



TECHNICAL BRIEF

Supervision of the Social Worker Workforce

CASE STUDY - UNITED KINGDOM¹

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

In the United Kingdom, supervisors in social work are called 'practice supervisors', and they must be qualified, experienced practitioners who are registered with the national regulator, Social Work England.

Supervision of registered social workers is legally mandated and supported in various policies and by regulatory bodies described in this document. Supervision is delivered by individual employers of registered social workers and expected to be embedded within each organisation's accountability systems. Employer supervision practices are monitored by Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills), with the Local Government Association also performing 'health checks'.

Instead of being designed as solely a managerial tool, supervision is structured as a reflective practice that requires emotional regulation skills, and continuous professional development. However, a 2023 review found inconsistencies in practice, with observations that supervision was overly task-focused or seen as a compliance requirement rather than a developmental opportunity.² Since this review, various resources have been published or updated, many of which are provided by the Department for Education (DfE) and described in more detail in this document.

Defining supervision in social work

In the United Kingdom, supervision is a core tenant of two foundational child protection frameworks including the **National Framework on Children's Social Care**, and the statutory guidance on **Working Together to Safeguard Children**.³ Further, the Health and Social Care Act 2008 defines supervision as a nationally regulated activity: "staff must receive the support, training, professional development, supervision and appraisals that are necessary for them to carry out their role and responsibilities; staff should receive appropriate, ongoing, or periodic supervision in their role to make sure competence is maintained."⁴

Overall, supervision for social work in the UK is largely defined and promoted as a reflective practice, not strictly as a managerial or performance appraisal process. The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) has a Supervision Policy that defines supervision as 'a regular, planned, accountable process, which must provide a supportive environment for reflecting on practice and making well informed decisions using professional judgement and discretion.'⁵ Reflective supervision includes structured supervision sessions in

which social workers critically examining their practice, learning from experiences, and develop strategies for improvement.

Supervision for social work should include uninterrupted monthly supervision sessions of at least 90 minutes each, except for newly qualified social workers who should receive supervision more frequently (90-minute sessions every two weeks per DfE; weekly per BASW⁶).⁷ There are no national standards describing how these 90 minute sessions should occur (see below), for example as group sessions or individual sessions.

It is up to the employer of registered social workers to prescribe a specific supervision model, or to provide a variety of tools and resources, allowing supervisors to select the most suitable approach. However, on the DfE website, The Social Care Institute for Excellence's approach to supervision is promoted. This approach views supervision as part of an organisational environment, with suggestions for supporting supervision in the organisation through the following:⁹

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE: the organisation should view supervision as valuable and invest in professional development of supervisors.

ORGANISATIONAL LEADERSHIP: the leadership of the organisation promotes a psychologically healthy workplace and addresses any declining practice.

SUPERVISORS: build relationships with supervisees, allocate time, observe practice, and support professional development.

PRACTITIONERS: are willing to discuss doubts, their anxieties and their strengths.

2 / British Association of Social Workers. (2023, March 28). Reflective supervision lacking, review finds. <https://new.basw.co.uk/about-social-work/psw-magazine/articles/reflective-supervision-lacking-review-finds>

3 / Department for Education. (n.d.). Expectations of leaders. Support for Social Workers. <https://support-for-social-workers.education.gov.uk/employer-standards/standard-5/expectations-of-leaders>

4 / Care Quality Commission. (n.d.). Regulation 18: Staffing. <https://www.cqc.org.uk/guidance-regulation/providers/regulations-service-providers-and-managers/health-social-care-act/regulation-18>

5 / British Association of Social Workers. (n.d.). Reflective supervision: Best practice guide [PDF]. https://basw.co.uk/sites/default/files/resources/basw_73346-6_0.pdf

6 / British Association of Social Workers. (n.d.). Reflective supervision: Best practice guide [PDF]. https://basw.co.uk/sites/default/files/resources/basw_73346-6_0.pdf

7 / Department for Education. (n.d.). Expectations of leaders. Support for Social Workers. <https://support-for-social-workers.education.gov.uk/employer-standards/standard-5/expectations-of-leaders>

8 / Department for Education. (n.d.). Improve how you meet standard. Support for Social Workers. <https://support-for-social-workers.education.gov.uk/employer-standards/standard-5/improve-how-you-meet-standard>

9 / Department for Education. (n.d.). Action planning to achieve standard. Support for Social Workers. <https://support-for-social-workers.education.gov.uk/employer-standards/standard-5/action-planning-to-achieve-standard>

Structure and implementation of the supervision system

Supervision is decentralised and provided by employers of registered social workers. Per the Department for Education (DfE), all employers of registered social workers are expected to provide supervision against **Employer Standard 5** on supervision in social work, which considers how supervision supports managing challenges, promoting psychological safety, understanding and developing leadership, practicing emotional regulation, and supporting neurodivergent social workers.

Most employer organisational policies include a contract or agreement between the supervisor and supervisee, which helps set expectations of each other and defines how supervision will occur.¹⁰ Standard 5 sets out that employers of registered social workers should:¹¹

- ✓ Have a policy in place which governs supervision and links supervision to organisational accountability frameworks and continuous learning.
- ✓ Define and monitor the frequency and quality of their supervision.
- ✓ Provide supervision for social work students who are on placement, newly qualified social workers, social workers who are in what is called their 'assessed and supported year in employment' (ASYE), and other social workers.
- ✓ Provide regular learning and development opportunities for supervisors.

Per the first bullet above, supervision is also expected to be integrated into organisations' accountability systems. By doing so, this links supervision to organisations identifying employee learning needs, promoting continuous learning, evaluating capability and developmental needs.¹² The Local Government Association of the UK, **has a standard for strong and clear social work accountability frameworks**. This includes that employers should promote reflection and learning from the following: experience, evidence and research, and from the voices of children, adults and families.

Fulfilment of Employer Standards (including standard 5) are monitored and published by the Local Government Association through **"health checks"**, which are implemented through regular surveys of self-reported views of social workers, occupational therapists, and non-registered social care professionals. These health checks are noted to be best complemented with observation of practices.¹³

In addition, Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, conducts inspections of children's and social care. Supervision is one aspect that is examined during their inspections, paying particular attention to if the supervision practiced is reflective, safe, emotionally supportive and challenging, and contributes to personal and professional development of workers. This includes inspecting if supervision is adequately recorded and on the child's case record.¹⁴

Regarding the linkage between supervision and case management, according to Social Work England, supervision can involve discussing ongoing cases.¹⁵ Further, within the DfE's description of being a practice supervisor, case management is mentioned, specifically as supervisors having a role in quality assurance of assessments and care plans, and support for reviewing and monitoring individual caseloads.¹⁶

No information was found on if and when external supervision is provided in the social sector, or about if supervisees can choose their supervisor.

10 / Research in Practice. (2017). Reflective supervision: Resource pack [PDF]. https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/media/2d2dxwrn/reflective_supervision_resource_pack_2017.pdf

11 / Department for Education. (n.d.). Standard 5: Supervision – Overview. Support for Social Workers. <https://support-for-social-workers.education.gov.uk/employer-standards/standard-5/overview?preferenceSet=True>

12 / Department for Education. (n.d.). Expectations of leaders. Support for Social Workers. <https://support-for-social-workers.education.gov.uk/employer-standards/standard-5/expectations-of-leaders>

13 / Department for Education. (n.d.). Improve how you meet Standard 5. Support for Social Workers. <https://support-for-social-workers.education.gov.uk/employer-standards/standard-5/improve-how-you-meet-standard>

14 / Department for Education. (n.d.). Standard 5: Supervision – Overview. Support for Social Workers. <https://support-for-social-workers.education.gov.uk/employer-standards/standard-5/overview?preferenceSet=True>

15 / Social Work England. (n.d.). Supervision and continuing professional development (CPD). <https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/cpd/supervision>

16 / Department for Education. (n.d.). Practice supervisor role overview. Support for Social Workers. <https://support-for-social-workers.education.gov.uk/explore-roles/practice-supervisor>

Supervisors: recruitment, standards, and development

Supervisors are recruited and employed by employers of registered social workers. DfE requires that supervisors have completed a degree, apprenticeship or graduating training scheme in social work, as well as be registered with Social Work England, and ideally have at least four years' experience as a qualified child and family social worker and have experience of mentoring and supporting others.¹⁷

The government has specific standards on supervision, which are different, depending on the area of supervision:¹⁸

For supervisors of social workers in adult care, there is a **Post-Qualifying Standards for Social Work Practice for Supervisors in Adult Social Care**

For supervisors of social workers in child and family social work, there is a **Post-Qualifying Standard, Knowledge and Skills Statement for Child and Family Practice Supervisors**

For supervisors of social work students (who are also called practice educators), there are **Practice Educator Professional Standards**, established by BASW

Within the Post-Qualifying Standard for Child and Family Practice supervisors, there are eight professional standards for practice supervisors:

1. promote and govern excellent practice,
2. develop excellent practitioners,
3. shape and influence the practice system,
4. effective use of power and authority,
5. confident analysis and decision-making,
6. purposeful and effective social work,
7. emotionally intelligent practice supervision,
8. performance management and improvement.

Further, Social Work England's Professional Standards of Social Workers explicitly promote supervision as part of the profession. More specifically, under Social Work England's standard 4.2, 4.6 and 4.8, supervision is encouraged as critical reflection to go beyond review of professional experience to encourage social workers to examine their approaches, judgements, decisions, interventions and the steps needed to provide objective support.¹⁹

For supervision to count for continuous professional development requirements of supervisees, the supervision activity must be used to critically reflect on, and identify learning needs, including how to use research and evidence to inform the individual's practice. The supervisee must record a reflection done through supervision and describe how they benefited from supervision and what changes they will make to their practice. Or, if the individual did not find their supervisor helpful, they record why they think that is, and how they could seek more constructive supervision in the future.²⁰



17 / Department for Education. (n.d.). Practice supervisor role overview. Support for Social Workers. <https://support-for-social-workers.education.gov.uk/explore-roles/practice-supervisor>

18 / Department for Education. (n.d.). Standard 5: Supervision – Overview. Support for Social Workers. <https://support-for-social-workers.education.gov.uk/employer-standards/standard-5/overview?preferenceSet=True>

19 / Social Work England. (n.d.). Professional standards guidance. <https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/professional-standards-guidance/>

20 / Social Work England. (n.d.). Supervision and continuing professional development (CPD). <https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/cpd/supervision/>

DfE provides various resources for social workers and employers to use to apply and guide supervision skills and practice, including the following:

- An example reflective questions for supervisors to ask themselves.²¹
- Emotional **intelligence tests** for supervisors to find out more about emotional awareness as a leader.
- The **Supervision Tool for Assessing Reflexivity (STAR)** for supervisors and managers to assess and oversee quality supervision.²²
- Research in Practice's **resources for reflective supervision practice, Supervision Brief Guide (2019)**, and **online library of tools** to support supervisors for adult social care. The resources for adult social care could be applicable to children's and families social care as well and include:²³
 - **Guide on Effective Supervision**
 - **Checklist of what to look for in a good supervisor**
 - **Supervision recording template**
 - **Tips to provide virtual supervision**
 - **Quick guide on supervision vs. appraisals**
- The national **Employer Standard 4 on Wellbeing** provides information on roles and responsibilities and practitioner wellbeing that can be useful for supervisors to consider when supporting their supervisees.²⁴

In addition, the Social Work Union published a **Reflective Supervision Best Practice Guide** in 2024. This guide provides information, insights and tools for supervision of social workers, including tools such as a Best Practice Cheat Sheet, Example Ground Rules, Example Decision-Making Tree, and interview and focus group guides to assess and gather information about reflective supervision practices.

It is recommended that supervisors receive ongoing learning opportunities. DfE promotes the following supervisor training programs, provided by third parties:

- Research in Practice offers a 'Practice in **Supervisor Development Programme**' for continuous professional development of social work supervisors specifically in the field of child and family social work. This programme offers both bespoke training options and online resources.
- A charity called Frontline offers a series of training modules for managers and supervisors to develop social work practice and leadership skills. This includes a **dedicated training module for practice supervisors**. This training module is structured around a 4C Leadership Framework, that strengthens four capabilities: curiosity, clarity, complexity and capacity.

Challenges, strengths, and lessons learned to inform Ukraine

A recent rapid review (2023) , found that reflective supervision of social work in the UK is 'lacking in both quality and quantity', and is criticized for being a 'tick box' approach or not occurring in some cases. It was commonly reported that supervision is ad hoc, irregular and not fit for the social work task at hand. Per this study, supervision in practice focuses on accountability, case management, and meeting care requirements at the expense of recognising the needs of the staff. Reflection is reported as often being 'optional' or 'extra.' Supervision is not often linked to helping with reflection, learning and development. There is reportedly a lack of training in supervision for managers, contributing to low confidence and motivation to conduct supervision.

These findings contributed to the creation of a supervision best practice guide for social workers and managers, which was published in 2024 (and referenced earlier in this document). Many of the DfE resources mentioned in this document were recently published or updated to contribute to strengthening supervision for social workers. The resources and tools used in the United Kingdom could be adapted to be contextually relevant to be applied to supervise Ukraine's social workers and practitioners.

21 / Department for Education. (n.d.). Promoting psychological safety. Support for Social Workers. <https://support-for-social-workers.education.gov.uk/employer-standards/standard-5/promoting-psychological-safety>

22 / Quality supervision is assessed against the following six domains: 1) considering voice of those whose lives are the focus of the service, 2) acting in a safe space where practitioners can 'risk talk' and express authoritative doubt, 3) practicing curiosity and generating hypotheses to better understand support needs, 4) sharpening practices by exploring the 'what, why and how', 5) providing opportunities for practitioners to discuss emotional impacts of the work and their wellbeing, 6) considering impact and actively supporting an anti-racist practice.

23 / Department for Education. (n.d.). Improve how you meet standard. Support for Social Workers. <https://support-for-social-workers.education.gov.uk/employer-standards/standard-5/improve-how-you-meet-standard>

24 / Department for Education. (n.d.). Benefits of achieving supervision standard. Support for Social Workers. <https://support-for-social-workers.education.gov.uk/employer-standards/standard-5/benefits-of-achieving-supervision-standard>

25 / Department for Education. (n.d.). Improve how you meet Standard 5. Support for Social Workers. <https://support-for-social-workers.education.gov.uk/employer-standards/standard-5/improve-how-you-meet-standard>

26 / British Association of Social Workers. (2023, March 28). Reflective supervision lacking, review finds. <https://new.basw.co.uk/about-social-work/psw-magazine/articles/reflective-supervision-lacking-review-finds>