



2. Why do supervision at all?



This section will help you think about the:

- key stakeholders for supervision in your own work setting
- organisation's influence and inter-professional working on supervision
- impact supervision has in the wider context of your organisation and beyond
- ways you might take account of others' roles.

The importance of supervision is identified in a number of inquiry reports² and in professional training and development. It contributes to safe and consistent standards of practice and forms part of an organisation's system of quality assurance. It provides support for individual workers, making sure they are not working in isolation but have access to advice and guidance from a manager or experienced colleague. This is significant for new or recently qualified employees but the opportunity to test out ideas, review decisions and reflect on practice is valuable for all staff, regardless of their role and level of experience. Research³ has shown effective supervision helps foster resilience and reduce the risk of burn out. It offers a space for dialogue and critical reflection, recognising social service staff are sometimes involved in situations which can be difficult and distressing. When strong emotions are raised in the worker as a result of practice it can be hard to keep a balanced perspective and exercise sound judgement. You can use supervision to make sure risks are carefully considered and best possible decisions reached.

'Supervision must enable and support workers to build effective professional relationships, develop good practice and exercise both professional judgement and discretion in decision making. For supervision to be effective it needs to combine a performance management approach with a dynamic, empowering and enabling supervisory relationship. Supervision should improve the quality of practice, support the development of integrated working and ensure continuing professional development'⁴

2.1 Influencing and understanding the context

Sometimes the importance of supervision is taken for granted in social care and social work settings. It is less common for people to take the time and opportunity to really examine why it is a worthwhile activity deserving priority in the workplace. This can have negative consequences as people may go through the motions and repeat habits learned from their own supervision experiences without fully engaging with the

²Laming, W.H. (2003) The Victoria Climbié Inquiry: report of an inquiry by Lord Laming, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-victoria-climbié-inquiry-report-of-an-inquiry-by-lord-laming>

Flynn, M and Citarella, V (2012) Winterbourne View Hospital: A Serious Case Review, South Gloucestershire Safeguarding Adults Board, South Gloucestershire Council

³Adamson, C, Beddoe, L, Davys, A (2014) Building Resilient Practitioners: Definitions and Practitioner Understandings, British Journal of Social Work, 44 (3), 522-541

⁴Skills for Care (2007) cited in BASW/CoSW (2011:3) Research on supervision in social work, with particular reference to supervision practice in multi disciplinary teams, BASW/CoSW England

process and what makes it meaningful. Supervisors, and supervisees, can become stuck in a particular way of working together that is not constructive and is hard to change. Or they may find they are able to establish a useful supervision relationship with one person but not another without really understanding why. One of the ways to think about the question of 'why supervise?' is to look at our assumptions about what difference it makes.

Exercise 2

In your experience, who or what is affected by the discussions you have, or the decisions made in supervision? Try to be quite specific about how these affect different people.

One of the ways you can think about people affected by your work is to use the idea of stakeholders. While this term originates in the world of business, social services commonly use it to refer to everyone who has a stake, or interest, in the work you are doing.

The literature⁵ on supervision identifies four key stakeholders:

- people using services
- staff
- the organisation
- partner organisations.

For most social care and social work staff it is clear supervisory conversations should have an impact on them as supervisees and the people they work with. Whether discussing annual leave plans or exploring shared understanding of a practice issue it is clear these conversations have an impact on you as a worker (for example, whether you get the break you asked for; or whether you have the knowledge and skills needed to work with a particular individual). It is also easy to recognise that both of these issues have an impact on the **person you are working with** (when will their practitioner be available? will that worker understand their needs?). For many supervisees it is also clear the **organisation** has a stake in these conversations (how many staff will be available to provide cover? is the agency meeting the required standards and employing competent staff?). In the context of increasing integration and inter-professional working, it is often the case that **partners from other agencies or sectors** are a fourth set of stakeholders (when and how do you best communicate with them? how does their perspective or contribution fit with your own?).

⁵Morrison, T (2005) Supervision in Social Care: Making a real difference for staff and service users, 3rd ed. Brighton, Pavilion Publishing

Kettle, M (2015) Achieving Effective Supervision, Insight 30. IRISS, www.iriss.org.uk

From the point of view of a **supervisor** the same is largely true, as they make decisions about annual leave or assessing the supervisee's understanding of a practice issue, they may be considering the impact of both things on all stakeholders.

What impact will it have on:

- the **person receiving support**?
- the **supervisee**?
- the **supervisor as a representative** of the immediate team and on the wider **organisation** or profession?
- any **other professionals/agencies** working with the people using services?

Not every decision or discussion needs assessing in this way and the different stakeholders do not have an equal stake in every issue. However, the concept of these four different perspectives can help you achieve a workable and effective balance across needs which are sometimes complex and competing. At the very least, you should remember the stakeholders who hold least power and whose views may be at risk of being overlooked during supervisory conversations. This is of particular importance given the limited research into the impact of supervision on outcomes for people who use services and carers⁶. It can be helpful to test decisions from their point of view by asking, for example:

- if the person I am working with was listening what would they say we have missed?
- how will our agreed action affect others working with this individual?
- how shall we let them know?

The concept of four stakeholders is a key aspect of the integrated model of supervision⁷. What is valuable in this approach is the recognition that the context in which it is set influences supervision between two people as well as it affecting a wider network of people.

Exercise 3

To what extent do you take account of the perspectives of all four types of stakeholders in your supervision process either as a supervisee or supervisor?

How can you best identify the impact of supervision on each of the different stakeholders?

⁶Carpenter, J; Webb, C; Bostock, L and Coomber, C (2012) Effective Supervision in Social Work and Social Care, Research Briefing 43, London, Social Care Institute for Excellence
Carpenter,J; Webb,C; Bostock,L; (2013) The surprisingly weak evidence base for supervision: findings from a syetematic review of research in child welfare practice(2000-2012), Children and Youth Services Review, 35(1), 1843-1853

⁷Morrison, T (2005) Supervision in Social Care: Making a real difference for staff and service users, 3rd ed. Brighton, Pavilion Publishing

There are other ways to consider how different interests are represented in supervision. The supervisor's experience is described by some writers as like a piggy in the middle role; trying to balance the organisation's requirements with the profession's requirements. Hughes and Pengelly⁸ contrast this with the experience of some medical practitioners who claim both case autonomy over casework (medical) decisions and practice autonomy in organising and prioritising their work independent of the managerial demands of the wider health agency. They suggest that 'organisational aspects of supervision have...often been peripheral' in these professions but it is interesting to reflect on whether this may have changed in recent times. Other writers, focusing on supervision in social work⁹, note that much of the early supervision literature emerged from therapeutic traditions where the influence of organisational context was less dominant.

⁸Hughes, L and Pengelly, P (1997) *Supervision in a Turbulent Environment*, London, Jessica Kingsley

⁹Brown, A and Bourne, I (1996) *The Social Work Supervisor*, Buckingham, Open University Press

