



# Wellbeing supervision

## Introduction

Supervision is part of any intervention with people who use services (Morrison and Wonnacott, 2010). It takes up time and resources and, in a busy social care context, it is essential that supervision is a priority for managers aiming to support practitioners in the delivery of better social care for adults.

This Supervisors' Briefing provides a short, accessible summary of the evidence about how to embed quality and effective supervision in social care organisations. It is aimed at supervisors in social care and integrated environments where social care staff work. It is also useful for leaders in social care and integrated environments.

*The general duty of a local authority, in exercising a function under this Part in the case of an individual, is to promote that individual's wellbeing.*

(Care Act 2014, Part 1, Care and Support)

*The principle of promoting wellbeing should be embedded through the local authority care and support system.*

(Care and Support Statutory Guidance 1.11)

In line with this, this briefing argues that the ultimate purpose of supervision in adult social care is to promote the wellbeing of adults and carers, and that this is achieved through keeping them at the centre of supervision - adopting a strengths-based approach to supervision; supporting supervisees' wellbeing and promoting wellbeing throughout the organisation.

The briefing aims to enable supervisors to:

- > refocus on the purpose of supervision as promoting wellbeing
- > develop and embed good quality supervision using an established model as the basis
- > embed strengths-based working through supervision to support wellbeing
- > provide support for practical issues that impact on supervision
- > evaluate the quality and impact of supervision.

This Supervisors' Briefing complements Research in Practice for Adults' other supervision resources which are available at:

[www.ripfa.org.uk/resources/supervision](http://www.ripfa.org.uk/resources/supervision)

## Background

### The purpose of supervision

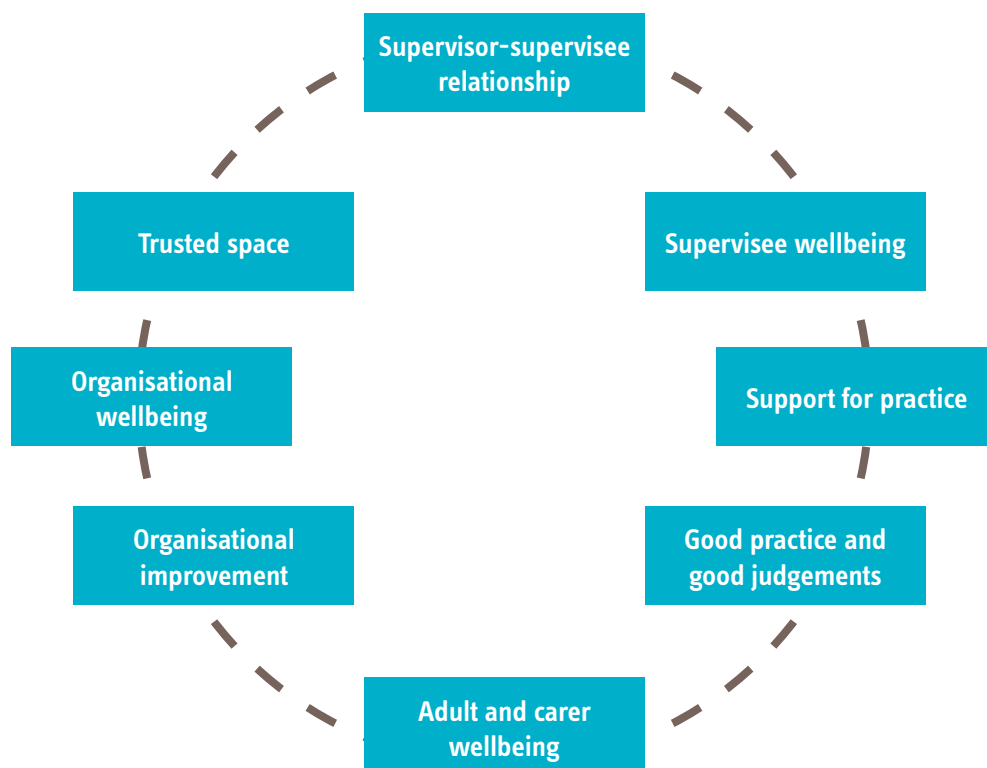
A widely accepted definition of supervision in social work theory and practice is:

*A process by which one worker is given responsibility by the organisation to work with another in order to meet certain organisational professional and personal objectives which together promote the best outcomes for service users.*  
(Morrison, 2005)

The Knowledge and Skills Statement for Practice Supervisors (DHSC, 2018) says that:

*Professional supervision in social work is a regular and ongoing process involving a practice supervisor who has responsibility for overseeing the social worker's professional practice.*

Research in Practice for Adults (RiPfa) undertook a Change Project on supervision in 2017-18. RiPfa worked with supervisors and supervisees, involved adults and carers, and reviewed the research on supervision. Through this Project, the following diagram was developed to show the purpose of supervision.



The process of supervision and the practice of social care are parallel processes. They are both about enabling and supporting people to work through complex issues to promote wellbeing (Simmonds, 2017).

Supervision is part of social care and, therefore, contributes to our overall aim to promote the wellbeing of adults and carers. The supervisee needs to be supported in their own wellbeing so that they can consider how best to support others. Supervision happens within, and interacts with, an organisational context. A good organisational context helps with good supervision.

In *wellbeing supervision*, practitioners are supported in their own wellbeing and are able to undertake better practice. This leads to improved experiences and outcomes for adults and carers, which also promotes their wellbeing. Attention to wellbeing in the organisation enables supervision to positively influence the context, as the supervisee and supervisor navigate how that context impacts on themselves, adults and carers.

### Evidence about supervision

The evidence about supervision is incomplete. In particular we have limited information about how supervision works well, the impact of supervision on practice and how best to involve adults and carers (Webb et al, 2016).

The following evidence does, however, point to some of the benefits of supervision:

- > For adults and carers – there is some limited evidence that supervision can promote service user empowerment and participation, reduce complaints and increase positive feedback. Supervisees state that reflective supervision helps facilitate effective direct practice, and helps support safe and proportionate decision-making.
- > For supervisees – job satisfaction, perception of practice improvement, wellbeing at work, empowerment.
- > For organisations – improved job performance, commitment, retention.

(Earle et al, 2017)

Supervision promotes the wellbeing of adults and carers by providing a space for reflection and learning (Kettle, 2015), encouraging critical thinking and the use of evidence (Hawkins and Shohet, 2000) and helping identify outcomes to support adults and carers (Johnstone and Miller, 2010).

Supervisees prefer supervision that is linked to help with practice, education and support, rather than to administrative priorities (O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2013). Supervision helps supervisees to be fit for engaging in decision-making by attending to their wellbeing, learning and role.

Supervision provides a safe and trusted space to reflect on the emotional impact of the work (Hawkins and Shohet, 2000). It is strengths-based in providing a safe environment for individuals to explore what is happening for them and how to thrive in their role. A good relationship built on trust underpins this. The relationship enables the supervisor to give constructive feedback and address the impact of work in order to support effective practice, identify gaps in learning and development, and consider self-care and additional support (Pack, 2015).

Good supervision helps to improve morale, job satisfaction, organisational commitment and retention (Kavanagh et al, 2003; Mena and Bailey, 2007; Kettle, 2015). In particular, supervision supports an organisation-wide approach to reducing the adverse impact of work pressure on staff (HSE, 2017).

Good supervision is supported by an organisational culture of learning from practice, commitment to professional development, support for professional judgement, emotional support and evaluation (Kettle, 2015).

Organisational sanctioning (by leaders) of social work supervision and allocation of resources influence the type, frequency and availability of supervision (Kadushin et al, 2009). Organisations need to bridge the gap between their supervision policy and supervision practice. The policy should reflect practice realities and support the kind of practice needed. Supervisions should be grounded in the policy (Daly and Muirhead, 2015).

Supervision is not consistently provided in terms of frequency or quality (Skills for Care, 2015). Morrison and Wonnacott (2010) highlight that too often we have supervision rather than good supervision. Supervision can be too narrowly focused on case management rather than on practice improvement through reflection, support and development (Manthorpe et al, 2015).

**Enablers to successful supervision include:**

- > permission
- > resource
- > skills
- > understanding of what good looks like
- > trust and safety
- > a clear policy.

**Barriers to successful supervision include:**

- > time and workload pressures
- > a focus on performance management
- > lack of ongoing training and information for supervisors and supervisees
- > limited space and time for reflection.

Using a model can support the delivery of quality supervision (Morrison and Wonnacott, 2010). Supervision is valued when it includes task assistance and guidance, social and emotional support, a positive relationship, and effective feedback to work well and have job satisfaction (Carpenter et al, 2013).

## Standards

Organisations should attend to the *National standards for employers of social workers* (LGA, undated). These are relevant to all staff, not just social workers, and include standards for supervision.

### **Standard 5 - Effective and appropriate supervision:**

Employers should ensure social workers have regular and appropriate social work supervision.

Supervision should challenge students and qualified practitioners to critically reflect on their practice and should foster an inquisitive approach.

#### **Frequency of supervision - all employers should:**

- > Ensure supervision takes place regularly and consistently, and lasts at least an hour and a half of uninterrupted time.
- > Make sure that supervision takes place:
  - For students on placement, as agreed with student and HEI.
  - For newly qualified workers, at least weekly for the first six weeks of employment of a newly qualified social worker, at least fortnightly for the duration of the first six months and a minimum of monthly supervision thereafter.
  - For workers who have demonstrated capability in their role, in line with identified needs and at least monthly.
- > Monitor actual frequency and quality of supervision against clear statements about what is expected.

#### **Quality of supervision - all employers should:**

- > Ensure supervision is not treated as an isolated activity by incorporating it into the organisation's accountability framework.
- > Promote continuous learning and knowledge-sharing through which workers are encouraged to draw out learning points by reflecting on their own practice in the light of experiences of peers.
- > Ensure the appropriate capabilities, at an appropriate level, are used as the basis for evaluating work and identifying development needs.
- > Ensure supervision supports students and qualified social workers to meet registration standards.
- > Encourage workers to plan, reflect on and record learning activity, using recording tools such as an e-portfolio.
- > Provide regular supervision training for supervisors.
- > Assign explicit responsibility for the oversight of appropriate supervision and for issues that arise through supervision.
- > Provide additional professional supervision by a registered social worker for practitioners whose line manager is not a social worker.

Practitioners may be registered and therefore need to adhere to registration standards, which include supervision. Skills for Care provide guidance to managers in social care provider settings about how to provide *Effective supervision in adult social care*.

The social work *Practice Supervisors Knowledge and Skills Statement* (DHSC, 2018), the Royal College of Occupational Therapists' supervision guidance (RCOT, 2015) and the Professional Capabilities Framework are useful for any supervisor (BASW, 2018).

Where social care staff are working in integrated environments supervision should attend to their social care role and expertise (Carpenter et al, 2013).

## Role of leaders

Promoting wellbeing is the core purpose of social care set out in the *Care Act 2014*. Leaders can support this purpose by enabling and encouraging:

- > Supervisors to focus on adults' and carers' wellbeing. This should be emphasised in the supervision policy.
- > Supervisors to model the strengths approach in their work with supervisees.
- > Supervisors to attend to supervisees' wellbeing. This requires a safe space, sufficient time, and support for both parties to develop a trusting relationship.
- > Supervisors and supervisees to identify how the organisation can better promote wellbeing and can influence the organisational culture to improve this. This is a shared responsibility. The organisation's leaders must set the culture by example.

## Strengths-based supervision

Supervision provides the ideal opportunity to model a strengths-based approach in order to parallel practice requirements and processes (Haynes, 2019). It is argued that strengths-based supervision can be transformational in this respect (Engelbrecht, 2010). Deficit or problem-oriented supervision might undermine a strengths approach in practice (Cohen, 1999).

In contrast, strengths-based supervision seeks to discover and build on the supervisee's strengths and capabilities. It identifies and amplifies success. As with strengths-based practice, difficulties and areas for development are not ignored but, rather, the supervisor works *with* the supervisee to co-construct solutions. Techniques drawn from strengths-oriented methods - such as solution-focused therapy, narrative work and motivational interviewing - can be employed.

Featured in the DHSC's new *Strengths-based approach Practice Handbook* are key steps an organisation should take to implement strengths-based practice at a local level, including:

***Focus on developing the strengths of the workforce rather than focusing on what's wrong:***

- > *Develop organisational expectations whereby interactions and supervision between managers and staff, as well as between colleagues, are based on strengths, successes, what can be learned from experiences and what can be done differently in the future, thereby implementing a strengths-based approach with staff as well as people with care and support needs.*
- > *Embed a strengths-based approach in supervision.*

(Colomina and Pereira, 2019)

**When developing strengths-based supervision, it is important for supervisors to consider the following:**

- > How do I notice and celebrate success with my supervisees?
- > How do I talk about service users in supervision? What am I modelling about expectations of success and change?
- > Does our supervision model match the way we approach our professional practice?
- > How often do we highlight what is working well and the times of exceptions to problems?
- > What different kinds of power do I utilise in this relationship and what is the impact of this? How important is it for me to be an expert? How do I invite feedback from supervisees and respond to it?
- > How do we talk about challenging issues?
- > How do I reflect on my own supervision process? What goals do I set for myself?

(Davys and Beddoe, 2010)

Colomina and Pereira (2019) offer similar considerations as well as a set of useful 'Questions in supervision to aid reflection'. See also Research in Practice for Adults' publications on strengths-based working:

[www.ripfa.org.uk/resources/publications/frontline-resources/embedding-strengthsbased-practice-frontline-briefing-2019](http://www.ripfa.org.uk/resources/publications/frontline-resources/embedding-strengthsbased-practice-frontline-briefing-2019)

[www.ripfa.org.uk/resources/publications/strategic-briefings/developing-strengthsbased-working-strategic-briefing-2019](http://www.ripfa.org.uk/resources/publications/strategic-briefings/developing-strengthsbased-working-strategic-briefing-2019)





At the centre are four stakeholders that need to be considered in supervision. There are four functions that supervision needs to engage with around the edge of the model. The reflective cycle - experience, reflection, analysis, and plan and act - underpins the four functions of supervision. These elements are integrated and support one another (Wonnacott, 2016).

Critical reflection requires practitioners to consider the impact of their own identity, power and beliefs, and how this affects their actions (Reynolds 1998). It is deeper than ordinary reflection - it seeks out knowledge and evidence, and embraces scepticism and challenge. It enables us to not only understand our thinking but also to question it.

It is important that conversations about getting the work done don't overwhelm conversations about how to do the work well (Egan et al, 2016). Supervision that is focused on supporting practice can lead to better practice and also help to avoid poor practice (Wilkins, 2017).

Supervisors can consider how supervision policy and practice in their organisation reflects the elements of the model. The RiPfa resources on mediation provide further information about this, including a self-audit tool:

[www.ripfa.org.uk/resources/supervision/tools/mediation](http://www.ripfa.org.uk/resources/supervision/tools/mediation)

### Adult and carer involvement

There is some research that suggests involving people who use services in discussion about practice is valuable for both parties (Rush, 2011; Cooke and Hayward, 2010). People who use services are keen to find ways of providing feedback about their experiences, as they would like to avoid difficult situations leading to formal complaints. They would also like the opportunity to highlight good practice (Carpenter et al, 2013).

Adults and carers want their views to be actively considered when decisions are being made about their support within supervision. They can provide feedback on practice for consideration in supervision, for example through surveys or comments (Marrable and Lambley, 2016).

Supervision is a place where learning from adults and carers can be incorporated into practice. You can consider how to provide a feedback loop from adults and carers to supervision, and from supervision to adults and carers. The RiPfa resources on mediation also include an Adults and Carers feedback tool:

[www.ripfa.org.uk/resources/supervision/tools/mediation](http://www.ripfa.org.uk/resources/supervision/tools/mediation)

## Supervision capabilities

A secure, respectful supervisory relationship built on trust underpins all the functions of supervision. An effective supervisory relationship is one in which dilemmas and ethical issues can be safely and openly discussed (Furlonger and Taylor, 2011). Reflective supervision sees the supervisee as the 'driver' while the supervisor is a facilitator, rather than the expert (Davys, 2013). It is strengths-based in promoting 'power with' rather than 'power over' the supervisee, and the co-construction of ideas (Davys and Beddoe, 2010).

Challenging practice and creating an environment where it is possible to learn from mistakes are essential elements in any supervisory relationship (Carpenter et al, 2013). The relationship should be an authoritative one where both parties share expertise, relate to each other as adults and are comfortable with discussing areas of challenge (Wonnacott, 2012). This is helped by:

- > A clear understanding by both parties of their role, responsibilities and the boundaries and limitations of their relationship.
- > Acknowledgement of power differences.
- > Working on the principle that both parties want to succeed in their roles.

It is important to ensure supervision is appropriate to the person's task, role and setting, covers all the functions and is recorded. Frequency should depend on experience, time in the job, complexity of work and individual support needs (Carpenter et al, 2012).

Supervisors and supervisees benefit from learning and development to support them with supervision practice (Carpenter et al, 2013). The organisation must have a way of resolving or changing relationships that do not work well.

The following RiPfa webpage includes tools to support individuals to audit their supervision, as well as tools to enable supervisors and supervisees to develop their relationship:

[www.ripfa.org.uk/resources/supervision/tools/support](http://www.ripfa.org.uk/resources/supervision/tools/support)

## Interdisciplinary supervision

Staff in adult social care can be supervised by people from different professional backgrounds. In this case it is important for supervisors to:

- > Give time to discussing discipline-specific skills and knowledge.
- > Demonstrate an understanding of supervisees' roles.
- > Try to understand the frameworks, roles, values and language of the supervisees' profession.
- > Consider whether profession-specific meetings or separate clinical supervision are needed.

(Carpenter et al, 2013)

Open and honest discussion of difference and what each participant brings to the relationship is essential. This is supported by the creation of a supervision agreement (Davys and Beddoe, 2016).

The RiPfa webpage on support also contains tools to support supervisees to identify what they need from supervisors.

## Resource pressures

Organisations are under pressure to provide services in a context of increased demand and reduced resources. Time and space for supervision is pressured.

### Effective support is enabled by:

- > a safe, confidential, quiet space
- > respectful, self-aware, empathetic supervisors
- > support for supervisors
- > active listening
- > a supportive relationship
- > recognition of anxiety.

(Carpenter et al, 2013)

Supervision can become absent (BASW, 2011) or procedural. Workloads, poor working conditions and a focus on targets can all undermine good supervision (Engelbrecht, 2013; Vito, 2015). When supervision doesn't happen, or is inadequate or negative, this undermines workforce stability, capacity, confidence, competence and morale (Carpenter et al, 2012).

The RiPFA webpage on support contains tools to help staff to get the most out of supervision. It highlights what is important to promote wellbeing, sets out what supervisors can do, and provides a model and tools to help you use supervision time in the best way possible:

[www.ripfa.org.uk/resources/supervision/tools/support](http://www.ripfa.org.uk/resources/supervision/tools/support)

## Organisational culture

Supervision is a place for sharing and gathering knowledge, which is key to organisational learning. Organisations should foster cultures that support all elements of organisational learning (Tsui et al, 2017). These activities do not just happen in supervision. Supervision fits with:

- > Continuing professional development activities - including induction, Assessed and Supported Year in Employment, appraisal, learning and development, career progression.
- > Practice excellence activities - including probation, line management, workload management, disciplinary procedures, compliments and complaints, audit and governance, management of absence/Occupational Health, capability procedure.

The RiPFA webpage on mediation provides tools to help organisations develop a supervision policy, consider how supervision fits with other activities and develop an organisational culture that supports supervision:

[www.ripfa.org.uk/resources/supervision/tools/mediation](http://www.ripfa.org.uk/resources/supervision/tools/mediation)

## Evaluation

Supervision is not an exact science and it depends on many different factors, and on personalities. All social care workers should receive individual supervision. This provides consistency and relationship (Earle et al, 2017). Alongside this, there should be consultative supervision to check out particular situations or decisions with a supervisor. Group supervision should supplement, but not replace, individual supervision (Wonnacott, 2012).

Evaluation of supervision and its impact is an essential part of continually improving the way supervision works in an organisation.

The RiPFA webpage on mediation also contains an evaluation framework and tools for observation, case audit and self-audit.

## Examples of good practice

The RiPFA resource on supervision was developed through a Change Project; a collaborative, action learning methodology that draws on research about supervision, practice experience from supervisees and supervisors, and learning from adults and carers.

We worked with a Development Group from seven local authorities to draw on their experiences.

We used a short survey to gather views on the purpose of wellbeing supervision. Practitioners, adults and carers agreed that supervision should support the wellbeing of adults and carers, and of supervisees, and should promote wellbeing within the organisation.

Adults and carers said that they want to be involved in supervision and have their views valued. This could be done through a survey, phone call or email to find out their views. Adults and carers also said they should be told what was discussed in supervision about them. Practitioners, adults and carers all felt that supervision was for supervisees to be supported, as well as to enable good work that promotes adults' and carers' wellbeing.

### Participants shared good practice in their organisations:

- > Clinical supervision being provided through practitioner group supervision around specific pieces of work with individuals and families.
- > Using coaching techniques in supervision.
- > Undertaking direct observations of supervision.
- > Using observations of newly qualified social workers as an opportunity to gather feedback from service users and to share this back in supervision.
- > Asking supervisees what is good and what could be improved in their supervision.
- > Asking supervisees how supervision is impacting on adults and carers.
- > Completing action plans for wellbeing with all supervisees.
- > Asking citizens how they think the workforce should be structured and supported.
- > Carrying out a full supervision audit, including looking at files and interviewing supervisors and supervisees.
- > Creating a new supervision form that incorporates the organisational values.
- > Developing a new supervision policy to include ten supervisions per year, one of which will be a direct practice observation, and action learning sets.



## Questions for supervisors and leaders

- > How does supervision in your organisation promote wellbeing for adults and carers, supervisees, and the organisation as a whole?
- > How does supervision policy and practice fit together with the organisational culture and aims?
- > How do you support consistency of quality and impact in supervision?
- > How do you enable supervisors and supervisees to build a good relationship?
- > How do you create time and space for critical reflection in supervision?
- > How do you involve adults and carers in supervision?
- > How do you evaluate the quality and impact of supervision?

## Conclusion

Supervision should mirror our practice. Supervision needs to be person-centred, strengths-based and underpinned by a relationship of trust. It must consider the individual and context, and it should be grounded in critical reflection.

All social care workers should receive good supervision. Leaders have a particular responsibility to create the right conditions to support good supervision. This resource helps leaders to understand what that should look like, why it matters and how to achieve it. It also links to tools that can help you to develop supervisory policy and practice.



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**Authors:** Geraldine Nosowska and  
Deirdre Ford

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**Research in Practice for Adults**  
The Granary, Dartington Hall  
Totnes, Devon, TQ9 6EE  
tel: 01803 869 753  
email: [ask@ripfa.org.uk](mailto:ask@ripfa.org.uk)

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