is in the best interest of the children” (AS24AI). Fathers often believed that solicitors’ “primary goal is to earn money” (CO19EX) and therefore they had “every time and interest in protracting arguments” (DU10PA) in order to maximise “billable hours” (AR25DU):

> “The people that run the courts are only interested in what serves them. They're rarely interested in really the needs of the child.” (GR31TO)

> “I don't feel I can really trust their judgement as to what I should do next because they've got a financial incentive for you to continue fighting a losing battle.” (HH18DU)

> “They don't want you to get to an early conclusion. They want you to take years to get to a point where anything's settled because by that point, all the money is already consumed by solicitors and you're on your knees.” (DU10PA)

As a result, fathers recalled occasions where solicitors engaged in foul play for the purpose of winning their case or elongating the process by creating more interparental acrimony:

> “[Her solicitor] kind of sweet talked me into dropping the safety order. […] I agreed. I asked her solicitor […] to drop the criminal proceedings against me. That was agreed. […] Her solicitor reneged on that deal. It was a verbal deal with me under duress.” (AR25DU)

> “[My ex-partner] was saying, ‘No, no, it's fine. Like as long as you respect my schedule, like, I’m okay.’ And her lawyer told her, ‘No, look, let’s talk.’ And 5 minutes later, she was like, ‘Yes, of course, we need support.’ So then from that point, I need to have a nanny [to supervise contact].” (AS24AI)

> “Solicitors aren't supposed to lie or falsify evidence. But that was that was rife.” (ST03ST)

7.1.4 Impact of FBSD

As already alluded to above, experiences surrounding FBSD had a huge impact on not only fathers but also their children.

7.1.4.1 On fathers

The impact of FBSD on the fathers interviewed can be characterised as a combination of things lost and things gained as a result of the family breakdown.

In relation to losses, more often than not, the father moved out of the family home following the family breakdown, resulting in “the loss of your home” (RY05ED) as well as everything that comes with that, such as their “valuables and belongings” (CR21VI) and "the loss of time with your kids” (RY05ED).

Sometimes under "the threat of homelessness” (WC14MO), fathers resorted to “couch surfing” (KI09BE, LI26PE), “sleeping in my office” (KI09BE), “sleeping on my father’s sofa” (FE19LU), or moving back “under the roof of my own parents and living in my old bedroom” (RY05ED). Several fathers remarked on the financial challenge of finding alternative accommodation because “housing is expensive” (RY05ED), meanwhile financially, “everything is tied up in the family” (DU10PA) in the immediate aftermath of the breakup. Often fathers were also continuing to pay “her rent I think for about four months afterwards” (KI09BE) for the family home as well as “the gas, electricity, […] grocery shopping” (KI09BE) after moving out.

Fathers were also tasked with the extra challenge of ensuring their new accommodation was deemed by authorities as suitable for hosting their children, but often this was something they could ill afford:

> "I've got a roof over my head with about enough space to accommodate my children for the next year or two. […] 80% of the time it is too big for my needs with the associated running costs and council tax and so on. […] But it has to be able to accommodate the children. [...] All I'm doing is treading water at the moment" (DU10PA)

> "It costs me about £2,000 every month. That's half my salary for a flat that I literally don't use. It's just I'm told that I need to have a flat as a legal position. In what world would it be a good idea for me to waste that much money? Like, I could have spent that on [son]." (WI13FA)

This challenge is intensified by the fact that "dads don't really get much support whenever they leave the family home" (KI09BE):

> "Dads don't really get much support whenever they leave the family home. If a relationship ends and you're under 35, you have no duty to be rehoused. You effectively have to house yourself. And often that means a house share. And then if you house share, then that's used as an excuse by a lot of ex-partners to stop people from seeing their kids. [...] The council, […] they give you a shared room rate, which effectively is like you're only able to afford a house share." (KI09BE)

> "The council provided an accommodation. I turned up at 10 at night at this accommodation and there was vomit on the floor and cockroaches in the kitchen. And I looked at this and I turned around and I walked out, and I rang them up and I said, I can't stay here. So, I ended up sleeping in my car that night." (WC14MO)

For the fathers who stayed in the family home, this sometimes meant staying in the place where their abuse took place:

> "So, I'm now stuck in the house where all these things happened. And I have tried very much to, you know, move everything around, sanitise it, change everything. But, you know, it's still, this is still where it all happened. So that's not good. I can't move. I can't afford to move. It's the only place I can afford to live." (LO14AB)

Fathers described the family breakdown and events following as having a negative impact on their career, for example through needing "time off sick" (CO19EX), having to go down to "only working part-time" (CO19EX), or even being "suspended from work" (FE19LU, LO14AB) after being charged with false allegations. Many fathers felt their "career had taken a backseat" (PO219PO) and been "de-prioritised" (HH18DU) due to balancing work with "the stress of the solicitor nonsense […] which that in itself was a separate job" (DU10PA). As a result, many fathers experienced "a lack of concentration. I can't focus" (PO129PO):

> "Work suffered. Essentially, I felt like I couldn't concentrate. We were going through a pretty, like, hardass project at the time. And I ended up having to take a step back from that just because what felt like a lot of pressure at home was leaking through into the workplace. And I just, I genuinely couldn't concentrate when I'd be getting like emails from various lawyers or text messages from my ex saying, 'You need to do this or else', kind of thing." (BE03WI)

Several fathers were now reliant on finding or keeping a job that offers "flexibility [so] I can still see my kids" (AS24AI) and juggle the demands of legal proceedings:

> “I have struggled to find work that I can fit around the kids and the school day.” (KI12CO)

> “At the moment, I'm in a job where I can use my spare time to fill out court paperwork, to research legal issues, to make lots of phone calls. So, I kind of have to stay in that job just now. If I change to a different job where I didn't have that flexibility [...] I think I would really struggle to follow through the court process.” (CH09KI)

A large proportion of the fathers interviewed described "a huge financial impact” (CH09KI) as a result of the family breakdown. Fathers struggled to juggle "so many financial obligations” (DU10PA), including “the legal costs, living costs at the time, and then travel costs when I could go and see the children” (AL17KL):

> “On top of that, you may still be trying to just get your own job done in order to be able to feed yourself. Never mind trying to feed your children, never mind trying to keep the mortgage and the upkeep on the alimony [...]. There's too many things for one person to be all happening in the same time frame: solicitor's costs, child maintenance, potentially having to pay your spousal aliment. [...] And you're still trying to cram in your own working day. And you don't have anywhere to live, so, you now need rent or a deposit [...] so you can just have a roof over your head. […] There's too many things. That's five things I've just listed there that in my case were all happening concurrently.” (DU10PA)

The prominent sources of financial loss were “thousands of pounds of debt” (LO16PL) belonging to them or their ex-partner, having to "pay for the courts” (ST03ST), and “child maintenance” (WD17SC), and "having to pay for a supervisor” (WD17SC) “through a supervision centre” (GR31TO). One father was paying for contact through a supervision centre but sadly “had to stop that because of finances” (LO16PL), illustrating the barrier the financial impact can present between fathers and children maintaining a relationship.

Several fathers were also “effectively trying to run two households” (KI09BE) as they continued to cover the running costs of the family home, whether or not they still lived there:

> “She left me paying for the mortgage on the house that she was living in and paying all of her bills: gas bills, electric bills, you name it. […] And she refused to accept that there was anything wrong with that.” (WI13FA)

> “I have to still pay for everything. My ex is in the former matrimonial home with my children. [...] I pay the entire mortgage. The rates, the household bills, the Wi-Fi. I then have to get somewhere else for me to live. So that's another outgoing rent. I've also a few other properties that I have to keep paying for. Yeah, it's, financially, it's a struggle” (PO129PO)

This meant that the father’s “salary was just covering, meeting my needs” (CR21VI) if not incurring a “deficit each month” (LO16PL). Fathers described “treading water” (DU10PA) and living “very much a frugal lifestyle” (DU10PA). For some, this impact was crippling to the extent that “I didn’t eat because I didn’t have the money to buy food.” (AL17KL)

> “So, three weeks into the month and in theory [...] it was likely I'd have my children for two more weekends. […] I've got 47p with which to feed them. So, you're on your knees.” (DU10PA)

A number of fathers acknowledged that the family breakdown had a negative impact on their social life and relationships. Some saw their “whole social life went out the window” (LI26PE)

due to “being with the kids all the time” (KI12CO) as a resident parent, or by being a non-resident parent having the children “at weekends” (SR23WO), meaning they have little time to socialise.

Other fathers reported feeling “isolated and cut off” (WC14MO) from social relationships, partly due to family and friends “taking my ex-partner’s side to a degree” (GR31TO) or due to the family breakdown experience having eroded their trust of others:

> “There's a very big trauma that's been attached from putting your heart, soul, and every expectation for life and every bit of your effort [...] to have someone just go and completely betray you in just the most atrocious way. So, that doesn't make it easy to go and start to develop new circles.” (DU10PA)

> “There's a period when you give up on humanity and we can't trust anybody. When the person who you're closest to sort of betrays you in this way. It's quite devastating and you think: ‘Why did I not see this?’ [...] You doubt your own judgement of other people.” (WC14MO)

Similarly to social relationships, the potential for new romantic relationships was inhibited by becoming “highly sceptical of women” (GR31TO) and developing “a mistrust of relationships” (BE03WI), resulting in “some pretty tall boundaries” (PO219PO). Some fathers recognised the need for a suitable adjustment period following the family breakdown to “work on myself a bit more” (PO219PO) and wait until they were “a bit more mentally ready” (HA11GL) to enter a new relationship:

> “I think I'm so busy trying to rebuild me as a person that actually having a relationship with anyone else is nowhere near on the spectrum.” (WD17SC)

There were other fathers who were more optimistic about entering a new relationship and spoke positively about the impact that their new partner had had on their life:

> “To me, it wasn’t the problem of marriage as an institution […] because it wasn’t marriage’s fault, it was the person I was married to in the first instance” (RU02CA)

However, some fathers acknowledged that the “baggage” (HA11GL) from their past could “put a dampener” (AL17KL) or be “taxing” (WC14MO) on new relationships, either because new partners would be deterred by the situation and “run for the hills” (CH09KI) or because the father’s ex-partner proactively “decimated” (LI26PE) or “destroyed” (WE04GL) potential new relationships.

Unsurprisingly, given the weight of all the losses previously discussed, most of the fathers discussed that their “mental health really, really struggled” (WD17SC) following the family breakdown. Many fathers described the family breakdown as “a really gloomy period in my life” (AS24AI) and that they were “in a very bad place” (DU10PA) where they “don’t ever want to be ever again” (AR25DU):

> “I would say that my mental state during the last few months of our relationship [...] it was going downhill then. But then afterwards and all the barriers and speed bumps [...] that didn't help. And then all the financial matters on top of that as well. So, it's like my jar, my pot was getting very, very full and I had no way to release it.” (AL17KL)

Although fathers’ “mental health was severely affected” (AL17KL) by various aspects of the family breakdown, some fathers singled out the court system as a key trigger:

> “I'd like to think of myself as quite resilient. But I've never experienced something that has messed up my mental health than this whole process has done. The

> breakup was bad. Don't get me wrong. But what's actually messed up my mental health is going through this court system" (GR31TO)

Fathers testified to having suffered "depression" (AL17KL, AS24AI , LO14AB, RY05ED, SR23WO, WC14MO) and "anxiety" (AL17KL, CH04KI, KI09BE, LO14AB, SR23WO) most commonly and often these coincided. Less commonly, fathers also cited suffering with "PTSD" (Crabby Dad, ST03ST) and "stress" (LO16PL, WD17SC). For some, this mounted into a diminished "self-esteem" (KI09BE) and ultimately a "breakdown" (Crabby Dad, WC14MO) and/or suicidality.

13 of the 30 fathers interviewed raised having some level of suicidal ideation, while two of these fathers had made attempts to end their own life:

> "There were a couple of times where I felt, not that I wanted to kill myself, but I felt so low that I didn't want life to continue." (SR23WO)

> "I confronted her with this. There was a bit of an argument. And then I took myself out of the situation and attempted to take my own life." (PO219PO)

These thoughts and attempts were often attributed to a sense of being "completely overwhelmed" (LO16PL), particularly during "a court day or [when] I get a letter or something, it's just a trigger point" (GR31TO). Fathers explained feeling like "everything is taken away from you" (WC14MO) and "having no one to turn to" (WC14MO). Most prominently, however, fathers felt "suicidal" (GR31TO) from their ex-partner "stopping any contact" (ST03ST) with their children:

> "When you totally and absolutely love your kids and suddenly that's taken away from you. [...] Imagine somebody [...] marched into your house and […] take you away from your kids for no reason whatsoever. Really no reason whatsoever. It's a tremendous shock." (WC14MO)

Still, thinking of the children was also typically their saving grace:

> "It's difficult to know what stopped me. [...] But it was, I again was thinking of the children. I kind of thought that […], for me, it would be easier but for the children, it would be devastating, and what happens is they've got to carry that for the rest of their lives. [...] I can't do this to them." (WC14MO)

> "But what would be the impact on the kids? You know, how would they cope? Me not being able to see them grow up. And then the thing that sort of clinched it for me […] When I had the boys, I bathed them and I was drying the little one's hair. […] And he looked like pretty much asleep on me. And I was just looking at him going: 'This is the reason to stay alive. [...] This is what I need to fight for.' And since then, [...] I've not had any thoughts at all." (SP22WI)

Many fathers commented on the likely "psychosomatic relationships" (WC14MO) that existed between the impact of the family breakdown on their mental health and thus physical health:

> "It's made me really think, have I been kinda holding things back? […] It's like my body's way of kind of telling me you've been holding on to a lot of the stuff." (HH18DU)

Fathers typically cited stress as being the underlying cause of several emerging issues with their physical health, including "lack of sleep" (LO02BA) most commonly, followed by having "very little appetite" (DU10PA) or "not eating healthily" (AL17KL) which then led to "being tired all the time" (CH09KI) and drastic weight change (in either direction):

> “I wasted away through separation and divorce. I lost... I was down to about 67 kilograms, so, you know, 30 odd, just about 30kg of weight loss. Part of that was I couldn't afford to eat. Part of that was I had very little appetite.” (DU10PA)

> “I lost about two stone in weight. I'm not a big man either and probably couldn't afford to lose two stone.” (AR25DU)

> “I am definitely a stress eater […] I think I put on about ten kilos” (KI09BE)

The toll of the family breakdown on their mental health was also thought to have "physically had a manifestation” (DU10PA) through physical illness and injury, such as “high blood pressure” (CO19EX), grinding teeth and being diagnosed as “diabetic and it is stress related” (WD17SC):

> “I was catching myself waking up in the middle of the night repeatedly […] grinding my teeth. During the course of divorce, I think I broke five teeth from grinding them. [...] And I couldn't afford to go and see a dentist. So, I've still got five broken teeth in my mouth because, […] among everything else, I still can't afford to go and get that fixed.” (DU10PA)

The most significant loss reported by fathers was the lost or weakened relationship with their children. A very large majority of fathers interviewed “thoroughly enjoyed being a dad” (Crabby Dad) and described having a “very close” (ST03ST) and “loving and supportive” (AL17KL) relationship with their children prior to the family breakdown:

> “Ever since the moment they were born, I've absolutely adored them both. I have fawned over them. And happily, happily from the moment they wake up to the moment I go to work to the moment I get back to the moment they go to bed.” (CO19EX)

> “I would say he actually related better to me than to my ex-partner in that premarital time” (DU10PA)

In most cases, fathers considered themselves “a very present and hands-on dad” (AS24AI) pre-separation, and in some instances “the main carer” (AR25DU) of the children:

> “When my daughter was young, I wasn't just the primary carer. I did everything with her.” (CO19EX)

> “Very proactive Dad. I was more than happy to do bath times, stinky nappy times. I was more than happy to get up in the middle of the night and do some milk, played with her loads, did loads of reading, did loads of music things...” (WD17SC)

With the family breakdown came several losses with regard to the children. Most obviously was the loss of contact, either completely or in part while the children were in the mother’s care:

> “In September, I will reach a point where my son has been living away from me for half of his life” (FE19LU)

> “I still love her like crazy. And it had a huge toll on me when she was gone. [...] I'm just not well, mentally, like, until I see her again.” (HA11GL)

> “I cry when I don't see her and I get really emotional about it. [...] It's usually on a Saturday morning when I get up and I know I'm not going to see her for the day. And I've got no work to do and I've got a day of leisure that Saturdays, I'm very, very vulnerable.” (WD17SC)

Fathers sometimes felt that they were losing their fatherhood role, appearing more as “an uncle” (WD17SC), “a friend” (ST03ST), or “a stranger” (AS24AI) as their input and control over their children’s lives reduced alongside their levels of contact:

> “We need more time. I'm trying to be his dad but at times he feels I'm his friend. […] He's not with me enough for him to understand that I'm actually his dad. I'm a parent. I've got the same authority as his mother.” (ST03ST)

> “Even if you're speaking to them on the phone every other day, […] you miss out on so much just from being in the same space. […] When you go from being present every day to having them even every weekend [...] something changes in how close you are and how your shared experience is. […] It does mean you have to let go of a lot of influence [...] because the other parent is the person who's there all the time. I think that's another thing that creates distance when the other parent is parenting in a way that you don't agree with or see problems with. It's really hard.” (RY05ED)

Some fathers expressed this profound loss as triggering a “sense of living grief” (Crabby Dad) as with every handover came “mourning the loss of your living child every week” (ST03ST):

> “I might as well just pretend that they died because it got to the point where I was seeing them so seldom.” (Crabby Dad)

Fathers complained that they had “missed months, if not years, of their child’s life” (GR31TO) enduring long drawn-out court processes and/or their ex-partners’ alienation or denial of access. It was a common worry that this time would not be available to them in the future as the children grow up:

> “And I need it now because when he turns 10, 11, he's a little teenager, ain't he? So, he won't want to sit on the sofa with his dad. Or play football with his dad. He'll want to play football with his friends. So, I'm losing all that time now. [...] I'm losing that with him.” (CO19EX)

> “Hopefully, with our son at one point in the future, we can get that back. But we've missed so much.” (RU02CA)

> "I lost a year of my daughter's life from the court process simply because no one could tell the mum to get her act together.” (KI09BE)

Consequently, several fathers were devastated by the loss of the bond they had with their children prior to the breakdown caused typically by "limited contact” (GR31TO) or “parental alienation” (RU02CA):

> “My relationship with the children changed drastically.” (CR21VI)

> “When I have seen him, there's a strain. […] He's just been dragged over to one side. […] You can see that there is a relationship that has been lost.” (RU02CA)

Despite these challenges, many of the fathers reported an enduring or even strengthened relationship with their children after the family breakdown:

> “My relationship with my kids survived it.” (AS24AI)

> “She is brilliant. We have such a good time together. She is a joy to be around. She's such a happy wee girl. Very rarely cries. Once or twice, she's been a bit unsure about coming for contact, but as soon as she gets a hug from me, she's fine. She's energetic. She loves exploring things. She's just [inaudible]. She loves me reading to her. I just wish that I had more time with her.” (CH09KI)

> “The bond that we share is very, very strong and seems to have maintained, you know, despite the small level of contact. […] With everything that I've told you about the barriers in place and the challenges along the way, like, our relationship gets stronger and stronger every week. You know, I treat every contact with such a level of elevation, like, it's so special because of, they're brief and they're rare. […] And I think he really understands how important the time is. So, he really puts himself into it. […] In terms of our relationship, in spite of everything, it's great.” (HH18DU)

> “I think there's a closeness between her and I and between us as a unit that is, it's really special. And I don't know if dads always get that. And I think I'm lucky because I have got it. And wouldn't want to give it up.” (RU02CA)

Fathers often commented that this was the case despite several barriers in place threatening the strength of their relationship. The main obstacle to the father-child relationship was absence, either prolonged due to the mother restricting access or temporary while the child was in the mother’s care:

> “I hadn't seen my daughter in ten months. So obviously, I wasn't used to looking after her again. So, it was quite a slow process, you know, getting our bond back and re-engaging. […] I kind of went through this process, you know, of getting to know her again and doing all this and relearning how to be a parent again, essentially.” (HA11GL)

> "The first time that he hadn't seen me for five months, it took him barely half an hour before he really realised who I was and gave me cuddles and all sorts of things, so that was great.” (ST03ST)

Some fathers also commented on the challenge that enforced supervision had on their time with their children:

> “[My] ex-wife was trying to stop me from seeing them. She also then was reluctant to choose supervisors. [...] It got to, the only people that I could use was my parents who are in their mid-80s. So that put a strain on doing things with my children. You know, I couldn't go to, like, one of those artsy play park things with an 85-year-old man. So, it put a bit of a strain on that.” (PO219PO)

Furthermore, some fathers commented that their relationship with their children would significantly benefit from being allowed to spend more time together:

> “I just wish that I had more time with her. That's the thing that's holding our relationship back, because I can't do some of the normal, friendly things I want to do with her. I want to take her to the animal park, I want to take her to the beach, I want to take her to the funfair. And time is so limited, that that's just not a possibility at the moment.” (CH09KI)

> “The judge is going to say: ‘Oh we'll just give you Friday night’. That's useless because basically what happens is I have to travel, pick them up. They're tired on a Friday night. […] If they have to be back for 6:00 on a Saturday, [...] it only gives you a few hours a Saturday morning realistically with them, you know, which is worse than useless” (LO02BA)

Despite these challenges, some fathers commented that they had become “closer” (KI12CO, EL12DU) with their children following the family breakdown. This was typically due to having more “freedom” (EL12DU) to be a parent “on my terms” (RY05ED) and “spend[ing] a lot more quality time together than I think we would've as if we'd remained a full family unit” (EL12DU):

> “I am no longer in this position of subordination with my ex-partner. […] Being, in a way, the family home, her house, her territory, there would still be some, some constraints or routines […] that would have to be maintained even when she wasn't around. So, to have them in my environment now, [...] I think this is what has helped my relationship with them to improve.” (AS24AI)

> “I would say that after the breakup, I was able to then be a dad. [...] I felt like my confidence as a father was being chipped away gradually. But soon as I was having one-to-one time, I was then able to develop me as a dad and have confidence as a dad and find my own feet, rather than be told how to do things. [...] So, that in turn has benefited our relationship […] and I think my daughter feeds off that confidence as well.” (SR23WO)

Several fathers discussed becoming “a lot more social” (EL12DU) as the family breakdown brought the freedom to spend time with friends and family that they were not permitted to see during the relationship. Sometimes this meant “rebuild[ing] bridges” (BE03WI) with previously estranged friends and family members. As a result, some fathers recognised that their “social life’s actually got a lot better” (PO219PO) and “improved from where it was immediately post-separation" (DU10PA). A few fathers referred to the "new friends” (WD17SC) they made as a result of going through this process:

> “Because I've been in this situation, I've made new friends as well. [...] I would say one of my best friends now is a dad who's going through a similar situation. […] So, we've always got each other for therapy which is nice.” (WD17SC)

> “I ended up making some really good friends with the parents. And I think having new friendships that weren't ever to do with my marriage or anything was really, really good for me. Really helped. Like a fresh start.” (KI12CO)

Some fathers explained that the experience “strengthened my family bonds” (SR23WO) as they had to rely on them for social support through the family breakdown.

> “With family, there's been a weird side effect of, because [my ex-partner] insists that I be supervised by my sisters, I've actually gotten to know my sister a lot better. [...] My family has all really pulled around as a result” (WI13FA)

7.1.4.2 On children

When asked how they thought the family breakdown impacted their children, several fathers emphasised their efforts to “keep our differences aside from the kids” (SP22WI) in order to protect them “because that kind of negativity can really leak in” (EL12DU).
Nevertheless, a number of fathers were concerned over the potential negative impact the family breakdown has had or will have on their children. Some of these concerns stemmed

from the children having witnessed interparental conflict and/or their father being subjected to abuse:

> “We used to do on Sundays, we did like family days where we would take [our daughter] swimming. [...] And then [our daughter]'s mum decided she wanted to come along too to these and made them extremely difficult. You know, she was very abusive during them, very toxic. And then even got to the point where [our daughter] didn't want to go swimming anymore because it was, she found it too difficult.” (KI09BE)

> “The children knew that it was difficult and [...] that I was managing this. I think my son was probably about six or seven when once he said to me ‘Dad it's really great you're here when mummy's angry because you're like a shield.’” (WC14MO)

Some parents were also concerned over the potential impact of the repeated intervention from the local authorities in response to false allegations made against the father:

> “I've had numerous allegations of neglect of the children and, you know, physical abuse of the children. So, all of which have been resulted in the children being medically examined by a paediatrician. […] My kids have been through [...] It's definitely in the double figures, it might be as many as 20. But I would say 15, 16 medical exams. They've seen 14 social workers.” (LO02BA)

> “I was accused of lying on top of him, which, you know, obviously didn't happen. [...] Police turned up at his school, and just checked everything was okay. And I think that's one of the difficulties is, you know, suddenly the children are pulled into this.” (RU02CA)

Fathers described their children as predominantly feeling negative emotions, such as feeling “really angry” (KI12CO) in response to the family breakdown itself, or experiencing “distress and anxiety” (PO219PO) during handovers:

> “He's told me straight when I've had to leave as well, that he's crying, bawling. ‘Don't leave me. Please don't leave me’, that sort of thing. And it breaks my heart obviously to hear that.” (GR31TO)

Several fathers recognised the instability for the children caused by having “two separate lives, two separate parents” (RY05ED) and the recurring adjusting required when “toing and froing between the two houses” (KI12CO):

> “My daughter's young, so she's two, so she sort of goes with the flow. But my son who's coming up to five, he's quite sensitive and he can be quite anxious and gets quite upset fairly easily with all the changes and things like that, which is understandable.” (LO16PL)

> “Every time they would turn up, they would be quite aggressive, which was never before the case. And it was almost, they had to get some physical tension out of their system, and after that, you will be able to sort of settle down and have a nice time together.” (WC14MO)

Fathers cited the impact of this on their children’s mental health, such as “anxiety […] panic attacks” (RU02CA), “PTSD” (Crabby Dad), and “self-harming” (KI09BE). Some fathers also recognised the knock-on impact of this on their children’s “sleeping” (KI12CO).

Several fathers distinguished the impact on their children stemming from parental alienation in particular. As a result of one parent's attempts to cut the father out of their lives, children were often left feeling distressed and "confused" (WI13FA, WC14MO) as well as "guilty" (KI09BE) due to feeling "torn" (WI13FA) between loyalties to both parents:

> "Of course, they want to love both of their parents because that's just natural and normal. You know, 'I want to love Mum. And I want to love Dad.' But now you don't know what's happening because apparently one of them is terrible, but I don't think they're terrible." (WC14MO)

> "We put in place little mechanisms to try and help [my daughter] adjust. We used things like a worry box, so every night she would write down a little thing in her worry box about how she was feeling that day. […] [My daughter] wrote down, 'I'm worried that my mum won't be my mum anymore because of how much I love [my stepmum]. I'm worried that my mum won't love me because I'm having fun with my dad. I'm worried that if I'm having fun at my dad's house, my mum will be really, really sad and I will not be there to make her better.' […] For a five-, six-year-old, those are very difficult emotions to manage. And I think that just created a sense that she felt guilty when she was with me and resentful when she was me and worried about her mum, you know, when she wasn't there." (KI09BE)

These feelings mounted to increased "tantrums" (KI09BE) as well as signs of anxiety and co-dependency on the alienating parent:

> "When my ex came to collect them, they'd been having a lovely time with us. And when my ex arrived, my oldest daughter became absolutely panicked. She was, like, grabbing her case and everything. Didn't even like think about saying goodbye. [...] It was like, she's got to go, she's got to go in this, like, a state of panic." (Crabby Dad)

> "She struggled an awful lot being away from her mum, not because she missed her mum, but because she was just always worried about her mum. […] She tried to let herself out the house to walk back to her mum's house because she really needed to be with her mum. She couldn't cope." (KI09BE)

Many of the fathers, whose children were very young during the family breakdown, suggested that the family breakdown may not have impacted them much at all, due to their young age. For example, some of the fathers' relationships with their ex-partners ended prior to or only very soon after the birth of their child, and children were therefore shielded from any negative impact given they were "too young to sort of comprehend what's going on" (LO16PL) and "it's all she's ever known" (CH09KI), therefore "he doesn't necessarily know what he's missing." (HH18DU):

> "And I hope because she was only 18 months, two years old, that maybe she just sees it as, dare I use the word, normal?" (WD17SC)

In contrast, fathers considered their older children to be more vulnerable to negative impact as they are more likely to be "aware of what's going on" (PO219PO).

7.1.5 Coping

In response to the experiences above, fathers had to find ways to try and cope, some 'healthy', some 'unhealthy'.

7.1.5.1 Coping Strategies

Alcohol was by far the most popular unhealthy coping strategy, adopted by nearly half the sample of fathers. Although they were keen to express this did not go overboard into a serious problem:

> “If I didn't drink, then I didn't sleep. I was just too wired. So, that became a mechanism.” (KI12CO)

> “I probably drank a bit more alcohol. I was never, sort of, dependent or anything. I wasn't unhealthy, but I was probably drinking a bit more alcohol as well.” (RY05ED)

Around a quarter of fathers coped through having a bad diet:

> “Even to this day, I think eating can, for me, it can be an unhealthy coping mechanism because it's a comfort for me.” (HH18DU)

> “I think most of that would have happened towards the end of the last relationship and during the breakdown, there were a lot of stress. I definitely ate my feelings alright. […] I definitely binge a lot. Whenever I'm stressed, I binge a lot and just eat junk. I kinda go through, like, I'll skip meals and then I'll binge on junk food, which is obviously not a great sort of pattern to be in.” (KI09BE)

A few fathers also reported smoking and overworking as unhealthy coping strategies:

> “The unhealthiest was starting to smoke again. I've since quit.” (AL17KL)

> “I started smoking for a little while, which was a habit I started during that breakdown period and post-separation and I gave that up.” (RY05ED)

> “My coping strategy was just going to work. […] So, I put all my focus and energy into work, quite frankly.” (GR31TO)

> “Working too much.” (BE03WI)

7.5.1.2 Healthy coping strategies

More than two-thirds of the fathers interviewed cited exercise as a healthy coping strategy, as it helped their mental health and countered the bad diet used by some fathers as an unhealthy coping mechanism:

> “So, sort of physical exercise, I would use that time to think about things and try and think things through when I was walking rather than thinking things through during the night and it affecting my sleep.” (CH09KI)

> “Physical activity was an outlet and a good form of socialisation and I needed that. […] I would use exercise as a way of blowing off steam, like a cathartic thing. I remember during the early phase, whenever my ex would come pick up the kids on a Sunday after they'd spent the weekend with me, I would go out for a long, long run. And looking back on it now, I know that was a way of dealing with the emotions of saying goodbye to my kids for another week.” (RY05ED)

Around a third of fathers engaged in hobbies or leisure activities as a coping mechanism. This was particularly valuable for fathers whose ex-partners prohibited such recreational activities during their relationship:

> “Engage in more mindful exercises, the likes of reading and painting.” (HH18DU)

> “I'm a musician. I've been a musician all my life. I was a music lecturer for 20 years. And I couldn't play. I couldn't pick up an instrument. It just made me cry. I couldn't. And it wasn't until really quite recently that I've been able to get back into doing that, and that's been massively great for my mental health.” (LO14AB)

Fathers also reported finding the outdoors, mindfulness and meditation, and helping others as well as socialisation, and therapy as effective coping strategies:

> “The only way I can really disconnect is when I'm working or when I'm away, [...] I do a lot of trekking. [...] And that's been my way to escape from all of this.” (LI26PE)

> “I'm a really big fan of meditation now [...] just to help calm my mind down. I found it particularly useful for helping me to get to sleep at night […] because I think that that's when I'm at my worst is nighttime, [...] it's sort of like a way of breaking out of that negative spiral in a healthy manner. And then, you know, once you're able to sleep again, it makes such a huge difference in helping you climb out of the massive hole that you've been put in.” (HA11GL)

> “And we are a recognised charity since 2017. Edinburgh Lone Fathers. So that's helped massively not only with myself because it's given me a focus now, [but also] because I've actually been in the system for so long, I'm able to actually support and help other people.” (WE04GL)

> “Definitely reconnected with a lot of my older friends [...] you'll get into a relationship and there's certain people you used to hang about with that maybe drop by the wayside. […] Catching up with people, you know, going down and seeing people in the pub and catching up has been good.” (EL12DU)

7.1.5.2 Social support

Fathers reported receiving support from a combination of family, friends, a new partner, their boss and colleagues, as well as neighbours, and other parents in their neighbourhood:

> “A couple other friends were just there to speak to. It was good. I was lucky. I don't think I would have been in such a good mental state of mind if I didn't have a couple of very switched-on people to speak to.” (EL12DU)

> “It’s strengthened my family bonds, so, particularly my relationship with my mum has been acutely helpful in the situations that I’ve been in. So, I have a lot of family support.” (SR23WO)

> “I leaned extremely heavily on my partner, [name]. She was absolutely wonderful. Like you couldn't ask for someone to be better. She was really, really supportive throughout all of it. And honest to God, if it wasn't for her, I don't think I would still be around.” (KI09BE)

> “At work even. A lot of my colleagues have been very supportive.” (AS24AI)

> “I've got a couple of neighbours. [...] I've been over there a couple of times and just melted down on their sofa and they've been lovely.” (LO14AB)

> “We've had a huge amount of support from parents at the school.” (KI09BE)

Fathers received predominantly emotional support from their social networks:

> “But just, I think, just a lot of validation from family and friends, you know, in terms of... ‘You're right to feel like this way.’” (KI09BE)

> “Sometimes, they're just there for an ear to listen to. You know, I needed something, kinda second advice or a second opinion about a situation” (WE04GL)

Some fathers also received “practical support for getting on with life” (HA11GL), such as financial support, accommodation, and assistance with childcare:

> “The amount of administrative work my fiancée does is incredible. Like, if we get an email from my ex-partner and it's really difficult, she will deal with it [...] because she knows how difficult that is for me. She knows I get into a bit of a frazzle about it and, you know, panic. So, she'll write a template email and be like: ‘Is that what we want to say?’ Okay. And she'll deal with that. […] It's probably the one that helps the most” (KI09BE)

> “They've always sort of helped me out in terms of finance and, God knows where I'd be without them, essentially, because it felt like a tight rope at that point.” (BE03WI)

> “There was a couple who, for about a year, I think, every Wednesday evening, they would come over and she would cook dinner and she'd bring it with her. And that was just brill, because one of the hardest things for me was suddenly having to do everything, like cook all the meals, you know, do it all together. And just to have that one night where I didn't have to do that was absolutely brilliant.” (KI12CO, Resident Parent)

Some fathers appreciated socialising with their friends and family:

> “It's mainly the socialising aspect to it all, getting away from where I was. So, one of my good friends who I've known 30 odd years, I would go round to his house with his wife and his kids as well and it was nice to get away and not think about stuff.” (AL17KL)

> “I had a friend who his wife would come look after the kids, and then we'd go out for a beer. And that was really, really good. I needed that.” (KI12CO)

Some fathers also recalled being referred to professional support by family members when needed:

> "My sister pointed me in the right direction towards professional support.” (HH18DU)

> “My parents were able to connect me with some more psychologists and psychiatrists that they knew.” (AS24AI)

Despite many fathers speaking very positively about the social support they received, they also identified several barriers which deterred them from asking for help. Most commonly, fathers “didn’t want to burden people” (AL17KL) with their problems:

> “But there's only so much burden you can put on friends and people who have got their own shit going on.” (RY05ED)

> “It was starting to actually impact our relationship because I was the guy that was turning up and talking about my ex or talking about my contact arrangements or talking about court and I became a bit like a broken record.” (HH18DU)

Or were embarrassed or ashamed about the breakdown of the relationship and how it was affecting them:

> “I was embarrassed. I didn't want to say anything to anybody. Didn't want to tell anybody where I was living, the way I was being controlled.” (AR25DU)

> “Male pride, ey? [...] As a grown man, you don't really wanna ask for help until maybe it's a bit too late.” (GR31TO)

Some fathers perceived others to be ignorant or found that others lacked understanding of what they were going through:

> “A lot of their advice or opinion was useless and ignorant of the, the reality of the British court system” (AS24AI)

> “These people are living in a bubble that is not exposed to what people like us are going through […] unless you've gone through this whole experience, you know, people have no idea.” (LI26PE)

And therefore, they could only do so much to help:

> “[They] didn't have anything to tell me that would make me feel better […] nice words are not enough to undo the damage that's an angry ex-partner." (AS24AI)

> “I'm also aware that [...] all I want to be able to do is have a chat with someone. No one's going to be able to actually take me out of that situation. So therefore, I try not to involve too many people unless they can actually help me with the situation. All most people can do is lend an ear.” (GR31TO)

Some of the fathers’ social networks were also distanced, either geographically or emotionally due to burnt bridges during the relationship with their ex-partner:

> “I had no contact with family, my family live abroad, I felt extremely isolated.” (WC14MO)

> “As a by-product of marriage, my friend, my friends had been pretty much isolated from me. My ex-partner was very disapproving of anyone that was in my life. […] I was left with no support and really very little chance to discuss this with anybody.” (DU10PA)

7.1.5.3 Professional support

Most fathers reported receiving some kind of professional psychological support, such as counselling or CBT:

> “I thought I was going nuts. Completely crazy. So, I took myself to a counsellor and that completely changed. I explained the whole situation and explained everything that had gone on and that benefited me massively.” (PO219PO)

> “I went to the GP and they referred me to a CBT course to basically stop me from jumping off a bridge. That was amazing. That really was a turning point. […] That got me through the end of the relationship and the moving out of my daughter, that got me through that and getting me to stop thinking about negative thoughts all the time and start to, like, be a lot more positive.” (WD17SC)

Around a third of interviewed fathers explained they received professional support through work, for example through their “employee assistance programme” (WD17SC) or through “private medical health care through work” (HA11GL):

> “Work arranged for psychotherapy for me, which was very good. Which I think probably saved me.” (AR25DU)

> “The only help I managed to get was through the company I was working for. Their employment assistance programme. I got a six-week counselling course through them.” (SP22WI)

Some fathers stated they were taking or had taken prescribed mental health medication, however, several more were reticent and declined taking medication to alleviate the mental health impact:

> “I had a breakdown with my neighbours. They rang the doctor's. I saw the doctor that afternoon. So, I'm now on antidepressants. I'm 53 years old. I've never had antidepressants in my life. I don't want to be on them. I tried to not take them for a day, and that feeling came back. My stomach turned, I get a thing in my throat comes up, I start shaking, I feel physically sick. So, I took them and I've not stopped taking them since I got them, which is maybe four or five weeks ago.” (CO19EX)

> “My GP was very happy to offer me all these different drugs. I didn't want any of those, thank you. […] I don't want to take drugs to mask the symptoms and not do anything about the causes. So, I've never, ever taken any medication.” (LO14AB)

Around two-thirds of participants had reported seeking support from a charitable organisation, for example for divorced or separated fathers, or for male survivors of domestic abuse. They discussed attending support groups, courses, or calling a helpline provided by these organisations:

> “I also spoke to Families Need Fathers who have now changed their name and they're Shared Parenting Scotland. […] They were a godsent really. I'm still going to their monthly meetings and they've really helped guide me through the process and make things quite a bit easier.” (CH09KI)

> “I got in touch with Dads Unlimited. And they, well, the fact that I'm still here and I'm still alive, that's down to them. But they were incredibly supportive emotionally and mentally as well, they were fab.” (WD17SC)

> “The other really good thing that I would recommend was Families Need Fathers and I did a Surviving Separation course. That was really helpful.” (LO16PL)

The majority of fathers reported that the professional help they received was helpful for providing them with emotional support, particularly therapy for offering an opportunity for “introspection” (LO16PL) and strategies for healthily regulating emotions:

> “The CBT therapists talked to me about various things in my past and how that relates to the person that I am today, which was quite helpful in understanding

myself better. But I think some of the most useful things that I've taken from it are [...] CBT techniques to help calm the mind." (HA11GL)

"If we take counselling, [...] it was me being able to talk through some of the conflict that was going on at that time, and deal with my emotional responses and then basically build in strategies for how to deal with some of the guilt that I was feeling. [...] Even though it was just six sessions, it was at least like a springboard for me to be able to talk through some of this stuff with someone who was neutral but [...] had my interests and wellbeing at the sort of centre of those discussions." (RY05ED)

Fathers also received pragmatic help in the form of problem-solving with a mentor or educational books or support through the court process:

"With the Shared Parent Scotland Group, I got recommended a good couple of books for just, like, handling these sort of situations. […] It was like BIFF responses, I think. It was brief, informative, firm, but fair kind of responses for, like, handling, basically, just like, trying to de-escalate de-aggro nasty conversations so that you don't, sort of, feed into the fire, essentially. So that helped a lot." (BE03WI)

"I spoke to the Scottish Child Law Centre. I think that was one of the first bodies I spoke to and I explained the situation to the lady on the phone and she gave me so much hope that I could do something about this. I felt powerless, powerless that I had not been added to the birth certificate and had no control over my ex taking my daughter away from me. And this lady gave me such good advice and it really set me on the path to resolving the situation." (CH09KI)

"So, I've got a mentor at Dads Unlimited and she's been really great. So, she can advise on some of the legal stuff. She can look through the court papers and stuff and, you know, she's just got experience of what the likely ways to respond to that are. She's not a solicitor, she's not a lawyer, but she's seen enough of these things to be able to give advice on it." (WI13FA)

Fathers also spoke about how the professional support offered opportunities for meeting others going through similar experiences to them, which helped them gain perspective, feel less alone, and recognise and validate their own abuse experiences:

"The one thing that that brought to me was the perspective that I'm not the only one going through this. I think I was very much feeling like in the beginning, this is only happening to me. And so, you felt like the world was against you." (HH18DU)

"It was just amazing to find out that it wasn't just me. I thought it was only me. And there were all these other guys from all different walks of life and every, you know, all different shapes, sizes, ethnicities, you name it. But our stories were all so ridiculously similar, and the tactics that had been used against us were all so ridiculous and similar. And it was really quite mind-blowing." (LO14AB)

"But you go along to some of the meetings and it's like okay. I get that these people are actually in the same boat as me [...] there's other people in the same position and that this is happening all the time across the country, up and down to families all over. Yeah, it's nice to know that there's other people going through it as well. And it's not just me." (WI13FA)

"They also did some walks as well where dads could get together. And so, I did a couple of those and they were really good at meeting other people in similar

> situations. […] I find being around other men who were going through a similar situation, I find that really, really important." (KI12CO)

Despite reports that "once you get in touch with and get on board with these people, they're great" (CH09KI), fathers identified a number of barriers to seeking and accessing professional support in the first place. Almost half of fathers experienced difficulty finding the right or any support. Some attributed this to poor signposting as "it's not really advertised anywhere" (ST03ST), while others believed it was because such services were lacking:

> "There's just no support out there for dads and for men in particular." (KI09BE)

> "I didn't find any help. When I looked on the internet, I didn't find anything that was locally to me that could help, which is a shame because it was there, I just hadn't found it." (KI12CO)

> "But I really had to dig in order to find those organisations. They weren't the, sort of, the clear, obvious ones that come up when you're searching for support and advice for separated parents. Like, you had to. You had to do some quite significant research to be able to find these people in the first place." (RY05ED)

As a result of not finding the right support, some fathers recalled experiences where services failed to offer adequate or any support for their situation:

> "I've tried to reach out to, like, the various helplines. It was a very disappointing experience. […] The guy said: 'Okay, go on, speak' and then after 20 minutes he said: 'Okay, well, that was 20 minutes. Thank you. Bye.' And I couldn't believe like how... Like he couldn't give less of a shit." (AS24AI)

> "There was a couple of other agencies that I was suggested I report the domestic abuse to. [...] And all they did was open the file, put the details down, and that was it. […] Or they took notes and then said, there's not a lot else we can do for you at the moment." (WD17SC)

> "So, I went to a Citizens Advice Bureau for help, and that was... I think that was one of the lowest moments. [...] Basically, 'Can you help me?' And all the woman said, she said 'Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know which one you're going to get.' And I remember, I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. [...] She gave me some printed sheets. And I left and I just cried as I got out the building 'cos I just thought, 'I'm on my own, ain't I? I'm totally on my own.'" (KI12CO)

Several fathers recognised that services were overburdened and struggling to stay afloat, therefore lacking capacity, which resulted in long waiting times:

> "I kind of went to the bottom of the waitlist and it took a year for me to get a call back from them." (KI09BE)

> "There's an 18-month NHS waiting list to see a psychologist." (LO14AB)

> "It took months to get allocated a mentor. [...] Yes, it's great, but it was very slow to get going initially." (WI13FA)

Some fathers described that they were not able to receive support from certain organisations because they did not meet the correct demographic criteria (e.g., gender, sexuality), especially domestic abuse services which were not open to men in some cases:

> “Particularly as a dad as well. Like, I just felt invisible, like, it's all single mums, there was nothing for dads.” (KI12CO)

> “And I rang them up, and they said: ‘Oh, we can't work with you. We only help women.’ That was really quite painful. It really was crap because I kind of thought, hang on a minute. I'm just as much a victim, and you are the people I'm supposed to be turning to. They said: ‘Well no, so sorry. Perhaps you could try somebody else.’ That was a real kick in the teeth.” (WC14MO)

> “Not many men sort of come to our service [...] it used to be like, ‘Oh we’ve got to get special permission if we’re going to see you.’ [...] There were those underlying tones of, like, it doesn't happen to you. And it's not, it's not very common and all that stuff which kind of doesn't really help when you're, like, really needing support.” (LO16PL)

> Some fathers discussed feeling shame or embarrassment in asking for help:

> “Maybe we're quite difficult to engage in support services. We're quite stubborn, we're quite, you know, reluctant to reach out and to be vulnerable and to, you know, to ask for help even.” (HH18DU)

> “As a man, you just feel like you've got to do it on your own.” (KI12CO)

> “Asking for help has never been my thing.” (WC14MO)

Some feared that their ex-partner would use it against them if they received professional help:

> “There was a big barrier because I was worried, that anything, if I expressed too much about any problems I was having mentally, that it would be turned and used against me. So, there was a big barrier. So, I couldn’t get the full support I wanted or needed at the time. I had to shoulder a lot of it. [...] I felt that any aspect of mental health could be seen as being a risk.” (SR23WO)

> “I did contemplate speaking to a doctor about it a couple of times. But again, I was fearful of the fact that if I came back with a diagnosis, that's the sort of thing that my ex would lead on as a reasoning for me not to see the kids.” (EL12DU)

7.1.6 Reflecting on Past, Present, and Future

Men spent time in interviews and in the survey reflecting on their experiences and looking to the future.

7.1.6.1 Past: Advice for other fathers

Having reflected on their personal journey through family breakdown, participants were asked what advice they would give to another father going through or about to go through a similar experience of family breakdown. A number of fathers felt they didn’t “even know what advice I can give” (ST03ST) because “it’s different for everyone. It’s completely different.” (CO19EX). This led to some fathers offering some pessimistic advice:

> “You’re entirely a victim of circumstance. […] There's no advice that I can give. […] Once that ball's rolling, [...] I don't think there's anything you can do. You just have to try and ride the storm as best you can.” (DU10PA)

> “Just prepare to go through hell. 'I'm sorry' is pretty much the only thing you can say, because it's got to be the worst thing that could ever happen to anyone. And if you're the non-resident parent, you're in for a much rougher ride than the resident parent.” (HA11GL)

> “Good luck. I mean, it's impossible. I couldn't say anything to them that's remotely positive because the system is a nightmare.” (LO14AB)

In contrast, several fathers were keen to offer more “hopeful and optimistic” (HH18DU) reassurance, urging fathers to “hang in there” (SR23WO) because “it does get better” (KI12CO) and “there is light at the end of the tunnel” (AL17KL, EL12DU). Fathers frequently emphasised the importance of “be[ing] kind to yourself” (HH18DU) and “look[ing] after yourself because your child needs a father that’s looked after” (SR23WO). Fathers often stressed that amongst everything, there was the fundamental need to “make everything child-focused" (SR23WO) by “put[ting] your child’s needs first no matter what happens” (KI09BE).

Several fathers advised it is vital to “keep your cool” (KI09BE), in particular, “don’t get engaged in the spats with your ex” (Crabby Dad) or with professional authorities because “the court will think better of you for doing that” (Crabby Dad). Some fathers offered practical advice, such as to “get some mediation involved immediately” (CO19EX) or “get a good solicitor” (RU02CA), and “record everything” (PO219PO) and “catalogue everything you can to provide the evidence” (Crabby Dad) to counter false allegations.

The most popular advice was also to “find support because you’re going to need it” (KI12CO), whether that be “talk[ing] to your family, talk[ing] to your friends” (KI09BE), “do[ing] some sort of counselling or psychotherapy” (AR25DU), or “get[ting] in touch with the male focussed charities and the parenting focussed charities” (Crabby Dad) because “there is support available out there” (AL17KL):

> “Reach out. Don’t go through it alone.[...] You'll get through it in the best way with other people helping you. [...] That's your best chance to get through it in one piece, is to reach out and get support and ask for help and take that help.” (HH18DU)

> “I grew up in the 80s when the attitude was to suck it up and be a man sort of thing. Like no, actually, you're allowed to cry, you're allowed to be upset. These things are really important and if you don't deal with it that way, then it's going to mess you up. You know, you need to be able to let this out. You need to be able to have a friend who can be there for a shoulder to cry on, [...] just people to speak to that help you balance things out, I think, is probably the biggest thing.” (EL12DU)

> “I would say that get support from as many places as you can find. Find other men who have had similar experiences, who are maybe further down the line, who can give you empathy and give you advice based on that experience.” (RY05ED)

7.1.6.2 Present: Current circumstances

When asked to reflect on their current circumstances, a few fathers described certain aspects of their life having “worsened” (LI26PE) or "deteriorated” (WD17SC) since the initial family breakdown, predominantly “in both a parental sense and a financial sense” (WI13FA) due to having “loads of debt now” (LO16PL), or more commonly “not seeing my daughter as much” (WD17SC).

However, most fathers reported that their circumstances had, to some extent, “improved” (AL17KL, BE03WI, CH09KI, HA11GL, HH18DU, KI12CO, LO16PL, PO219PO, SR23WO, WD17SC), even if this was part of a mixture of things being “simultaneously better and worse” (WC14MO):

> “There are quite a few negatives that kind of stacked up alongside it. But I think, overall, I would say it's more positive.” (LO16PL)

The most frequently reported improvement was the “relief” (WI13FA) and “elation” (DU10PA) of “breaking free” (DU10PA) from their (often abusive) ex-partner:

> “The day I break up, I felt like I could fly. I felt like all the weight was off my shoulders. Like when I closed that door for the last time, I felt like I was closing a chapter in my life, so a new me was just starting.” (CR21VI)

This was closely followed by the fact that “the relationship with the kids is better” (EL12DU) after having maintained or restored a relationship with them:

> “Having structured time with my kiddo, [...] there's no surprises or fights that have to happen for it to be a thing, is great. She knows I'm here. And it's a regular enough occurrence that I feel like, you know, she knows what's up. [...] I feel much better.” (BE03WI)

Several fathers remarked on the success of rebuilding aspects of their life previously lost, such as “having my own home” (Crabby Dad), “got a new job” (EL12DU), and “getting out and seeing a lot more friends” (EL12DU):

> “It has improved because it’s forced me to grow up and to create a life and create a world that my daughter is a part of. So, I’ve got more, I’ve gained more than I had before.” (SR23WO)

A number of fathers also commented on having “emotionally and mentally improved” (PO219PO) having “been through the worst” (WC14MO) and now being able to “cope much better with the stress of things” (CH09KI). A few fathers attributed this improvement, in part, to their “new relationship” (WC14MO) with a new partner, which is “much healthier and caring” (AS24AI) and so “life feels very complete now” (KI09BE).

7.1.6.3 Future: Change needed

Participants were asked about what needed to change to help other fathers going through a family breakdown in the future. Their responses broadly fell into three main areas: A Presumption of 50/50 Care, Court Reform, and More Support.

Many participants wanted there to be “a legal requirement for both parents to be able to see their child on a regular basis” (HA11GL). Often, fathers wanted this in the form of a legally enforced “default starting point of 50/50” (Crabby Dad) in cases where “alienation doesn’t occur, coercive control doesn’t occur” (RU02CA) and “unless there is an absolutely cast-iron proven risk” (LO14AB).

Many fathers supported this "default presumption of 50/50 shared care” (WI13FA) “because that’s the best thing for the kids” (RU02CA) and because “we shouldn’t be going to court” (LO14AB) to achieve “a point of impartiality” (Crabby Dad). Many fathers perceived themselves to be “on a back foot” (EL12DU) compared to the mother, being “told that I’d be lucky to get Friday through to Sunday” (BE03WI). They considered this to set “a very bad precedent to the father that you’re replaceable, you are not necessary. But you are necessary” (GR31TO):

> “Both sexes have a beneficial role to play. […] The primary problem we have in the system, it's the law.” (Crabby Dad)

> “In Sweden, if two people separate, you have a 50/50 right and responsibility for your kids. You know, why Britain is so far behind on this is unreal. I mean, we

> brought in gender equality laws decades ago, but not as far as it comes to a family. [...] The nondomicile parent is instantly on a back foot and can literally have anything happen to them. And there is no support net there. At least not one that most people can afford." (EL12DU)

The most popular change wanted was for the systems involved in the family breakdown process to be "overhauled" (GR31TO) because they are "rotten to the core" (LI26PE). Most commonly, fathers wanted to see "more equality in the courts" (CH09KI) and "social services need to be more balanced" (PO219PO). They stressed that "men need to have a voice […] they need to be taken seriously" (LI26PE) because currently "there's too much emphasis on the father or the non-resident parent to prove that they are a fit parent" (GR31TO), and this can be achieved by "hear[ing] both sides of the story" (CR21VI).

Several fathers identified "perverse incentives built into the system" (WI13FA) that encourage legal professionals to "try to antagonise people as much as possible" (WC14MO) to elongate the process and reap a greater financial benefit. Instead, fathers wanted the system to be "more person-focussed and a lot less adversarial" (LO14AB) by not treating the father "like a criminal" (AS24AI) and by "look[ing] for ways to end the process rather than continue the process" (HH18DU):

> "The services need to be far more, like, restorative. Like, they need to repair the relationship. They seem to create divisions and, kind of, take sides. [...] It could have been resolved within a week. [...] Yet, 18 months down the line, like, it's just got worse and worse and worse, and it seems more hostile and more hostile. And so therefore, like, the division's just getting wider and wider and wider, which obviously is not helpful for the children, it's not helpful for the parents and it's not helpful for society." (LO16PL)

Fathers were eager for legal professionals to exercise "a healthy scepticism in accusations that are made against you" (LO02BA). They wanted a more robust practice for assessing the validity of allegations which involved fathers "be[ing] believed, […] look[ing] seriously at the evidence and deal[ing] with it accordingly" (LO14AB) rather than "immediately rush[ing] in there and take the female side of it" (PO219PO) without "look[ing] at the evidence […] to get a proper picture" (LO14AB) of the situation:

> "Cafcass. That needs to go. That needs to be reformed. It needs to be a proper system of people who actually look at things and given the time to look at things. And they shouldn't be allowed to present a report until they have gone over it with the people who they are making the report about and noting where there is disagreement, if there is any. Cafcass officers get my child's name and age wrong. I mean, bloody hell, if you can't get those things right, what chance that they're gonna get everything else wrong?" (LO14AB)

Furthermore, fathers recognised that "there needs to be punishment for lying in the family court" (WI13FA) to deter "bad faith actors" (KI09BE) from abusing legal and administrative processes for their benefit "without discouraging genuine victims coming forward" (KI09BE):

> "There needs to be penalties. [...] At the moment, one parent can stop contact and it takes the court system a year, two years, more, to deal with it." (LO14AB)

> "If someone lies in a statement that they have said is a sworn statement of truth and you can prove that that is true, they must be punished. They must be punished if they break court orders. And there must be, the fundamental thing with a presumption of shared care is if someone blocks access and there is no basis for it, that should be a criminal offence." (WI13FA)

> “I'm certainly getting held responsible for things I've not done. So why my ex-partner can't be held responsible for the damage she's caused” (EL12DU)

Many fathers wanted “more support” (CH09KI) “that is centred on them or at least neutral” (RY05ED), so family breakdown was a less “isolating experience” (WC14MO).
Some framed the problem as support being limited or non-existent:

> “For men to have access to these kind of groups […] because there’s just not many.” (KI12CO)

> “I think the systems are not there. I think people are being let down and I'm worried about that suicide statistic.” (WC14MO)

> “Male mental health charities are not as well funded and male domestic abuse charities are absolutely not as well funded as female charities.”

Others, on the other hand, perceived the problem to be the accessibility of support available and wanted “it not to be such a hurdle to get the help you need” (BE03WI). Fathers saw a financial barrier to accessing support, and also wanted greater "awareness given to the options out there” (HH18DU) as “when you Google it, there’s very little” (WD17SC):

> “There needs to be access for people. […] Being able to get quick access to either a counsellor or a psychologist, it's okay if you've got lots of money or a good job and maybe you can get it through Bupa or whatever private health scheme, you know. But for the rest of us, us normal people, you can't and it's not there. And my God, do you need it. Not everybody's got family and friends who they can get support from.” (LO14AB)

7.2 Study 2 - Brief Discussion

The men in this survey and those interviewed described a substantial array of challenges following FBSD, largely centred around establishing parental responsibility. The toll this took on fathers and their children, especially in relation to mental health, was extensive, and they often struggled to cope. This was particularly exaggerated when men also reported experiences of abuse, both within the relationship and post-separation. Many of the men spoke about how children were used as part of this abusive behaviour, with a significant proportion experiencing parental alienating behaviours (PABs), again, with significant consequences. Experiences of support were mixed, as were outlooks on their situation, and the future.

8. Study 3 – Deliberative Inquiry with Organisations Supporting Fathers

To assess the challenges in addressing the issues outlined in Study 2, a focused discussion was conducted with leading organisations in the sector to establish not only the challenges in supporting men experiencing FBSD but also examples of best practice and recommendations for change.

8.1 Results

Analysis revealed five main themes: 'Support Needed by Fathers', 'Barriers for Fathers', 'Barriers for Organisations', 'Best Practice', and 'Recommendations'.

8.1.1 Support Needed by Fathers

Fathers were identified as having several differing needs upon approaching services following FBSD. This ranged from very practical advice to emotional support.

8.1.1.1 Practical support

Several types of practical support were discussed by participants when asked what their service users needed from their organisation. One participant raised that fathers wanted "signposting/access to local services" (BO23YE, 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." (WH03LO)

> "As a general rule, if someone looks at our website, they will see that we advise against going to court or rushing to court if they can possibly avoid it. However, a high proportion of the people that get in touch with us are getting in touch with us because they're already there." (NE22NE)

Participants also described fathers as being "lost in the process" (NE22NE) due to a lack of "awareness [and] understanding of the system/process" (BO23YE, Chat Entry). This was said to be hindered by there being "so little" (WH03LO) information available about "how an actual family court hearing operates" (WH03LO), particularly in "comparison to the criminal side of the law, which does confuse things quite a lot" (DU31LO):

> "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." (WH03LO)

To address this, participants from one organisation explained how they connect service users with legal professionals "to guide them through that process" (WA16WE):

> "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." (DU31LO)

One participant mentioned that fathers need to receive this practical support and information "in bitesize parts so that they can process that" (HA05BA). 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.

8.1.1.2 Emotional support

Participants also emphasised their service users' need for "emotional support" (BO23YE, Chat Entry; NE22NE, WA16WE, HA05BA). This often presented as a need to talk through and process what they are experiencing with someone who can 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. They appreciate the relationship has broken down, but there's a real block between moving from an intimate relationship to a working relationship, i.e., co-parenting. And that bit really struggles with a lot of men." (DU31LO)

This can also emerge as the need specifically for "mental health support" (HA05BA, DU31LO), 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." (BO23YE)

> "Suicide ideation is high. I think ours is tracking at 44% of people we speak to." (HA05BA)

It was discussed that fathers typically require urgent emotional and mental health support because they arrive at the service in their most desperate time of need. It is 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 the 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." (HA05BA)

There was also consensus that emotional support was fundamental to getting fathers "in the right headspace" (HA05BA) or "in the right state of mind" (DU31LO) 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 in a healthy and effective way 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. So, a lot of the support actually is around that emotional support and that mental health support, as well as then answering the practical questions that are churning around in their head." (HA05BA)

> "And what we do [...] is provide the mental health support and get them court-ready because we don't want them landing in court and not being in the right state of

> mind. So, I think [...] two of the things around understanding the process, understanding how the family law system works, coupled with 'How do I regulate myself to make sure that I can demonstrate that I am a loving, caring parent?'" (DU31LO)

Participants shared how they offer this emotional support through a variety of services such as a "helpline" (WH03LO, WA16WE; DU31LO, BO23YE, GA19LO), "mentoring" (DU31LO), through "local groups […] giving them that camaraderie" (WA16WE) and responding in-person to "people [who] have been threatening suicide on the call" (WA16WE):

> "So, once a client comes through to us, they will enter into our mentoring service and then they're mentored all the way through their family breakdown from start to finish. [...] Two of the main prongs behind the mentoring service and the work that our mentors do is helping the dad understand that how you engage with the system is everything. If you go at the system in an angry, disappointed, frustrated way, the system is not going to respect you. So, it's about emotional regulation." (DU31LO)

Participants also expressed a need for their organisation to adopt "early intervention models […] and strategies that help men regulate themselves" (DU31LO) and that would enable their organisations to assess needs and track progress with regards to 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. It will tell you with pretty good accuracy how ready people are to engage with the process. […] It can tell you if you're very emotionally ready, then, you know, you can start engaging in this type of support. If you're not emotionally ready, you might need to do some individual emotional support, therapy, that kind of thing." (BA09LO)

8.1.2.3 Uncertainty

A challenge raised by some participants was that "sometimes [service users] don't actually know what they need" (HA05BA). For example, even though fathers "do need a lot of emotional support […] men don't understand that's what they're looking for" (WA16WE). This added a layer of complexity to organisations' 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." (HA05BA).

8.1.2 Barriers for Fathers

Several *internal* and *external* barriers to engagement by fathers were identified.

8.1.2.1 Internal barriers

In relation to the fathers themselves, initially, there may be a barrier presented by the difficulty in coming to terms with the family breakdown and accepting the situation because "they think that no matter how bad it is, that actually we can solve this, we can talk about it, we can resolve it" (WA16WE). Moreover, in the immediate aftermath of the family breakdown, "shame" (BA09LO) and being "embarrassed" (HA05BA) can prevent fathers from being emotionally ready to request and accept support:

> "There's an element of shame creeps in when the relationship has failed. And I think there's a big fear that they're going to be embarrassed amongst their friends, amongst their family and so on. Particularly if that's not common within that circle

> as you go through this. I think that that element of shame stops them picking up the phone to people to say: 'How do I get help for this?'" (WA16WE)

Feelings of shame and embarrassment can also feed into more substantial, enduring personal issues that fathers carry through family breakdown, and which present personal barriers to them seeking support. For example, it was recognised that "men, when they come to us, initially, they're struggling with things like abandonment issues and attachment styles" (DU13LO) as a result of the impact of the family breakdown on them personally. This could lead to a feeling that "you're out of control" (DU13LO) and thus "that loss of agency" (DU13LO) can inhibit fathers' belief that they can ask for help or that such help will be effective in aiding their situation.

There is also the fear that by contacting professional third parties about their family breakdown, there is a risk that "the level of animosity just rockets through the roof […] there's a fear they're going to make it worse." (WA16WE)

8.1.2.2 External barriers

There are also several external barriers to fathers being able to access the support available, such as the level of service provision being a "postcode lottery" (BA09LO):

> "We used to deliver nationally. We used to get national funding and then make it available to everybody. That funding model has now changed. [...] Everything's delivered through local authorities. And local authorities have to bid for support, […] which means that our resources aren't available everywhere. They're only available where local authorities have licenced them. So, a lot of the time, people will come to us and say, you know, 'I need this type of support'. And we have to say: 'Well, where do you live? Because if you don't live in one of the local authorities where it's available, then we can't provide it." (BA09LO).

Several participants also alluded to the problem of not knowing where to turn after a family breakdown, either because "in many cases, fathers just don't know that services are available in the first place" (BA09LO, Chat Entry), or because the landscape is so wide, the number of possible groups to call is often overwhelming - women often have the "one-stop-shop" to resolve issues" (WA16WE, Chat Entry). This is only "reinforced by professional that aren't aware either" (BO23YE, Chat Entry):

> "We have regular calls from social workers, police officers, and other practitioners who don't know that the law is applied equally and what is out there to support men." (BO23YE, Chat Entry)

Even if fathers are aware of support available, they may be discouraged from going to these services because their social support networks fail to validate that they need and deserve help. It was suggested that this is elevated for fathers who have left an abusive relationship:

> "One of the main things [...] is the lack of support network. […] For men, what we're finding is, when they are reaching out for support, they're being told to man up. […] One guy I spoke to told his friends in the pub about the domestic abuse. It was really awful physical domestic violence, physical violence. They basically just took the mick out of him, called him a pussy for the night. He then isolated himself by not going to the pub again with his friends. So, it's that lack of support, peer support, family support network." (HA05BA)

A common barrier identified among participants was society's or the culture's "lack of consideration for dads and the importance of their roles" (BO23YE). This is bolstered particularly by those "looking to appoint a main parent" (NE22NE), such as "school and

doctors" (WA16WE), the "local authority" (NE22NE), or "the Child Maintenance Service" (NE22NE). This is also reinforced by the "lack of voice" (BO23YE) offered to fathers during "professional engagement" (DU10PA) following a family breakdown, for example through Cafcass and Social Services:

> "Repeatedly, week on week, I hear that the Cafcass officer has been to see the children with mum, the Cafcass officer or the social worker's been into school. They haven't listened to dad. They haven't heard what's going on for him. They haven't seen dad with the children or given him an opportunity to parent in front of them. Or to see what his parenting is like. [...] And men are afraid to ask for that because they're then being perceived as being bullish or controlling." (BO23YE)

Participants discussed that this external barrier becomes a personal barrier as "fathers themselves are also susceptible to those social attitudes" (GA19LO) and internalise "the conception that they are the underdog, […] the secondary parents, […] the inferior parents and that mums have the upper hand" (LA24BA) while "they feel on a back foot" (HA05BA). Consequently, this deters them from looking for or requesting help as "a lot of dads don't recognise their own value as parents" (GA19LO):

> "I read a book by Dr. Anna Machin called 'The Life of Dad' a couple of years ago. […] It sort of goes through the scientific research on the contributions that dads make. […] The people who call our helpline generally are dads who recognise their value as parents and want to contribute to their children's well-being. But obviously, right now, we're talking about people who are not calling our helpline or maybe not seeking support. And I think, you know, I've spoken to dads who just, kind of, walk away from the situation because they don't see how valuable they are as parents. And that's also part of the kind of cultural background that is […] such a key barrier to dads seeking help." (GA19LO)

8.1.3 Barriers for Organisations

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

8.1.3.1 Capacity and funding

Firstly, organisations are experiencing "an immense demand and we do not have enough capacity to meet that demand" (DU31LO):

> "The number of guys calling us every week is increasing exponentially." (DU31LO)

Crucially, this high demand for their services exists despite the numerous barriers which stop many fathers from coming forward– "The two are not mutually exclusive" (DU31LO).

The challenge to offering support to everyone who needs it is largely down to a "lack of funding" (NE22NE):

> "We've got big ambitions and very, very small bank balances." (WA16WE)

8.1.3.2 Lack of support (from government and society)

The lack of funding is partly because "we don't get the government support that's required" (WA16WE) and this can be, at least partly, attributed to a lack of acknowledgement of the urgency of the issue on a societal level. This manifests as a "lack of acknowledgement in strategy, policy, and plans" relevant to fathers and family breakdown, and "unconscious bias"

surrounding gender roles in parenting and masculinity. There was consensus in the group around the need for "getting us all together to demonstrate to society and government" that family breakdown is "a societal issue and [a risk of] harm to children." (WA16WE)

> "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 shit together and tell society, 'We've got to do something about this and manage this process better', we will not be succeeding at anything. And all we'll be doing is chasing the hamster wheel round, and round, and round. We've got to do something to get us together to raise this up to a possible public health issue. Parental conflict, the disease of family breakdown, the impact it has on children […] can be catastrophic. […] This is all preventable. It's preventable by government. Preventable by society. And it's preventable by money being focussed and pushed towards organisations that are trying to do their best to reduce the impact. That I think is our greatest challenge." (DU31LO)

8.1.3.4 Lack of coherency and collaboration

It is possible that the economical and ideological barriers could be somewhat alleviated through "unity" (LA24BA) of services, as participants acknowledged there is "a lack of coordination" (LA24BA) between the "whole diaspora of different organisations for fathers in the UK" (LA24BA), partly due to creating "break off organisations" (WA16WE):

> "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 organisations" (WA16WE)

If organisations were able "make a more concerted effort to be more coordinated" (WA16WE) and "work together […] to rally around something" (LA24BA), this may bolster the message they send out to society and governmental bodies while facilitating more efficient use of the funds currently available to them and improve fathers' awareness of their services.

8.1.4 Best Practice

Several examples of best practice and what the organisations 'did well' were given across the course of the discussion.

8.1.4.1 Moving away from fathers' rights activism

Several organisations 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." (BO23YE)

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.” (DU31LO)

Some participants sought to also highlight the benefits for women of increasing the focus on parental equality rather than fuelling 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.” (LA24BA)

8.1.4.2 Raising awareness

Participants felt that their organisations had done excellent preliminary work on raising awareness around fathers’ needs, and that they had done so through a variety of means, 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.” (BO23YE, Chat Entry)

Again, participants were keen to point out that this wasn’t just about raising awareness around the suffering of 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 organisations to say we've got a problem here. [...] I think we've done really, really well on that.” (DU31LO)

They also were keen to point out the pitfalls of raising more awareness of the issue as raising awareness inevitably "raises demand” (DU31LO) for their services.

8.1.4.3 Credibility

There was a clear focus on the necessity to have ‘credibility’ as organisations so that they could put forward a stronger case around their cause. For example, this participant describes how difficult it was to initially be heard:

> “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.” (NE22NE)

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 organisation with the data that we are, kind of, collecting.” (HA05BA)

8.1.4.4 Being data-driven

The importance of data didn't just inform credibility, but also helped individuals and services to dynamically evolve and engage with their client base. It also allowed them to be leaders in the field, by using data to help others understand what they are doing in the sector, and to help shape other services:

> "The other thing we're very good at as an organisation 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 organisation with the data that we are, kind of, collecting." (HA05BA)

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

> "Behaviour change. […] We deliver evidence-based interventions that are proven to reduce harmful conflict behaviours and increase […] positive communication behaviours." (BA09LO)

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

> "Around evaluation and data. [...] We do evaluation very well. It's, we're evidence-based. [...] And so far, it seems to be working 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." (BA09LO)

8.1.4.5 Government links

Participants made it clear that almost no change is possible without leadership from the government and associated policy change. Indeed, several of the organisations 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." (WA16WE)

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." (DU31LO)

8.1.4.6 Centralised, digitalised, tailored support

Finally, participants spoke about some more general aspects of their work and organisational 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 'centralisation':

> “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. And I've tried to make it into a, kind of, a go-to place where people can go and find out all the information and why we should have shared parenting.” (LA24BA)

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.” (BA08LO)

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.” (WA16WE)

Finally, participants were keen to point out that services had to be bespoke in order 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. […] They're sharing some of their innermost secrets. They've got to. like, trust and respect the person that they're speaking to. [...] It's building up that relationship so that they're liking the person they're talking to. […] So, I think the three things – like, trust, and respect - is really important. I think we do that really well. And then treat [...] each client as an individual. Or we don't want them to feel like they're part of a system. That we're actually interested in them as an individual, and that we help them identify their individual needs, and help them and empower them with their own individual actions. It's not just a ‘Let's open a book and see what these actions are’. It's very individual and a bespoke service. And I think that's really important.” (HA05BA)

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.” (WA16WE)

8.1.5 Recommendations

As is one of the central methodological tenets of deliberative inquiry, participants also came together to provide core recommendations for moving forward. Importantly, this involved consensus-targeting discussion as to which of these recommendations was most important.

8.1.5.1 Rebuttal presumption of shared parental responsibility

The most important recommendation provided was that there should be a rebuttal presumption[3] of shared parental responsibility:

> "There needs to be a legal change, that there is a presumption of shared care where safe and appropriate." (WA16WE)

> "I think that the presumption of shared parenting, a rebuttable one, I think is a no-brainer." (DU31LO)

> "I think, probably, there's a general consensus that a rebuttable presumption of shared parenting would take the heat out of the overall situation." (NE22NE)

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. And that's why I campaign for a change in the law, because if we have a change in the law for a rebuttable presumption of shared care, then we will, then it will send out a very clear signal to society that, actually, dads matter just as much." (LA24BA)

It was also pointed out that where this was in place in other countries it had been extremely successful in stopping couples go to family court in the first instance:

> "In terms of less fighting and less court. I mean, it's an interesting statistic. In Sweden, 9% of cases go to court. That was a 2017 study. In the UK, a comparable figure is 38% and that figure comes from 2019. So, you're more than four times more likely to go to court in a jurisdiction which doesn't have a rebuttable presumption of shared care. So that's a massive statistic. If we're going into recession, we want to save money. Let's save on the courts and get a rebuttable presumption of shared care into statute." (LA24BA)

And how shared parenting was fundamentally better for the children involved:

> "But the root to that is really going to be to praise and talk about the role of fathers in parenting. 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." (NE22NE)

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." (WA16WE)

[3] In common law and civil law, a rebuttable presumption is an assumption made by a court that is taken to be true unless someone proves otherwise.

8.1.5.2 Court reform

With the acceptance that some couples would still inevitably end up in courts even with the change above, and that many couples were engaged in family court proceedings presently, there was a clamour 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." (DU31LO)

> "So, I think it's a very, very deep, deep and dirty review of the family court system." (BO23YE)

This was largely in recognition that the issues and challenges that the organisations 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 unpredictability [...] which is a terrible breach of confidence and respect in any judicial system. 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. Lost relationships can never be restored. And on the point of costs, when we have people who have also spent well in excess of £100,000. […] So cost, predictability, time, and distress, if they can all be cut into then it will be to the benefit of the children in those relationships." (NE22NE)

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. So, I think, where a false allegation is made, it has to be dealt with even at a criminal level rather than a civil level as you're going through. I think that would significantly reduce the number of false allegations being made." (WA16WE)

> "But I think that's a complicated area because one person's false is another person's not false. I think the other way of looking at it would be around vexatious allegations. […] where the failure is, it can't root out people who abuse the process. The family court system doesn't know how to root that out. And that's why you get all these vexatious non-molestation applications because you've got people who are being advised by lawyers saying: 'Well, actually, if you say this and say that, [...]'. The system has to have a mirror held up to it and say: 'How are you addressing those who abuse the process?' And then my last comment, sanctions. I'm pretty sick and tired of keep going to court where people are deliberately frustrating child arrangements orders, and the sanctions attached to them are: 'That's not very good. Don't do that again. Otherwise, I don't want to see you here.' [...] The court system has got to become more punitive about people who are deliberately trying to frustrate the process and elongate cases and therefore cause harm to children." (DU31LO)

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.” (BO23YE)

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… They complain about the workload for them and their judges. There's more and more cases in the family court. Well, you've only got yourself to blame that you've got more and more child arrangements because you're giving out more and more non-molestation orders. […] It's more NMOs, less mediation, more child arrangement proceedings. It doesn't take much to say, be tougher on the granting of NMOs. Yes. Do give if there's grounds for it, but cut down on the number of non-mols, it will increase mediation, decrease child arrangement orders.” (WH03LO)

8.1.5.3 Centralised ‘triage’

Again, 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 useful:

> “There needs to be a national network akin to citizens' advice bureaus. Let's call them divorce centres 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.” (WA16WE)

> “Somebody mentioned having a single point of contact. [...] I think it's a great idea. And I just, kind of, wanted to attach to that an improved triage system [...] something better needs to be done about how people are directed towards services. […] I think that includes measuring emotional readiness and finding out what people are able to engage with. [...] somewhere at the very beginning of that process, there needs to be some more robust decisions being made about how we direct people towards services.” (BA09LO)

Encouragingly, there were existing systems that participants believed could be utilised 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.” (BA09LO, Chat Entry)

> “Alliances that are being set up under the MoJ is kind of doing that. [...] You've also got the other thing that's coming down the pipe, the Family Hubs. [...] They are two other things which are slowly crystallising. So, they do, kind of, dovetail with your third point quite beautifully, but it's just being aware that there is something already burgeoning. So, we kind of like stick on to that and say it could be improved by.” (DU31LO)

8.1.5.4 Recognition of the importance of fathers

Finally, participants felt that there was also a more fundamental societal change that needed to occur – 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 publicising 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." (GA19LO)

8.2 Study 3 - Brief Discussion

It is clear that both men experiencing FBSD and services seeking to support them face substantial challenges and barriers to engaging with and providing this support respectively. A lack of recognition of the severity of the issue, coupled with a subsequent lack of appropriate resourcing, are both squarely to blame for these issues. Crucially, participants highlight that without both political will and a change in the societal perceptions of the role of fathers, it would be difficult to stimulate meaningful change. However, there were some encouraging signs as participants spoke about the ways in which their organisations had identified and enacted effective methods of support (albeit on a shoestring budget). The recommendations for change outlined above capture the enormity of the task ahead if fathers are to be meaningfully supported, further discussed below in Section 10.

9. Conclusion

This project has not only provided a comprehensive and holistic assessment of fathers' extremely negative experiences following FBSD, but it has also outlined several clear recommendations as to how to improve these experiences. Indeed, based on the evidence put forward in this report, it is not hyperbolic to say that without serious and far-reaching reform, both societally and institutionally as to how we treat fathers and the fatherhood role, we will continue to lose many, many more men to suicide. Moreover, we will continue to deprive thousands of children of loving, 'good enough' parents, to their extreme detriment. It is therefore now up to us all, including policymakers, politicians, and service providers, to commit to a 'new fatherhood'; one which values the role of fathers from the moment they become them, to when things break down and beyond.

There can be no equivocation; we must act, now.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Literature Review

4.1 Introduction

In the UK, fathers are increasingly expected and even encouraged to actively participate in their children's upbringing, to nurture and share caring responsibilities with their partners, as well as maintain their patriarchal identities as protectors and providers for their families (Bateson et al., 2017). Despite the transition to shared parental leave and social policies supporting dual-earner parents, there is evidence that the changing landscape of fatherhood still creates tensions in new families and leads to men feeling overwhelmed by increased responsibilities and gender-role conflicts between work and parenthood (Huffman et al., 2014).

Societal stereotypes identifying women as 'primary' caregivers (Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2019) and men as principal breadwinners (Machin, 2015) still manifest, despite contemporary fathers' desires to spend more time and have more meaningful relationships with their children than men in previous generations (Bateson et al., 2017). Representations of fatherhood through the lens of hegemonic masculinity, portraying men as strong, silent authority figures in opposition to subordinate relationships (Connell, 2020) have a profound effect on men's confidence in childrearing and their preparedness in contributing to their children's development and in supporting their partners through important life transitions (Baldwin et al., 2019). It can therefore be argued that the lack of support new families are negated throughout their role identity transition as partners and parents has devastating consequences in regards to marriage outcomes, as suggested by high rates of divorce.

Dewar (2000) defines a good divorce as one where the couple is rational, altruistic, settlement-minded, cooperative, and cost-conscious. When these criteria are not met, divorce and separation can constitute very severe life events (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Shmueli, 2005). This is the case despite a change in the "social significance" of marriage, which has led to more cases of cohabitation outside of formal marriage or civil partnership (Evans et al., 2016). Divorce and separation involving children, often termed 'family breakdown' is even more complicated and emotionally heightened. Put simply, any form of family breakdown, separation, and divorce (FBSD) is extremely difficult and can be (and often is) a profoundly negative experience.

4.1.1 The Paternal Role

Although historically women have taken primary responsibility for domestic duties, such as childcare (Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2019), research has demonstrated that fathers have a hugely important role in the child's life. In their comprehensive review, Wilson and Prior (2011) made the robust case that a) fathers make important contributions to their children's development and well-being, b) that accessibility, engagement, and responsibility for the range of child-care activities are important aspects of fathering, and c) fathers need to be included in early parent education programmes and other family services (in recognition of points a) and b). Indeed, Allport et al. (2018) go further, arguing that father involvement is important for family health and that positive intervention to involve fathers in early paediatric care and beyond should be encouraged.

Indeed, Lamb and Tamis-Lemonda (2004) outline the benefits of high father engagement in further detail, highlighting that high levels of father involvement result in (among others): better psychosocial adjustment in children and better mental health as adults; higher levels of cognitive and social competence; increased social responsibility, capacity for empathy, self-control, self-esteem, social maturity and life skills; more positive child–father and adolescent–father relationships; more prosocial sibling interactions; fewer school adjustment difficulties, better academic progress and enhanced occupational achievement in adulthood. This is supported by meta-analyses examining the positive impact of fathers on children's cognitive development across early and middle childhood (Rollè et al., 2019). The consequences for fathers of positive involvement are also related to a range of healthy

psychosocial outcomes; psychological and social aspects of sharing parenting are associated with marital happiness, parental competence, and closeness to children (Ehrenberg et al., 2001). Some have noted that father involvement may be particularly important for outcomes in boys, especially in relation to problem behaviour (DeKlyen et al., 1998) and have highlighted particular importance at specific life stages (i.e., adolescence; East et al., 2006). There is also now extensive literature outlining the positive impact of fathers on both school achievement and problem behaviour (see Hine et al., 2022 for review). This includes the time following FBSD, as evidenced in research detailing college students' reports highlighting that they wanted and valued their father's involvement as important in their lives following parental divorce (Fabricius, 2003; Sadowski & McIntosh, 2015). Furthermore, the strength of the father-child relationship has been demonstrated to be a fundamental factor in determining the ultimate well-being of the child (Bastaits et al., 2012; King & Sobolewski, 2006).

4.1.2 Support Programmes for New Fathers

Research focused on understanding men's transition to fatherhood suggests that there is a lack of support available to address psychological, social, and emotional changes which occur with the arrival of a child in a couple's life. Baldwin et al. (2019) highlight that 8%-10% of fathers are affected by depression and up to 18% of men are exhibiting anxiety in the postnatal period, however, the mental health and well-being 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 are taking up health professionals' time. Despite several UK policies aimed to support fathers' involvement during the transition to parenthood, both ante- and postnatally, there are several social- and healthcare barriers against men, including biases around fathering, 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 & Hwang, 2019). Indeed, even in societies with a reputation for gender equality, health professionals are still not acknowledging paternal needs, as indicated in a Swedish literature review by Wells (2016). Child health fields hold the power to either implicitly or explicitly encourage men's engagement in children's lives. Moreover, supporting fathers, as they do mothers, with potential health issues such as smoking, drinking, drug use, and depression could impact their children (Wells, 2016). If men are not offered the same support at incipient points of family life, systems will inadvertently perpetuate gender inequalities in childrearing and treat men like ancillary parents, minimising their experiences and needs (Jungmarker et al., 2010).

Studies investigating the parent-child dyad suggested that mothers' support of fathers' parenting was a protective factor to competitive co-parenting, which correlated positively with men's involvement in their child's life and the longevity of the relationship (Murphy et al., 2017). The transition to parenthood places an immense strain on the couple and has been identified in longitudinal studies as a period of instability and distress leading to relationship deterioration and FBSD. According to Houts et al. (2008), three months after the arrival of the firstborn, couples may begin to handle their disagreements in a destructive way, by using negative escalation, threat, and coercion instead of cooperative problem-solving approaches, negotiation, and compassion. Fathers appear to be more aware of the changes in marital satisfaction sooner, due to increased tension, hostility, withdrawal, lack of validation, and decreased intimacy with their partners. Contrastingly, mothers appear to be so emotionally focused on the needs of the child that their awareness of marital deterioration is concealed for longer and becomes apparent around the child's fifth birthday (Houts et al., 2008).

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 & Johnson, 2008). Expressing concerns about relationship changes accompanying parenthood within a female-dominated parenting group was 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 normal working hours, a lot of men expressed their employment obligations as a barrier to accessing support, accompanied by the fact they felt underrepresented within them (Carlson et al., 2014). 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).

The need for connection and peer-to-peer support arose as particularly important in father-centred support programs, with non-residential fathers stressing the need for practical, life-skill assistance with budgeting, children's activities, counselling and legal aid (Carlson et al., 2014), which became even more necessary following the COVID-19 pandemic (Vazzano et al., 2022). Moreover, men involved with child protective services in the Huebner et al. (2008) study prioritised 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 fathers' programmes are complex due to the broad demographical differences between fathers (i.e., residential/non-residential, stay-at-home/full-time employed), the arguments for designing men-inclusive parenting programmes could have a great impact not only for mothers and children as recipients of support (Fisher et al., 2018) but also for men themselves as they mitigate their new roles as partners and parents.

4.1.3 Divorce in the United Kingdom and the West

In the UK, 42% of marriages are estimated to end in divorce, with half of these involving couples who have children aged under 16 (Office for National Statistics, 2012). The UK's divorce rate accelerated during the 1970s but has remained reasonably stable since 1985 (Wilson & Smallwood, 2008). Cohabitation has also increased and now precedes 80% of UK marriages (Beaujouan & Bhrolcháin, 2011) – though this does not seem to have mitigated the eventual relationship outcome.

In other Western countries, statistics are similar. For example, in the US, 46% of marriages end in divorce (National Center for Health Statistics, 2017) and this has remained stable in recent years (Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006). This amounts to an estimated one million children experiencing the divorce of their parents every year (Kreider, 2007). Since the millennium, Italy has seen a rise in separations and divorces, with separations increasing by 68.8% between 1995 and 2011 and divorces almost doubling (Verrocchio et al., 2015). Just under half (48.7%) of separations and a third (33.1%) of divorces involve couples with at least one child under the age of 18 years (ISTAT, 2016). Averaging across Europe, it was found that around half of marriages end in divorce (EUROSTAT, 2021).

4.1.4 FBSD and Fathers

FBSD can be viewed as a traumatic process with accompanying long-term responses. Indeed, Amato's (2000) divorce-stress adjustment perspective proposes the end of marriage as a lasting process during which the signs of dissolution occur over an extended period starting from before the official end of the relationship itself. This is supported by the finding that children start to experience a negative impact prior to the official ending of their parents' relationship (Cherlin et al., 1998; Cherlin et al., 1991; Strohschein, 2005). Conversely, Kluwer et al. (2021) conceptualise the post-divorce journey as *recovering* from a trauma, which entails managing the crisis of the breakup, then processing and understanding the contextual factors of the separation, and ultimately finding closure (Bonach, 2009). There are several key experiences and emotions that often occur during this process: experiences of loss and grief, determination of parental responsibility, and post-separation abuse.

There is compelling evidence for the profoundly negative impact that FBSD can have on the physical and mental health of the parents involved (Bierman et al., 2006; Richards & Bergin, 1997; Wood & Liossis, 2007). For example, divorced individuals are more than twice as likely to die by suicide than married individuals (Kposowa, 2000). However, divorced men

are shown to be particularly vulnerable, with a suicide rate almost ten times that of divorced women (Kposowa, 2003). This is possibly explained by the consistent finding that men are considerably more reluctant than women to seek professional support for their mental health (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Oliver et al., 2005) in fear of appearing weak and unmasculine (Seidler et al., 2016; Yousaf et al., 2015).

Furthermore, most divorced fathers (97%) experience the unique challenges associated with being the non-resident parent (NRP) (Department for Work & Pensions, 2020), including increased distress over limited contact with their children (Kielty, 2006) and increased risk of being alienated from their children by the resident parent as a form of post-separation abuse (Harman et al., 2018). There is also evidence to suggest substantial gender bias against men in law enforcement and legal systems (Andreasson & Johansson, 2019; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001; Natalier, 2012; Steinbach, 2019), for example in the family court system, where three-quarters of non-resident fathers believe that the legal system is biased against them (Braver & Griffin, 2000). Moreover, fathers are also more at risk than mothers to experience custody challenges related to having a serious mental illness (Kaplan et al., 2019; Salzer et al., 2021), which significantly increases the risk of loss/change in parenting custody (Salzer et al., 2021). Finally, if FBSD is the result of abusive behaviour, fathers leaving these relationships must also navigate negative stereotypes which undermine the visibility of their experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV, Bates et al., 2019; Hine, 2019). There are also significant financial implications for fathers, relating to custody and stereotypes around masculinity and being a financial provider (Dudley, 2021).

4.2 FBSD and Joint Custody

Given the evidence for the importance of paternal involvement in children's lives (Bastaits et al., 2012; King & Sobolewski, 2006), it seems logical to ensure parental responsibility is shared between co-parents. One such care arrangement which seeks to achieve this is joint physical custody, whereby the child resides with each parent for at least 25% (Steinbach, 2019) or at least 33% (Markham et al., 2017) of the time following parental separation or divorce. Pivoting from the traditional stance of mothers having sole custody, this is an arrangement that is growing in popularity in some Western societies (Smyth, 2017). For example, Sweden adopted a new law in 1998 whereby joint legal custody would be the default arrangement following divorce and parents would be required to apply for an alternative arrangement if desired (Willén, 2015).

A review by Steinbach (2019) consolidates research evaluating the benefits and costs of joint physical custody. For the children, there is some evidence to suggest that the frequent exchange between households and disrupted time with each parent can cause insecure attachment and less regulated behaviours (McIntosh et al., 2013; Tornello et al., 2013), however, the conclusiveness of these findings is disputed (Emery & Tornello, 2014; McIntosh et al., 2015). Joint physical custody may be impractical for some families as it requires co-parents to live relatively close to one another to facilitate the children's regular travel between households and may incur elevated financial costs associated with furnishing two homes with children's belongings (Steinbach, 2019). Furthermore, joint custody inevitably requires frequent communication between co-parents to plan and coordinate childcare tasks (Bauserman, 2012; van der Heijden et al., 2016), so is therefore likely to be unsuitable for parents in high-conflict divorces as it creates further opportunities for friction between parents. Research also suggests that having a childcare arrangement which frequently presents opportunities for hostile interactions between co-parents can be detrimental to the children's welfare as they suffer from being exposed to this hostility (Emery, 2016; McIntosh et al., 2013; Pruett et al., 2014).

Nevertheless, for parents who are in a position to co-parent with minimal conflict, there is a large amount of research which demonstrates the significant benefits of joint custody for both the children and the parents. For example, children benefit from access to a greater number of resources from both parents (Steinbach, 2019) and benefit from developing stronger and more enduring bonds with their fathers, which is a pivotal factor in improving

children's development and well-being outcomes, as discussed earlier (Bastaits et al., 2012; King & Sobolewski, 2006). This is supported by reports of lower subjective stress and higher self-esteem among children in joint custody compared to children in sole custody arrangements (Turunen, 2017). Similarly, co-parents benefit from sharing the burden and responsibilities of parenting with one another (Botterman et al., 2015; Breivik & Olweus, 2006). This in turn can help parents to cope more effectively and lead to better physical and emotional health outcomes (Melli & Brown, 2008), although some evidence refutes this with no evidence of a link with parents' psychological well-being (e.g., Sodermans et al., 2015).

Despite the well-documented evidence of the harmful effects of children being exposed to continued conflict between parents after the family breakdown, there is some evidence to suggest that engaging in joint custody can actually reduce inter-parental tensions over time (Bauserman, 2012; Fabricius, 2003; Sadowski & McIntosh, 2015). Taken together with evidence that most parents (particularly fathers) are satisfied with their joint custody arrangement (Bergström et al., 2014) and that most sampled parents report a preference for joint custody (Andreasson & Johansson, 2019; Kruk, 2015), it is reasonable to rationalise making joint custody the initial default parental responsibility arrangement for low-conflict families post-divorce or separation, as is the case in Sweden (Willén, 2015). This is especially the case considering that, in some instances, losing out on a relationship with their father will be worse for the child than having to witness occasional conflict (Kruk, 2012; Warshak, 2014).

4.2.1 Legal System Experiences

Dissatisfaction with the legal system post-FBSD is now widely supported. This is captured in Treloar's (2019) study which found that both mothers and fathers expressed feelings of powerlessness and frustration from being unheard and the seeming lack of justice in the Canadian judicial system. Participants also described the process as being too concerned with complex rules and practices, and not concerned enough with the best interests of the children and parents involved.

In addition, there is now considerable work on the widespread dissatisfaction from fathers in particular, who have engaged with the legal system following FBSD (e.g., Lehr & Macmillan, 2001; Treloar, 2019). For example, negative experiences with the judicial system were a key theme in Lehr and MacMillan's (2001) focus groups with non-custodial fathers. Fathers described their court experiences as extremely financially and emotionally taxing, which is pertinent considering this is a time when fathers are already likely to be financially and emotionally vulnerable as a result of the relationship breakup. They also expressed little confidence that the process would lead to a satisfactory outcome for them as they believed the system to be skewed in the mother's favour (Braver & Griffin, 2000). This is reflected in more recent research, where fathers are equally damning of a system they feel is 'stacked against them' (Bates & Hine, in press). They nonetheless feel it essential to seek formal parental responsibility arrangements through the court as they feared alternatively that the mother would try to deny them contact (see section 4.2.3.2 below).

Of particular concern is fathers' frequent accounts of so-called legal and administrative abuse (Tilbrook et al., 2010), whereby the structures and processes of the legal system were used as a tool by ex-partners to exhibit aggression towards the fathers as a form of post-separation abuse (Bates, 2019; Hines et al., 2015; Kruk, 2015; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001; Poustie et al., 2018; Tilbrook et al., 2010). Such research again highlights the vulnerabilities that fathers in particular face after FBSD when there are subsequent disputes around parental responsibility which are addressed within potentially biased systems.

4.2.2 Financial Support Policies for Fathers

One of the major barriers men encounter in parenting their children after an FBSD event is the economic challenge associated with the payment of child support. Historical representations of mothers as the resident parent assume that women are biologically bound to assume the role of primary caretaker to their offspring following divorce. Therefore, social welfare policies

and financial assistance have been provided to children and single-parent households (typically mothers) who are financially disadvantaged. There are few, if any, programs specifically targeted to assist non-resident fathers (NRF), who are held financially accountable for supporting their children, in spite of their age, the economic landscape, or their available options for full-time employment (Castillo et al., 2011). In the UK, between 12-18% of fathers who pay child support fall below the poverty line, with numbers arguably higher should housing costs be excluded from the calculations (Hakovirta et al., 2019).

The marginalisation of NRF has been detailed by Hawthorne & Lennings (2008), with men's accounts specifying little input into decisions concerning children's post-separation living arrangements or the amount of child support due. Moreover, NRF stressed that their ability to interact or maintain a relationship with their children was contingent on whether the mother was pleased with the financial contributions of the father and their co-parenting dynamic (Roberts et al., 2014; Turner & Waller, 2017). The devastating effect of economic recessions on noncustodial fathers can explain the crisis in child support payments and the correlative effect on mothers' gate-keeping behaviours (Roberts et al., 2014).

Hakovirta et al. (2019) echo findings from the first dedicated survey of non-resident fathers in the UK by Bradshaw et al. (1999) suggesting that this population has a low ability to pay support due to low income or new family commitments in their households. When asked about child support programmes aimed at NRF, men in the Roberts et al. (2014) study referred to their identity as providers and spoke about the issues related to their own spending choices and how they should better plan their finances. These testimonies speak to the need of creating co-parenting programmes open to residential as well as non-residential parents concerning financial education and budgeting (Carlson et al., 2014; Threlfall & Kohl, 2015). There is a clear need to educate parents on the importance of less sex-stereotyped roles in the family dynamic to facilitate the engagement of both parents in children's lives. While preconceived notions about fathers as primary breadwinners still manifest in society, the lack of government assistance supporting fathers and men's own help-seeking behaviours will likely jeopardise fathers' engagement in their children's lives. Engaging fathers with financial assistance services and employment services that lead to job placements and extending legal aid to fathers involved in complex high-conflict divorces with elements of abuse, IPV, and PA would begin to offer an effective long-term solution.

4.2.3 Post-Separation Abuse

4.2.3.1 Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) After Separation

If a relationship has included abusive behaviour, and indeed even if it has not, the ending of a relationship does not equate to the end of abuse inflicted by that partner (and it may also constitute the beginning). In research examining the prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) inflicted on men, Hotton (2001) and Hine et al. (2021) found approximately a third of their samples of male victims of IPV experienced abuse from an ex-partner after the end of their relationship (32% and 29.7% respectively). Of particular note is Hotton's finding that, of the men who reported post-separation abuse, 24% reported that the violence had, in fact, escalated following the breakup, while 39% reported the violence as having begun only after the relationship had ended. The end of the relationship can also be a trigger point for abuse perpetrators who wish to continue to control the partner and/or punish the victim for terminating the relationship (Jaffe et al., 2003), and this can be achieved when the couple continue to share responsibility over children and/or finances as these necessitate continued contact bates (Bates & Hine, in press).

Indeed, there is evidence that children are often used by abusive ex-partners as a vehicle for continuing to inflict aggression post-separation (Toews & Bermea, 2017). In Clements et al.'s (2022) qualitative study of victims of IPV, the authors found that most participants' abusers had used their children as a method of inflicting abuse within the previous six months. It was reported that abusers used the children for several abusive purposes including to intimidate (72%), monitor (69%), harass (71%) and frighten (69%) the abused ex-

partner, and even to persuade them to agree to resume the relationship (45%). This is supported in research with both mothers (Katz et al., 2020; Monk & Bowen, 2021) and fathers separately (Bates, 2020b; Bates & Hine, in press). Participants in Clements et al.'s study also cited that their abusers made attempts to turn their children against them (62%), a form of post-separation abuse known as Parental Alienation.

4.2.3.2 Parental Alienation

Parental alienation is defined as "a situation whereby one parent has a negative influence on a child's relationship with the other parent and makes a deliberate effort to intervene and prevent the relationship from developing/continuing or improving" (McCarten, 2022, p. 2). It is different from so-called 'justifiable estrangement', which describes a situation whereby a child rejects a parent for an 'appropriate' reason, including betrayal and major issues with lack of trust or emotional closeness (Linden & Sillence, 2021). In recent years, research on PA has proliferated, with over 40% of all published work on this topic occurring in the last six years (Harman, Warshak, et al., 2022).

Specifically, researchers have explored the patterns involved in enacting PA (also referred to as parental alienating behaviours (PAB) (Harman & Matthewson, 2020) and the relationship between PA and 'traditional' forms of violence and abuse (Haines et al., 2020; Harman et al., 2018). International studies from Portugal (Tavares et al., 2020, 2021) and Turkey (Torun et al., 2022) provide further support for these findings. The design of more accurate measures for PA (Bernet & Greenhill, 2022) has also allowed for the measurement of prevalence (Harman et al., 2016, 2019), subsequently highlighting the magnitude of the issue.

There is now also substantial evidence available on the experiences and impact of PA on alienated parents. For example, in their 2022 systematic review, Harman, Warshak, et al. provided a clear overview of the experiences and impact of PA on alienated parents. Indeed, they listed significant and wide-ranging negative impacts, including anxiety, depression, stress, physical symptoms, and feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness, and being socially isolated (Harman, Warshak, et al., 2022), as well as several studies that had specifically examined the relationship between alienation and these outcomes (e.g., Verrocchio et al., 2019). Lee-Maturana et al. summarised ten key findings from their previous work (Lee-Maturana et al., 2020, 2021; Lee-Maturana et al., 2019): that more research is required on parents' experiences; that there are several definitions of PA known to parents (see section 1.2 above); that parents strongly identified PA as family violence; that child abduction is a PAB; that targeted parents are active in attempts to see their children; that there are a variety of alienators; that they experienced disenfranchised grief, and ambiguous loss; that they experienced sadness, distress, frustration, anger, guilt, and shame; that there was a risk of serious psychological harm, including suicidal ideation; and that they used a variety of mechanisms to cope with PA (Lee-Maturana et al., 2022). This summation provides a clear and comprehensive summary of the profundity of the impact of alienating behaviours on targeted parents, depicting PA as another risk factor in FBSD and positioning it as an urgent health and mental health issue.

Some scholars have recently chosen to focus on the experiences of fathers, due to their potentially elevated vulnerability to alienating behaviours as the parents most likely to live outside of the home following separation (i.e., the non-resident parent, NRP). Indeed, recent work by Bates and Hine has highlighted the gendered vulnerabilities of men to PA due to a) the high likelihood of being the NRP, b) prejudicial stereotypes relating to fatherhood, and c) lack of visibility associated with additional IPV victimisation (Bates & Hine, in press; Hine & Bates, 2022). Work holistically examining fathers' experience of family breakdown echo these findings, implicating fathers' incidental and deliberate nullification from their children's lives, sometimes with the aid of various institutions (i.e., family courts; Hine & Roy, 2022). Importantly, the work on men's experiences of PA above has highlighted a greatly elevated risk of suicidal ideation and completion, a finding supported by other theoretical work on this specific relationship (Sher, 2015a, 2017), and on men's elevated risk of suicide

following family breakdown more broadly (i.e., 11x more likely than women; Evans et al., 2016; Scourfield & Evans, 2014; Sher, 2015b).

Parental alienation also has extremely serious consequences for children. Several reviews now exist that detail the profound effect of PA and PABs on the psychological well-being of children (Haines et al., 2020; Marques et al., 2020; Silva, 2021), with some such reviews concluding that outcomes are similar to other forms of severe child abuse (Harman, Warshak, et al., 2022). The most recent review by Miralles et al. (2021) provides a comprehensive assessment, outlining how currently published research supports links between PA and: affective disorders, psychological general distress, self-esteem and self-sufficiency, alcohol abuse and drug use, attachment and relationship with parents, life satisfaction and quality, and perceptions of emotional consequences. This largely quantitative research body (i.e., the work of Verrocchio, Baker, and colleagues) has recently been supported by other quantitative work (showing increased risk of depression; Sun et al., 2021) and qualitative work with adults alienated as children. For example, research by Verhaar et al. (2022) with 20 such adults found that they suffered from mental health difficulties (including anxiety disorders and trauma reactions), emotional pain, and addiction and substance use (as well as coping mechanisms and a level of developed resilience). Second-hand accounts of the effects on children provided by alienated fathers (Hine & Bates, 2022) and coercively controlled mothers (Monk & Bowen, 2021) provide further support for the significant and wide-ranging psychological impact this form of abuse has on children.

More recently, Harman, Warshak, et al. (2022) have sought to highlight the extensive losses experienced by alienated children, due to the alteration which occurs to the child's beliefs, perceptions, and memories of the alienated parent. Specifically, they outline losses relating to the individual self, the loss of childhood experiences (and the opportunity to engage in them – see paragraph above), the loss of a 'good enough' parent, the loss of extended family, the loss of community, and the loss of activities and relationships essential for healthy development. The authors also note that many of these losses are interconnected, that the loss of the parent also means the loss of fulfilment for critical needs (i.e., as outlined in Maslow's hierarchy of needs; 1943), and that the purposeful removal of a parent is an attack on the child's attachment system (Kneier, 2021). The authors further argue that, subsequently, children have hugely strained cognitive and emotional experiences related to ongoing and ambiguous loss, and disenfranchised grief – both of which are reflective of parents' experiences (Harman, Matthewson, et al., 2022). Indeed, this is unsurprising considering the previous theoretical positioning of PA as a fundamental disruption of, and attack on, healthy attachment systems (Harman, Matthewson, et al., 2022; Lowenstein, 2010). There is, therefore, no doubt that children who experience alienating behaviours are severely psychologically affected.

Despite the seriousness of PA highlighted in the research above on outcomes for both parents and the children, parent samples report consistent dissatisfaction with the formal systems designed to protect them, including the family court (see section 4.2.2.3), child support agencies, and mental health services. For example, TPs interviewed by Poustie et al. (2018) described these systems as slow and ineffective; uncaring; uninformed; expensive; and even contributing to the alienating parent's attempts at PA. This is reflected in work highlighting men's extremely poor and prejudiced experiences of the family court system (Bates & Hine, in press; Hine & Bates, 2022; Hine & Hine, 2022; Hine & Roy, 2022; Kruk, 2015), in which they suggest that courts fundamentally devalue their role as fathers, rarely award any level of custody, and ignore their claims of alienation and violence from mothers (Bates & Hine, in press).[4]

[4] As stated, this report focuses on the experiences of fathers following FBSD. However, it would be remiss to not at least mention that the use of parental alienation within family courts is a highly contentious issue, and several researchers have highlighted potential issues regarding 'erroneous' alienation claims as a way to further abuse mothers (see work by Meier and others).

4.3 Impact and Outcomes of FBSD for Fathers

Emotion regulation theory (Gross & Barrett, 2001; Gross et al., 2006) posits that particular behaviours (i.e., emotion regulation strategies) will increase or decrease the intensity and endurance of an emotional response. Willén (2015) identified from interviews with divorced parents that participants fell into the category of either engaging in *emotion regulation flexibility* or *emotion regulation rigidity* according to whether they engaged in adaptive or maladaptive behaviours (respectively) to regulate their emotions. Sbaraa and Emery (2005) suggest that the inability to healthily regulate emotions following a divorce or separation may be a determining factor in the endurance of negative emotions and conflict with an ex-partner. Consequently, healthy emotion regulation is crucial for productive engagement in post-divorce arrangements, such as negotiating financial and custody arrangements.

Millings et al. (2020) carried out a series of studies applying the concept of emotional adaptation to coping with relationship dissolution. Emotional adaptation refers to the process of resolving one's personal emotional reaction to the end of a relationship by engaging in coping strategies. Depending on the effectiveness of these coping strategies, as well as a variety of factors relating to the individual and their situation, the goal is to progress from a state of low emotional adaptation (focusing initially on what has been lost), to a state of high emotional adaptation (with a predominant focus on restoration). Progress from one state to another is unlikely to be linear as individuals shift back and forth between degrees of emotional adaptation, but progress is facilitated by adaptive coping strategies. Similarly, with emotion regulation, emotional adaptation has been demonstrated empirically by Millings et al. (2020) to be important for facilitating post-separation logistics such as legal processes and co-parenting.

How emotions are processed is important in mediating the relationship between FBSD and outcomes for the people involved. Particularly in cases where the couple is married and/or has children together, negative emotions about the relationship and its dissolution can be sustained through necessary post-breakup communication during legal divorce proceedings, and negotiations of parental responsibilities (Millings et al., 2020).

Negative feelings have then been found to correlate with outcomes, such as poor psychological and physical health (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). Considering how emotional stoicism is still highly prized within many 'traditional' and venerated conceptualisations of masculinity (Connell, 2020), it can be argued that the manifestation of the emotions outlined above in fathers would prompt concern. Indeed, when taken together with other valued characteristics such as 'independence' which frequently discourage men from help-seeking, it is unclear how men in particular might process these emotions, and in a way that is productive, and healthy. Evidence on outcomes for fathers supports the idea that this is a significant issue.

Studies consistently report that FBSD causes a variety of predominantly negative emotions, such as:

- Loss, grief, and sadness (Keshet, 1978; Simpson et al., 2014)
- Loneliness (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980)
- Inadequacy and incompetence (Hetherington et al., 1985)
- Shame & Guilt (Stack, 2000)
- Anger (Lehr & MacMillan, 2001; Lund, 1987)
- Frustration (Kruk, 1991)
- Hurt and pain (Kruk, 1991)
- Sadness (Kruk, 1991)
- Stress (Lehr & MacMillan, 2001; Millings et al., 2020)
- Being emotionally drained from constant battling (Lehr & MacMillan, 2001)

4.3.1 Identity Loss

A prominent theme within the literature on experiences of FBSD is the idea that the event is characterised by significant loss. Bohannan (1970) describes six forms of divorce which illustrate the various losses a parent can experience concurrently during a relationship breakdown. These are:

- the emotional divorce,
- the co-parental divorce,
- the legal divorce,
- the economic divorce,
- the community divorce, and
- the psychic divorce.

Together, these encapsulate the numerous aspects of life which parents report to involve loss and/or require restoration following family breakdown (Millings et al., 2020) spanning multiple areas of life, such as finances, employment, housing, mental, and physical health, social relationships and, crucially, one's relationship with their children (Natalier, 2012).

Fathers experience some of these losses more acutely. Most obviously, there is the fundamental loss (in part or sometimes completely) of contact with one's children which has been reported in qualitative research with fathers as "like losing part of my body" (Kruk, 1991). With this loss of contact also comes the loss of other more abstract elements of fatherhood, such as the loss of control or input into the children's upbringing by "contributing really very little to the lives of the kids" (Kruk, 1991). Furthermore, this can contribute to the perceived loss of the 'father' identity, with fathers feeling as though they perform "more like a friend role" (Kruk, 1991) as their limited contact time with their children only permits a stunted superficial level of engagement in their relationship as opposed to the multi-dimensional relationship achievable through the familiarity and regularity of day-to-day contact. This can all occur while the parent suffers a tremendous financial loss through the divorce itself and/or child maintenance costs (Poustie et al., 2018).

With the experience of multiple losses there naturally follows feelings of grief which have also been a topic previously discussed in the literature. For example, Kruk (1991) applies Kubler-Ross' (1973) traditional five stages of grief (originally applied to grieving death circumstances) to the context of grieving the loss of a relationship, progressing through the same five stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. In a similar vein, Wiseman (1975) adapted Kubler-Ross' framework to outline the following five-stage process in relation to FBSD:

1) denial,
2) loss and depression,
3) anger,
4) reorientation of lifestyle and identity and
5) acceptance.

Alternatively, Kresseil (1980) outlined four stages of divorce:

1) denial,
2) mourning,
3) anger and
4) readjustment.

However, as Kruk (1991) importantly pointed out, none of these formulations considers the nuanced experience of loss as experienced by a father following a family breakdown. For example, fathers may experience recurring grief as they repeatedly exchange children back and forth between their and their co-parent's household (Elizabeth, 2019). If they become the

non-resident parent, this grief may be amplified through considerably less contact. Other research has found fathers describing each handover as “dying all over again” (Arendell, 1992). This highlights the intense trauma parents suffer as they experience the cyclical and repeating wave of losing time and contact with their children. This is complexified by the fact that they are experiencing grief for someone who is still alive and with whom they may see to some extent on a regular basis. This something is referred to in the literature as ‘ambiguous loss’ (Lee-Maturana et al., 2022).

What creates a further challenge to fathers’ grief is that this grief is not often recognised by their social networks because they are grieving someone who is still alive. Consequently, some report receiving a mocking or mean-spirited response from others when discussing their grief (Kruk, 2015). This is what is referred to as ‘disenfranchised grief’ (Lee-Maturana et al., 2022) whereby the significance of the loss is not understood by society and therefore those grieving fail to receive the social support to help them cope (Thornton et al., 1991). Lack of social support, combined with cultural pressures on men to resist appearing weak to conform to the values of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2020; Yousaf et al., 2015), only add to men’s resistance to help-seeking (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Oliver et al., 2005). As a result, men experience poor outcomes associated with grief, such as poor psychological well-being (Parkes & Weiss, 1983).

4.3.2 Physiological Effects

It has been argued that men benefit more from marriage, whereas marriage is more stressful for women, therefore men suffer greater at its loss (Trovato, 1991). Health is one of these areas, as married and cohabiting men are more likely to visit a primary care service than non-married men (Blumberg et al., 2014). It has also been suggested that divorce or separation may be perceived more by men as an insufferable ‘failure’. It is well-documented that men feel cultural pressure to conform to the image of hegemonic masculinity whereby the ideal man provides for their wife and family (Connell, 2020; Scourfield, 2005). This image also serves to discourage men from appearing weak, and therefore inhibits men from help-seeking when suffering and establishing supportive social networks (Joiner et al., 2012; Kposowa, 2000). The detrimental effect on physical health can also be explained by other factors resulting from FBSD, such as unhealthy coping strategies (e.g., drinking more alcohol: Power et al., 1999) and stress. Furthermore, mental health difficulties can manifest physically through symptoms of stress, such as sleep problems, fatigue, and reduced appetite (Jacobs, 1986). This can have knock-on effects on other aspects of life, such as one’s career and finances (Kruk, 2015; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001), amounting to an overall dissatisfaction with life (Rhoades & Bell, 2012) and, in the most serious cases, lead people to consider and/or attempt suicide (Lee-Maturana et al., 2020). Kposowa’s (2003) finding that men are almost ten times more likely to die by suicide following divorce adds to the extremely concerning picture of evidence for a public health risk among divorced and separated fathers.

4.3.3 Mental Health & Suicidality

Divorced and separated parents commonly report mental ill health, such as depression (Davies et al., 1997; Monroe et al., 1999; Shapiro & Lambert, 1999; Shapiro, 1996) revolving around feelings of being inadequate and incompetent amounting to unhealthily low self-esteem (Coley & Hernandez, 2006; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001).

Evans et al. (2016) discuss the potential reasons for explaining men’s higher susceptibility to mental health disturbances and increased risk for suicide following relationship breakdown. In their review of gender differences in suicidality following FBSD, the majority of included studies (12 of 19) found that men were at greater risk than women of suicide following separation or divorce. Furthermore, while two studies found women to have higher risk and five studies found no gender difference, the authors noted significant methodological limitations in these studies. One particular study of interest in their review was

conducted by Shiner et al. (2009). They categorised 100 deaths by suicide detailed in coroner files by their psychosocial context. One of the resulting categories was 'separation from children' whose suicides were exclusively committed by fathers. This supports the notion that fathers are more vulnerable to the serious outcomes associated with reduced contact with their children (Hine & Bates, 2022).

Men in particular appear vulnerable to severe mental health issues following FBSD (Affleck et al., 2018), particularly when disputes over children and custody are involved (Hine & Bates, 2022). Moreover, men appear to face double jeopardy in this area, as fathers have been shown to be at greater risk of experiencing custody challenges linked with having a serious mental illness compared to mothers, resulting in the greater likelihood of partly or completely losing custody of their children (Kaplan et al., 2019; Salzer et al., 2021). The relationship between mental illness and losing custody is gravely concerning considering that FBSD is naturally a very stressful and emotionally taxing life event and that removing contact with their children is likely to only exacerbate a father's worse mental health.

4.4 Impact and Outcomes of FBSD for Children

The association between family breakdown and poor outcomes for children has been well-documented (Amato, 2000; Amato, 2010; Auersperg et al., 2019; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002; Kelly & Emery, 2003). The negative mental and physical health outcomes found to be associated with FBSD include:

- Addiction (Aro & Palosaari, 1992) and substance abuse (Haug et al., 2014; Otowa et al., 2014; Tebeka et al., 2016)
- Increased alcohol consumption (Otowa et al., 2014; Thompson Jr et al., 2014; Zeratsion et al., 2014)
- Smoking (Zeratsion et al., 2014)
- Chronic pain (Voerman et al., 2015)
- Anxiety (Choi et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2021; Sareen et al., 2013; Tebeka et al., 2016)
- Depression (Choi et al., 2017; Sands et al., 2017)
- Suicidal ideation (Coêlho et al., 2016; Lindström & Rosvall, 2016)
- Suicide attempts (Alonzo et al., 2014; Coêlho et al., 2016; Lindström & Rosvall, 2016)

The wealth of evidence for the negative health impacts of FBSD on children is helpfully summarised by Auersperg et al. (2019). In their meta-analysis, they found negative associations between parental divorce and children's depression, anxiety, distress, suicide (ideation and attempts), alcohol and drug consumption, and smoking. However, the authors acknowledged that publication bias for significant findings has likely distorted the calculated effect of FBSD on children's poor outcomes.

4.4.1 Mediating Factors

More recently, research in this area has begun to steer away from specific outcomes of FBSD for children, and instead towards the factors which mediate or moderate the impact of FBSD on children (Verrocchio et al., 2015). Findings on the heterogeneity of effects of FBSD on children demonstrate that children do not necessarily suffer following a family breakdown, at least not irreparably, and can be resilient in the face of this kind of adversity (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Kenyon & Koerner, 2008; Zill et al., 1993).

Warner et al. (2009) summarised five factors that were key in determining how negatively a child will be impacted by FBSD:

1. The loss of contact with the non-resident parent
2. The resident parent's adjustment to the family breakdown (affecting the attentiveness and competence of their parenting: Target et al., 2017; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980)
3. The level of continued interparental conflict (Johnston, 1994; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Shelton, 2008)

4. The economic change (Bradshaw & Millar, 1991; Emery & Dillon, 1994)
5. The accumulation of stressful life changes

While grounded in wider literature Warner et al. (2009) acknowledge that the effect sizes for each factor remain small and therefore these are not sufficient for predicting how well a child will fare following a family breakdown. Therefore, it is important to consider additional possible mediating and moderating factors.

4.4.1.1 Interparental conflict

According to the stress relief hypothesis (Yu et al., 2010), children's well-being improves after separation if there was a high degree of interparental conflict while the parents were still together. As Amato et al. (2011) state: "children tend to show improvements in well-being when divorce removes them from high-conflict households and decrements in well-being when divorce removes them from low-conflict households (Booth, 2001; Strohschein, 2005)." This is supported by more recent findings demonstrating that higher levels of interparental conflict following divorce are predictive of post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSS; Lange et al., 2022).

4.4.1.2 Insecure attachment

Auersperg et al. (2019) suggest that family breakdown could lead to the development of an insecure attachment between the child and their parents due to spending less time with them. This is supported by research which has found insecure attachment-style to be linked to poor outcomes, such as depression (Fuhr et al., 2017; Lee & Hankin, 2009), psychological distress (Gidhagen et al., 2018), social and trait anxiety (Andrews & Hicks, 2017; Notzon et al., 2016), and suicide risk (Miniati et al., 2017; Ozer, 2020).

4.4.1.3 Less attention

The impact on children may also be explained by the finding that parents are less attentive and less emotionally attached to their parenting role (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000; Krishnakumar et al., 2003), possibly because they are preoccupied with their own efforts to adjust to the family breakdown (Target et al., 2017; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

4.4.1.4 Loyalty conflict

Children who feel torn between parents following family breakdown are more susceptible to poor outcomes than children who do not feel torn (Buehler & Welsh, 2009). Feeling torn has been found to be associated with poor outcomes, such as depression, low self-esteem, psychological distress, and low autonomy (Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011; Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012; Bernet, 2015).

4.4.1.5 Parent's concerns

Sanford and Rivers (2017) found a direct correlation between parents' concerns about the impact of family breakdown and children's negative affect following family breakdown. Specifically, they found significant associations with parents' concerns about the other parent's malicious behaviour during the breakup, the power dynamics in the breakup, losing custody following the breakup, fears of being rejected by the child, the parent's self-esteem following the breakup, and worries about the financial impact of the breakup. In sum, the more concerned the parents were about these issues, the worse the children's well-being. It is

important to note that these were correlational associations and thus do not necessarily implicate causal relationships.

4.5 Impact and Outcomes of FBSD on the Father-Child Relationship

The quality of the relationship between a parent and their child has been found to be one of the most important predictors of parents' well-being post-separation over and above the level of contact with their children. This could go some way to explaining the somewhat heterogeneous findings on the impact of FBSD on the parent-child relationship, outlined below.

Hetherington & Stanley's (1999) review found that divorce has a profoundly negative effect on father-child relationships (Kruk, 2021). However, Shapiro & Lambert's (1999) findings make the important distinction that it is only non-resident fathers whose relationships with their children decline in quality following a family breakdown, whereas resident fathers maintain a relationship with their children to a similar quality level of fathers who are not divorced or separated.

More recent findings refute this conclusion, however, with the finding that different families experience very varied effects on parent-child relationships. For example, Ahrons & Tanner (2003) asked adult children about the impact of divorce on their parental relationships 20 years later and found that while 38% of children reported the relationship with their father to have got worse, almost half (49%) of participants reported the relationship to have improved, and 12% reported it staying the same. In comparison, the majority of participants reported their relationships with their mother improved (60%), while fewer reported the relationship got worse (27%) and a similar proportion reported no change (13%). Moreover, and in support of a heterogeneous effect of FBSD on father-child relationships, Wallerstein & Kelly (1980) found that the same proportion of fathers reported the relationship getting worse as those reporting it got better (25% each).

In a similar vein to research investigating the impact of FBSD on children's outcomes, there has been a shift in focus towards the factors which moderate (and therefore predict the variance) of family breakdown on the quality of the father-child relationship. Kalmijn (2015) found the negative effect of family breakdown on the parent-child relationship was weakened when:

- The father was highly involved in childrearing during the relationship
- The father was highly educated (as they may be better equipped to engage in post-divorce or post-separation negotiations and proceedings)
- There was a high degree of interparental conflict during the relationship (suggesting the breakup had a stress-relief effect on the children involved: Yu et al., 2010)

4.6 Support

4.6.1 Self-help and Coping Strategies

Much of the research on coping following FBSD has focused on communication processes (Afifi & Hamrick, 2013) and the use of social networks (Sprecher et al., 2006). Both are captured in Treloar's (2019) work which identified several coping strategies used by parents following high-conflict FBSD:

1. Advocating for the reform of family law and related systems (e.g., welfare, child protection) as a way of processing their feelings of frustration and injustice, and as a way of empowering themselves
2. Beginning new careers
3. Recreational activities, including challenges to build confidence and resilience
4. Social support from friends and family
5. Spirituality

6. Therapy

This is reflected in work with alienated parents specifically, such as Poustie et al.'s (2018) thematic analysis which revealed four predominantly used coping strategies:

1. General hope, resilience, and stoicism
2. Therapy
3. Social support
4. Educating self and others about PA

Lee-Maturana et al. (2020) also explored coping strategies adopted by targeted parents of parental alienation in their qualitative study and identified the following:

1. Social, mental, and physical activities
2. Seeking professional help
3. Keeping busy, e.g., through work
4. Family support
5. Hobbies
6. Faith

However, a key finding of this study was that a considerable proportion of the participants (44%) reported not coping well or not coping at all after having been alienated from their children. Across all studies, it is evident that some form of support for separating parents is critical.

4.6.2 Social Support

Strong interpersonal relationships with others have been found to have a protective effect on how individuals are impacted by challenging life events such as FBSD (Hughes Jr et al., 1993; Richmond & Christensen, 2001). Research testing a stress-buffering model for divorced fathers suggested that noncustodial fathers relied more on relatives and custodial fathers relied more on new relationships for parenting support (DeGarmo et al., 2008). Research comparing the effect of co-parenting and social support on adolescent versus adult fathers suggests that paternal social support and parenthood programs are significantly more effective in younger samples, highlighting the need for further research regarding the focus, delivery, and impact of adolescent fathers' programs (Fagan & Lee, 2011). Complementary research on fathers' engagement with social support options suggests that fathers may not benefit as much from these protective factors following a family breakdown due to their difficulties in help-seeking and accessing social support (Coley & Hernandez, 2006; Warshak, 2000). Concerningly, a lack of social support may also explain middle-aged men's greater suicide risk following relationship breakdown (Evans et al., 2016; Joiner et al., 2012; Scourfield & Evans, 2014).

4.6.3 Professional Support

Access to professional support has been demonstrated to have several potential benefits for fathers, including enhanced emotional awareness, increased self-esteem, greater perceived parenting competence, empowerment in helping others dealing with their problems, and sustained motivation to continue efforts to achieve any or increase contact with their children (Lehr & MacMillan, 2001). However, as with social support above, there is now well-established evidence of men's low engagement with mental health services (Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2019), which places fathers in an extremely vulnerable position following FBSD. DeGarmo et al. (2008) recommend several focus areas in fathers-oriented parenting programmes, including aspects such as men's role overload, help-seeking behaviour, problem-solving, and interpersonal skill building.

In addition, where post-separation abuse is present, it is important to acknowledge that professional support can be invaluable in helping to validate men's experiences of intimate partner violence, through which other forms of support can be built upon and accessed (Hine et al., 2020; Hine et al., 2021; Wallace et al., 2019a, 2019b). In these circumstances, it is important to consider men's need for confidentiality when receiving emotional and practical support in this context (Hine et al., 2021) and their need for this support to be tailored appropriately to their gender and other intersectional characteristics (Hine, Bates, Graham-Kevan, et al., 2022; Hine, Bates, Mackay, et al., 2022). However, it is again now firmly established that there is a lack of effective support services for fathers, which requires urgent rectification (DeGarmo et al., 2008; Pearson & Fagan, 2019), particularly in the context of the issues discussed above regarding the use of children as a form of abuse and control as outlined above.

4.7 Summary

At present, the literature in this area presents a grim picture of fathers' experiences following FBSD. They experience wide-ranging and severe mental health issues, fuelled by feelings of loss and grief, which are often exacerbated by legal proceedings to establish parental responsibility. When abuse is involved, including parental alienation behaviours, such outcomes are exacerbated. Crucially, fathers are clearly particularly vulnerable due to their identity as men specifically, as masculine stereotypes make their issues less visible to the public and discourage help-seeking. What is clearly missing from the literature at present is a comprehensive, holistic examination of fathers' experiences post-FBSD, which seeks to connect fathers' experiences across largely 'siloed' bodies of work.

Appendix 2 – Study Methods

Study 1 – Client Case Review

Method

Data Set

The data was provided by a Kent-based charity which supports the emotional safety of men and those they care about through three key areas; supporting male victims of domestic abuse; supporting men with family separation; and supporting men's mental health. All their services use an evidence-based, trauma-informed, person-centred approach, which they deliver through the provision of a family separation helpline, One-to-One Mentoring Advice, Mental Health Support, Peer-led Support Groups, Education and Social Services Liaison Support, Pastoral Support, Court Support, and Adult and Child Community Activities.

It was practice for the intake form to be completed for every client seen or dealt with (i.e., over the phone) by a caseworker, though there are some rare exceptions (e.g., if the client refuses consent to completion, or if they only engage with a service briefly). The sample, therefore, represents the vast majority of individuals who engaged with the service between January 2018 and June 2022. For most variables, a combination of professional assessment and specific reporting by the client was utilised to make a judgement as to whether the client met each question's criteria.

Analytic Plan

Several focused areas of analysis are outlined below, split into demographic characteristics, the context of help-seeking, and client needs. Within each of these areas (and respective tables), descriptive data is first presented. Some questions allowed clients to provide multiple selections or were simple multiple-choice questions (i.e., with more than just a yes/no option). For these variables, additional dummy variables (1 = yes, 0 = no) were created for each selectable option to allow for multiple presentations of the data. Of the 1,350 cases reviewed, 1,030 were male. The remaining 320 were removed since they were either 'female', 'non-binary', or 'missing'.

Study 2 – Survey & Interview of Fathers

Method

Participants - Survey

A total of 140 men took part in the survey. Participants were aged between 29 and 75 years old (M = 45.54, SD = 9.22), mostly White (89.3%, n = 125; Asian 5.7%, n = 8; Black n = 5, 3.5%; Mixed n = 1, 0.7%; Other n = 2, 1.4%), and mostly identified as heterosexual (n = 137, 97.9%; Bisexual n = 2, 1.4%; Bi-curious n = 1, 0.7%). If/when married, this was for an average of 9.95 years (SD = 6.38, Min = 1.00, Max = 32.00), and when unmarried, the relationship length was an average of 7.70 years (SD = 5.08, Min = .30, Max = 22.00). In relation to current relationship status, a significant proportion was divorced (n = 56, 40%), followed by 'separated, not previously married' (n = 49, 35%) and 'separated, previously married' (n = 35, 25%). Almost all reported not living in the same household as their separated partner (n = 136, 97.1%), and most had been in a serious/formal relationship since the breakdown event (n = 80, 57.1%). Of those who had been in a formal relationship, most reported still being with that new partner (n = 69, 86.2%), and of those men, most were either in a relationship but not living together (n = 30, 43.4%) or were in a relationship and cohabiting (n = 28, 40.5%; 11 were married, 15.9%).

Participants - Interviews

A total of 30 men took part in interviews. Participants were aged between 20 and 68 years old (M = 43.97, SD = 9.76), mostly White (93.4%, n = 28; Asian 3.3%, n = 1; Black n = 1, 3.3%), and most identified as heterosexual (n = 29, 96.7%; Bisexual n = 1, 3.3%). If/when married, this was for an average of 8.04 years (SD = 5.57, Min = 0.25, Max = 22.00). In relation to current relationship status, a significant proportion was divorced (n = 13, 43.3%), followed by 'separated, not previously married' (n = 9, 30.0%) and 'separated, previously married' (n = 8, 26.7%). Just over half had been in a serious/formal relationship since the breakdown event (n = 16, 53.3%). Of those who were in a current relationship (n = 14), most were either in a relationship but not living together (n = 9, 64.2%) or were in a relationship and cohabiting (n = 4, 28.6%; 1 was married, 7.1%). Most resided in England (n = 16, 53.3%; Scotland n = 9, 30%; Northern Ireland n = 4, 13.3%; Republic of Ireland n = 1, 3.3%).

Materials & Procedure - Survey

The survey, hosted on Qualtrics, asked participants about their demographic data (e.g., age, ethnicity etc.) and information about their family setup (e.g., how many children, resident or non-resident parent etc.) to capture the characteristics of the sample and provide context to their responses. Participants responded by selecting a multiple-choice response or providing a short text response.

Participants were then asked open questions about the events that took place during the breakup of their family (including any experiences of abuse), as well as the impact these events had on their mental health, their family relationships, and other aspects of their life. Questions were generated both from previous qualitative studies on men's experiences of post-separation abuse (Bates & Hine, in press; Hine & Bates, 2022) and as novel questions to probe areas of interest (i.e., post-separation coping). Participants were also asked to describe their experiences (if any) of engaging with support services, how effective these were in supporting their needs, and any challenges they experienced in accessing support. Examples of questions include: "Please describe the events that took place during the end of the relationship", "Did you ever experience any behaviour from your ex-partner that you would describe as abusive during your relationship?", "When thinking about all of the experiences described so far related to the end of your relationship and the events following, how would you say this has impacted you?", and "Following the end of your relationship, did you engage in any coping strategies you deem to be 'unhealthy' or maladaptive?".

We recruited participants by advertising the survey via social media (e.g., Twitter) and with the support of organisations that support men in this position. Posts contained a link to a website where more information was provided about the eligibility criteria for participation and where to direct questions. This webpage contained a link to the survey on Qualtrics for participants to complete at their own convenience before a specified deadline.

The survey began with an information sheet outlining in detail the nature and purpose of the study and how participants' data is handled. After reading this, participants were asked to confirm their understanding of the information sheet and their willingness to take part via a tick-box consent form. Following this, participants were asked to create an anonymous pseudonym, which could be utilized if they wished to withdraw their anonymised data (prior to publication).

If participants progressed to the questionnaire, they initially answered questions regarding demographic characteristics and information about their family setup that were related to participation inclusion criteria. All other demographic questions (and all other questions) were optional, and participants could provide as much or as little detail as they felt comfortable with (up to a maximum of 150 words per textbox).

All survey participants were eligible for entry into a prize draw for the chance to win a £25 Amazon voucher. Twenty-five vouchers were available in total (a maximum of one per participant). To be entered, participants provided their email address via a link to a separate webpage, so this was stored separately from their survey responses. After submitting their

responses, participants were also asked whether they would be interested in attending an interview to discuss their experiences in more depth, and to contact the research team directly to register their interest (this was again to ensure that personal data wasn't stored with participant responses).

Due to the survey's sensitive subject matter, the survey ended with a debrief sheet explaining the purpose of the study, information on how participants could withdraw their data at a later time point, if necessary, and contained signposts to organisations providing support specifically for fathers and for mental health more generally.

Materials & Procedure - Interviews

The interviews followed a semi-structured format based on a set of pre-prepared questions outlined in an interview script, supplemented by additional follow-up questions to provide an opportunity for participants to clarify or elaborate on their responses. The purpose of the interview was to explore in greater depth the issues raised by fathers during the survey, and questions therefore strongly reflected the sectioning and format of the survey.

Questions, therefore, covered the following topics: Events encountered during FBSD (e.g., with their ex-partner, with their children, in court), the impact of FBSD on fathers' relationships with their ex-partners and children (including incidences of parent alienation and its role in post-separation abuse and intimate partner violence), the impact of FBSD on fathers' and children's mental health, including suicide, the impact of FBSD on fathers' and children's quality of life (e.g., financial stability, employment, accommodation, social networks), experiences engaging with support services (if any), perceptions of the effectiveness of support provided by these services, and challenges in accessing support.

Participants were contacted via email with an information sheet describing the purpose of the research, their ethical rights, and how their data would be managed. If they replied expressing they still wanted to take part, they were then sent a consent form to sign to confirm their willingness to participate and their understanding of the information sheet. A mutually convenient appointment time to conduct the interview was then arranged, and participants were sent a demographic questionnaire to complete.

Interviews were hosted virtually on Microsoft Teams and lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. At the beginning of the call, the interviewer confirmed consent to participation and recording. The interviewer then began recording and participants were asked open questions outlined in the interview script, as well as appropriate follow-ups and prompts. Several mitigations were implemented to protect the well-being of participants as they discussed their personal experiences, such as frequent breaks and reminders that they had a right to withdraw at any time. Participants were also free to skip any of these questions they do not wish to answer.

At the end of the interview, the interviewer thanked participants for their contributions and reiterated how they could withdraw their data later should they wish to do so. Similar to the survey, participants were asked to provide a pseudonym which was then used if they wished to withdraw their anonymised data at a later date but prior to publication. They were asked to create a new pseudonym that was unique from the one used for their survey responses so their data could not be linked between the two studies. Following the interview, participants were given a verbal debrief and the opportunity to ask any questions. They were then emailed a debrief sheet containing a list of signposts to resources and organisations for support should they need it.

All interview participants were emailed a £25 Amazon voucher following their interview to thank them for their participation.

Analytic Plan

The audio recordings from the interviews were transcribed by the company *Trint*. These transcripts were anonymised by assigning a pseudonym chosen by the participant and omitting any potentially identifiable information. The survey responses and interview transcripts were

analysed according to Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) technique. Survey responses and interviews were analysed together, after an initial review of the data revealed high levels of similarity in the data, just with differing levels of depth. RTA is appropriate because it is a modern iteration of thematic analysis, a well-established qualitative technique for highlighting important and common experiences among a population. RTA also emphasises the importance of disclosing the analyst's relationship with the topic as it inevitably shapes their interpretation of the data.

Firstly, each participant's survey or transcript was read repeatedly to gain in-depth familiarity with the data. Following this, excerpts from the transcripts were highlighted and annotated with coding labels according to their relevance to the research topic. Once all of the transcripts had been coded, codes were organised into themes representing common patterns across participants' accounts. The names of the themes identified and the codes they contain were refined through an iterative process of shifting attention 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 facilitated using NVivo 12.

Study 3 - Deliberative Inquiry with Organisations Supporting Fathers

Method

Participants

Nine individuals from six organisations took part. Participants were aged between 43 and 70 years (M_{age} = 51.67; SD = 8.06), were mostly men (2 women), and were mostly White British (n = 6, White Irish n = 1, White British/South African n = 1, Asian Pakistani n = 1). They had been with their organisations 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 manage anywhere between 0 and 30 cases a month (M = 11.44; SD = 12.11).

The organisations represented were based across the UK, including Scotland, Wales, and England (but not Northern Ireland), and reported actively supporting between 140 and 1,000 cases at the time of the inquiry. Organisations were reported to provide 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 & Training (n = 5), and Signposting (n = 2).

Materials & Procedure

This study collected data via the method of deliberative inquiry (DI). The aim of a DI is to facilitate a back-and-forth discussion between a group of topic experts to understand more about a research topic and formulate ideas for improved practice going forward in the field. What distinguishes a DI from other research methods involving group discussion (e.g., a focus group) is the effort to identify if there is consensus among the group (Kanuka, 2010).

The DI took place virtually via Microsoft Teams and lasted approximately 92 minutes. Prior to the DI session, participants were provided with an information sheet, and, if happy to proceed, completed a consent form and 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 go ahead.

The DI moderator began the session by reiterating the purpose of the study, explaining the nature of the DI method, and summarising the planned topics of discussion. The moderator confirmed with each individual that they were willing to be audio recorded before posing a series of open questions to the group for discussion. The moderator facilitated the group discussion by: (i) guiding the group through each of the planned topics within the scheduled time; (ii) ensuring all participants engaged in a respectful discussion where they were given opportunities to defend or alter their viewpoints based on others' contributions; and (iii) reached

a verdict among the group about where there was and was not consensus and why (Kanuka, 2010). Participants were encouraged to share their ideas both verbally and using the chat function.

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

Analytic Plan

As outlined above for Study 2, reflexive thematic analysis was utilised, as per the stages outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019).

Appendix 3 - References

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