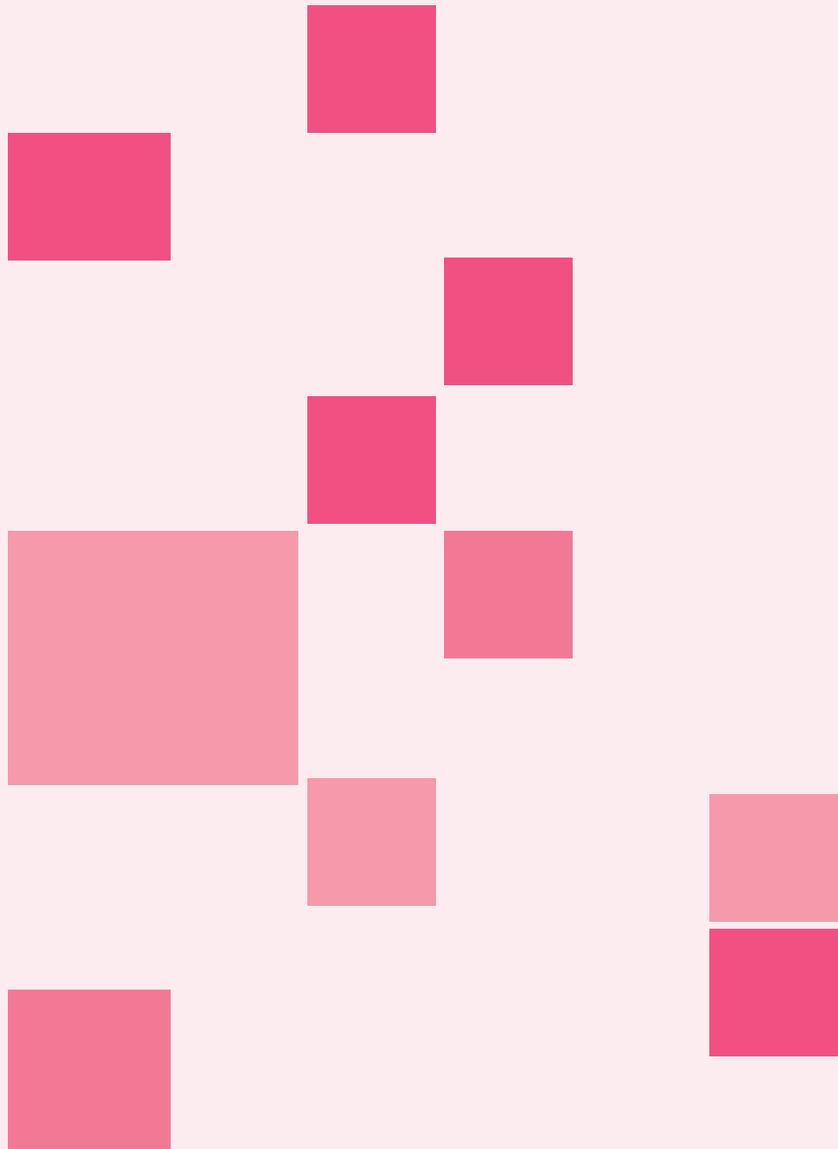




3. What is supervision?



By the end of this section the aim is that you will:

- be more knowledgeable about the different functions of supervision and your responsibilities as supervisee or supervisor
- have an awareness and understanding of some models of supervision and their relevance to your practice
- be able to critically analyse and evaluate the supervision policies in your workplace with reference to relevant models of supervision.

Section 2 on the context of supervision and its impact on the wider system may have felt abstract because it asked you to think broadly about the purpose of supervision. However, you will have seen there are contrasting ideas about supervision which have resulted in a variety of definitions and functions of supervision. Some of these may underpin the supervision policies in your own organisation. This section explores the variation in definitions and models in more concrete ways and provides guidance for further reading.

3.1. Definitions and functions of supervision

Definitions of supervision tell us something about what supervision aims to achieve or the function(s) it intends to fulfil.

Although there are various definitions of supervision there are commonalities between them. Some place more emphasis on the organisational purpose of supervision while others focus more on the individual. When analysing the different aspects of supervision, some authors identify three functions, while others see the process¹⁰ as having four (or more) functions. When reading this section, you will want to consider which definition has resonance in your practice context including how this has influenced your organisation's supervision policy.

IRISS Insight¹¹ on achieving effective supervision makes use of the Care Council for Wales' definition of the purpose of supervision for the organisation as:

'An accountable, two-way process, which supports, motivates and enables the development of good practice for individual social care workers. As a result, this improves the quality of service provided by the organisation.'

The SSSC [Step into Leadership](#) website has the following description of supervision, which emphasises the professional development of the supervisee in the context of the organisation's aims and accountability, particularly in relation to people who use services:

'Supervision is a process which aims to support, assure and develop the knowledge, skills and values of the person being supervised (supervisee),

¹⁰Throughout the learning resource supervision is referred to, and understood, as a process not an event.

¹¹Kettle, M (2015) Achieving Effective Supervision, Insight 30. IRISS, www.iriss.org.uk
Wonnacott, J (2012) Mastering Social Work Supervision, London, Jessica Kingsley

team or project group. It provides accountability for both the supervisor and supervisee in exploring practice and performance. It also enhances and provides evidence for annual performance review or appraisal; it sits alongside an organisation's performance management process with particular focus on developing people in a way that is centred on achieving better outcomes for people who use services and their carers.'

Tony Morrison,¹² whose writing on supervision has had a strong influence in social work and social care, explicitly recognises personal and professional functions alongside the organisational. He also positions the overall purpose of supervision towards achieving best outcomes for people who use services:

'A process by which one worker is given responsibility by the organisation to work with another worker(s) in order to meet certain organisational, professional and personal objectives which together promote the best outcomes for service users.'

This highlights the delegated (organisational) authority of the supervisor in relation to the supervisee. In contrast the definition given by Hawkins and Shohet¹³ only indirectly recognises the organisation as part of the 'wider systemic context' and instead emphasises the shared professional responsibilities of supervisee and supervisor:

'Supervision is a joint endeavour in which a practitioner with the help of a supervisor attends to their clients, themselves as part of their client practitioner relationships and the wider systemic context, and by doing so improves the quality of their work, transforms their client relationships, continuously develops themselves, their practice and the wider profession.'

A more recent definition¹⁴ highlights not only the separate functions of supervision but also recognises how these may be assigned to more than one supervisor. This is likely to become increasingly common in integrated services and when staff may be line managed by someone from a different professional background.

'Social work supervision is an interactive professional relationship and reflective process that focuses on the supervisee's practice, professional development and well-being, with the objectives of improving, developing, supporting and providing safety for the practitioner and their social work practice. It is distinct and different from counselling/therapy, direct practice and consultation. Supervision may occur through a traditional internal hierarchical arrangement or an external professional arrangement which focuses on all of the areas and objectives, or a mix of internal and external arrangements, which focus on particular areas and objectives.'

¹²Morrison, T (2005) *Supervision in Social Care: Making a real difference for staff and service users*, 3rd ed. Brighton, Pavilion Publishing

¹³ Hawkins, P and Shohet, R (2012) *Supervision in the Helping Professions*, 4th ed., Maidenhead, Open University Press

¹⁴ O'Donoghue, K (2015) Issues and challenges facing social work supervision in the twenty-first century, *China Journal of Social Work*, 8:2, 136-149

The assigned or designated supervisors may be a line manager, colleague or external consultant/contractor or a combination of these where there is a mixed arrangement.'

When considering how the overall purpose of supervision is broken down into different functions Inskipp and Proctor¹⁵ identify three.

- Normative – which they define as the shared responsibility of both supervisor and supervisee to monitor standards and practice in a way which is ethical and reflects the value base¹⁶ of the profession.
- Formative – which they see as the shared responsibility for the supervisee's development.
- Restorative – given the nature of the work supervision needs to provide a restorative space to explore the impact and for the practitioner to re-charge.

Morrison uses different language and adds a fourth element in the functions of supervision:

- competent, accountable performance/practice (this may be referred to as the managerial function)
- continuing professional development
- personal support
- engaging the individual with the organisation (mediation).

Morrison refers to this fourth aspect as the mediation function and highlights the way supervision includes the upward and downward flow of information in organisations. The table in Appendix 1 provides a more detailed description of some of the tasks Morrison identifies as contributing to each function.

Importantly, Morrison sees 'personal support' as a function in its own right as do Inskipp and Proctor when they refer to the 'restorative' function. In contrast, Hughes and Pengelly purposefully do not define support as a separate function. This is because they are concerned that supervisees' own needs could take precedence over the needs of people who use services. They choose instead to think of support as an element underpinning the three key functions of supervision which they identify as:

- managing service delivery
- facilitating practitioner's professional development
- focusing on practitioner's work.

¹⁵Inskipp and Proctor, cited in Davys, A and Beddoe, L (2010) Best Practice in Supervision: A guide for the helping professions, London, Jessica Kingsley.

¹⁶One place where professional values are outlined is in professional Codes of Practice. For workers in Scotland's social services this is the SSSC Codes of Practice for Social Service Workers and Employers (2016).

Hughes and Pengelly emphasise that there are effectively three participants in supervision. While people using services are not physically present in the room, it is vitally important both supervisor and supervisee actively consider their perspective. It can be helpful to hold the image of a triangle (representing supervisor, supervisee and people using services) as a means of making sure attention stays focused on outcomes for people who use services.

Exercise 4

Find the supervision policy in your organisation

Was it easy to access? Is it referred to regularly? Read it and identify the extent it explicitly draws on and integrates the functions of supervision you have just read about. Is it possible to identify the key theories or principles which have informed the policy?

Consider your own experiences of supervision in the organisation where you currently work

To what extent are the functions outlined in your organisation's policy put into practice? Is there a balance across different functions? If so, how is this achieved? If not, what aspects of supervision seem to take priority and why?

It can sometimes be helpful to look at another organisation's supervision policy to help think about what your organisation does well and what it might want to change. ENABLE Scotland has developed its supervision policy and practice and its head of learning and professional development reflects on the process below, with links to the template (Appendix 2) currently used to record supervision.

Supervision to support personalised services

ENABLE Scotland recently revised its approach to support and supervision to better support personalised services. We used a proactive and dynamic approach for this task. A group of staff met to try, learn, adapt and improve the existing approach and to troubleshoot issues. We used participative leadership, person centred approaches, a focus on the outcomes of the people we support, the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) quality framework and the SSSC competencies of the Continuous Learning Framework to underpin development of the system and processes. The staff used a quick turnaround and followed an iterative plan, do, check, act, approach. This enabled the paperwork to improve as it was trialled.

We chose to use open questions to encourage first line managers and personal assistants to focus on resilience and strength. For example, staff members are asked 'What are your successes? What are you pleased about?' They are also asked 'What will you focus on to help people using services move towards personal outcomes?' Workers are encouraged to seek feedback from others. This complements a 'no blame' improvement culture where staff members have coping strategies beyond the supervision sessions.

See the current form we use to record supervision in Appendix 2. This is merely a support to good conversation and open dialogue in supervision and will be reviewed again based on feedback from ENABLE Scotland staff on its usefulness.

Midlothian Council has also reviewed and amended its supervision policy to strengthen its focus on outcomes for people who use services. Its practice learning and development manager (health and social care) outlines the process taken on the next page.

Midlothian Council's review of their supervision policy

A small group of team leaders across adult and social care and children and families worked with the learning and development manager to review Midlothian Council's supervision policy. We considered a range of outcomes-based supervision policies. After consulting staff and several drafts, we wrote and adopted an outcomes-based supervision policy and guidance.

We recognised the risk at this point was a lack of implementation. Through the initiative of key team leaders and learning and development staff we took forward a number of actions.

- Development of an observed practice template to use for annual feedback with staff in relation to their practice.
- Small group to plan a training day on planning and implementing group supervision – this was identified as an important part of implementing a range of methods of supervision.
- Ongoing training in effective supervision skills – to provide support and practical tools/frameworks for developing supervision practice.
- Gathering feedback from team leaders about how they were shifting their approaches in supervision, for example starting with developmental areas, asking the staff member to prioritise eight most important areas of work for discussion to avoid an overly case management approach.
- Linking supervision policy to the appraisal process so both are outcomes instead of objectives based.

On reflection, the integration (of health and social care) agenda was not addressed alongside developing the supervision policy. The different understandings of supervision and reflection between health and social care provide a range of new steps in the journey of implementation and ultimately ensuring improved outcomes for people using services and carers.

The Changing Lives: 21st Century Review of Social Work report¹⁷ identified the need for practitioners to be both autonomous and accountable. Autonomous does not mean the practitioner is entirely independent but implies they are able to make decisions appropriate to their role and function. Accountability is about being able to explain how and why the practitioner made those decisions. The authority you have (delegated by your organisation and because of your professional and personal

¹⁷Scottish Executive (2006) Changing Lives: Report of the 21st Century Social Work Review, Edinburgh: Scottish Executive

experience) and the authority of your supervisor/supervisee will be relevant when considering the appropriate balance between autonomy and accountability. Reflecting on the definitions and functions of supervision should start to trigger thoughts for you about the authority you assume exists in your supervisory relationships. While all definitions highlight the managerial responsibilities held by supervisors, these responsibilities do not absolve the supervisee of practice (and professional) responsibilities or of all authority to make decisions in work situations. There will be some areas of authority which are negotiated between supervisee and supervisor and others which are assigned to one or other because of their role and responsibilities or their professional background and/or experience.

Exercise 5

Several models of supervision emphasise the shared responsibility that supervisor and supervisee have for making sure supervision is effective. In the example given by ENABLE Scotland this extended to joint responsibility for the design of the supervision process itself. Can you describe the ways you feel responsibility is shared in your own supervision and reflect on ways this could be enhanced?

3.2 Balancing the functions of supervision

You have now considered the different functions of supervision. Using Morrison's framework these include the management, support, development and mediation functions. In Scotland, Changing Lives¹⁸ noted a concern that supervision had become too weighted towards the managerial function. Many writers have identified how the management function may dominate¹⁹ with the result that supervision focuses too much on performance monitoring and caseload management. There is a risk of this happening when all four functions are included in a single supervisory relationship as is common in social work teams.

There are many reasons for this imbalance to occur. Where the **management** function dominates it may be because:

- there is significant pressure to report on work to funders, senior management and inspectors
- there is an aversion to risk and a presumption that one way of managing this is to make sure that comprehensive information is collected and scrutinised

¹⁸Scottish Executive (2006) Changing Lives: Report of the 21st Century Social Work Review, Edinburgh: Scottish Executive

¹⁹ Noble, C and Irwin, J (2009) Social Work Supervision: An Exploration of the Current Challenges in a Rapidly Changing Social, Economic and Political Environment, *Journal of Social Work*, 9(3), pp. 345–358

Gordon, R. and Hendry, E. (2010) Supervising Assessments of Children and Families: The role of the front-Line managers, in J. Horwath (ed.) *The Child's World: The Comprehensive Resource to Assessing Children in Need*, 2nd ed. London, Jessica Kingsley

O'Donoghue, K (2015) Issues and challenges facing social work supervision in the twenty-first century, *China Journal of Social Work*, 8(2), 136-149

- there is a lack of trust between the participants in supervision
- the culture of the organisation is defensive
- the supervisor is uncomfortable with her/his authority and over compensates by being excessively demanding
- the supervisor is less comfortable in the support role and/or lacks the skills to promote development or reflection.

In other situations the **supportive** function may dominate. This might be because:

- the supervisor is aware of the pressure her/his staff are under and tries to compensate by being protective
- the supervisor is uncomfortable with her/his authority and overcompensates by being excessively nurturing
- the boundary between personal and professional issues is unclear and the supervisor gets pulled into a counselling/therapeutic role²⁰
- the supervisee is not fully confident in their professional role and can be overly dependent on the supervisor
- the organisation has a tough 'macho' culture and supervision is a compensatory space.

The value of a four function model in a single supervisory relationship is that both parties (supervisor and supervisee) have to manage the balance between functions. In a consistent supervisory relationship you can often work through the tensions even if there is no perfect solution. One of the best remedies for an imbalance in the functions is to consciously reintroduce those elements that have gone missing. A supervisor may pose a learning question to shift the conversation into development or introduce a team or organisational perspective (**mediation**) to shift the focus from more personal discussion.

In some organisations, one approach is to separate the functions of supervision and give these to different people. Bradley and Hojer²¹ explore contrasting practice in the UK and Sweden where there is often a divide between line management and consultation. If you are working in a context where the functions of supervision are split, you will want to consider the benefits of this for you, for people who use services and carers and for the organisation. For example it can help to make sure the space for reflection is not lost. A shared supervisory arrangement can create its own challenges. Where there are two people sharing responsibility for the four functions the split may be between an operations manager, who attends to work flow issues, performance monitoring and organisational requirements and a practice or clinical supervisor whose focus is on the practitioner's development and support, sometimes in the context of a particular profession. This may help to make sure professional development and/or support needs are addressed. However if the roles

²⁰Cousins, C (2010) 'Treat Me Don't Beat Me' Exploring Supervisory Games and Their Effect

²¹Bradley, G and Hojer, F 2009 Supervision reviewed: reflections on two different social work models in England and Sweden, *European Journal of Social Work*, 12 (1), 71-85

and responsibilities are not clearly defined and understood by all parties involved the practitioner can:

- receive conflicting messages
- fall between two possible sources of support because of assumptions the other person is providing something they are not
- exploit differences between supervisors to avoid tasks or responsibilities.

If you supervise (or are supervised) in a work setting where the functions are allocated to different people, it will be useful to think about how to minimise or avoid some of the potential difficulties including fragmentation, duplication and omission. At a minimum, we recommend you have occasional three-way meetings to discuss arrangements and explore the kinds of challenges that may arise as well as making the most of the benefits.

There is an increasing focus on integration in social services and it is not unusual for someone from a different professional background to supervise staff. In these instances, the different functions may be distributed across two or more members of staff. If this is part of your experience, as a supervisor or supervisee, or you are thinking about the possible benefits this may bring, there is a short film (Supervision in an integrated setting) on the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) website which shows how practice in an integrated setting can be enhanced by 'complementing line management supervision with clinical and professional supervision'.

Exercise 6

What do you think would be the best possible arrangements for supervision in your organisation? What would the challenges be and how could they be addressed?

3.3 Outcome focused supervision

There has been an increased emphasis on improving outcomes for people who use services and for carers in recent years. In part, this has been in response to evidence that, despite extensive input from social care and social work services, there was limited impact on some people's day to day, lived experience²². This emphasis is also informed by shifts in the balance of power between professionals and people using services so individuals have a greater role in designing and commissioning their own support. Reflecting this focus on outcomes for people who use services and carers, there has been a similar shift in supervision with the development of policies which encourage supervisees/supervisors to use an outcome focused approach in supervision sessions.

²²Scottish Executive (2002) "It's everyone's job to make sure I'm alright", Edinburgh, Scottish Executive

In the context of working with young people, Bucknell²³ developed a cyclical model for outcome focused supervision. Working together, the supervisor and supervisee firstly focus on the future – what are the desired outcomes they are working towards? Next they identify specific goals and realistic timescales for achieving these. As a foundation for moving forward, they consider existing strengths and how these can develop further. Progress is sustained by continually looking at the next steps and using the supervisory space to rehearse or prepare for new kinds of engagement with the young person. In this model, the supervisor is committed to giving regular, constructive feedback and the process includes ongoing review so that progress is evaluated and goals revisited as appropriate.

Bucknell highlights the way this approach:

'parallels the supportive and shared process the supervisee is building with the young person'.

Although Bucknell developed this cyclical approach for direct work with young people, it can be applied across other areas of practice. The model might help you think about the different aspects of outcome focused supervision and to focus more clearly on outcomes for people who use services as well as for yourself as a practitioner.

Exercise 7

Use the following prompts based on Bucknell's model to think about a relatively routine problem or issue (for you or for someone you work with) and how a clear focus on outcomes might help. You may want to use this exercise as a basis for discussion in supervision.

- What do you want to achieve or to change in the situation?
- What existing strengths or capabilities might help you?
- What might be the first step? This could include shadowing a work colleague, reading an article or listening to a podcast.
- How might you test out your ideas? This could include rehearsing something with a peer or your supervisor or taking on a new piece of work.
- What is the most effective way for you to receive feedback?
- How will you use feedback to help you achieve your goal?

²³Bucknell, D. Outcome Focused Supervision in H.L. Reid, and J. Westergaard, (2006) Providing Support and Supervision: An introduction for professionals working with young people, Oxon, Routledge 5