

Understanding the varied support that carers' workers offer and highlighting best practice

This in-depth study showcases different ways of supporting people caring for a family member or friend and the valuable role played by workers who support family carers with tailored support.

Everyone knows that carers are important, but we don't think precisely enough about the support they need. Our research is demonstrating the different kinds of help that they value. It shows the need for flexibility in the support that local authorities and the voluntary sector offer them which recognises the full range of help that carers value.'

That's Jo Moriarty's message to policy makers, providers and commissioners, following completion of a research project examining the varied support that carers' workers offer family carers and friends.

'Everyone recognises that carers are vital,' says Jo, a Research Fellow at the Social Care Workforce Research Unit, King's College London, 'But we often underestimate how their level of caring impacts upon their own lives. Giving improved support to carers is essential if the Government is to achieve a better and more responsive care system.'

Mr Moriarty's research study, funded by the NIHR SSCR, has conducted almost 90 interviews with family carers, carers' workers, representatives from voluntary organisations and those responsible for commissioning and planning support for carers. The study has also surveyed all councils with social services responsibilities

in England about the key issues for family carers.

Personal budgets are an increasingly important way of offering carers more flexible help. One worker described how she helped the mother of a son with very severe autism to apply for one so she could take a day off caring. 'She took herself off for a day's pampering,' the worker explained. 'She had a massage, her hair cut and coloured, her fingers done, a pedicure. It's boosted her batteries no end, feeling good about herself.' Another example was a woman caring for her husband living in a rural area. She put her personal budget towards driving lessons.

However, some carers are in complicated situations where a personal budget is not the answer. 'Doing this research, we were very struck by the way in which different types of carers will need different help,' explains Jo. 'For instance, a carer could be caring for someone with a substance misuse or mental health problem, sometimes both. These carers valued talking over their situation with a worker who really understood their situation. In some instances, the worker could also provide specialist counselling.'

Most people don't immediately recognise themselves as carers so people often come

'Very often...when we meet them initially, they don't realise that they are a carer. Often they will say, "Don't be silly, I'm not a carer, I'm their mum", which is true, but if you took mum out of the equation then the whole system would fall over and the person would have no support.'

Vince, Carers' worker



into the system late. That's why having a centre – whether a purpose built centre or a space in a public building like a library, where you can just walk in or phone up – is important.

Jo explains: 'Councils and carers organisations are only in touch with a small proportion of the 5.5 million or so carers in England. Most don't need any help from outside their family support network. The key thing is to ensure that those carers who would benefit from more support know what they are entitled to and how to get it.'

'Often people don't need a leaflet with a list of home care agencies – they can find that information themselves. They want to know which agency has workers trained in dementia care or who understand people with communication problems or challenging behaviour.'

Carers' workers bring a number of other skills to the job. Some had experience of family caring, others had worked as nurses or social workers or in advice centres. There was a shortage of men. Flexibility in terms of background seems to bring advantages in terms of the varied skills on offer, according to the study.

Jo Moriarty encourages councils to herald the support they offer carers: 'Local authorities are not good at telling this story. For example, a council might give a grant to a Carers' Centre or provide funding to a voluntary organisation to employ a carers' support worker. People are very confused about what social care is and what support they are entitled to. Councils should improve the way they publicise how they support carers, legitimising the entitlement and making it more democratically accountable.'

Project: [Social care practice with carers: an investigation of practice models](#)

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