



SSSC

7. Group supervision



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

- have a critical understanding of the benefits and limitations of group supervision
- have reflected on how you might use group supervision to complement one-to-one supervision.

There is increasing interest in group supervision and what it can offer. This section explores some aspects of group supervision and considers the benefits of this approach as well as some of the challenges involved in taking part in, or facilitating, group supervision.

Kadushin and Harkness³² defined group supervision as:

'the use of a group setting to implement the responsibilities (or functions) of supervision'.

They specifically noted how it differs from other organisational activities which might involve groups but are not set up to meet the functions of supervision for example a team meeting is not a form of group supervision. A number of authors including Brown and Bourne³³ highlight that group supervision may not address all the functions of supervision but may be used 'to implement part or all of the responsibilities of supervision'. One of the implications of this is that group supervision is most often used to complement one-to-one supervision and is rarely sufficient on its own to meet the supervisory needs of individual workers.

The literature on supervision has identified positive features associated with group supervision.

- Group supervision allows practitioners to share their experiences with others in similar circumstances, which aims to increase opportunities for learning, new ideas and emotional support.
- Group supervision can be a powerful means of reducing isolation, which is particularly relevant for staff working shifts or work from home or on their own. It can support the development of group cohesion and shared values.
- The group may allow different views and opinions to be voiced. This kind of diversity, including ideas which may challenge those of the supervisor may be more difficult to achieve in one-to-one supervision, so there may be more distribution of power in group supervision.
- Being involved in group supervision may help participants develop skills which are transferable to other practice situations, many of these involve working in teams and groups.

³²Kadushin, A and Harkness, D (2002) *Supervision in Social Work*. 4th ed., New York,

³³Brown, A and Bourne, I. (1996) *The Social Work Supervisor*, Buckingham, Open University

- Group supervision may be seen as an efficient use of time and resources. Issues which are relevant to a number of staff (for example, concerning policies and procedures) can be communicated and discussed in the group rather than on a one-to-one basis.

However you need to consider the benefits alongside some potential challenges.

- In group supervision it is difficult to meet the specific needs of individual participants and there is a risk discussions remain generalised and do not meet anyone's needs in a satisfactory way.
- In individual supervision there is a clear focus on the supervisee, while in a group setting some people may hide or have their needs overlooked.
- In group supervision the facilitator needs to be confident in managing and responding to different group dynamics in a constructive way. In many respects this is a more demanding role than one-to-one supervision.
- In any group there is the risk people who are more confident or outspoken dominate and the voices of quieter or less experienced individuals are not heard. Although the power of the supervisor may be more limited than in one-to-one supervision other power dynamics may have an unhelpful impact.
- There are occasions where the interaction in a group can distract from the task in an unhelpful way or does not feel safe for some/all of the group participants.
- In group supervision the focus can shift from the people who use services to the needs of group members. Although this can also happen in one-to-one supervision it requires particular attention in the complex dynamics of a group, particularly if there is a sense that practice issues are being mirrored or 'played out' in the interactions between participants.
- A group which is too cohesive and harmonious may make it difficult for individual members to express different views or challenge the group norms. This can lead to the kind of conformity which limits new ideas, constructive debate and sound decision making.

The practice example below from Clackmannanshire and Stirling Council shows how it has introduced group supervision as part of its outcomes focused approach to supervision.

Clackmannanshire and Stirling Council: group supervision

Clackmannanshire and Stirling Council has implemented an outcomes focused approach to supervision and practice development planning. In the practice guidance for the policy and practice standards, we identify and validate a range of supervision models used across social services. This has provided both a framework and a clearer focus for group supervision. Previously, group supervision had a more ad hoc structure in a range of formats. Staff said these would often take the form of business meetings or sessions which focused on staff dissatisfaction and which could sometimes feel negative and unconstructive. The new recording tool for group supervision has been sufficiently flexible for managers in adult and children's services to adapt it to meet staff needs in residential and community services. The tool includes prompts to support supervisors to facilitate more reflective discussions with a focus on improving outcomes for people using services and carers. We have evaluated completed records and feedback gathered from supervisors. They found the recording tool provided a framework for discussion which allows staff to share knowledge and best practice and leads to future focused plans for ongoing work with people using services. We have used these completed records to support other supervisors' learning and development. The recording tool is in Appendix 5.

The policy recognises that staff will require one-to-one sessions at times to experience more individualised advice and support, attend to personal practice development planning and deal with sensitive issues of staff welfare or competence. The practice standards set out expectations for individual sessions to complement group supervision where that is the dominant model.

Clackmannanshire and Stirling Council's Group Supervision Record

Appendix 5 highlights the need for clear recording systems. It is equally important in group supervision as in one-to-one supervision to agree clear structures and have a clear purpose. This includes negotiating and making clear the following factors in a group supervision contract or agreement.

- 1) All participants are clear about the purpose, focus and tasks of the group.
- 2) The authority and decision making power of the group (including how this might impact on individual supervision) is clear.
- 3) Agree the boundaries of the group including how long it will meet and whether it is open or closed.

³⁴Proctor, B (2008) Group Supervision: a guide to creative practice, London, Sage

- 4) The role and authority of the facilitator (including who performs this role) and the expectations of the group for example, attendance, timekeeping.
- 5) How to record sessions and how confidentiality is understood in the group.
- 6) What methods are used for example, discussion, role play, action learning sets.

More detailed guidance on appropriate contracting is in Brigid Proctor's³⁴ book on group supervision.

Appendix 4 offers practical guidance on preparing for group supervision, making clear this is different from one-to-one supervision and that participants may find it helpful to reflect on their previous experiences of being involved in groups so they can make best use of supervision in a group context.

Exercise 10

What do you think the particular strengths and challenges of group supervision are:

- for you as a worker
- for the people who use your service
- for your supervisor
- for your team or organisation?