

Employing Personal Assistants during the Covid-19 pandemic: Lessons for social care practice

Kritika Samsi, Monica Leverton, John Woolham, Jill Manthorpe
King's College London

Acknowledgements & Disclaimer

We thank all participants and our Study Advisory Group for valuable steer and advice. The study is funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) School for Social Care Research. The views expressed here are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

Overall study aim

To understand the impact of Covid-19 on those who were receiving care and support from Personal Assistants (directly employed or self-employed care workers) prior to the pandemic, and the employers' experiences during the initial months of lockdown (or shielding) restrictions and after.

Study overview

- ❖ 17 month study, from November 2020 to March 2022
- ❖ Qualitative interviews with:
 - 1) 15 staff working in disability support organisations
 - 2) 70 Personal Assistant employers (people with care and support needs ($n=26$) and those supporting this employment ($n=44$ family members))

Staff interviews

Aim: To understand the views and experiences of people working in organisations that support Personal Assistant employers and/or Personal Assistants of the implications of their work during the Covid-19 pandemic.

15 participants



recruited from

11 organisations



Staff interviews - themes

- 1. PA employers were 'forgotten'**
- 2. Navigating payment arrangements**
- 3. Sense-making and filtering misinformation**
- 4. Adapting to new tasks and ways of working**

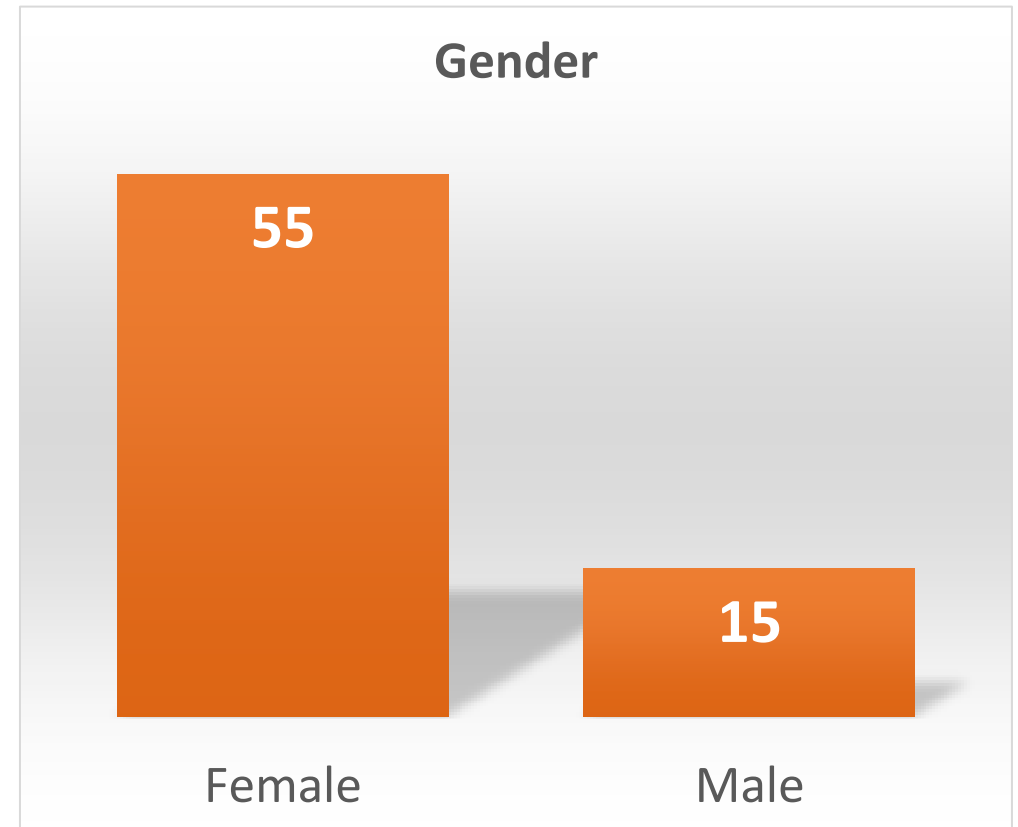
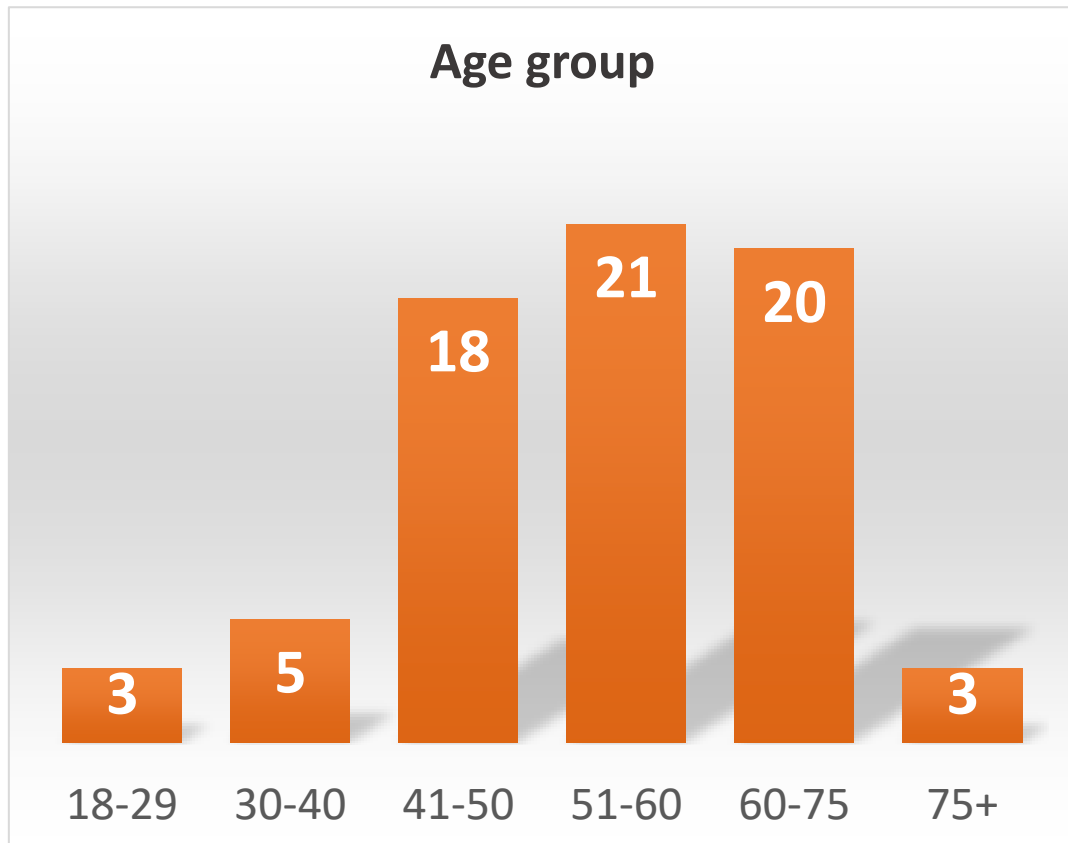
PA employer interviews

Aim: To understand the impact of Covid-19 on PA employers.

- To understand existing and changed attitudes around health and safety
- To identify sources of information and support accessed by PA employers in relation to Covid-19 – eg payments, furloughing, reviews
- Unmet needs, gaps in support – how could this have been improved during and following Covid-19?

Participant demographics – employers

70 participants



Participant demographics – employers

70 participants

Ethnicity	n=70
White - English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish	53
White - Any other white background	3
Black - African	8
Black - Other Black background	2
Mixed - White and Black African	1
Asian/ Asian British - Indian	1
Asian/ Asian British - Any other Asian background	1

1 'prefer not to say'

3 overarching themes

- 1. Risk and disability** – how decisions were made, keeping safe, sources of support and advice
- 2. Impact of Covid on employment status, contractual arrangements for PAs**
- 3. Gaps in support, needs, what helped, what is needed in future**

Topic 1: Risk and disability

- Fear of virus as risk factors high
- Safety measures to minimise Covid risk
- For some, care needs outweighed risk of Covid
- Impact on relationship between employer and PA

“It was really tricky situation because I had to isolate for 10 days but obviously I can't really isolate when I need people. I felt really bad about potentially putting my other PA at risk and my mum and anyone that would help me. I needed people to come in and help me.”

Topic 2: Impact of Covid on employment status, contractual arrangements for PAs

- Difficult decisions
- Do 'the right thing' but limited by Direct Payment system
- Employer status amplified during pandemic

“Because you're an employer as well and you've got no experience being an employer really, so you've got all that to cope with as well as the vulnerability and your own disability to cope with as well.”

Topic 3: Gaps in support, needs, what helped, what is needed in future

- Government guidance (e.g. initial lack of awareness of PA workforce/employers)
- Local authority support (e.g. no support/ support came too late)
- Community support (e.g. kindness of neighbours, neighbourhood social media networks)
- Going forward (e.g. contingency planning)

“There was regular emails [from LA]. But at some point, I think, four or six months into the pandemic last year, I got a call from a team to see if I was alright, and because it was six months down the line, I was smiling when I took the call, thinking, ‘Well, I could have died’. It’s a little bit too late...if there is a follow-up call to find how you’re coping, that should be at the beginning, when you are still struggling to figure out what to do.”

Implications for practice

- It was clear that the pandemic amplified existing challenges facing people employing Personal Assistants
- Social care needs to be part of national contingency planning, and local contingency planning needs to address micro-care arrangements
- Disability support organisations may offer personal support but are not national in coverage – role opportunity?
- Review postponement may lead to feelings of abandonment by people with care and support needs including PA employers
- Agreeing DP support plans should include contingency planning, emergency contacts, so that contact is based on mutual trust and understandings

In the context of declining DP take up, our study offers some explanations or reasons why and also what needs to change



ANY COMMENTS, FEEDBACK, SUGGESTIONS – KRITIKA.1.SAMSI@KCL.AC.UK