Survey Report: Experiences of Carers at UoR

This report presents the findings from a survey conducted in February-March 2025 by three staff diversity networks at the University of Reading: The Parent and Family Network, The Staff Disability Plus Network, and Women@Reading.

The survey aimed to gather insights into the experiences of colleagues who have caring responsibilities for adults or children with long-term care needs related to physical or mental illness, disability, or old age.

77 individuals completed the survey:

- 38% were in Research, Teaching & Research or teaching only roles; 35% were in Professional and Managerial roles, 23% were in Administrative or Technical & Operational Support Roles.

- 42% had worked at the University for 10 years or more. 68% were contracted to work full time; 87% had permanent contracts.

- 62% identified as White-British/Scottish/English/Welsh; 67% were 40-59 years old; 69% were female; 95% identified with the same gender as that registered at birth; 82% said heterosexual/straight best defined their sexual orientation; 22% had a long-term physical or mental health condition or illness, or disability (as defined in the Equality Act 2010)

Part 1: Caring responsibilities

Survey respondents often held multiple caring roles, with around **20% reporting two or more responsibilities**. As seen in Table 1, **most identified as the primary carer**, particularly for children and adults with long-term conditions or disabilities. Notably, **care for older adults was the most frequently reported caring responsibility overall,** although more commonly reported as a secondary responsibility. Respondents were able to select multiple options as applicable and were directed to answer as the primary carer if they shared care responsibilities equally with another person. In addition to the responses shown in the table below, 3 respondents reported they had caring responsibilities that fell into the category of 'other'

Table 1
Respondents' caring responsibilities (number of responses)

Type of Care	Primary Carer	Secondary Carer
Caring for a child (under 18) with long-term health conditions/disability	24	2
Caring for an adult (18+) with long-term health conditions/disability	20	13
Caring for a person with care needs related to old age	14	22

Note that the total number of responses here exceeds the number of survey participants due to some respondents reporting multiple caring responsibilities.

- **Hours Spent Caring**

Time spent caring varied significantly. **38% of respondents reported spending 20 hours or more per week** on average giving help or support to the person/people they care for; 59% of those respondents indicated they were contracted to work full-time hours, highlighting a significant caring responsibility for this group. A further 18% reported spending between 10 and 19 hours. This suggests a substantial group balancing intense caring demands with professional commitments.

- **Types of care provided**

The **nature of care provided** was often multifaceted. **Over 90% of respondents reported providing multiple types of care.** The most common were **emotional/social support** (67 responses), **administrative help** (62), and **household tasks** (61). Less frequent but still significant were **medical** (37) and **personal care** (36) tasks**.** Types of care mentioned in the category of 'other' included support with transport, communication, helping a person to manage specific physical or mental health needs, and managing care/carers at a distance.

Respondents were able to select multiple options as applicable and were directed to select all that apply to their caring responsibilities. Responses are shown below as raw data (number of responses).

Table 2
Types of care provided

Type of Care	Responses
Personal care (e.g. help with dressing, washing, eating, using the toilet, etc.)	36
Physical support (e.g. help getting in and out of bed, getting up/downstairs, walking, etc.)	21
Administrative support (help dealing with correspondence, bills, banking, etc.)	62
Medical support (e.g. administering medicines, changing dressings, etc.)	37
Household support (e.g. cooking, cleaning, shopping, etc.)	61
Emotional and social support (help with accessing social opportunities, help to maintain relationships with friends and family, etc.)	67
Other	8

Note that the total number of responses here exceeds the number of survey participants due to some respondents reporting multiple caring responsibilities.

Part 2: Caring responsibilities and work

- **Line Manager Awareness and Support**

78% of respondents reported that their line manager was aware of their caring responsibilities; 83% of these respondents (around 60% of all respondents) said they had discussed their caring responsibilities with the line manager.

Respondents who had not discussed their caring responsibilities with the line manager gave a range of reasons for this. Respondents were able to select multiple reasons and the four options of *I do not think my employer/manager needs to know; I do not wish to discuss my caring responsibilities at work; I do not know how to raise the subject* and *I do not believe it would be useful to inform my line manager/employer* were roughly equally cited.

Some responses added comments which underlined concerns about the usefulness or possible impact of sharing information about caring responsibilities with the line manager.

- **Flexible working requests**

47% of respondents had requested one or more forms of flexible working to help manage their caring responsibilities;

91% of these respondents reported that some or all of their flexible working requests were agreed.

The most commonly requested flexible working arrangements were *compressed hours* followed by *altered start/end time* and *working from home on a fixed/structured basis*.

8% of all survey respondents had requested a reduction in FTE to manage their caring responsibilities.

Respondents who reported not having requested flexible working were asked if they were aware of the right to do so; **18% of the total survey respondents were unaware of the right to request flexible working**, suggesting it may be useful to try and raise awareness of this right to request.

- **Leave and caring responsibilities**

83% of respondents reported using leave from work to help manage caring responsibilities; in 95% of these cases respondents reported using Annual Leave, either alone or alongside other kinds of leave.

26% of respondents reported using Carer's Leave, either alone or alongside other kinds of leave.

It was notable that other types of leave (Parental Leave; Emergency Leave to care for dependents; Annual Leave Purchase Scheme and Unpaid Leave) were used much less frequently. **42% of respondents said they were not aware of leave options which may be**

available to staff in addition to annual leave and **43% said they were not aware of the right to take Carer's Leave,** suggesting it may be useful to try and raise awareness of this option.

23% of respondents had heard about Carers Leave on the Staff Portal, while 37% said they had first hear about this option from the survey itself.

52% of respondents thought that the right to take Carer's Leave would be either very helpful or somewhat helpful in the future.

- **Challenges faced**

Responses showed that balancing work and caring responsibilities presents significant challenges for many respondents, with the majority of respondents selecting two or more challenges. The most commonly reported issue is **stress and mental health concerns** (62 responses). Many also feel **limited in career progression** (34 responses) and **struggle with taking time off** (23 responses). Responses in the 'other' category mentioned feelings of guilt/stress over trying to manage commitments inside and outside work.

Respondents were able to select multiple options as applicable and were directed to select all that apply to their caring responsibilities. Responses are shown below as raw data (number of responses).

Table 3
Challenges faced balancing work and caring responsibilities

Type of Care	Responses
Lack of support from line manager(s) to balance caring responsibilities and work	5
Lack of understanding of caring responsibilities from line manager(s)	7
Lack of understanding of caring responsibilities from colleagues	15
Difficulties arranging time off/away from work to fulfil necessary caring responsibilities	23
Stress and/or other mental health issues related to balancing caring responsibilities and work	62
Feeling unable to take up opportunities at work due to caring responsibilities	34
I have not faced any challenges	8
Other	6

Note that the total number of responses here exceeds the number of survey participants due to the majority of respondents reporting multiple challenges.

- **Institutional Support**

Respondents were asked how well they felt supported by colleagues, their line manager and the university. Full details of the responses can be seen in Table 4 below.

87.5% of respondents felt very well or fairly well supported by their line manager, with a similar rating reported for support from colleagues.

Despite the overall positive sense of being supported shown here, it should be noted that a significant minority (34%) of colleagues felt not very well supported, or not supported at all in one or more areas. That is to say, 34% of respondents 34% of the respondents had selected 'not very well supported' or 'not supported at all' in one or more of the categories shown in the table below.

Respondents reported a lower rate or feeling supported by the university, although responses later in the survey (see Part 3) indicated that for some respondents at least this is because they felt all the support required came from the line manager and they did not feel they were necessarily dealing with 'the university' around this issue.

Table 4
Respondents' reported feelings of support from colleagues, line managers and the university

	Your Colleagues	Your Line Manager	The University
Very well supported	41.1%	45.8%	31%
Fairly well supported	45.2%	41.7%	43.7%
Not very well supported	5.5%	9.7%	18.3%
Not supported at all	8.2%	2.8%	7%

Part 3: Qualitative Responses

Respondents were asked if they had further comments or suggestions about the University's support for working carers at the University. There were 38 respondents to this question.

While many participants acknowledged support they had received, particularly from individual manager, others described significant challenges they had faced. This thematic analysis identifies seven key areas of feedback.

1. **Awareness and Understanding of Caring Responsibilities**

Respondents' comments highlighted the very wide range of caring responsibilities that colleagues around the university have, both in terms of who they are caring for and the nature of the care required. A number of respondents felt that there needed to be greater awareness of the challenges of being a carer and the differences between being a carer or parent-carer and

being a parent. Respondents also mentioned the challenges of caring for people 'at a distance' which could involve managing carers and administrative issues, as well as providing emotional support, potentially across different time zones.

- *"I feel there needs to be more institutional awareness of how challenging it is to be a parent/carer. It absolutely is not the same as being a parent alone which many people think it is."*

- *"Line managers need help understanding the difference between care for the elderly and caring for children."*

- *..."while most staff are supportive of those with caring needs, most don't actually understand what it entails. Some messaging about this would be really helpful in raising awareness."*

- *I feel there is a gap in the understanding of the types of care needs, and how this impacts on a Carers day to day job.*

Related to this, some respondents were not sure themselves whether the responsibilities they had would 'officially' count as caring, or felt sure they would not, which had influenced their decisions about asking for flexibility in the workplace or discussing their caring responsibilities with colleagues/line managers. This reflects the finding by Carers UK that it takes two years on average for someone to identify themselves as a carer

- *"I'm not even sure that what I do counts as Caring (with a capital C), or whether it's just something that everyone goes through with older parents / parents with mental health conditions. Further information on what classes as caring responsibilities, what situations are covered, would be helpful."*

It should be noted that, "dependant" for entitlement to Carer's Leave is defined as anyone for whom an employee reasonably has caring responsibility for, **and does not have to be a family member**. This includes a spouse, civil partner, child, parent, a person who lives in the same household as the employee (other than by reason of them being their employee, tenant, lodger or boarder), **or a person who reasonably relies on the employee for care** (see UoR Carers Leave)

The findings of this survey suggest that it could be useful to raise awareness of this definition so that colleagues are not self-selecting themselves out of support that could be available to them due to too narrow definitions of the word 'dependent'.

2. Awareness and Communication of Support Provisions

Another strong, related theme in the responses was uneven awareness of the University's carers policies, including carers leave and other entitlements. Many participants said they had never been informed about these options or were unsure what counted as a "caring responsibility" (see above). Even staff who had accessed support often learned about it informally, rather than through any institutional communication.

- *"I have nice colleagues and line manager but I wasn't aware of any of the arrangements listed in this survey.*

- *"There is room for improvement in raising awareness of the available support. Much of what I know has come through word of mouth, and I am aware that many others are in a similar position."*

- *"Let the line managers know about this additional leave, I'm well supported but others may not be so much."*

- *"The carer's leave entitlement was new to me today so I will use then when needed."*

- *"So much of the HR website seems to be aimed at parents with caring responsibilities, specific pages for carers of adults/parents would be really useful."*

This highlights a clear opportunity for improvement: making information about carers' support more accessible, visible, and part of training/information for line managers.

3. Institutional Support

Several staff described positive relationships with their line managers, emphasising how important this individual support had been in enabling them to manage working and caring. However, these experiences were not universal. For some, managerial discretion led to inconsistency or even feelings of judgment. Some respondents described specific instances where they had felt a lack of support during difficult times related to caring and/or bereavement.

- *I am very fortunate that my line manager understands my issues and I also manage staff with caring roles so I extend the same flexibility to them. Showing this level of empathy and compassion for my staff means they go above and beyond in work because they are not stressed about the stuff they cannot control from the office.*

- *My experience with the University has been very positive, as it is a highly supportive employer. I have received great support from my line manager and colleagues.*

- *The University has some great structures in place, but they have become harder to access and less "friendly" towards the staff who need them.*

- *I haven't asked for the support or informed anyone and I am unlikely to. I believe the university does offer support but I am concerned about repercussions for requesting them.*

Comments around support from line managers, colleagues and the university were often linked to points about awareness what is involved in caring and what support is available (see points 1 and 2 above).

4. Flexible Working

Many participants expressed gratitude for both formal flexible working arrangements and flexibility to manage their workload, describing this as essential in managing the demands of caring. The ability to work from home or adjust working hours allowed carers to remain productive while responding to urgent responsibilities.

However, others felt that flexibility was applied unevenly between departments, or worried that their arrangements might not be maintained in the future.

- *I think it would be helpful that in times of need that WFH is made more flexible. It's a shame that WFH is not consistent throughout the University especially in depts./roles where WFH is feasible. Some depts. are better at this than others.*

- *I can work from home if needed and can be flexible with my hours. I truly appreciate the benefits this provides.*

- *Timetabling has, over my time at the University, become extremely inflexible, hard to access, and less willing to accommodate special arrangements.*

- *I was never asked about my specific caring responsibilities, which gave the University the opportunity to misunderstand my request and refuse to help.*

- *A major reason for coming back to work at the Uni was the flexibility to try and achieve a work/life balance, which is really appreciated.*

- *While I understand why there are time limits on using carers leave (i.e., needing to book in advance), most of the care I need to give to my dependent is reactive, not proactive. Yes, Emergency leave is available, but whether this is paid or not is up to managers, rather than specified as being paid.*

5. Emotional Demands and the Hidden Cost of Caring

The emotional weight of unpaid caring was a strong theme in the responses. Several participants shared powerful reflections on how their caring roles had impacted their mental and physical health.

This aspect of the data often highlighted an underlying feeling of being unseen or unsupported, especially when carers did not feel able to speak openly about their home lives at work.

- *It's difficult to know where the line is between your personal and professional life and when to raise/not raise things with your line manager.*

- *…as a manager there appears to be an expectation, from the colleagues I manage, that I am somehow indestructible.*

- *My line manager was really supportive when problems first arose... but they never end and it doesn't get easier.*

6. Impact on Career Progression and Workplace Identity

Several respondents expressed concern that being a carer had affected their career trajectory. They described having to scale back ambitions or decline opportunities, while watching colleagues advance. These challenges sometimes led to feelings of frustration.

- *It has affected my ability to give more at work and develop my career over my time here,*

- *If I have to reconsider my current flexible working arrangement, I would very seriously be at risk of having to resign - which I definitely don't want to do, as I love Reading and I love working here.*

- *….it feels like I am seen as not been able to do the job well and not given many opportunities to do the more interesting work anymore as I have to prioritise the central repetitive every day work.*

7. Suggestions for Improvement

Respondents offered a number of practical suggestions to improve support for carers. These were related to the points above and included:

- Clearer communication of policies and eligibility
- Carer-specific training for managers
- Creating an internal carers network
- Informal meet-ups for carers at the university

Several participants also emphasised the importance of being able to speak openly about caring responsibilities without fear of stigma or professional consequences.

Key recommendations

- Communicate via the Staff Portal and other channels the rebranding of the Parent & Family Network to **UoR Parents & Carers Together** so that more carers can be encouraged to join the network and benefit from being part of this university-wide community.

- Consider inviting more carers to join the **UoR Parents & Carers Together Steering Group** to help ensure a range of voices and experiences of caring are represented.

- Review **guidance for line managers** around supporting carers and Carer's Leave with the possible exploration of online booking for Carer's Leave

- Use Carer's Week 2025 (9-15 June) as an opportunity to share again via Staff Comms channels **information about Carer's Leave**.

- Consider **inviting external speakers** (e.g. from Carers UK Lunch & Learn Sessions) to facilitate sessions around topics such as different forms of caring, supporting line managers.

- Arrange **informal meet- ups for carers** using a similar model to the successful Women's Health Cafes (Women@Reading).

- Explore whether the University could benefit from engagement with [Employers for Carers](#) and the [Carer Confident Benchmarking Scheme](#).

Sarah Mattin, June 2025