



Reforming the Mental Health Act 1983: an opportunity for social work in mental health?

**Faculty of Wellbeing Education
and Language Studies (WELS)**

Call for doctoral projects starting in October 2026

Contents

Project description	3
School	3
Members	3
Aim	3
Methodology	4
Contribution	5
PhD/DHSC project	5

Project description

School

Health, Wellbeing and Social Care

Members

Name	Website	Email address
Dr xx (TBC)	https://www.open.ac.uk/people/xx	x.x@open.ac.uk
Prof Sarah Vicary	https://www.open.ac.uk/saom3	sarah.vicary@open.ac.uk

Aim

The aim of this project is to explore new ways of working in mental health roles from a social work perspective in the context of the reform of mental health legislation in England and Wales and any opportunity this might bring.

In addition, this project would enable the candidate to seek insight into the workings of a professional association, the British Association of Social Work (BASW).

Whilst the project is focussed on mental health, BASW affords an opportunity across the sector to engage with the broader context of social work related to social policy, practice and education. BASW will provide the necessary infrastructure for the candidate to become involved in all aspects of the organisation's activity. A work-based supervisor will be identified to ensure the learning and work experience complements the work with The Open University not least in the 4 nation outlook of each. There will also be opportunities to access the CPD programmes and events delivered by BASW depending on the candidates' areas of special interest.

Methodology

Based on the methodological approach Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, this research will seek In-depth qualitative approach into the lived experience of the phenomenon of experiencing the Approved Clinician/ Responsible Clinician (AC/RC) role as a social worker. To that end the project will use the following methods:

- literature search and review
- semi-structured Interviews of social workers' experience of undertaking the AC/RC role

The objectives will be:

- to explore the barriers and enablers for take up of new roles as defined by any suggested changes or continuation of already existing legislative drivers.

- to examine what perspective, if any, social work brings.
- to determine the extent to which any new mental health legislation in England and Wales (and wider UK context) echoes new ways of working, using AC/RC as a case example

Contribution

The project will add to the generation, dissemination and application of legal roles in Mental Health Social Work and will be at the forefront of explorations of regulatory practices that restrict human behaviour.

The PhD project will seek to make use of OU expertise in the provision of an Open Learn module, free learning materials that can be study at one's own pace and badged for Continuous Professional Development. An example includes Sarah' lead design and authorship of the Badged Open Course *Understanding mental capacity* [Search | OpenLearn - Open University](#) which raises awareness of and explains in an accessible manner devolved UK statutory guidance and wide-ranging legal roles.

PhD/DHSC project

The PhD/DHSC project would ...

- Afford an opportunity to undertake a doctoral study into the impact on and by social work concerning current mental health legislation and the proposed 2026 reform of it in England and Wales (and In the wider context of the United Kingdom)
- Use the example of the AC/RC as one new way of working in mental health to build on extant research of the experience of undertaking a

previously exclusive medical role. Previous research has explored the role of a previously exclusive social work role, the Approved Social Worker/the Approved Mental Health Professional

- Enable the candidate to experience the work of the Professional Association for Social Work, the British Association of Social Workers
- Enable the candidate to be involved in the production of Open Learn materials as one way of effective and accessible methods of dissemination



An acronym summarising the project

