

# CARING AND WORKING

Developing Insights into the World of the Working Carer

Key Findings

January 2026

## Context

During 2025 we completed a study exploring the experiences of working carers in the South of England – part of a larger project funded by NIHR ARC Wessex exploring carers needs, experiences and ideas about improving their involvement in research.<sup>1</sup>

A carer is anyone who provides unpaid care to a family member, partner, or friend who is unable to manage without support due to an illness, frailty, disability, mental health issue, or addiction.

Carers who work in addition to their caring responsibilities – ‘working carers’ – often face an ongoing struggle when trying to combine the dual demands of providing care with paid employment. There are nearly 3.7 million working carers in England and Wales; 2.6 million (72%) of these working in full-time paid employment alongside their caring roles. About 1.6 million carers have problems combining work and care.<sup>2</sup>

## What Were the Aims of the Research?

Our research aimed to understand the experience of being in paid employment whilst providing unpaid care to someone, including adjustments made to employment, support provided by employers and support agencies, the impact on the carers perceived wellbeing and ideas for improving their involvement in carers research.

<sup>1</sup> Pulman, A. and Fenge, L.-A., 2025. Caring and working: developing insights into the world of the working carer. Health & Social Care in the Community.

<sup>2</sup> Austin, A. and Heyes, J., 2020. Supporting working carers: How employers and employees can benefit. CIPD/University of Sheffield.

## Grounded in Carer Experiences

An online survey was used to gather working carers’ experiences. Working carers were involved in its development through patient and public involvement, including exploratory work with carer organisations; a questionnaire development workshop with six carers; and a pre-publication questionnaire review by two workshop attendees.

## Collecting the Data

The online survey was distributed across four counties in the South of England. Working carers were recruited through online and university channels, carer charities and local authority support services, and private and public sector employers via internal networks.

Data were collected between December 2024 and May 2025, with 51 working carers completing the survey. Most respondents were aged 18–74; one was aged 75 or over and working part-time. The majority identified as female (n=44; 86%), six as male (12%), and one response was missing (2%).

Findings are based directly on what working carers told us. Key themes emerged relating to **experience at work, support mechanisms, issues and challenges**, and **priorities for future research** to deepen understanding of working carers’ experiences.

This document shares the key findings from the Caring and Working research project. It outlines the importance of developing more humanised ways of employers understanding a working carer’s needs and to meaningfully assist them in meeting their full potential within the workforce.

# 1. The Carer Experience at Work

## 1.1 Flexible Working

*"I work for a supportive organisation and manager who understands I need flexibility to respond to needs at home. Working from home and part time helps as I can manage my time and tasks independently."*

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- Carers saw tangible benefits from flexible working.
- But a lack of flexible working created tensions in working and caring experiences.

## 1.2 Impacts on Working Life

*"I have weeks when I go to bed after work as I know I will have to be awake most nights."*

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- Participants highlighted how caring sometimes forced them to reduce working hours and resulted in feelings of fatigue and stress.
- They discussed how caring responsibilities prevented engagement with some work events and training opportunities.
- Their limitations on being able to fully commit to work demands resulted in feelings of guilt for some also affecting their ability to apply for promotion.
- Being unable to commit to increased levels of responsibility and a full time workload could prevent them from applying for promotion opportunities also stopping employers from utilising many skilled employees.

- Caring demands could create financial pressures on working carers and their families.
- Alongside concerns about their financial future, participants also described financial worries impeding their ability to help the person they were caring for more.

## 1.3 Unfair Treatment

*"Previous manager disregarded my caring responsibilities and effectively bullied me out of my previous job. I was managing well just needed option of flexible working which wasn't considered."*

P20

*"I feel 'singled out' as a carer which makes me uncomfortable."*

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*"Flexible working for carers should be more than just a soundbite. The [organisation] claims to provide flexible working, but in reality it depends entirely on your immediate line manager."*

P40

Several types of unfair treatment at work were identified:

- Experiences of being treated unfavourably compared to colleagues because they needed to provide care for someone.
- Difficulties meeting employer requirements because of care responsibilities.
- Exclusion at work because of care responsibilities.
- Employers refusing a request for changes to be made at work to help with caring responsibilities.
- Feeling bullied at work due to the fact that they had caring responsibilities.

## 2. Workplace Support

### 2.1 Management

*"You don't know what you don't know – and nobody tells you."*

P01

- Supportive managers made a real difference in helping staff to manage work alongside a caring role, including through being person-centred and flexible.
- Whereas a non-supportive line manager with little understanding or empathy could have many negative consequences for the working carer.
- It was acknowledged that it was difficult for some line managers to appreciate what someone might be going through unless they had experienced a caring role.
- Better training for managers around supporting working carers was suggested as a way of improving employee/manager relationships.

### 2.3 Organisations

*"I think they do understand but have found their priority is adhering to policies and procedures over my wellbeing."*

P17

- Workplace pressures and inflexible policies caused challenges for working carers and could undermine their physical and mental wellbeing.
- Line managers trying to accommodate the needs of their staff can experience wider organisational pressures from above and may find themselves acting as a buffer between staff and organisational demands.
- Organisations which have carer friendly policies can enhance the wellbeing of working carers whilst supporting the wider workforce in becoming more 'carer aware'.

### 2.2 Colleagues

*"It isn't until someone who I work with has become a carer that they then TRULY understand the impact, not just on work but on every aspect of my life."*

P18

- Some participants described fears about the 'stigma' of being a carer and of being judged by their work colleagues.
- Some believed their colleagues - like their line managers - were unable to fully appreciate their caring role unless they had experience themselves of a similar role.
- Accessing peer support from other working carers offered a meaningful and beneficial source of support within the workplace.



## Recommendations

### For Employers:

The Care Act (2014) and the Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Act 2023 have the potential to promote improved accommodation of working carers needs, but there remain inconsistent approaches supporting working carers across employers.

Employers need to think and plan differently for people with unpaid caring responsibilities and realise that working carers need more:

- **ENGAGEMENT** about how they can stay in work and be supported.
- **EMPATHY** regarding their caring responsibilities and demands.
- **EQUALITY** showing respect and giving carers opportunities to thrive.

### For Managers

There is a real need for more training for line managers and the wider workforce about the needs and experiences of working carers to better promote supportive working environments

### For Researchers

Working carers suggested the following research priorities:

- How working carers could be best supported by different work patterns to remain in employment.
- The role of peer support in the workplace.
- Ways of supporting carers into work.

This highlights important issues not just for researchers but also for policy makers, and links to concerns about how legislation such as the Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Act 2023 can meaningfully be enacted for working carers.

## Project Information

The Caring and Working research project was developed by Dr Andy Pulman and Professor Lee-Ann Fenge as part of a larger body of National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) ARC Wessex research exploring the experiences of unpaid carers in the South of England and helping to developing carer research capacity in Wessex.

## Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was granted by Bournemouth University Social Sciences & Humanities Research Ethics panel during December 2024 (Ref: 60029).

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