

Experiences of adult social care complaint processes

Submission date 01/06/2026	Recruitment status Recruiting	☐ Prospectively registered ☐ Protocol
Registration date 04/06/2026	Overall study status Ongoing	☐ Statistical analysis plan ☐ Results
Last Edited 02/06/2026	Condition category Other	☐ Individual participant data ☒ Record updated in last year

Plain English summary of protocol

Background and study aims

This project looks at the experiences of family carers of adults with learning disabilities who make a complaint to their local council adult social care department. We want to understand how family carers and local council staff experience the complaint process and make new resources to share what we have found out with local councils and the wider public.

We know that family carers often find it difficult to make a complaint to adult social care, and they want professionals to understand what it is like for them. However, there is little research about their experiences of making complaints or how social care staff think about and respond to complaints.

Who can participate?

Family carers of adults with learning disabilities can participate if they have experience of making a formal complaint related to their relatives care, to their relative's local authority adult social care team.

Local authority staff who have experience of managing, handling or responding to adult social care complaints can also take part.

While participants do not have to live in England, their experience must relate to English local authorities.

What does the study involve?

The project will last 22 months. It has four parts which have been designed after talking with family carers, family carer groups, and council staff.

1. We will read what has been written about adult social care complaints and write a summary of this. (A rapid scoping review)
2. We will talk to 20 family carers of adults with learning disabilities who have complained to their local council adult social care department. We will meet each family carer twice. In the first meeting the person will be asked to talk about their experience of making a complaint. In the second meeting the researcher will ask more detailed questions. The researcher and family carer will make a timeline of the family carer's experience of complaining. The researchers will then carefully read and think about what family carers said and their timelines.
3. We will hold 3 focus groups with 20 local council staff who have experience dealing with adult social care complaints to find out what they think about complaints and how they respond to

them. If people do not wish to take part in a focus group, they can take part in a 1:1 interview.

4. We will bring together key people involved in the research, including family carers and local council staff in

three co-production workshops:

Workshop 1 will look at what we found out in parts 1-3. We will talk about this and, together, choose the most important points.

Workshops 2 and 3 will focus on making resources for local council staff and social work students so they can understand the experience of family carers making a complaint. An artist will work with us and help make sure the resources are clear and easy to understand.

What are the possible benefits and risks of participating?

Risks: Complaints can be a sensitive topic, and participants sharing their experiences may be challenging. The research team understands this and is experienced in working with people on difficult topics. Participants are not expected to share anything they are uncomfortable with, and they will be welcome to take breaks during the interview or stop and/or continue on a different day. Participants will also need to dedicate some time to take part in the research. However, interviews will be at a time that suits the individual participant and can be online or in-person depending on what works best for the participant.

Benefits: People who take part in similar interviews often say they find it rewarding and value having the space to share their experiences. Family carer participants will receive £25 per interview as a thank you for their time, and there will be an additional payment for those who take part in the coproduction workshops. Participants will contribute to increasing our knowledge on this topic, with findings and resources produced through the project intended to improve understanding and improve the way local authorities work with family carers regarding complaints.

Where is the study run from?

Manchester Metropolitan University (UK)

When is the study starting and how long is it expected to run for?

March 2026 to August 2027

Who is funding the study?

The National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) Research Programme for Social Care (RPSC) (UK)

Who is the main contact?

Dr Francesca Ribenfors, f.ribenfors@mmu.ac.uk

Contact information

Type(s)

Public, Scientific, Principal investigator

Contact name

Dr Francesca Ribenfors

Contact details

Brooks, 53 Bonsall St, Hulme
Manchester
United Kingdom

M15 6GX
+44 (0)161 247 2646
f.ribenfors@mmu.ac.uk

Additional identifiers

Study information

Scientific Title

Complaining about complaints: an exploration of family carers' experiences of raising complaints with local authority adult social care departments in relation to adults with learning disabilities

Study objectives

Aim: To understand how family carers and LA staff experience adult social care complaint processes and co-produce learning resources to share this understanding with LAs and the wider public.

Research questions (RQs):

1. How do family carers of adults with learning disabilities experience making a complaint to their LA adult social care department?
2. How do LA staff interpret and respond to complaints from members of the public?
3. What aspects of their complaint experiences do family carers feel require better understanding and improvement by local authorities?

Objectives:

1. To undertake a rapid scoping review of the literature about LA adult social care complaints (RQ 1 & 2)
2. To conduct qualitative interviews in three stages with carers regarding their experiences of complaining (RQ 1 & 3)
3. To conduct focus groups and interviews with LA professionals involved in handling complaints. (RQ 2)
4. To co-produce and disseminate learning resources for local authorities to better understand and improve public experiences of complaining. (RQ 3)

Ethics approval required

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Ethics approval(s)

Approved 20/10/2025, The Faculty of Health & Education Research Ethics and Governance Committee at the Manchester Metropolitan University (Brooks, 53 Bonsall St, Hulme, Manchester, M15 6GX, United Kingdom; +44 (0)161 247 2646; FOHE-Ethics@mmu.ac.uk), ref: 81928

Primary study design

Observational

Secondary study design

Cross sectional study

Study type(s)

Health condition(s) or problem(s) studied

Experiences of adult social care complaints processes for family carers of adults with learning disabilities and local authority (LA) staff

Interventions

For family carer participants:

Data will be generated through individual interviews in a three-step process:

1. Narrative interview: participants will share their experiences of raising complaints with minimal researcher direction. A broad opening question will be used to initiate the conversation and encourage participants to freely share their experiences. Follow-up questions, where necessary, will largely stem from what participants share, with a list of key areas of interest acting as a loose topic guide for the researcher.
2. Initial analysis: Interviews will be professionally transcribed and an initial analysis will be conducted. Key aspects of participants' experiences will be mapped onto individual timelines and areas needing further clarification will be identified.
3. Follow-up interviews: Timelines will be shared with participants via email (or a hard copy via post if participants find this easier), and a follow-up interview will be arranged within 3 months of the initial interview to enable participants to review and amend their timelines and provide additional detail as needed.

For local authority staff participants:

Local authority staff will have the option to attend a one-off focus group or a 1:1 interview.

Intervention Type

Other

Primary outcome(s)

1. Qualitative self-reported data from family members and local authority staff measured using data collected via interviews and focus groups to form two qualitative datasets which will be reported via academic journals and accessible summaries at the end of the study

Key secondary outcome(s)

1. Co-produced resources measured using data generated through the study with resources created via co-production workshops and made publicly available at the end of the study

Completion date

31/08/2027

Eligibility

Key inclusion criteria

Family carers of adults with learning disabilities:

1. Currently be a carer of an adult with learning disabilities (age 18 years and over) or have cared for an adult with learning disabilities over the last 5 years
2. Be related to the person they care for
3. Have experience of making at least one complaint to their relative's local authority adult social care department with the complaint relating to the care of their relative
4. The local authority they complained to is in England

Local authority staff:

To participate in this study, a person must:

1. Be currently employed by an English local authority and have experience of handling, managing or being involved in adult social care complaints, or
2. Have previously been employed by an English local authority (within the last 5 years) and have experience of handling, managing or being involved in adult social care complaints

Healthy volunteers allowed

Yes

Age group

Mixed

Lower age limit

18 Years

Upper age limit

99 Years

Sex

All

Total final enrolment

0

Key exclusion criteria

Family carers of adults with learning disabilities (20 participants):

People will be excluded from this study if:

1. The person they care for is not aged 18 or over
2. The person they care for does not have a learning disability
3. The local authority they complained to is not in England.

Local authority staff (15 participants):

People will be excluded from this study if:

1. They do not have experience of adult social care complaints
2. They are not employed, or recently employed (within the last 5 years) by a local authority
3. The local authority they work/ed for is not in England.

Date of first enrolment

01/03/2026

Date of final enrolment

31/12/2026

Locations

Countries of recruitment

United Kingdom

England

Study participating centre
Manchester Metropolitan University
All Saints
Grosvenor Square
Manchester
England
M15 6BH

Sponsor information

Organisation
Manchester Metropolitan University

ROR
<https://ror.org/02hstj355>

Funder(s)

Funder type

Funder Name
National Institute for Health and Care Research

Alternative Name(s)
National Institute for Health Research, NIHR Research, NIHRresearch, NIHR - National Institute for Health Research, NIHR (The National Institute for Health and Care Research), NIHR

Funding Body Type
Government organisation

Funding Body Subtype
National government

Location
United Kingdom

Results and Publications

Individual participant data (IPD) sharing plan

IPD sharing plan summary

Not expected to be made available