



March 25, 2024, Mala Pavlivka, Okhryrka, Ukraine.
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TECHNICAL BRIEF

Supervision of the Social Worker Workforce

CASE STUDY - GERMANY¹

1 / Information presented in this document was obtained through review of relevant documents available online. The findings presented are limited to what was readily available through these sources. Interviews to confirm information or provide more details were not conducted.

This publication was prepared by Maestral International at the request of UNICEF, with the financial support of the Government of Sweden. Its contents are the sole responsibility of Maestral International and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Government of Sweden and/or UNICEF.

Introduction

Social work supervision in Germany has developed into a distinct professional discipline² shaped by international influence and national adaptation. Initially introduced from the United States in the 1950's, supervision moved beyond a managerial focus during the 1970s, evolving into a practice centred on professional reflection, development and maintaining standards of care. Unlike in many Anglo-American contexts, supervision in Germany is treated as an independent field with dedicated training, recognised qualifications and its own professional associations. Supervision has developed into a profession offering services across various fields such as social work and health care.³

This case study examines how Germany has integrated supervision into social work profession, the structures and standards that sustain it, and lessons that may inform and strengthen supervision elsewhere.

Defining supervision in social work

Social work supervision has developed historically alongside the wider social work profession. Supervision is recognised as central to professional practice rather than merely an aspect of administrative oversight.⁵ It involves reflective dialogue on case work, professional roles and organisational context. While supervision is often structured into administrative, educational and supportive functions, in Germany, support and reflection are particularly valued.⁶ Supervision is understood as a reflexive counselling process, often provided by professionals externally to the employing organisation, aimed at promoting professional development, quality assurance and self-reflection.⁷ It is also recognised as a professional standard and a support mechanism offered by employers.

Social work in Germany is informed by various laws, including the Social Code (SGB), which addresses areas like social assistance and social law.⁸ However, these laws do not explicitly define supervision itself.

Although supervision is not mandated by law, it is embedded in organisational practices and job definitions – particularly, in NGOs and public sector agencies, through contractual agreements and professional norms.⁹ The frequency of social work supervision is usually monthly or bimonthly; however, this varies depending on the agency or organisational size, remit and resources and is guided by agency policy rather than legal requirements.

Supervision in German social work encompasses a broad range of topics including:

- professional identity and reflection
- case conceptualisation and intervention skills
- ethical dilemmas and practice standards
- professional development
- self-care and well-being
- risk management and safety
- supervisory relationships and communication



2 / Belardi, Nando. (2002). Social work supervision in Germany. *European Journal of Social Work*. 5. 313-318. 10.1080/714053162. Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/248946119_Social_work_supervision_in_Germany

3 / Busse, S. (2009). Supervision between critical reflection and practical doing. In: *Journal of Social Work Practice*, Volume 23, Number 2, June, p. 159-175. Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/238399826_Supervision_between_critical_reflection_and_practical_action 20/06/2025

4 / Busse, S. (2009). Supervision between critical reflection and practical doing. In: *Journal of Social Work Practice*, Volume 23, Number 2, June, p. 159-175. Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/238399826_Supervision_between_critical_reflection_and_practical_action 20/06/2025

5 / Ibid

6 / Busse, S. (2009). Supervision between critical reflection and practical doing. In: *Journal of Social Work Practice*, Volume 23, Number 2, June, p. 159-175. Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/238399826_Supervision_between_critical_reflection_and_practical_action 20/06/2025

7 / Rappe-Giesecke, K. (1999). What are the standards of effective and qualified supervision. In Fazter, G, Rappe- Giesecke, K., & Looss, W. *Quality Performance of Counselling – Supervision, Coaching, Organisational Development*. Cologne: Verlag für Angewandte Psychologie. (p 2-3) <https://rappe-giesecke.com/publikationen/veroeffentlichungen/2009/SondierungvonderBeratungsanfragezumKontraktAutorenfassung.pdf>

8 / The SGB VIII (June 1990, as amended in September 2002 https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/sgb_8/) German only

9 / Busse, S. (2009). Supervision between critical reflection and practical doing. In: *Journal of Social Work Practice*, Volume 23, Number 2, June, (p. 159-175); Rappe-Giesecke, K. (1999). What are the standards of effective and qualified supervision.

Table 1 provides a summary on social work supervision in Germany, discussed in depth in the sections that follow.

Table 1: Summary table on social work supervision in Germany (with [hyperlinks to materials](#))

Area	Comment
Structure	External and in-house supervisors - not mandated by law, integrated in policy
Approach	Reflective, supportive, systematic but varied methods
Provider Bodies	The DGSv ¹⁰ plus ANSE ¹¹ /ECVision frameworks (A European Competence Framework for Supervision and Coaching) - defines key competences, learning outcomes and performance criteria for professionals in supervision and coaching. Aligned to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). <i>Additional resource:</i> The ECVision Competency Matrix of Supervision and Coaching
Recruitment standards	Master of Social Work (MSW) plus experience, reflective skills, and supervisor certification. Recruitment of supervisors, including those with an MSW, is guided by specific standards and requirements, often emphasising practical experience and specialised training in supervision. The DGSv plays a significant role in setting these standards.
Perceived value	High usefulness for professional development and burnout prevention
Cultural style	Reflective, critical, respectful, confidential

Structure and implementation of the supervision system

In Germany, social work supervision has developed as a distinct discipline with dedicated training requirements, separate from general social work practice.¹² Explicit ratios of supervisors to staff are not standardised at national level. Staffing and budget allocations for supervision are typically negotiated at an organisational level, influenced by programme complexity and the resources available.

Supervision is commonly delivered by external, freelance, or in-house independent supervisors rather than direct line managers. It is decentralised, rather than centralised.¹³ The Deutsch Gesellschaft fur Supervision und Coaching (DGSv)¹⁴ is Germany's largest professional association for supervision, coaching and organisational consulting representing over 4,500 supervisors, including those specialising in social work. It serves as both a quality gatekeeper and a voice for the profession across sectors (social services, healthcare, academia, business and the public sector).

¹⁰ / The Deutsch Gesellschaft fur Supervision und Coaching

¹¹ / ANSE is the Association of National Organisation for Supervision and Coaching in Europe.

¹² / Belardi, Nando. (2002). Social work supervision in Germany. European Journal of Social Work. 5. 313-318. 10.1080/714053162.

¹³ / Busse, (p.164-165); Rappe-Giesecke (p. 5)

¹⁴ / DGSv key roles include setting and maintaining standards, quality assurance, supporting members and fostering dialogue and connection between members with academia, policy makers, training bodies and other professional associations, promoting the discourse on supervision, coaching, research and policy.



Supervisors: recruitment, standards, and development

Social work supervisors in Germany are professionals with extensive social work experience, often holding a graduate degree and several years of frontline practice. Many undertake supervision-related training through programmes supported by the DGSv, system theory institutes, or universities.

There is no statutory licensing for supervisors.¹⁵ Certification is typically voluntary, obtained through DGSv accreditation, and requires meeting formal standards, submitting documentation and passing an assessment process.¹⁶ Professional standards and competence frameworks are set out by both the DGSv and in frameworks such as **ECVision** by **ANSE**, which covers ethics, reflective methods and setting or maintaining professional boundaries.

Supervisors in Germany are primarily recruited through professional associations, notably the DGSv and through accredited training programmes. The training requirements according to **DGSv standards**¹⁷ include a minimum of 640-time units of training (1 unit = 45min):

500 units

in face-to-face instruction

50 units

under supervision in different settings (group and individual)

90 units

of supervised practical work

It must include:

Core curriculum on reflection skills, action competence, and knowledge

Crisis management components to build professional resilience

Supervised learning and instruction components

Supervision recruitment in Germany prioritises experience, specialised training, ethical conduct and a supportive organisational context to ensure high-quality social work practice and professional development. Training providers advertise programmes, screen applicants against entry criteria, and connect qualified graduates to professional networks.¹⁸

THE KEY CONSIDERATIONS IN RECRUITING SUPERVISORS IN GERMANY¹⁹ INCLUDE:

Experience and expertise

1.

Practical experience - DGSv standards emphasise at least five years of active practice in supervision counselling and coaching, according to standards from the Association of National Organisations for Supervisions in Europe.

2.

At least three years' experience in a relevant field (e.g. youth services, mental health, etc.).

3.

Professional Development - ongoing professional development and staying current with the best practices are crucial.

¹⁵ / Busse, S. (2009). Supervision between critical reflection and practical doing. In: Journal of Social Work Practice, Volume 23, Number 2, June, (p. 159-175)

¹⁶ / Standard of the German Association for Supervision and Coaching (DGSv) p. 5-6: https://www.dgsv.de/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/DGSv_Standards_2021_eng.pdf

¹⁷ / p.5-8

¹⁸ / Standard of the German Association for Supervision and Coaching (DGSv) : https://www.dgsv.de/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/DGSv_Standards_2021_eng.pdf

¹⁹ / Standard of the German Association for Supervision and Coaching (DGSv) p.11

Training Qualification

- **Supervision specific training** – In Germany, supervision is considered a distinct field requiring specialised training and qualifications, separate from general social work practice.
- **DGSv Accreditation** – The DGSv offers accreditation for supervisors, ensuring they meet specific quality criteria.
- **Focus on key competencies** - training programmes focus on developing skills in areas like professional identity, reflective practice, and the ability to act and broaden knowledge.

Ethical and Professional Conduct

- Adherence to ethical guidelines, such as those established by the DGSv.
- Clear mandate setting – supervision should be conducted within a clear and well-defined framework, including specific setting, roles, tasks, and client systems.
- Confidentiality and boundaries – maintaining confidentiality and respecting boundaries are fundamental ethical principles in supervision in Germany.

Organisational Context

- Organizational support – the organisational context plays a role in supervision, including the structure of the organisation (university, private institute, NGO, etc.) and its capacity to support the supervisor's role.
- Documentation – agencies and organisations must provide documentation demonstrating their suitability to provide **clinical social work services** and ensure adequate supervision.
- Third party supervision – if supervision is provided by someone outside the agency, there must be an affirmation that the setting is authorised to provide **clinical social work services** and will ensure appropriate supervision.

Supportive and Educational Role

- Balancing administrative, educational and supportive functions²⁰ – social work supervision supervisors should be competent in all three.
- Promoting professional development – supervision should be able to foster the supervisee's professional growth, self-efficacy, and ethical practice.
- Addressing job stress – supervisors should have the ability to help mitigate job stress and promote self-care and positive work environment for supervisees.

Common criteria for recruitment include master's level education, five plus years of professional experience, additional supervision training and reflective practice ability. Standardised supervision programmes run by DGSv affiliated institutes include system theory²¹ and group dynamic models.²² Course content often includes ethics, reflective skills, organisational understanding.

Time spent in supervision is regarded as part of continuous professional learning. While not always formally recognised for accreditation purposes, it supports reflective practice, quality improvement, burnout prevention and is linked to career progression.²³

20 / The administrative, educational and supportive roles of a supervisor are embedded in the DGSv standards under the core curriculum, the understanding of coaching and the quality criteria for supervision. The administrative role focuses on clarifying mandates, agreements, organisational expectations and accountability; educational includes helping supervisees gain new insights, skills and professional attitudes; and supportive role relates to helping professionals deal with stress, uncertainty and role conflicts.

21 / An approach that looks at people, teams and organisations as interconnected systems rather than isolated parts and emphasises understanding how relationships, structures, patterns of interaction shapes behaviour and outcomes. (DGSv standards, section 1.1, p.6)

22 / Theories and methods for understanding and working with the psychological and social processes that occur within groups, exploring how group roles, norms, conflicts, leadership patterns and communication affect group functioning. (DGSv standards, section 1.3, p.11)

23 / Belardi, Nando. (2002). Social work supervision in Germany. European Journal of Social Work. 5. 313-318. 10.1080/714053162.



Challenges, strengths, and lessons learned to inform Ukraine

KEY CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING SUPERVISION SYSTEMS IN GERMANY

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| <p>1.
Lack of national level policy and standards – supervision is integrated into organisational policies and professional norms rather than statutory requirements; this can result in variability between organisations.</p> | <p>2.
Variable competence among supervisors – although there are DGSv standards, certification is voluntary, and the skill level of supervisors varies depending on training pathway.</p> | <p>3.
Resource limitations – high quality supervisions especially external models, can be expensive to scale nationally. Some organisations may struggle to allocate consistent funding, especially in smaller NGOs.</p> |
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Table 2: Outline of Strengths, good practice and lessons for Ukraine

Strengths and good practice	Lesson
Professionalisation of supervision as a distinct field: Evolved into a respected discipline with its own training, qualifications and professional association (the DGSv).	Clear frameworks and standards help embed supervision in professional culture: Though not legally mandated, DGSv's clear standards, voluntary certification and widespread recognition have made supervision a normative expectation in Germany.
Robust training standards: DGSv requires a minimum of 640 training units, including reflective practice, crisis management, supervised instruction and professional demeanour development.	Competence matters and training is critical: Effective supervision depends on the supervisors' training in reflective practice, ethics and supportive methods. DGSv's rigorous training standards are widely seen as key to quality.
Reflective and supportive orientation: Germany's supervision culture places strong emphasis on emotional support and critical reflection rather than compliance.	Prioritising emotional support fosters a safe environment: Practitioners feel able to discuss challenges openly. It strengthens professional learning, reduces stress and burnout and helps maintain quality practice.
External supervision model: Most organisations use external supervisors who are independent of management, which increases trust, confidentiality, and openness.	External supervision increases trust and effectiveness: External supervision reduces power imbalance and makes staff more willing to discuss challenges.
European and national frameworks: Germany aligns with the ECvision and the European Qualifications Framework, promoting cross country comparability and clarity on competence.	Aligning standards with regional and international standards supports cross border recognition of qualifications and encourages shared professional standards across countries.
Integration with professional development: Supervision is connected to CPD and performance appraisal, with supervision hours recognised as contributing to career progression and professional growth.	Integration with CPD and appraisal strengthens commitment: In several settings' supervision hours are linked to professional development and career progression, reinforcing their value.

Common challenges in implementing supervision systems across Europe

- Inconsistent policy and standards** – many countries lack national standards defining supervision frequency, content and supervision competencies resulting in highly variable practice quality.
- Supervisory skills gap** – supervisors often have limited reflective and developmental supervision versus administrative oversight.
- Limited resources** – High caseloads, limited budgets and staff shortages make it hard to allocate dedicated supervision time.
- Lack of digital integration** – supervision systems often are not linked to digital case management platforms, so tracking and follow up are manual and fragmented.

Table 3: Strengths, good practice and innovative examples

Germany - External Supervision model ²⁴
• External independent supervisors are often contracted to deliver supervision sessions (particularly in child protection and high stress fields) • Focus is on reflective practice, emotional processing and professional development rather than managerial oversight • Usually monthly or bimonthly, in small groups or one on one formats • Supervision is often a recognised entitlement in employment for social workers • Emphasis on professional neutrality – external supervisors do not hold managerial authority. Benefits • Builds trust - practitioners feel freer to discuss difficulties • Reduces stress and burn out • Clarifies boundaries between administrative and development supervision Challenges • Can be expensive if scaled nationally • Needs clear quality standards for external supervisors.
United Kingdom - Reflective and Structured Supervision ²⁵
• Framed as a balance of managerial oversight (compliance, workload), reflective practice, learning and development. • Use of supervision agreements that define purpose, frequency, record keeping and confidentiality • Supervisors often trained and accredited and supervisor vision practice is routinely audited by regulatory bodies like Ofsted and Care quality Commission • Common models include Gibbs Reflective Cycle, Kolb's Reflective cycle, Signs and Safety approach to supervision in child protection Benefits • Promotes accountability and learning • Normalises reflection as a core professional skill • Supervision is formally protected time. Challenges • Variability in quality between organisations • Supervisor competence and confidence can be uneven
Scotland – Continuous Learning Framework (CLF) and Competency Approach ²⁶
• The CLF defines clear expectations - competencies for supervisors and competencies for supervisees. • Supervision is embedded in a broader learning culture. It is linked to appraisal and continuous professional development (CPD) and supervisors receive dedicated training. • Emphasis on strengths based and outcomes focused supervision • Use of structured tools to assess supervision quality and impact on practice Benefits • Provides clarity on what good supervision looks like • Ensure supervision supports professional growth Challenges • Requires investment in supervisor training • Needs strong organisational commitment

24 / More detail can be got from: <https://www.dgsv.de/der-verband/mission-statement/>

25 / More detail can be got from these sources: <https://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/resources/documents/Support-for-leaders-and-managers/Managing-people/Supervision/Effective-supervision-guide.pdf>; <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children-2> ; pgs. 105 – 127 <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7b455ee5274a34770ea939/Munro-Review.pdf>

26 / More detail can be got from these sources: Continuous Learning, The Framework for Continuous Learning in Social Services: <https://learn.sssc.uk.com/AppResources/clf.pdf>; <https://www.iriss.org.uk/approach>

Recommendations and lessons for Ukraine

1. DEVELOP A NATIONAL SUPERVISION POLICY

framework: ensure that it defines the purpose and scope of supervision (reflective, developmental, managerial); minimum frequency; core competencies of supervisors; rights and responsibilities of supervisees; confidentiality and record keeping standards.

Lesson: The clarity of the **UK** and **Scotland** models have helped embed supervision in professional culture.

2. PILOT EXTERNAL SUPERVISION FOR HIGH-RISK CASES:

start with pilots in child protection services, GBV and emergency response units; contract accredited external supervisors to provide monthly sessions and evaluate outcomes on practitioner wellbeing and case quality.

Lesson: **Germany's** model shows that this can build trust and reduce burnout.

3. USE SUPERVISION AGREEMENTS AND REFLECTIVE MODELS:

introduce agreements to set expectations from the start. Train supervisors to use structured reflection tools (e.g. **Gibbs Reflective Cycle**).²⁷

Lesson: The UK experience shows these agreements prevent misunderstandings and improve consistency.

4. INVEST IN SUPERVISOR TRAINING AND SUPPORT:

Develop a training programme on reflective practice facilitation; managing power dynamics in supervision,

trauma informed responses and build communities of practice for supervisors to share learning.

Lesson. All three countries highlight supervisor competence as critical.

5. LINK SUPERVISION TO CPD AND APPRAISAL:

Make supervision part of performance reviews and professional development plans. Track participation in supervision and link it to progression (as in Scotland and Germany).

Lesson: Encourages commitment and signals that supervision is valued.

6. LEVERAGE DIGITAL TOOLS:

Integrate supervision records and scheduling into any case management platform Ukraine is rolling out (e.g. the **Unified Information System for Social Sphere - UISSS**).

Lesson: Germany and the UK are increasingly digitising supervision to save time and improve tracking.

7. MONITOR AND EVALUATE IMPLEMENTATION:

Develop key indicators (e.g. frequency, staff satisfaction, perceived impact). Use surveys and focus groups.

Lesson: Continuous feedback is key to improving quality.

²⁷ / <https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/media/MyCumbria/Documents/ReflectiveCycleGibbs.pdf>

