

## Informing and improving policy and practice for carers through research and evaluation

*Carers Week took place last week to raise awareness and improve the lives of carers and the people they care for. Much has been said about the need for a robust evidence base to support this aim. Last year a [seminar series funded by the Economic and Social Care Research Council](#) explored some of the evidence and next steps; and there is a growing body of studies exploring different aspects of carers' lives. Here PSSRU at LSE colleagues Valentina Zigante, Nicola Brimblecombe, and Derek King reflect on a [joint workshop](#) by the Social Services Research Group and the NIHR School for Social Care Research on how research and evaluation could inform and improve policy and practice in relation to informal carers.*

The day offered ample opportunity to reflect on issues ranging from the legal framework to the day-to-day reality of carers' lives and the future of carers' research.

Helena Herklots, Chief Executive of Carers UK chaired the event which brought together a mixed audience of carers, practitioners, researchers and stakeholders.

Elaine Edgar, the Carers Policy Lead from the Department of Health, kicked off the workshop with an update on the Care and Support Bill (now Care Act), which places a new duty on local authorities to meet carers' eligible needs for support and extends obligations to provide carers' assessments. A major theme was what Elaine described as the *mainstreaming* of carers – they are to have equal rights to support as the person they care for. The Act takes a holistic, 'whole family' approach to the provision of services, although carers aged under 18 and carers of someone aged under 18 will be covered separately, in the forthcoming Children and Families Bill. Many of the themes, the implications and the practicalities of the Care Act were returned to throughout the rest of the day. Elaine's presentation can be seen [here](#).

[Mary Larkin](#) from De-Montfort University turned to the topic of the long-term approach to carer research, with a presentation on the state of the art and the future prospects for research. She highlighted two themes related to care and caregiving research. The first theme, *gathering, profiling & evaluating*, describes research which focuses on caring patterns and their impacts as well as research on policy evaluation. This type of research is often available to the public and receives funding from various stakeholders. A defining characteristic is that it tends not to have the focus on theory found in other academic and policy research. The second theme, *conceptualising & theorising*, explores care as being an integral part of human relationships, resulting from interdependence and reciprocity. Some of the challenges carers' research faces stem from the wide variation in types and sizes of research projects, as well as different approaches and methods. Most importantly, projects do not always build on each other and sometimes create duplication. Reinforcing the problem is that these two types of research are rarely linked together – a more coherent approach would be more likely to generate better and more innovative research. Mary's presentation can be viewed [here](#).

[Diane Fox](#) from the Personal Social Services Research Unit (PSSRU) at the University of Kent presented recent research on carers' quality of life. The research found that most variation in quality of life was associated with individual factors as compared to differences between local authorities. These include being female, non-White ethnicity and poor perceived health. The local authority factors associated with good quality of life among carers were ease of access to and helpfulness of information and advice services and ease of access to services. Shorter waiting times and better timing and flexibility of services were also associated with good carer quality of life. The findings from this research have already informed the Adult Social Care Outcomes Framework measures used by the Department of Health and local authorities and could be used

to support decision-making and improve practice within local authorities. Diane's presentation can be seen [here](#).

**Wendy Mitchell** from the University of York spoke about the ways in which local authorities balance the interests of older people and their carers when arranging personal budgets. The research uncovered a lack of clarity around identifying and responding to the support needs of carers, including the need to conduct regular, separate reviews of carers support needs. Looking ahead, the research raised a number of issues, including the capacity of local authorities to conduct and manage more assessments, support plans and reviews – a likely outcome of the Care Act. Wendy's presentation is available [here](#).

The day ended with a presentation by **Jo Moriarty** from Kings College London (KCL) on outreach services for family carers. Carers have difficulties finding out about, and accessing, support for themselves, and there is still a lot of stigma associated with asking for help, particularly for certain groups. Returning to a theme that recurred throughout the day, the KCL research found that many people do not see themselves as carers and so do not access 'carer' services, and this applies more to some groups of carers than others. The KCL team looked at different types of outreach such as drop-in, carers' cafes, GPs, self-help groups and specialist outreach. They concluded that different types of outreach would help reach the diversity of carers. Jo's presentation is available [here](#).

The range of presentation topics and mixed audience led to some interesting debate and much to consider in how best to meet the needs of unpaid carers and the people they care for in the future.

## About the authors

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