

PhD Studentship

Caring for Carers: An exploratory study of support needs for unpaid carers of people with serious mental illness in rural contexts in UK

Supervisory team:

Director of Studies: Professor Elizabeth Hughes, Professor of Mental Health Inequalities, Director of Rural Mental Health Research Unit, lead for NIHR THRIVE Programme, University of Worcester, UK

Supervisors:

Dr Molly Miley, Research Fellow, THRIVE Programme, Rural Mental Health Research Unit, University of Worcester, UK

External Advisor: Dr Martin Webber, Director of Mental Health Social Care Research Centre, University of York

Research Unit: The University of Worcester have been awarded a National Institute for Health and Social Care (NIHR) Mental Health Leaders Award to establish a programme of research designed to address mental health inequalities in rural settings (THRIVE). The programme of research will have 3 areas of focus: Earlier intervention and detection of serious mental illness (SMI); Suicide Prevention; and Digital Support. THRIVE sits in a newly established Rural Mental Health Research Unit at the University of Worcester. The THRIVE programme has been developed in partnership with colleagues at the Institute for Mental Health, University of Birmingham and there will be opportunities for collaborative working for doctoral candidates across both Worcester and Birmingham.

The PhD Studentship:

Applications are invited for a full-time PhD studentship for the project: **Caring for Carers: An Exploratory study of support needs for unpaid carers of people with serious mental illness in rural contexts in the UK.**

Context

Around 9% of people in England and Wales provide unpaid informal care for a relative or friend with physical and/or mental health conditions (ONS, 2023).

The UK Government definition of an informal carer is:

“A person is a provider of unpaid care if they look after or give help or support to anyone because of long-term physical or mental health conditions or illnesses, or problems related to old age. This does not include any activities as part of paid

employment. No distinction is made about whether any care that a person provides is within their own household or outside the household. (ONS, 2021)

Carers of individuals with severe mental illness (SMI)—such as psychosis or bipolar disorder—are often excluded from formal health care delivery. They frequently need to manage complex responsibilities, including monitoring well-being, responding to relapses, and supporting daily living, often with minimal professional support. This is compounded if the person they are caring for also has a physical long-term condition as well (Carswell, 2024).

Many carers, as they get older, face their own health challenges. Nearly half of unpaid carers report that caring had an adverse effect on their health (ONS 2024). About half of informal carers are not unable to work, and this adds to financial concerns as well as increasing social isolation.

What is already known

A report on rural mental health (HoC Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee 2021) highlighted limited service access, higher suicide risk in farming communities, and a need for crisis cafés in rural areas. Rural unpaid carers often face isolation, long travel distances, and service scarcity. A recent systematic review of qualitative studies of carer experiences (Cleary et al., 2020) included 40 studies, of which only 2 were from UK. The review highlighted the need for stronger relationships between carers and healthcare professionals, reduced social isolation, and better access to tailored support groups for carer well-being. There was no mention of rurality (especially in the UK context) and how this may compound social isolation and access to support for informal carers.

There is no UK-specific evidence on the needs and support provision of rural carers of people with SMI. This PhD will address this gap by identifying current provisions in Herefordshire and Worcestershire, factors that may exclude carers from support, as well as conducting qualitative interviews with a diverse group of rural carers to obtain their perspectives. In addition, the study will explore how intersecting inequalities (such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexuality/ gender) may impact on informal carer support in rural communities.

Aims and Objectives

In alignment with the THRIVE People and Community Engagement and Involvement Strategy (PCIE) the successful applicant will work with local stakeholders including NHS and Social Care, the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sector, and people with lived experience to co-produce a programme of research to meet the following objectives:

Research Questions

1. What is already known about carer support needs (and how these are addressed) in rural contexts and what are the gaps in knowledge?
2. What types of support currently exist in Worcestershire and Herefordshire for those who care for people with SMI?
3. What are carer support needs in Worcestershire and Herefordshire, and what are the challenges they face in getting their needs met?
4. What is the impact of intersecting inequalities on carers needs being identified and met?

Indicative methodology

Phase 1: Literature review of informal carer needs and experiences of accessing support in high/middle income countries

Phase 2: Mapping local provision of carer support (provided by NHS, VCSE or informal support provided by family and friends).

Phase 3: Developing effective ways of identifying carers of people with SMI; including those who may face additional health inequalities, and identifying their support needs, preferences for support and identifying ways to meet those needs in a rural context. This is likely to involve outreach work, focus groups and interviews, and/or surveys.

Meaningful Involvement and engagement with those with a diverse range of lived experience will be a key strand of the PhD programme.

References:

Carswell, C., Brown, J.V.E., Shiers, D., Ajjan, R., Balogun-Katung, A., Bellass, S., Holt, R.I.G., Jacobs, R., Kellar, I., Lewisohn, C., Lister, J., Siddiqi, N., Sidorova, I. and Coventry, P. (2024), The Lived Experience of Informal Caregivers of People Who Have Severe Mental Illness and Coexisting Long-Term Conditions: A Qualitative Study. *Health Expectations*, 27: e14119. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hex.14119>

Cleary, M., West, S., Hunt, G. E., McLean, L., & Kornhaber, R. (2020). A Qualitative Systematic Review of Caregivers' Experiences of Caring for Family Diagnosed with Schizophrenia. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 41(8), 667–683. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01612840.2019.1710012>

Office for National Statistics (2023) Census 2021. Unpaid Care [Unpaid care by age, sex and deprivation, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics](#)

Office for National Statistics (2024) Unpaid Care Life Expectancy and Health Outcomes of unpaid carers [Unpaid care expectancy and health outcomes of unpaid carers, England - Office for National Statistics](#)

House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee (2023) Rural Mental Health [Rural Mental Health - Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee](#)

Knudson, B., & Coyle, A. (2002). Parents' experiences of caring for sons and daughters with schizophrenia: a qualitative analysis of coping. *European Journal of*

Psychotherapy & Counselling, 5(2), 169–183.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1364253031000077558>

Details of the studentship:

The studentship is offered for a 4-year period on a full-time basis. During the period of your studentship you will receive the following:

- a tax-free bursary of £20,407 for 3 years
- a fee-waiver for 4 years
- a budget to support your project costs
- a laptop and other IT equipment or software as appropriate to the project
- use of the Doctoral School facilities

You will be expected to play an active role in the life of both the Doctoral School and of the School. You will be given opportunities to gain experience in learning and teaching within the School under the guidance of your Director of Studies.

Application Process:

The closing date for this studentship is Friday 18th September 2026.

To begin the application process for this studentship please go to our [webpage](#) and click 'apply now' next to the project you wish to apply for.

It is expected that applicants will have the following qualifications:

- A Masters in the area of Health Care or equivalent professional experience.
- A First or Upper Second Honours Degree

It is also expected that applicants will be able to demonstrate the following:

- A sound understanding of and interest in both the project and the wider subject area, including the NHS mental healthcare setting.
- Experience of relevant research methods and skills
- Ability to contribute to the research design of the project
- Proficiency in oral and written English
- Proficiency in IT relevant to the project
- Ability to organise and meet deadlines
- Good interpersonal skills
- Ability to work independently
- Ability to work as part of a team

Completing the Personal Statement on the Application Form:

To support a fair and consistent shortlisting process, all applicants are required to submit a personal statement of up to 1,000 words, using the structure below.

Statements that do not follow this structure, or that rely on generic or nonspecific content, may be disadvantaged. Write in your own authentic voice; AI generated content is easy to detect and weakens an application. Provide specific examples throughout to support your personal statement. Finally, ensure your statement is well structured, clearly written and carefully proofread.

Required Personal Statement Structure

1. Motivation for Applying (approx. 150 words)

Explain why you are applying for this specific PhD project. Demonstrate your understanding of the topic, why it matters, and what motivates you to pursue doctoral study in this area. Outline your longer-term career aspirations and how this studentship supports them. Avoid general statements that could apply to any project or institution.

2. Relevant Research Experience (approx. 200 words)

Provide a focused summary of your research experience, including undergraduate or Masters dissertations, involvement in audits, evaluations or research projects, and any research assistant work. Describe your specific contributions, the methods you used, skills developed and outcomes achieved. Include research related training (e.g., qualitative or quantitative methods, systematic review techniques). Use concrete examples and emphasise what you did.

3. Research Outputs, RKE Activity or Scholarly Achievement (approx. 150 words)

Summarise research related achievements such as publications, reports, conference presentations, workshops, knowledge exchange activities, involvement in funding applications, or academic awards. Be clear about your personal contribution to collaborative work and distinguish between published, accepted, in progress, or planned outputs.

4. Professional or Employment Experience (approx. 200 words)

Outline employment or voluntary roles relevant to this programme of doctoral study. This may involve work in health, social care, education, community or research settings. Highlight responsibilities such as data collection, participant engagement, safeguarding, communication or project coordination. Provide examples showing independence, reliability, time management and resilience. Explain how these experiences have prepared you for PhD level research and informed your interest in the project area.

5. Skills, Values and Personal Attributes (approx. 200 words)

Provide evidence of the qualities expected of a doctoral researcher, including a strong work ethic, conscientiousness, commitment to ethical practice, curiosity, critical thinking, independence and effective communication. Use specific examples that demonstrate these attributes in practice. Avoid generic lists, focus on behaviours and experiences that show your readiness for doctoral study.

6. Fit with the Project and Supervisory Team (approx. 100 words)

Explain how your experience, interests and career goals align with the project and supervisory team. Highlight relevant methodological expertise, subject knowledge or lived/professional experience. Demonstrate awareness of the broader research area in which the project sits and articulate clearly why you are a strong match.

The Interview:

Shortlisted candidates will be given at least 7 day's-notice of interview. In advance of interview, shortlisted candidates will be asked to submit their CV and a sample of their written work (e.g. a publication or a dissertation).

Alongside the interview, shortlisted candidates will be asked to deliver a brief presentation (10 minutes) on a topic related to the studentship. This will provide an opportunity to demonstrate understanding of the project context and potential research approaches. Candidates are invited to present on the following suggested topic: **What are the support needs of unpaid carers of people with severe mental illness in rural contexts?** To support their presentation, candidates are encouraged to use a concise slide deck and reflect on how their background or interests align with the aims of the Care for Carers project.

Research at the University of Worcester

Research is central to the University's mission to make a difference in everything that we do. We are committed to delivering excellent research which extends the boundaries of human knowledge but which also improves people's lives by enabling better health outcomes, improving food security, developing environmentally sustainable solutions for crop production and socially sustainable solutions to our ageing population, enhancing public knowledge and understanding of the past and present.

The University hence focuses its research around five high-level challenges facing society, locally, nationally and globally:

- [Human Health and Wellbeing](#)
- [Sustainable Futures](#)
- [Digital Innovation](#)
- [Culture, Identity and Social Exclusion](#)
- [Professional Education](#)

The success of our research is reflected in our continuous improvement in external research assessment processes. In the most recent Research Excellence Framework, REF 2021, the University saw a near 50% increase in the scale of its research and 12% increase in quality, building on its performance in REF 2014 when it was the UK's most improved university in terms of Research Power, a combination of scale and quality.

Research Degrees at Worcester

Our research students are central to our overall mission for research. They are working at the cutting edge of their disciplines and driving forward the quality of our research whilst enriching our research culture. We are looking to increase our research student numbers as a strategic imperative.

Our commitment to our students is reflected in the results of the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2023 in which we ranked 3rd for overall research student satisfaction nationally. Key to our success in this area is the Doctoral School, a focal point for all our research students.

It provides:

- day-to-day support for our students, both administrative and practical, through our dedicated team
- a Research Student Study Space with both PCs and laptop docking station

- a comprehensive Researcher Development Programme for students and their supervisors
- a programme of student-led conferences and seminars

Widening Participation:

As part of its mission statement the University is committed to widening participation for its higher degrees. Although most candidates will have an undergraduate and/or a Masters degree, the University is happy to accept applications from candidates with relevant professional qualifications and work related experience.

For further information or an informal discussion on this project, please contact Professor Elizabeth Hughes by email:

elizabeth.hughes2@worc.ac.uk

