

Intimate lives matter: sex, relationships and the Care Act

Submission date 28/04/2026	Recruitment status Recruiting	☐ Prospectively registered ☐ Protocol
Registration date 29/04/2026	Overall study status Ongoing	☐ Statistical analysis plan ☐ Results
Last Edited 12/05/2026	Condition category Other	☐ Individual participant data ☒ Record updated in last year

Plain English summary of protocol

Background and study aims

An intimate relationship is a close relationship between people who aren't family, and can be romantic, or sexual, or both. This project will explore how social workers can better consider sex and intimate relationships of people with learning disabilities and autistic people during care assessments where they decide what support people need. We will create information and training to help social workers to do this well. Supporting people to have relationships can reduce loneliness, increase happiness, and improve safety. The law says people should get this support if needed. Our team has carried out three research studies with people with learning disabilities and autistic people about relationships, sexuality, and support needs. Although there were differences between the challenges and needs that people with learning disabilities and autistic people had, most people wanted partners for love, companionship, pleasure, and to share their life with. People often felt lonely - they didn't have the information, support and opportunities they needed to safely meet people and have relationships. We found that the professionals who are there to decide what support people need, and to make sure they get it, rarely ask about sex and relationships and how they can support them.

What does the study involve?

Interviews and focus groups: We will talk to social workers, on their own and in groups, about their experiences of doing care assessments with people with learning disabilities and autistic people. We will ask what would help them feel confident to discuss sex and relationship support needs in assessments.

Workshops: We will hold workshops with people with learning disabilities and autistic people to make checklists and guidance to help social workers to include questions about sex and intimate relationships in needs assessments with people with learning disabilities and autistic people.

Training: We will use what social workers tell us to create and run a free online training programme, with help from our advisory group. Afterwards, we will ask social workers if the training helped them talk about sex and relationship needs during adult care assessments.

Good practice case studies: We will find three examples where local councils have provided good sex and relationship support for people with learning disabilities and autistic people and write about what they have done so that other councils can learn from them.

We will share our resources and findings in different ways: online training, webinars, our

websites, magazines for social workers, easy-read reports, and accessible summaries.

Who can participate?

Different people can participate in different parts of the study.

Interviews and focus groups: social workers who in the last 5 years have done Care Act assessments as part of their role

Workshops: autistic people and people with learning disabilities

Training and survey: social workers who agree to undertake the survey can attend the training.

Good practice case studies: staff working at identified sites or autistic people and people with learning disabilities who have been supported by those sites

What are the possible benefits and risks of participating?

Benefits: The training and resources developed through this study are intended to improve sex and relationships support for people with learning disabilities and autistic people. Participants will be paid for their time.

Risks and how they will be reduced:

Time: Participants will need to dedicate some of their time. Meetings will be scheduled at convenient times, and interviews will be conducted online. Participants will be informed about the duration in advance.

Difficult conversations: Some topics, such as sex and relationships, may be uncomfortable to talk about. Participants will be allowed to take breaks and will be informed about their right to withdraw at any time.

Safeguarding: If participants disclose harm, safeguarding procedures will be in place to ensure their safety. Participants will be informed about situations where confidentiality cannot be maintained

Where is the study run from?

Manchester Metropolitan University in collaboration with Supported Loving (UK)

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

December 2025 to February 2027

Who is funding the study?

NIHR Research Programme for Social Care (UK)

Who is the main contact?

Dr Monique Huysamen, m.huysamen@mmu.ac.uk

Contact information

Type(s)

Principal investigator, Scientific, Public

Contact name

Dr Monique Huysamen

Contact details

Brooks, 53 Bonsall St, Hulme
Manchester
United Kingdom

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

Additional identifiers

Study information

Scientific Title

Supporting social workers to include sex and relationship needs in Care Act assessments for people with learning disabilities and for autistic people: a qualitative study

Study objectives

Ethics approval required

Ethics approval required

Ethics approval(s)

Approved 28/10/2025, 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: 82320

Primary study design

Observational

Secondary study design

Cross sectional study

Study type(s)

Health condition(s) or problem(s) studied

Support for autistic people and people with learning disabilities around sex and relationships

Interventions

This study involves two work packages.

Work Package 1:

Interviews and focus groups with social workers. We will conduct 15 interviews and two focus groups with social workers, to a total of 25 social workers involved in this. Data will be analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Co-production workshops with autistic people and people with learning disabilities. This is not a research activity and instead is PPI. We will speak to 10 autistic people and 10 people with learning disabilities to co-produce guidance and tools for social workers and for autistic people and people with learning disabilities around Care Act assessments and intimate lives.

Development and evaluation of training: We will develop and deliver training to 80 social workers and evaluate this using three surveys, one directly before and one directly after the training, and one 3 months later to capture how the learning has been used. Social workers will be invited to attend the training via the research team's extensive networks, and participants from the interviews and focus groups will be invited to attend and to share with their colleagues.

Work Package 2:

Good practice case studies: We will identify three local authorities or service providers that are doing good practice around sex and relationships. We will interview staff and people who have been supported, observe, and analyse resources to create good practice case study booklets which will be professionally designed and shared within the training and online.

Intervention Type

Other

Primary outcome(s)

1. Self-reported inclusion of sex and relationship support needs in Care Act assessments with autistic people and people with learning disabilities, measured using survey at directly before and after training and 3 months post-training

Key secondary outcome(s)

1. Social workers' knowledge of including sex and relationships in Care Act assessments with autistic people and people with learning disabilities, measured using survey at directly before and after training and 3 months post-training

2. Social workers' attitudes towards including sex and relationships in Care Act assessments with autistic people and people with learning disabilities, measured using survey at directly before and after training and 3 months post-training

Completion date

28/02/2027

Eligibility

Key inclusion criteria

Interview and focus groups (25 participants):

Registered social workers who work in England and for whom undertaking adult Care Act Assessments or Reviews is, or has been, a core part of their role in the last 5 years

Workshops (20 participants):

Autistic people and people with learning disabilities aged 18+ years and living in England

Good practice case studies (15 participants):

Staff and autistic people and people with learning disabilities who are connected with the sites of good practice as identified by the research team

Survey (80 participants):

Registered social workers who have attended our training

Healthy volunteers allowed

Yes

Age group

Mixed

Lower age limit

18 Years

Upper age limit

100 Years

Sex

All

Total final enrolment

0

Key exclusion criteria

Interview and focus groups:

Social workers who have not undertaken Care Act assessments as part of their role in the last five years.

Workshops:

Autistic people and people with learning disabilities aged under 18 years or those who do not live in England

Good practice case studies:

People who are not connected with the good practice sites as identified by the research team

Survey:

Registered social workers who have not attended our training

Date of first enrolment

01/12/2025

Date of final enrolment

30/11/2026

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