Facilitated Practice-based Research (© University of Sunderland) Report

'*I feel so much better after I've had supervision'*: Social Workers experiences and perceptions of 'effective' supervision

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The purpose of the report is to share findings from a small-scale exploratory research study conducted by a group of practitioners who participated in a Facilitated Practice-based Research project. The aim of the research was to explore what constitutes 'effective' supervision according to those who receive it (Deacon, 2022), i.e. the supervisee. Focus groups were completed with practitioners at different stages of their social work career – from student social workers through to principle social workers and strategic managers. Each focus group was facilitated by cohort members and consisted of four open questions (plus probing areas), giving participants the opportunity to interact with others to explain and expand on their responses. Five focus groups took place with a total of 13 participants (n=13).

Conclusion: For supervision to be 'effective', it should feel safe to practitioners, and they should feel they can trust their supervisor. Supervision should consist of a balance between reflection and case management. Where the case management focus increases following the ASYE, this is received positively by practitioners. However, a re-balance towards reflective supervision is needed when practitioners transition to a senior level.

Recommendations: Supervision should be:

- consistent, regular, transactional, flexible, formal and informal;
- adapted to the needs of the social worker and the social work career stage;
- a balance of reflection with case management, with more reflection needed at senior practitioner level; and
- individual, but for added reflection group supervision can be an effective tool that is also less time-intensive on supervisors.

Introduction: This research project emerged through a group of practitioners engaging in a Facilitated Practice-based Research (FPR) (©University of Sunderland) programme with academic educators and researchers from the University of Sunderland. The aim of FPR is to support practitioners to reframe their practice skills as research skills, and to complete their own practice-based research. During the programme, the cohort worked together to co-construct, design, implement and analyse a piece of practice research relevant to the shared organisation which, in this case, was the North-East Social Work Alliance (NESWA) (Deacon, 2023). NESWA are a charitable body that oversee the social work teaching partnership in the North-East of England, which includes all Local Authorities (LAs) and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (see Appendix 1 for list of members).

This research project was partly funded by the University of Sunderland, the European Social Fund and NESWA.

Research aim: The research topic emerged through discussions about current areas of concern for the practitioners in the cohort. The topic, which is the basis of this report, is an exploratory study to understand what constitutes 'effective supervision' to current social work practitioners at different stages of their careers in social work.

Research question: What constitutes 'effective' supervision in statutory social work? An exploration of social work students' and practitioners' perspectives.
Focus groups conducted to explore: what aspects of supervision have social work students and practitioners found beneficial in the following areas?
1. preparing them for the realities of practice;
2. developing effective decision-making; and
3. supporting their competence in understanding identity of the self and others.

Participants: Social Work students and practitioners from pre- to post- qualifying and up to the level of Principle Social Worker. If a student, they must attend one of the NESWA partnership HEIs (see Appendix 1) and have completed at least one practice placement. Or, if a qualified social worker, they must work in one of the NESWA partnership Local Authorities (see Appendix 1).

Literature review: Supervision in social work, according to Parris (2012) has three 'essential functions'; administrative/managerial (e.g. performance management), supportive (emotional support/ethical dilemmas) and education (e.g. professional development) (p.208). According to Social Work England, which is the regulator for the profession, effective supervision enables social workers to 'develop personally and professionally through trust, honesty, accountability and empathy' (Social Work England website). It is a space where (according to section 4.2 of the CPD requirements for all Social Workers) practitioners can discuss cases, reflect on learning, support wellbeing and review decision making.

A framework is provided through the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) (a national framework led by Skills for Care) aimed at standardising post-qualifying training and support for Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSW) in England. This was set up through the National Evaluation Criteria in 2018, initially for children's social workers and then for adult and mental health social workers. The guidance provided by Skills for Care is not mandatory, but is seen as good practice, and their perspective of supervision is that it is needed because 'your workforce is your most valuable resource' (Skills for Care: Supervision website) and it is an opportunity for focus on the supervisee allowing them 'to lead' and 'unload' consider their 'work and wellbeing', 'identify new development opportunities' and review objectives set at appraisals' (Skills for Care: Quick Guide website). So whilst there is an emphasis on the need for supervision and what it might contain, there is no set formality regarding what supervision should look like.

Research into what 'effective' supervision can look like has been conducted, but whilst there has been an increase of international research into social work supervision, research in the UK has remained fairly limited (Wilkins et al., 2018). According to O'Donoghue and Tsui (2015) this means there is a need for advancing 'supervision scholarship and practice' (p.628) in the UK. However that remains problematic as there is a lack of agreement as to which model may be most effective in developing social workers and social work practice.

Methodology and methods: Emancipatory Practice Development underpins the research focus of the FPR programme. It emphasises the need for improving practice to be supported by a person-centred approach to access the voice of the person using the service (Deacon, 2022). The term 'service user' is used to refer to anyone who is accessing a service, so in the case of this project *social workers* were the service user. A pragmatic approach was taken (Muurinen and Satka, 2020) to access their voice through the use of a qualitative approach in the first instance (Macdonald and Deacon, 2019). This enables the voice of the service user to come through more clearly and can be followed up by wider surveys that take a statistical focus to test findings on a larger scale, to inform service provision.

Through a process of exploration the cohort chose focus groups as the preferred method for data collection. Focus groups (also known as group interviews) are beneficial as the interactions between group members enables the narrative to develop so participants compare and contrast experiences with each other. This enables the narrative to be expanded beyond the original questions asked, and social norms around the topic to be explored. The social context of the focus group allows participants to see how much of their own experiences are shared with others (Patton, 2002; Ritchie et al., 2014).

There were challenges, however, in drawing frontline practitioners together at the same time to attend a group interview. Based on responses to the advert, all focus groups took place online via Teams so that travel was not needed. Online polls were utilised to identify dates that enabled as many participants as possible to attend. This did, however, limit the number of participants, with a reduction rate of approximately 50% from initial interest to attendance at the focus group.

To ensure consistency, cohort members were separated into groups of two to facilitate one focus group each. Every group had an interview guide to follow which was developed together – see Appendix 2. The programme leader attended all the focus groups for quality control purposes. Also, only the programme leader knew all the participant details. For purposes of anonymity and confidentiality, cohort members only led a focus group where they did not work with any of the participants.

Five role-specific focus groups took place:

1. Social work students (BA/MA), Frontline social work students/apprentices, ASYE NQSWs (i.e. up to 12 months experience)
2. Social workers with 2–3 years' experience, experienced social workers (3+ years' experience), Practice Educators
3. Senior Social Workers, Lead Social Workers, Advanced Social Workers
4. Social Work Managers (including Deputy/Assistant/Senior)
5. Principle Social Workers

Ethics: Ethical approval was sought and received from the University of Sunderland Research Ethics Committee (application: 018096), as the academic host of the research, as well as from the NESWA management group.

Approach to analysis: A three-phrase qualitative thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006; and Clarke and Braun, 2013) six-stage framework in each phase: familiarisation, coding, search for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up themes. The three-phase approach was necessary as a quality control measure to enable each member of the project team to engage in thematic analysis, to gain research experience and to share out the work of the project.

In Phase 1 each member of the practice research team analysed the transcript for the focus group they moderated. Each followed the six-stage framework for coding and submitted their findings showing how they had come to decisions regarding identification of themes. In Phase 2 an experienced researcher in the project team conducted a quality assurance check, comparing each team member's findings to the original data and combined the two summaries together. Following this, in Phase 3 the same researcher conducted an overall six-stage framework analysis to present the overall findings across the project in a constructed narrative.

Findings: A total of 13 participants were involved in the research, spread across five focus groups.

Focus group	Number of participants
Student Social Workers/Apprentices/ASYE/NQSWs	2
Social Workers, 3 years+ experience	2
Senior/Lead/Advanced Social Workers	2
Social Work Managers/Assistant Managers	3
Principle Social Workers/Workforce Development Managers	4

Table 1: Focus groups and participants

Descriptive findings

The findings section is set out firstly based on the individual focus groups, followed by an overall analysis of the key themes across the groups.

Student/Apprentice/ASYE/NQSWs (Andrea McCarthy and Rebecca Cheesman)

Three key themes emerged from this focus group (n=2).

Time and space

Participants agreed that the frequency and length of supervisions (particularly reflective supervision) as a student and early into the ASYE programme directly correlated with feelings of support in their roles, less pressure and shared risk. They commented on the difference this made to their current role and attached importance to exploring a given situation with another profession who had some existing knowledge of it already which acted as a *check and balance* approach to decision(s) made.

> *[…] having supervision on a fortnightly basis there's a lot more oversight on the case you're working with, […] they know the cases I'm managing more so I'm on the front foot. I feel like there's genuine oversight there, you know, someone helping us. You know, there's that space to manage the pressure, of course. Now that's on me.*
>
> Participant1

However, participants acknowledged that having truly reflective supervision required time and space which was often impacted upon by the pressures in the role.

> *It's the pressure on the service at the moment and it's really hard to get away from that*
>
> Participant1

> *It's almost like I don't want to spend that time talking about how I feel because there's actual practical things that I feel I need to address in my practise and need support and advice with.*
>
> Participant2

> *I felt I was put through the ringer at times emotionally, but was for the better, you know?*
>
> Participant1

The participants acknowledged that reflective supervision had been important to their development but spoke as though that purpose of supervision was in their professional past (i.e. ASYE), rather than their continued experience as a practitioner. Participant1 reflected on their 'best supervision' being a time when it was 'not just about case supervision' but also time to reflect. Throughout the focus group both participants agreed on the importance of time and head-space availability to participate fully in supervision for the benefit of their growth as practitioners, but also to the outcomes for people with lived experience of services.

Inconsistency and processes

Participants agreed that the supervision offer was inconsistent and dependent on the individual supervisor and their preferred approach. Participant2 spoke about a having to change their approach to the supervision session because of supervisor change, and their feelings of being more exposed as a result.

> *I mean, one difference was that even though I'm in the same team, obviously my supervisor did change and so I kind of adapted to a new style of supervision*
>
> Participant2

> *Some people that have [a] much more involved supervisor […] I think there's maybe more depth to the work and then some, maybe it's not so much.*
>
> Participant1

They also noted how supervision became more process-driven, as workers become more qualified and experienced. They noticed these differences between their experiences as students compared with their experiences through the ASYE. They reflected on this as being negative.

> *When things feel quite process driven, it can be quite disheartening*
>
> Participant2

Both participants spoke about feelings of safety in supervision and the importance of feeling *contained* and having a manager who was *on the same page* as them.

> *I felt I was put through the ringer at times emotionally, but was for the better, you know?*
>
> Participant1

> *Reflection is essential as a practitioner, particularly for your own self-care and your own confidence. I do think that reflection's very important and like you were saying, [Participant1] just there are times when things feel quite process driven, it can be quite a little bit disheartening because I know when I came into social work I very much came into it because I enjoyed that reflective aspect. I like thinking about theory and you know problem solving but I have noticed that that kind of does tend to reduce a little bit when you qualify.*
>
> Participant2

Participants spoke about supervision as something that happened to them rather than an activity that they had an equal opportunity to shape and mould to their own requirements. They spoke of it as being a separate task to their daily work shaped by their supervisor.

Developing competence and decision-making
Both participants recognised supervision as a space to challenge decision making and explore defensible practice. They both commented on there being no proven methodology used to aid in decision-making. For both participants, decisions made in practice were explored through the flow of conversation in each case.

> *I mean, from my perspective, it's probably the central feature of my supervision. You know… every decision that I make and discuss in in supervision, […] and we always kind of ask why I made that decision and kind of really get me to think about, my decision making, and making sure that it's defensible*
>
> Participant2

> *I think for me the best is when decision making has been sort of pulled apart a bit, a lot of thinking about it. […] there's no or not that I'm aware of any sort of overall formula to it or anything of that nature. But I think there's a bit of a degree of freedom in that.*
>
> Participant1

Social Workers (Lyndsey Edwards and Katherine Weightman)
Three key themes emerged from this focus group (n=2).

Structure and process
Case management was a significant focus for supervision at this stage in the profession and was echoed by both participants, 'it does feel very sort of case management led really' (Partricipant1). Participants found this positive as they moved away from legislation and theory discussions that were more dominant during the ASYE. Participants reflected on how this helped them in feeling prepared for practice realities. They appreciated the opportunity to discuss cases and any ethical dilemmas with their managers and reflect on outstanding tasks so they could prioritise.

> *I always feel actually a lot better after I've had supervision with my manager, even if I think, Oh my goodness, I haven't done that, that that yet or that … it alleviates my worries about things*
>
> Participant 1

This element of supervision was identified as significant to them and allowed them to understand their own knowledge development and limitations; and to discuss them with their manager. They also considered how having structure was helpful for them as they transitioned from ASYE to being a Social Worker. Participants reflected on the use of an organisational proforma for supervision which guided the structure. Whilst elements relating to case supervision were not necessarily perceived negatively, they noticed that reflective models were not used in favour of this proforma.

Safe spaces to reflect

Both participants felt that having an effective and supportive relationship was important to support supervision. They both felt they have such a relationship currently.

> *I've got a really good relationship with my manager and I always feel that I can be quite honest about how I'm feeling about things … but I feel safe in my in my supervision relationship as well as with my manager, I do*
>
> Participant1

The participants felt they had the opportunity to reflect in supervision and actively sought the opportunity to be challenged on their practice by trusted managers.

> *I do think it is a good time to sort of maybe challenge your views on things and sometimes it takes another, whether it's your manager or another peer to kind of shine a light on maybe a blind spot that you might have.*
>
> Participant1

They also reflected on how group supervision could be helpful in allowing more reflective discussion with colleagues and possibly the use of scaling questions to give a benchmark for levels of emotional wellbeing. However, they observed that within reflective supervision, critical thinking was not captured in a structured format, but it was felt that it was more the skill of the manager to tease this out of the practitioner by asking the 'right' questions at the 'right' time.

> *We would link it back to theory about past practise, whereas potentially in the team I'm in now, we don't really do that so much, but it's a lot more crisis in the team that I'm in. So we don't really have as much time to set aside for those sort of things I suppose.*
>
> Participant2

> *We have talked sometimes about bringing like a reflective model into supervision. ... And we might have done one set and then it sort of went back to normal. So I think the intention we all kind of, it'd be nice to do it, but there is, it isn't specifically set out in within our supervision document.*
>
> Participant1

Confidence and competence building

Participants considered that supervision which highlighted their good practice and gave the opportunity to reflect on identified pieces of work, helped in increasing their confidence.

> *I think… having that space and time to talk it, say it out loud and be reassured that yeah, what you are on the right path or potentially maybe you're not, but that's what builds your confidence as a social worker and you feel more confident in your decision making and then potentially next time you wouldn't need to seek that guidance and come back and discuss that because you've done that before.*
>
> Participant2

When considering confidence within the supervision environment, this was reflected upon as relating to how embedded in practice you are. That is, the more experience you have of practice, the more you can raise things in supervision. Participant1 also reflected on how they changed in their views of supervision as they became a Practice Educator so rather than just being supervised, they became the supervisor.

Senior/Lead/Advanced Social Workers (Julie Smiles and Ola Tony-Obot)

Two clear themes emerged from the participants in this focus group (n=2).

From reflective to process-driven supervision

Participants in the focus group (n=2) reflected on the differences they experienced in supervision, from being a Newly Qualified Social Worker during ASYE, through to being in a more senior role. All talked of positive experiences of the mix of structured, scheduled and reflective supervision sessions that were a core part of their early experiences (through the ASYE). Whilst they acknowledged how helpful this was for developing their foundation, they all talked of how, as they progressed further, they noticed a decline in supervision especially concerning reflection and developmental support to 'more process driven as opposed to actual frequent reflective supervision' (Participant2). Concern was expressed at the importance of reflective supervision for engaging in critical thinking, as they felt it gave their managers an opportunity 'for them to ask really good questions on us' (Participant1). Both participants were welcoming of the idea of being challenged on their decision making, and were concerned that this element was disappearing the higher they went in their careers. They talked of increasing gaps between supervision (which had previously been fortnightly) which contributed to them experiencing increasing feelings anxiety and self-doubt in their decision-making.

This concerned the participants as they felt more confident in themselves and their practice, when they could depend on regular, uninterrupted supervision time dedicated to their personal and professional development. However, they increasingly found that some managers were less available for continued nurturing and instead they prioritised the recording of the supervision session above the genuine interest in the wellbeing of their workers. This was something which both participants highlighted, was not a criticism of the individual manage, but on the system requirements at this stage.

> *what I see in my organisation is that supervision document becomes the focus as opposed to the supervision itself*
>
> Participant2

This contributed to a decreased focus on the practitioners personal wellbeing as well. Participants felt emotional wellbeing was not a priority in supervision, as reflected by Participant1 who noted 'I feel discussion about the self is like an afterthought within supervision'.

Trusted relationships and safe spaces

For these practitioners they appreciated it if their managers were able to create *safe spaces* for exploring their emotions and wellbeing. They emphasized that their managers' ability to build a trusting relationship was key to how supervision was experienced. Participants felt that having real conversations that focused on the self within supervision demonstrated genuine interest in their wellbeing. Participants suggested that a trusting relationship with their manager could help in reducing the fear associated with blame culture within social work practice.

> *It is advantageous to know that one has a trusting relationship with the manager and that one's manager is able to defend in times where mistakes are made and not focus on opportunity blame*
>
> Participant2

> *Getting to know one's manager makes a lot of difference*
>
> Participant1

They valued supervisors who they perceived as being able to create *safe spaces*, i.e. where participants felt safe due to the trust in the relationship. Participant1 reflected that this was when one manager 'had a really nice balance between empathy and ability to challenge'. Both participants felt that effective supervision sessions ought to incorporate discussions to explore their identity and the impact on their practice.

The participants also appreciated gradual transitions as they increased their practitioner autonomy in decision-making, as illustrated below.

> *My manager s incredible supportive … I feel like I 'm given a lot of support to sort of think about what other agencies views are when we're looking at decision making.*
>
> Participant1

They appreciated when their managers provided opportunities for joint meetings and case discussions involving multi-agency partners. They emphasised that this assisted them in having more confidence in their decision making.

Social Work Managers/Assistant Managers (Andrea Barragan and Bokali Bonina)

Three themes emerged from this focus group (n=3) as they reflected on their experiences of being supervised, being a supervisor and their transition to management.

Becoming social work managers

Participants reported a common experience of not fully grasping the 'other side' of the job until they actually became a manager. This included human resources and performance management. All participants reflected that they did not receive support in relation to that side of management and instead were expected to learn as they did the job, in practice. In entering the role Participant1 referred to also referred to having a certain amount of 'imposter syndrome' (Participant1 and Participant3). They reflected on how supervision had helped them in becoming more self-aware of their new role and to look into appropriate training e.g. in leadership.

I think a lot of my early supervisions in that role were me reflecting on like impostor syndrome really and feeling, you know, how do the team see me? How do I see myself? How am I going to negotiate this step up into a different role?

Participant3

Other practical support from management in both direct and indirect supervisions was also highlighted.

I think it's quite difficult to take over the role. Because you have to get to a level very quickly, it's difficult to kind of ease your way in if you like. So for me there was lots of formal and informal supervisions with my manager to help me with the practicalities and also to kind of get used to what was expected of me.

Participant2

There was also a sense that coming to terms and fully understanding the role and responsibilities took time, even with the support provided in supervision.

So I wasn't prepared for any of that at all. When I first became a manager because I'd never looked at it. But then there's an expectation when you are a manager straight away, you get asked questions about these things. And like I did feel a bit clueless at first and even discussing it in supervision, it didn't help until I actually had to do it.

Participant1

Emotionally safe to develop trusted relationships

In their role as managers and therefore supervisors of other staff, *and* receivers of supervision themselves, participants felt wellbeing was taken into consideration within the supervision process. An important factor within supervision was exploring where people were, emotionally, and how that may be impacting on their wider performance, including their work/life balance. There was some suggestion that exploration about their emotional wellbeing was the most important aspect of supervision.

I think well-being is … the most important part of supervision because that's what helps me the most. […] So someone's like not performing. It's like what's happening at home. What's happening outside of work? What's happening with your cases that might be tipping you over the top kind of thing

Participant1

My manager's very, very good. Helping me manage myself, my own emotions, my own expectations of other things. She helps me reflect in that way.

Participant3

There was also recognition that in order to be able to be properly supported within their supervision environment, it must be felt to be a safe space for them to be able to share how they are doing and seek that support from their managers.

It should always be a safe space and it should be definite trust between you and your supervisor

Participant1

To create safe spaces, participants reflected on trusted relationships being formed in several ways. Firstly, through being valued as colleagues throughout their supervisions. This included the idea of being able to turn to their manager for anything they needed through the concept of there being 'no stupid questions'.

You're not made to feel like that you should know that/that's a stupid question, because no question is a stupid question.

Participant1

They also emphasised that feeling like their manager has time for them was important.

I've got such a supportive manager who's very good at kind of doing all of those things and not putting a limit on the time that we have for supervision, so it never feels like it's rushed

Participant2

Sharing the load in decision-making was highlighted as important in trusted relationships. Participants felt enabled to explore more complex issues within supervision when able to share the load of responsibility in important decision making. They shared that it felt reassuring that within supervision they could discuss things and come to decisions together.

Between the four of us, I always know that I'm confident that I'm, I don't need to make a decision in isolation

Participant3

As well as this joint decision-making taking place within supervision, there was also an appreciation of being able to be supported to make decisions autonomously, especially in those they were supervising.

I think sometimes people come back feeling a bit, needing a bit of support in terms of the decisions that they're making. And it's about trying to strike the right balance between not being prescriptive about what they need to do whilst encouraging them to and reassuring them about their own ability to make those kinds of complex decisions

Participant2

This relates to an emphasis on feeling safe enough to be reflecting on feelings/emotions.

Your supervision has to be a safe space where you feel like confidence and trust in your manager, where you can discuss those things.

Participant1

Reflective supervision

Reflection appeared to be a regular part of the supervision process for these participants and was something that made the experience very positive for them.

> *I feel so much better after I've had supervision. I just feel that I've been able to vocalise all of these thoughts and feelings that have been rattling in around inside my brain*
>
> Participant3

Participants also shared the importance of being able to engage in informal support with managers, i.e. not having to wait for specific supervision sessions and also being able to speak to others, both with management and within peer settings. This included being available for informal discussions throughout the working day just by being within close proximity to each other.

> *I really do value those reflective discussions that go on in the office and that meeting out of any issues that somebody's got with that, with a case […] I really do encourage other people to pitch in and share their views as well*
>
> Participant3

> *We get together in a group and in person. When we do that, we often have lots of really interesting discussions about practice and ethical decision making and things that haven't gone right and how we might do things again, which is always, always really positive.*
>
> Participant2

Through discussion, it became clear that because reflection is valued and encouraged within their own supervision, this was then promoted by them as managers within the wider team.

> *I do spend a lot of my time at a desk in the team room so we can have those reflective discussions and in supervision.*
>
> Participant3

PSW/Service Managers/Workforce Development Officers (Beverley Bowe and Tess King)

Whilst this group did consider their own experiences of being supervised, they primarily focused on the process of being a supervisor and what they had learned throughout their careers. Different methods of supervision (structured/unstructured, formal/informal, individual/group) and approaches (transactional, reflective, coaching) were linked to different stages of the social work career, linking to confidence building and development of skills. They referred to how models and learning styles have and can change over the years. Three key themes emerged through the discussion with participants in this focus group (n=4).

Trust and safety

Participants all referred to the importance of a positive relationship between the supervisor and supervisee. This includes a sense of trust and safety established that allows both parties to be open and honest and ensures the process of supervision is supportive and challenging. There was recognition that parties need to consider their relationship:

What's our relationship like? Because without that trust, I don't think. I don't think you really do have that space where you can challenge and support and champion.

Participant4

Participants recognised that both parties need to have a level of safety and comfort with each other so that they can consider and explore difficult issues; '…a space to have uncomfortable conversations' (Participant2).

Participants described how it was important that practitioners were able to raise worries or share mistakes, and that supervisors need to be able to challenge, direct and identify concerns – being contained. That is, regardless of the level you are working at, supervision should be a place where you leave feeling better. It was acknowledged within this group that the systems in which they were all working would be challenging.

And I think we everybody on this screen will be working within a system that is stretched, so being able to feel safe and feel relief and feel guided and feel challenged.

Participant4

As senior managers, participants in this group also reflected on the power dynamics in relationships between the supervised and the supervisor.

…it goes back to that relationship and I guess we've always got to think about there's a power indifference between a manager and a supervisor, although you try as much as you can not to have that it is there. We work in a hierarchical organisation and that's where we sit. We don't all sit at the same level.

Participant1

The 'sweet spot'

Participants acknowledged that supervision has a number of different functions, and that they are often difficult to balance effectively, something Participant4 referred to as the 'sweet spot'. They reflected on there being a tendency for *accountability* to take priority over functions such as reflection on practice and professional development. There was consensus that there has been a positive shift over recent years, with a greater focus on reflective conversations, testing hypotheses and using models of practice. However, it was recognised that pressures of time and workload present challenges to creating the space in supervision to consider all these aspects of practice.

Supervision's changed quite a lot in terms of we talked about when our first qualified supervision being as I guess it was more of a transactional bit of supervision in that it was a you went in, your manager told you what you needed to do when you went off and you did your tick list. I think we've moved much further on in practise now where we're actually using supervision as a space to test hypothesis, to test reflective thinking but also to use models of practice to help with reflection. I guess. What there's always going to be a constraint around this time in wanting to do a really good job.

Participant1

Valuing the difference

There was considerable discussion between the participants about the significance of recognising that supervision needs to take account of individual's different learning styles and have different needs for supervision at different stages of their career. Supervisors need to be able to adapt their approach to reflect different learning styles so that it is most effective for each individual.

> *… I think sometimes it's an understanding of students and practitioners of different learning styles and your supervision for one person may differ to another person… Some people want that straightness, that brightness, other people need a bit more of a gentle touch.*
>
> Participant3

One participant highlighted the importance of supervision agreements to consider these things at the start of supervision relationship.

> *… what do you need? Need from me as a supervisor? What do I need from you to be prepared as a supervisor?*
>
> Participant3

It was acknowledged that more experienced practitioners will need different types of support to newly qualified workers, and it is important that supervisors are able to adapt their approach and use different skills to meet the needs of their supervisees.

> *It's supervision is very different in that if I was sitting, supervising a student, it may feel very different to what my supervision would feel like as an assistant director. So I guess is trying to think about what those layers of an organisation mean within, within a supervision context.*
>
> Participant1

All the participants also placed value on the importance of being able to access different forms of supervision; recognising that providing informal support and group/peer supervision, was complementary to the formal individual supervision process.

Overall findings: a narrative

Following a further thematic analysis (Stage 3), the following extract presents the experiences of effective supervision for practitioners from when they first enter social work study (as a student/apprentice/ASYE) through to become strategic level managers.

> *At the start of their journey, practitioners find the reflective elements of supervision particularly supportive. Once fully qualified (after ASYE), practitioners see the shift to a case management focus as helpful in developing their practice knowledge. As they progress further, e.g. to senior social work level, supervision decreases, and a lack of confidence can develop in their decision-making due to the process-driven nature of supervision. So, at this stage they would appreciate a return to include more reflective supervision, as they had earlier in their career. When transitioning to management practitioners feel they are left to learn human resources and performance*

management 'on the job'. However, they see the return of reflective supervision in easing the transitioning – helping them deal with 'imposter syndrome' as they become managers. As practitioners develop further into more strategic roles, they emphasise the importance of supervision being a safe space where expectations, on both sides, are managed. They emphasise that for supervision to be effective it should be adaptable – to different styles of learning, and to different stages of the social work career.

Discussion and conclusion

I feel so much better after I've had supervision

Research into what effective supervision looks like for practitioners in the UK is limited, therefore this exploratory study presents an opportunity to highlight and explore the perceptions and experiences of practitioners. To achieve effective supervision, practitioners in this study highlight the importance of reflective supervision. They see this as a forum in which they can be asked critical questions, of their practice, by their supervisors. When this is done supportively and constructively, practitioners appreciate being challenged to improve their practice. It was suggested by practitioners at different stages of their careers that group supervision with other team members is a practical way to include more reflection and critical thinking. Based on the responses in this study, a shift to a case management focus is not problematic early in the social work career as this assists newer practitioners in developing and making sense of their emerging hands-on practice experiences. It appears to become problematic, however, as the practitioner develops into a senior practitioner. It is at this stage, according to the research, where the balance is not suitable, i.e. too much in favour of case management and not enough on reflective supervision.

To ensure the purpose of supervision is effective, practitioners emphasised the importance of ensuring safe spaces and the development of trusted relationships between the supervisor and the supervisee. Practitioners reflected on this being connected to supervisors seemingly having e.g. time to engage in informal conversations, being consistent, having regular supervision, and the supervisee having input into, rather than just receiving, supervision. Trusted relationships and feeling safe were seen as essential for practitioners to benefit from supervision, to feel supported in their emotional wellbeing and to feel their decision making is shared.

Recommendations

For supervision to be 'effective' it should feel safe to practitioners, and they should feel they can trust their supervisor. To achieve this, the following are recommendations for consideration. Supervision should be:

- consistent, regular, transactional, flexible, formal and informal;
- adapted to the needs of the social worker and the social work career stage;
- a balance of reflection with case management, with more reflection needed at senior practitioner level; and

- individual, but for added reflection group supervision can be an effective tool that is also less time-intensive on supervisors.

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https://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/Support-for-leaders-and-managers/Managing-people/Supervision.aspx

Social Work England

https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/cpd/supervision/

APPENDIX 1

NESWA membership – in alphabetical order

Local Authorities:
Darlington Borough Council
Durham County Council
Gateshead Council
Hartlepool Borough Council
Middlesbrough Council
Newcastle City Council
North Tyneside Council
Northumberland County Council
Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council
South Tyneside Council
Stockton Borough Council
Sunderland City Council / Together for Children, Sunderland

Higher Education Institutions:
Durham University
New College Durham
Northumbria University
Open University
University of Sunderland
Teesside University

APPENDIX 2

Focus group questions, with probing areas:

What aspects of supervision have social work students and practitioners found beneficial in the following areas?

1. Preparedness for the realities of practice
    - transitions e.g., to next role
    - understanding of the self e.g., emotions, resilience, self-awareness etc.
    - how to engage in IT, manage systems/processes, workload etc.
2. Developing effective decision-making
    - capacity building e.g., from manager-led decision-making to practitioner autonomy in decision-making
    - support to engage with other professionals/agencies
    - confidence building
    - developing skills in critical thinking
3. Supporting competence in understanding identity of self and others
    - e.g. through *Social GGRRAAACCEEESSS*
    - bias, values etc.
    - *feeling confident (safe) in relationship with supervisor*
4. Is there anything else you would like to say?