

Supporting carers

Outline of a research project
funded by the NIHR School
for Social Care Research

How do specialist 'carer support' staff ensure effective support for unpaid carers?

Successive governments have recognised the need to support people who provide unpaid care to relatives and friends. As a result, there has been a rise in the number of social care posts aimed at developing, coordinating and providing assistance and support for carers.

These specialist 'carer support' staff have developed a range of different models of how to support carers: working across local authority, health and voluntary organisations.


Yet there has been little analysis of the different ways these post holders carry out their work, and whether they are effective in improving the lives of carers. A better understanding is needed of how the policy on carer support is being put into practice on the ground in order to ensure that resources are used to the best advantage of carers.

This project

- is an investigation of the various roles of specialist staff in supporting carers, and an analysis of the effectiveness of emerging support models.

It aims to

- map the different approaches to developing specialist 'carer support' posts across adult social services in England
- describe the various types of specialist 'carer support' staff, the work they do, and the models of practice that have been adopted
- consider the effectiveness of these specialist roles from the perspectives of different stakeholders – carers, local authorities, voluntary organisations that support the needs and rights of carers, and the staff themselves
- obtain a sample of carer support plans that have been developed with the input of specialist 'carer support' staff and compare these against the attributes of good support as evaluated by the various stakeholders, and through discussion with the specialist staff.



Improving the evidence base for
adult social care practice

Research project outline

WHAT IS THE CONTEXT?

Unpaid carers play a vital role in ensuring that disabled adults and older people receive the care they need and are able to participate in life to the fullest extent possible.

Yet many carers continue to experience problems in obtaining the information and advice they need to assist them in the care they provide. They also find it difficult to arrange the types of support they feel are most useful.

An estimated 1.75 million adults use social care services, supported by around 1.5 million social care workers.

Around 6 million people provide unpaid care to family members or friends, representing around 11 per cent of the population aged five and over.

Over the next 30 years, the number of carers is projected to rise to around 9 million due to the increase in the number of older people and people with disabilities.

These shortcomings persist despite legislation that has established the rights of carers to receive support, and a raft of government policy guidelines in recent years that outline good practice in how to support carers. Central government funding has also been provided to local councils through the annual Carers' Strategy Grant

Specialist 'carer support' posts

Much of this investment has been spent on providing direct practical support for carers, for example through short respite breaks. However, part of this state investment has been used to pay for specialist workers who have taken on a range of different roles in supporting unpaid carers. These new social care posts have a variety of different strategic and delivery goals including:

- Identifying carers.
- Planning and co-ordinating support for carers.
- Providing advice on health and social care services.
- Advising on benefits and employment.
- Long term planning in one stop shops or specialist carers' centres.

The number of specialist workers undertaking such roles has increased in recent years, and is expected to continue to rise.

Despite this trend, only limited attention has been given to the impact of these new specialist 'carer support' posts on carers' lives and looking at whether these specialist staff are effective in ensuring that carers receive improved advice, information and support. Until now, most of the analysis has been confined to unpublished evaluations within individual services and descriptive accounts in the professional press.

There is a need for evidence on how these post holders undertake their work and the ways in which the different models of carer support have been developed, both for individuals and strategically. It is also important to evaluate how effective these approaches have been, from the various perspectives of carers, specialist staff, and key stakeholders in the voluntary and statutory sectors.

HOW WILL THE PROJECT WORK?

The project will carry out different methods of information collection concurrently, with the benefit that results from one approach can be used to inform another. After completing a preliminary literature review, the study will use three broad methods of enquiry to produce interview data, case record data and survey data.

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METHOD 1: Interviews with professional staff and carers

Four local authorities will be approached to assist in this part of the project. The final list of participating authorities will represent a geographical spread and include different types of local authorities.

- The local authorities will identify all post holders with the word 'carer' in their job titles.
- Interviews will take place with a sample of these post holders in each authority to ask them about their work practices.
- These workers will be asked to identify staff with similar roles to their own in other sectors in the locality; these individuals will then also be approached for interview.
- The project aims to carry out ten interviews per authority.
- The interviewees are expected to include: carers' support workers at voluntary organisations who work directly in people's homes; carers' advice and advocacy staff employed by local councils of voluntary organisations; staff in strategic roles, often funded jointly by the NHS and local authorities, whose role is to improve recognition of 'hidden' carers, and to develop local policies for supporting carers.
- Interviewees will be asked to complete a staff survey, which includes the Job Content Questionnaire and has already been used successfully with a sample of social care staff.

Interviews will also take place with commissioners or policymakers employed in the local authority to ask about strategies for supporting carers.

Representatives of key voluntary organisations (such as the Princess Royal Trust for Carers, the Alzheimer's Society and local Council for the Voluntary Sector) will also be interviewed.

Finally, interviews will take place with a diverse sample of around 20 carers about their

experiences and the extent to which they consider their needs, and the needs of the person for whom they care, have been met.

METHOD 2: An analysis of carer support plans

The participating local authorities will be asked to provide a total of 40 care plans for carers who have received a carer's assessment. These carers will be invited to discuss their own support plans and their opinion of what the carer support worker was trying to achieve, and whether it was effective.

One question to be investigated is whether there are advantages in the carer and the person receiving care having the same specialist support worker.

METHOD 3: A national postal/online survey of local authorities

The third approach will be a postal/online survey to be sent to all directors of adult social services in England. This will cover:

- How the Carers' Strategy Grant money is currently used by the authority.
- The authority's commissioning strategies.
- The employment of carers' leads.
- How the authority develops its strategy for identifying and supporting carers.
- The organisation of specialist and generic carers' services.

The survey will aim for a 50 per cent response rate.

Project publications

A final report will be published on completion of the project, accompanied by an accessible summary, a summary aimed at professionals and commissioners, and a comment on methodology. Further dissemination will be through conferences, academic journal articles and events for professionals and carers.

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HOW DOES THE PROJECT FIT THE AIMS OF THE SCHOOL FOR SOCIAL CARE RESEARCH?

This project aims to improve the evidence base across a number of the School's programme areas. Evidence is currently lacking on how best to provide unpaid carers with assistance and support that will prevent or reduce the carers themselves needing social care in the future. Effective support for carers will help to empower and safeguard these individuals, and also helps to create the circumstances and environment that may enable carers to take on paid work and become involved in other types of meaningful activity.

The findings will demonstrate how best to equip carer support practitioners to provide the most relevant and effective advice, information and support. As well as assessing current practice and providing an improved evidence base, the study will be relevant to a broad range of care staff who work with families and friends, and across all types of organisation (private, voluntary, local authority and joint-funded) and across sectors (older people, people with physical and sensory disabilities, and mental health and learning disabilities).

The NIHR School for Social Care Research

The School for Social Care Research was set up by the National Institute for Health Research to develop and improve the evidence base for adult social care practice in England. It officially launched on 1 May 2009 with funding of £15 million over five years.

The School conducts and commissions high-quality research across five overlapping programme areas:

Prevention and reduction – How can we best prevent or reduce the development or exacerbation of the circumstances that lead to the need for social care?

Empowerment and safeguarding – How can we best empower and safeguard people who use social care services?

Care and work – How can we best equip and support people – practitioners, volunteers, informal carers – to provide optimum social care? How can we ensure that people who use social care and their carers are enabled and supported in paid work and other types of meaningful activity?

Service interventions, commissioning and change – What interventions, commissioning and delivery arrangements best achieve social care outcomes?

Resources and interfaces – How can social care and other public resources best be deployed and combined to achieve social care outcomes?

Further information about the NIHR School for Social Care Research is available at www.sscr.nihr.ac.uk

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Social Care Practice with Carers: an investigation of practice models

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