Reducing unnecessary social worker workload through improving the quality of supervision

Research report

September 2025

Authors: Research in Practice

Exploring the case for quality standards in supervision for social workers by Professor Eileen Munro

The supervision tool for assessing reflexivity (STAR) by Dr Lisa Bostock and Dr Louise Grant

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Acknowledgements

Research in Practice would like to thank the members of the National Workload Action Group for their commitment to ensuring that the objectives of the National Workload Action Group were met, and for their continuing drive to contribute to system change which benefits social workers, and ultimately the children and families they work with.

We would also like to acknowledge the work and commitment of Essex County Council and King's College, London in supporting the National Workload Action Group (NWAG). Essex County Council played a critical role in supporting the 22 local authorities who tested the learning resources produced as part of NWAG activity. Essex and King's College, London each contributed their workforce research and practice knowledge and expertise, making this work richer and relevant to practice.

The involvement and engagement of the 22 local authorities taking part in this project ensured that the work was focused on what would make a difference in social work practice, to children and families and to social workers. The feedback they provided on the practice resources developed during this project was essential in checking the resources would be practical and useful for social workers and the social care workforce.

Research in Practice is grateful for the generosity of time and expertise freely given by everyone involved in this project and would like to thank DfE for the opportunity to contribute to this important strand of workforce reform.

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Please cite as:

Munro, E (2025), *Exploring the case for quality standards in supervision for social workers*, Department for Education

Bostock, L and Grant, L (2025), *The supervision tool for assessing reflexivity (STAR)*, Department for Education

Introduction

This report is published as part of a suite of supplementary reports from the work of the National Workload Action Group (NWAG). NWAG was established by the Department for Education to identify potential solutions to reduce unnecessary social worker workload, so that social workers could focus on necessary activities. The suite of supplementary reports provide additional detail about the activity and findings of each of the workstreams: admin support, workload and caseload management, supervision, hybrid working and digital practice and the use of AI in case recording. The NWAG Final Report summarises the NWAG activity and recommendations.

This supplementary report is in two parts. The first part, written by Professor Eileen Munro, considers if the introduction of national quality standards would improve the quality and consistency of social work supervision in England. The supplementary report identifies how we might understand more about the quality of social work supervision using methods adapted from other professions.

The second part of the supplementary report, written by Dr Lisa Bostock and Dr Louise Grant, introduces STAR (Supervision Tool for Assessing Reflexivity). Based on the work of Bostock et al[1] STAR is presented as a research-informed method for assessing the quality of the reflective dimension of supervision. Originally developed as a research instrument used in contexts of systemic social work practice and motivational interviewing, the current iteration is intended to be applicable across social work practice model contexts and to assess both one-to-one and group supervision. The STAR is primarily designed to support staff learning and development and organisational quality assurance through direct observations of supervisory sessions in action. A downloadable version of STAR is available for use in practice.

[1] Bostock L, Patrizo L, Godfrey T, Munro E and Forrester D. (2019a). *How do we assess the quality of group supervision? Developing a coding framework*. Children and Youth Services Review, 100, 515-524. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.03.027

Part 1: Exploring the case for quality standards in supervision for social workers

Professor Eileen Munro

This paper is a contribution to the work of the National Workload Action Group (NWAG). As one element of NWAG's work to explore means to improve social work conditions and workload, it considers whether national supervision quality standards would drive improvements in current supervision practice.

In preparing the paper the author reviewed literature and guidance on developing effective, reflective supervision, existing methods for measuring quality and critiques of prescribing national standards. This was by no means a systematic review but was helped by some good reviews of current evidence on use, effectiveness, purpose and impact of social work supervision. The paper also refers to selected safety management literature on developing organisational conditions in which errors or faults are picked up early and rectified, so they do not proceed to adverse outcomes – a key aim of social work practice supervision. A discussion with Dame Moira Gibb, who chaired the Social Work Taskforce which recommended that national supervision standards should be implemented, provided background on what this recommendation was intended to achieve.

Various factors make the idea of introducing a national quality standard challenging:

- managerial oversight and the data returns it generates provide a metric for monitoring the quantity of management supervision. Understanding the quality of reflective supervision and its support to workers' professional development and wellbeing is more complex and might be a significant addition to the workload of practice leaders

- there is growing recognition of the importance of locating the reflective, developmental and wellbeing elements of supervision as 'distributed factors'[2] in practice systems. Alongside formal sessions these may be experienced in team interactions, group supervision and multi-agency case meetings. As such, measuring their occurrence only within formal supervision sessions would be an incomplete measure of a practitioner's experience

- the use of quality measures in organisational contexts in which weaknesses and omissions are treated as opportunities for learning might be very different than in a

[2] Gregory, M. (2024). *Supervision as a dispersed practice: Exploring the creation of supervisory spaces in day-to-day social work practice*. Child & Family Social Work, 31(1), 48–59. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13191 (Accessed: 7 April 2025)

context in which the judging of performance is experienced as punitive. In the latter, such measures might lead to professionals 'gaming' the system to achieve the appearance but not the reality of the intended goal

- quality measures developed as research instruments or within specific practice frameworks need adaptation to test whether they can have generic application in different organisational structures and within a range of practice frameworks

Background

Social work practice requires workers to develop relationship skills to work with people and analytic skills to assess problems, plan and provide help. As with the related professions of psychology and psychoanalysis, supervision, both one-to-one and group, is seen as a strong support for improving reasoning, building expertise, and in providing emotional support for the challenges of the work. Indeed, the importance of supervision in improving judgments and decisions was stressed in the first social work textbook; Social Diagnosis by Mary Richmond[3] and there are many guides to undertaking supervision.[4,5,6]

Since the first social work textbook was written,[7] reflective supervision and support have been recognised as important for both social workers and the families with which they work. Research studies are small scale but offer support for the positive impact of effective, relationship-based support and supervision on staff wellbeing and retention (Warwick et al[8] provide a succinct summary). Effective supervision is associated with benefits for practitioners, including job satisfaction, self-efficacy, capacity to develop reflexivity and engage consciously with the self and strong emotions generated from practice, social and emotional support as well as stress management.[9,10] For organisations, provision of supervision is associated with workload management, case

[3] Richmond, M. (1917). *Social diagnosis*. Russell Sage Foundation.
[4] Earle, F., Fox, J., Webb, C., & Bowyer, S. (2017). *Reflective supervision: A resource guide*. Research in Practice
[5] Beddoe, L. and Davys, A. (2020) *Best Practice in Professional Supervision, second edition: A guide for the helping professions*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
[6] Kadushin, A. and Harkness, D. (2014). *Supervision in Social Work*. 5th ed. New York: Columbia University Press.
[7] Richmond, M. (1917). *Social diagnosis*. Russell Sage Foundation.
[8] Warwick, L., Beddoe, L., Leigh, J., Disney, T., Ferguson, H., & Cooner, T. S. (2023). *The power of relationship-based supervision in supporting social work retention: A case study from long-term ethnographic research in child protection*. Qualitative Social Work, 22(5), 879-898. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/14733250221113015 (Accessed: 7 April 2025)
[9] Carpenter, J., Webb, C., & Bostock, L. (2013). *The surprisingly weak evidence base for supervision: Findings from a systematic review of research in child welfare practice (2000–2012)*. Children and Youth Services Review, 35, 1843–1853. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.08.014
[10] Jermaine, M. Ravalier, P., Wegrzynek, P., Mitchell, A., McGowan, J., McFadden, P., Bald, C. (2023). *A rapid review of reflective supervision in social work*. The British Journal of Social Work, 53(4), 1945–1962. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcac223 (Accessed: 7 April 2025)

analysis and workforce retention.[11] There is also some evidence that quality of supervision is associated with improved outcomes for service users, including improved parental engagement, life ratings over time and greater alignment of goals with social workers.[12] Evidence from research in the context of a practice framework suggests that the higher the quality of supervision, the better the quality of direct practice with service users.[13,14] The highest-quality supervision has been found to actively shape practice by providing a 'rehearsal space' to plan and practice challenging conversations with families to ensure that practice is purposeful and effective.[15]

Research evidence, guides and resources on how and why to provide good one-to-one reflective supervision are plentiful yet research over decades suggests that management oversight of targets and timescales frequently drive out the space for supervision's critical reflection and emotional support functions.[16,17] Where these elements are insufficient, there is negative impact on the development of practitioners' capacity to reflect on their own reasoning and thereby develop their professional expertise[18] and to receive emotional support with a consequent impact on the quality of practice.

Statutory guidance, inspection frameworks and professional development frameworks endorse supervision's importance:

- **statutory guidance:** foregrounds supervision for some roles. In child and family social work, Working Together to Safeguard Children[19] states that managers should ensure teams 'have time to engage in peer learning and knowledge

[11] Carpenter, J., Webb, C., & Bostock, L. (2013). *The surprisingly weak evidence base for supervision: Findings from a systematic review of research in child welfare practice (2000–2012)*. Children and Youth Services Review, 35, 1843–1853. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.08.014
[12] Wilkins, D., Lynch, A., & Antonopoulou, V. (2018). *A golden thread? The relationship between supervision, practice, and family engagement in child and family social work*. Child and Family Social Work,
[13] Bostock, L., Patrizo, L., Godfrey, T., & Forrester, D. (2019). *What is the impact of supervision on direct practice with families?* Children and Youth Services Review, 105, 104428. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104428
[14] Bostock, L., Patrizo, L., Godfrey, T., & Forrester, D. (2022). *Why does systemic supervision support practitioners' practice more effectively with children and families?* Children and Youth Services Review. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2022.106652 (Accessed: 7 April 2025)
[15] Bostock, L., Patrizo, L., Godfrey, T., & Forrester, D. (2019). *What is the impact of supervision on direct practice with families?* Children and Youth Services Review, 105, 104428. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104428
[16] Beddoe, L., Ferguson, H., Warwick, L., Disney, T., Leigh, J., & Cooner, T. S. (2022). *Supervision in child protection: A space and place for reflection or an excruciating marathon of compliance?* European Journal of Social Work, 25(3), 525–537. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2021.1964443 (Accessed: 7 April 2025)
[17] Wilkins, D., Forrester, D., & Grant, L. (2017). *What happens in child and family social work supervision?* Child & Family Social Work, 22(2), 942-951. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12314
[18] Lee, A. Y., & Hutchison, L. (1998). *Improving learning from examples through reflection. Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*, 4(3), 187–210. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1037/1076-898X.4.3.187
[19] HM Government. (2023). *Working together to safeguard children: A guide to multi-agency working to help, protect and promote the welfare of children*. Department for Education. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children--2 (Accessed: 7 April 2025)

exchange, peer audit, group supervision and observation'. This latest iteration of Working Together focuses on the role of lead practitioner and their access to high quality supervision as playing a 'critical role in ensuring a clear focus on a child's welfare and support practitioners to reflect critically on the impact of their decisions'. This focus on lead practitioner in a multi-agency team relates to the Reforms tested in Pathfinder areas to implement multi-agency 'family help' services for targeted early help and Child in Need work.

Working Together states that 'practitioners' analysis should be supplemented and challenged by others working in the multi-agency team, including the social work qualified practice supervisor or manager, with the family and/or in their teams and management chain. Critical reflection through supervision should further strengthen the analysis.

- **Professional development frameworks:** the various Knowledge and Skills Statements for child and family and adult social work, the generic Professional Capabilities Framework, the children's social care national framework and forthcoming Early Career Framework all foreground the role of reflective supervision as an enabler of good practice.

  The children's social care national framework sets expectations and the significant pivotal responsibilities of practice supervisors. These include building an 'inclusive workplace culture' that values the expertise of practitioners; developing 'a culture of learning and improvement'; facilitating reflective discussions; influencing 'the culture of practice by providing a safe, calm, and well-ordered environment'; and to 'share feedback to help senior leaders to improve the practice environment'.

- **Regulation and inspection:** Ofsted inspectors and CQC assessors make judgments on the quality of supervisory practice. Ofsted includes supervision in the framework for inspecting local authority children's services (ILACS). This requires that inspectors review a sample of supervision records and flag for priority action where they identify 'deficit in management oversight and supervision that impacts adversely on delivery of help, protection or care to children or care leavers.' Inspectors ask practitioners about the quality and impact of supervision and management oversight and supervision policies are one of the documents required at Annex A of the ILACS framework.

- **National context:** In taking a systems approach it is appropriate to consider the national context of intensely high demand and a public sector funding environment that has created highly challenging conditions in which leaders make decisions on what to prioritise.

In the child and family sector a plethora of reform and new primary legislation are in progress, seeking to give more priority to the quality of service by improving enablers and reducing detractors. Improving practitioners' experience of supervision is an element within these reforms.

Purposes of Supervision

Managerial oversight: this is the function consistently observed to take priority.[20] It is the most easily measured aspect of supervision and supports the procedural compliance required by DfE annual data returns.[21,22] This is one function that may, at least partly, be done outside supervision through access to online case management systems where managers can check the progress or delay and the quality or weakness of the practice recording. Advancing technological innovations might further enable the efficiency of this function, allowing supervision sessions to be more focused on the second and third functions.

Reflective supervision is seen as crucial in both improving practice in a specific case and in contributing to the development of practitioner expertise. In critical reflection or 'slow thinking'[23] a worker develops more conscious analytic thinking in order to review their intuitive thinking, make sense of what is going on and plan next steps. It is widely accepted that a worker's emotional response to the people they work with can be both a source of wisdom and of distortion so explicitly considering it in supervision can provide a check. Intuitive reasoning is known to be vulnerable to some biases and it is very difficult to police one's own intuition, talking it through with others can alert workers to bias.[24,25,26] Supervision is also a place where explicit consideration of the application of a theory or research findings may be done.

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[20] Beddoe, L., Ferguson, H., Warwick, L., Disney, T., Leigh, J., & Cooner, T. S. (2022). *Supervision in child protection: A space and place for reflection or an excruciating marathon of compliance?* European Journal of Social Work, 25(3), 525–537. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2021.1964443 (Accessed: 7 April 2025)

[21] Johnson, C., Beninger, K., Sanders-Earley, A., Felton, J., Earl, S., Winterbotham, M., McLaughlin, H., Pollock, S., Scholar, H., & McCaughan, S. (2019). *Longitudinal study of local authority social workers (wave 2)*. Department for Education. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/longitudinal-study-of-local-authority-social-workers (Accessed: 7 April 2025)

[22] Johnson, C., Sanders-Earley, A., Earl, S., Winterbotham, M., McLaughlin, H., Pollock, S., Scholar, H., & McCaughan, S. (2021). *Longitudinal study of local authority social workers (wave 3)*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/longitudinal-study-of-local-authority-social-workers (Accessed: 7 April 2025)

[23] Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Allen Lane.

[24] Munro, E. (1999). *Common errors of reasoning in child protection work*. Child Abuse & Neglect, 23, 745–758. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/S0145-2134(99)00053-8

[25] Gambrill, E. (2004). *Decision making in child welfare: Errors and their context*. Children and Youth Service Review, 26(7), 625–644. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2004.12.005

[26] Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Allen Lane.

Reflective supervision requires a trusting relationship between supervisor and practitioner[27] and it takes time to build confidence that opening up about anxieties or concerns will lead to a constructive response. Supervisors need professional development to take on the role, sufficient practice experience to be able to offer authentic perspectives on real world situations and ideally, their own experience of receiving good supervision. Issues of workforce churn and retention create obstacles to achieving these goals. Given the longstanding issues, some who have been in post several years may never have received high quality supervision themselves.

Support for emotional wellbeing: the final purpose of supervision is to provide support for the practitioner in an emotionally demanding profession in which their own safety and wellbeing and that of those they serve are clear and present factors. Without emotional support, workers suffer burnout and may become impersonal in their dealings with children, families and adults.[28,29] This function requires experienced and skilled supervisors with sufficient time and emotional resource to offer effective support to practitioners.

Dispersed practices for professional development and emotional support

Social workers may receive a good deal of the professional development and emotional support through a range of 'dispersed practices' rather than limited to sessions explicitly called 'supervision'.[30]

Distributed decision-making: many decisions are made in the context of multi-agency case meetings, with senior management or legal team's involvement, or in family or person-led forums such as Family Group Conferences. As such, decision-making is frequently a distributed activity[31] and rarely down to one individual. Such forums may

[27] Research in Practice. (2020). PSDP - Resources and tools*: The role and functions of supervision. Knowledge Briefing*. Department for Education. Available at: https://practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/assets/the-role-and-functions-of-supervision/ (Accessed: 7 April 2025)
[28] McFadden, P., Campbell, A., & Taylor, B. (2014). *Resilience and burnout in child protection social work: Individual and organisational themes from a systematic literature review*. British Journal of Social Work, 44(2), 1–18. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bct210
[29] Travis, D. J., Lisano, E. L., & Mor Barak, M. E. (2015). *'I'm so stressed!': A longitudinal model of stress, burnout and engagement among social workers in child welfare settings*. The British Journal of Social Work, 46(4), 1076–1095. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bct205
[30] Gregory, M. (2023). *Story-building and narrative in social workers' case-talk: A model of social work sensemaking*. Child & Family Social Work, 30(1), 100–112. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13014 (Accessed: 7 April 2025)
[31] Gregory, M. (2024). *Supervision as a dispersed practice: Exploring the creation of supervisory spaces in day-to-day social work practice*. Child & Family Social Work, 31(1), 48–59. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13191 (Accessed: 7 April 2025)

also provide opportunity for reflective case discussion as the adequacy of an assessment and justification for a decision are appraised.

Group supervision: a widespread means of generating learning through being exposed to a range of cases. Prioritising group supervision sessions when workloads are high can be a challenge, but attendance can be improved if senior managers strongly encourage it.[32]

Team as secure base: ethnomethodological studies of social work offices have demonstrated how much support workers get from their team mates on a daily basis.[33,34,35,36,37] Talking over a practice interaction with a colleague can assist in sense-making and enable catharsis after difficult experiences. Biggart et al[38] report how the team, at its best, is a 'secure base', helping workers to deal with the emotional demands of the work.

The literature identifies major differences between being part of an expert team or a team of experts.[39] Expert teams are more than the sum of their parts in which the interactions between members strengthen what they each can achieve, and they are a major source of support and developing expertise. A team of experts is just individuals grouped together but operating independently. Social work teams have, historically, been viewed as expert teams, with dedicated workspaces and a professional culture that expects them to help each other. Long before the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns, workplace pressures of 'hot desking' and the pressures of bureaucracy were discussed as undermining these.

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[32] Munro, E., Turnell, A., & Murphy, T. (2020). *You can't grow roses in concrete, Part 2*. Elia. Available at: Publications & Resources | Turnell Plus

[33] Helm, D. (2016). *Sense-making in a social work office: An ethnographic study of safeguarding judgements*. Child & Family Social Work, 21(1), 26–35. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12101 (Accessed: 7 April 2025)

[34] Ferguson, H., Warwick, L., Cooner, T. S., Leigh, J., Beddoe, L., Disney, T., & Plumridge, G. (2020). *The nature and culture of social work with children and families in long-term casework: Findings from a qualitative longitudinal study*. Child & Family Social Work, 25(3), 694–703. Available at: https://research.birmingham.ac.uk/en/publications/the-nature-and-culture-of-social-work-with-children-and-families- (Accessed: 7 April 2025)

[35] Helm, D. (2021). *Theorising social work sense-making: Developing a model of peer-aided judgement and decision making*. The British Journal of Social Work, 52(4), 2329–2347. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcab178 (Accessed: 7 April 2025)

[36] Carder, S. (2023). *Emotional labour in child and family social work teams: A hybrid ethnography.* University of East Anglia. Available at: https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/id/eprint/93530/ (Accessed: 7 April 2025)

[37] Munro, E., & Turnell, A. (2023). North Tyneside. North Tyneside Council.

[38] Biggart, L., Ward, E., Cook, L., & Schofield, G. (2017). *The team as a secure base: Promoting resilience and competence in child and family social work*. Children and Youth Services Review, 83, 119–130. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.10.031

[39] Bisbey, T., Taylor, A., & Salas, E. (2021). *Transforming teams of experts into expert teams: Eight principles of expert team performance*. Journal of Expertise, 4(2), 131–143. Available at: https://www.journalofexpertise.org/articles/volume4_issue2/JoE_4_2_Bisbey_etal.html (Accessed: 7 April 2025)

Since the pandemic, ongoing changes to working practices and places mean that teams work in a variety of hybrid and tech-enabled ways and may now spend very little time in the same physical space. Remote working practitioners and supervisors may live far from where they work and rarely enter any physical team space, raising challenges for working relationships, team functioning and professional development. Research during COVID-19 lockdowns revealed the imaginative measures adopted to maintain team support via shared online spaces for planned group conversations or ad hoc advice and support.[40] Many organisations enact means to preserve face-to-face team interactions, such as identifying days in which workers all prioritise coming together in the office.

Organisational culture and practices

The Social Work Taskforce and the Independent Review of Social Care locate supervision quality firmly in the wider context of organisational systems, cultures and practices and suggest that supervision cannot achieve its full potential if the work environment is acting against it. Therefore, the primary requirement is to develop organisational culture and practice that give supervision sufficient priority and provide work conditions that facilitate social workers choosing to stay in post and carry out the work with growing expertise.

A workplace that enables honest discussions of practice and the practice environment requires a culture in which staff at all levels feel able to ask for help, admit a mistake, accept a challenge or raise concerns. Here we turn to a body of research in the safety management literature that is highly relevant, since accident investigations have found the organisational culture around these issues to be highly influential in the causation of adverse outcomes.[41,42]

A 'good' error culture[43] accepts that mistakes are likely and treats them as opportunities for learning, developing an environment in which staff feel that when they talk about mistakes or weak practice there will be a constructive response. In contrast, in many organisations, a punitive reaction to errors leads to workers hiding them and developing a defensive approach. A positive error culture is premised on the view that poor practice is made more or less likely by the work context. Improving safety requires learning about contributory weaknesses in both practice and organisational functioning.

The 'Safety Attitude Questionnaire' was developed in aviation as a tool for measuring organisational culture on these factors and is used across the globe. It is based on

[40] Munro, E., & Turnell, A. (2023). *North Tyneside*. North Tyneside Council.
[41] Dekker, S. (2006). *Ten questions about human error*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
[42] Woods, D., Johannesen, L., Cook, L., & Sarter, N. (2010). *Behind human error: Cognitive systems, computers, and hindsight*. Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio: CSERIAC
[43] Dekker, S. (2006). *Ten questions about human error*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

extensive factor analysis of data from studies of work environments that correlate with safe performance and have been shown to cover empirically distinct, though conceptually related, factors.[44] It was subsequently adapted and is widely used in health care and has been adapted to children's social care[45] where it is used, to some extent, in Norway and in England. While it is insufficiently tested to be recommended, the questions it contains give valuable insight into the dimensions of people's experiences that contribute to good practice.

Teamwork climate: the level of satisfaction with the quality of teamwork and cooperation experienced with colleagues.

Safety climate: the extent to which individuals perceive a genuine and proactive commitment to safety in their organisation.

Perceptions of management: the extent to which the wider system supports the work.

Job satisfaction: the level of satisfaction with the organisation, the individual's morale.

Stress recognition: the extent to which individuals recognise personal vulnerability to stressors and their impact on performance:

- the questions on Safety Climate are most relevant to the quality of critical reflection not just in supervision but in the organisational culture (wording is slightly modified to fit the social care context and answers are on a five-point Lickert scale)
- the culture in my team/area of work makes it easy to learn from the difficulties in practice that others have experienced
- I know the proper channels to direct questions regarding any safety concerns I may have
- in my team/agency when my opinion on a case differs from others, I find it difficult to speak up
- I receive appropriate feedback on my performance

[44] Sexton, J. B., Helmreich, R. L., Neilands, T. B., Rowan, K., Vella, K., Boyden, J., Roberts, P. R., & Thomas, E. J. (2006). *The safety attitudes questionnaire: Psychometric properties, benchmarking data, and emerging research*. BMC Health Services Research, 6(1), 44. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1186/1472-6963-6-44 (Accessed: 7 April 2025)

[45] Skjeggestad, E., Sørensen, T., Hofoss, D., Slettebø, T., & Deilkås, E. T. (2023). *Psychometric properties of a modification of the safety attitudes questionnaire (SAQ) for child protection services*. European Journal of Social Work, 1-13. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2022.2154318 (Accessed: 7 April 2025)

- I would feel safe if I or a family member were to receive a service from my team/agency
- in my team/area of work it is difficult to discuss poor practice

Whether or not this survey is deemed adequate for social work (it does not cover all factors that might be considered important) it does offer a model for appraising organisational culture and staff experience. Like any health check survey, administering is only step one. Senior managers need to act on the findings and show staff what and how they are doing so. This will lead to improvement and also encourage staff to complete future surveys.

Organisational culture change

If organisational culture is a major part of the solution, what is the necessary cultural shift and how do you achieve it?

In social research methods there is a growing interest in studying causal processes, not simply demonstrating a correlation between A and B but understanding how A causes B. in realist evaluation and process-tracing methods it is common practice to develop logic models that articulate a theory of how proposed resources and activities will lead to change. In the literature the term 'mechanism' is used in three significantly different ways (Cartwright, Munro et al. forthcoming).[46]

1. The step-by step process by which an initial cause produces an endpoint outcome. Logic models which set out how organisational changes will lead to change at the front line are of this form, often at a high level of abstraction.
2. The underlying physical/socioeconomic, legal and cultural systems that afford some causal processes and not others. In realist evaluation this is described as the context in the 'context-method-outcome' model.
3. The causal principles under which causes operate to produce their effects. These are what Mill called 'general tendency principles'.[47]

   Mill argued that most of the principles to be uncovered in political economy will tell what effect a cause is tending to, not what effect actually occurs. That is because what happens is usually the result of a number of different causes pushing and pulling in different directions at once.

[46] Cartwright, N., Munro, E., & Pemberton, J. (forthcoming). *Causal processes and their warrant: A practical guide*. Cambridge University Press.
[47] Mill, J. S. (1846). *A system of logic ratiocinative and inductive*. Harper and Brothers, p. 259.

> Tendency principles often describe familiar psychological or sociological dispositions widespread across individuals or institutions, or widespread in individuals and institutions in specific settings. The knowledge base of social work includes many tendency principles about human behaviour.

The recommendations in both the Social Work Taskforce Report and the National Practice Framework are about achieving the desired mechanisms in the second meaning – an underlying system that enables and encourages the features of good practice and both sources offer advice on enablers and detractors. But setting out **where** you want to get to need to be augmented by developing an understanding of the mechanisms in the first meaning: **how** do you transform an organisation from one underlying system to the desired one? This question is harder to answer but reports from the Department for Education-funded Innovation Programme demonstrate that local innovation and adaptation are needed to achieve systemic change.

There is a good deal of learning to be drawn from those organisations that have undergone radical reform, implemented and sustained clear practice frameworks and make support for the intellectual and emotional aspects of the work a high priority. Learning how such employers have been able to achieve radical shifts in organisational culture despite financial constraints and growing demand may well not identify a simple Theory of Change but can provide higher level principles and stories which can guide others.

Studying successes is unlikely to produce a blueprint with detailed instructions. Context matters in system change and the differences in their starting points between one organisation and another are significant, not just on internal factors but in the wider context of their local community and partner agencies.

Policy gaps

As evidence on the implementation of practice models demonstrates, there are no simple means that applies to achieving change in all social work employer organisations because there are so many significant differences between them. Different organisations respond to the same organisational theory of change and the same input of training and support with very different outcomes.[48] Examples of strong practices can provide useful indicators but, at the micro level, all will have followed different pathways to reform with varying degrees of achieving their goals. If is it accepted that the change process requires creativity and continual learning and adaptation, then there is a limited place for Government prescription.

[48] Munro, E., Turnell, A., & Murphy, T. (2020). *You can't grow roses in concrete, Part 2*. Elia. Available at: https://www.turnellplus.com/publications

The Munro Review argued that the level of prescription that had slowly accumulated had reached a counterproductive level so that organisational attention was directed on achieving compliance with procedures more than on improving the well-being and safety of children and young people. There is a danger that introducing a national quality standard for supervision will be measured in a way that skews organisational attention onto the easily measured and not the desired quality relevant to their practice framework.

Policy implications

There is consensus on what supervision should cover and considerable similarity in the visions of the desirable underlying organisational system of the Social Work Taskforce,[49,50] the Social Care Review[51] and the National Practice Framework.[52] The policy gap is guidance on how to get from where we are to where we want to be. Supervision is considered to have three main purposes: managerial oversight, critical reflection on the social worker's reasoning about a case and psychological support. Evidence indicates that the first purpose is already reasonably well done and can to a large extent, be done outside supervision. The gaps are in meeting the second two purposes. Their importance is well accepted in the sector and front-line workers who receive good supervision on these issues value it highly. Enabling sufficiently high priority to finding time and resources to achieve them requires substantial organisational change to create the culture and the practice of good supervision whether it takes place in individual, or group supervision or in informal discussions with teammates, partner agency staff or consultations with senior managers.

In view of the widespread recognition of the importance of reflective supervision and emotional support, if work conditions are improved so that practitioners and managers have more time to spend on each child and family, and there is higher value given to the contribution of the team in helping with reflection and emotional support, such supervision, in its various forms, may occur more without any additional external prompt.

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Part 2: Supervision Tool Assessing Reflexivity (STAR)

Dr Lisa Bostock and Dr Louise Grant

Introduction and overview

It is widely acknowledged that regular, reflective supervision is the foundation for the effective delivery of social work and social care practice.[1] It has been described as 'the cornerstone'[2] of good practice and its reflective element critical to the social work practice experience.[3] It is incumbent on senior leaders to establish and operationalise supervisory policy and practice which clearly articulate the importance of good quality reflective supervision.

Based on the work of Bostock et al[4] the STAR tool offers a comprehensive method for assessing the quality of supervision. It was originally developed as a research tool used in contexts of both systemic social work practice and motivational interviewing to assess the quality of supervision and understand its impact on practice.

The current iteration was developed from this starting point and is designed to be applicable across social work practice model contexts. It draws on key studies which addresses the essential elements of effective practice,[5] including worker wellbeing and a focus on anti-racist practice and it enables users to identify and evidence the following six supervisory skills or domains:

The domains are:

- voice of those whose lives are the focus of service involvement: are these voices and perspectives 'present' in the conversation? Is there willingness to learn from people about their own lived experiences

[1] Local Government Association (LGA). (2020) *Standards for Employers of Social Workers in England*. Available at: https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/workforce-and-hr-support/social-workers/standards-employers-social-workers-england-2020 (Accessed: 20 January 2025).
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- risk talk and authoritative doubt: are risks understood as dynamic rather than static? Are practitioners supported to adopt a position of 'authoritative doubt' enabling them to explore what else might/could be happening
- curiosity and hypothesis generation: are supervisors/supervisees curious about multiple possibilities and perspectives? Do they generate new ideas or hypotheses
- practice shaping: how do participants develop their hypotheses into clear, actionable conversations with people using services
- wellbeing focused: to what degree is the emotional impact of the work acknowledged and managed with compassion and curiosity
- anti-racist practice: to what extent is anti-racism and other forms of discrimination addressed within supervision, both in personal and practice-related contexts

Application

Aimed at strategic leaders, principal social workers, quality assurance managers and individual supervisors and supervisees, STAR offers a research-informed method for assessing the quality of both 1:1 and group-based reflective supervision through direct observations of supervisory sessions in action. It is also suitable for peer learning and training.

What is reflective supervision?

The purpose of reflective supervision is to ensure that the organisation's primary objective is fulfilled through the direct practice of its practitioners. In other words, a key function of supervision is practice shaping. As such, supervision should be designed to empower practitioners to engage in their very best work with the people whose lives are the focus of service involvement, promoting skilled, research-informed practice. It should facilitate thorough risk assessment and careful analysis, fostering decision-making and strategic planning focused on enabling positive outcomes for people with service involvement in their lives.

Supervision is enacted in the context of professional relationships with a shared purpose: to provide high-quality support to those whose lives are the focus of service involvement in accordance with the organisation's responsibilities and accountable professional

standards.[6] Co-operative, respectful, and open dialogue between supervisors and supervisees are required foundations for these relationships.[7]

The STAR approach facilitates the evaluation of the supervisory relationship, and the extent to which it is shaping reflective, inclusive practice. The STAR tool is informed by the work of Ahmed[8] to highlight the importance of supervisory practice to encourage reflection on anti-racism in professional practice and to create space for discussions around the impact of experiences of racism and other inequities and structural disadvantages. To capture the role of supervision in the workforce wellbeing strategy a focus on wellbeing is included, thereby supporting the personal wellbeing of practitioners with the aim of enhancing job satisfaction.

Reflective supervision is designed to help the supervisee:

- reflect on their practice: examine their actions, decisions, and interactions with those whose lives are the focus of service involvement, their families and colleagues
- recognise risk: work from an acceptance of 'not knowing' and curiosity to support generation of multiple possibilities and responses to increase the safety of the people they are working with
- identify areas for improvement: recognise patterns, biases, or challenges that may be impacting their work
- develop new skills and knowledge: learn from their own and others' experiences and gain insights from the supervisor's/peer's expertise
- enhance their professional growth: increase self-awareness and develop a deeper understanding of their role and responsibilities
- process strong emotions: to enable supervisees to make sense of unmanageable thoughts and feelings and become more emotionally attuned to the experiences of those whose lives are the focus of service involvement[9]

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[6] Carpenter, J. Webb, C and Bostock, L. (2013) *The surprisingly weak evidence base for supervision: findings from a systematic review of research in child welfare practice (2000-2012)*, Children and Youth Services Review, Volume 35, 1843-1853, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.08.014

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Effective supervision is associated with a suite of benefits for practitioners, including job satisfaction, self-efficacy, capacity to develop reflexivity and engage consciously with the self and strong emotions generated from practice, social and emotional support as well as stress management.[10,11] For organisations, provision of supervision is associated with workload management, case analysis and workforce retention.[12] There is also some evidence that quality of supervision is associated with improved outcomes for service users, including improved parental engagement, life ratings over time and greater alignment of goals with social workers.

Evidence also suggests that the higher the quality of supervision, the better the quality of direct practice.[13] The highest-quality supervision has been found to actively shape practice by providing a 'rehearsal space' to plan and practice challenging conversations with families to develop practice that is purposeful and effective.[14]

How the STAR tool works

The organisational conditions for effective assessment of the quality of supervisory practice need to be psychologically safe. For any observation of practice to be successful it needs to be based on principles of trust with careful regard to the negotiation of a clear understanding of scope and purpose.[15] The STAR tool is designed to provide a focus on learning and development rather than to be used as a blaming or shaming exercise.

The STAR tool should be used in conjunction with an organisation's supervision policy that clearly articulates the importance of reflective supervision. In line with the Employer Standard for Supervision, this policy should offer opportunities for reflection, foster practice shaping conversations, and prioritise professional development and wellbeing. It should encourage a focus on anti-racism and rights-based professional practice and

[10] Carpenter, J. Webb, C and Bostock, L. (2013) *The surprisingly weak evidence base for supervision: findings from a systematic review of research in child welfare practice (2000-2012)*, Children and Youth Services Review, Volume 35, 1843-1853, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.08.014
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other aspects of diversity, equity and inclusion. Additionally, the policy needs to encompass auditing frequency and quality, objective setting and planning.

The STAR tool can be used to assess the quality of supervision on an individual or organisational basis. It is designed to observe supervision across the six key supervisory skills or domains outlined above, with questions posed to guide observations.

Using STAR to assess organisational strengths in reflective supervision

As well as its use with individual practitioners, the STAR tool can also be used to assess whether supervision quality across the organisation meets the Employer Standard for Supervision. Once the individual observations have been rated, ratings across all observations undertaken should be analysed, to inform the development of an action plan to achieve the standard.

Action planning using PACT goals is likely to promote sustainable change.

PACT goals (Purposeful, Actionable, Continuous, Trackable) focus on continuous development by prioritising the process of change over long-term outcomes, promoting sustainable and attainable improvements.

Key points include:

- delegation and collaboration: involve individuals in defining problems and co-designing solutions to foster ownership and commitment
- breaking down goals: se goal-setting techniques to create immediate, achievable actions from larger objectives

Four essential elements of PACT goals

1. Purposeful: align goals with organisational values, principles, and the vision for reflective supervision.
2. Actionable: focus on practical, immediate steps within the organisation's control to drive progress.
3. Continuous: actions are repeatable and adaptable, becoming ingrained in organisational practice.
4. Trackable: monitor smaller actions over time to measure progress toward goals and demonstrate impact.

This structured, inclusive approach to action planning should help embed reflective supervision and sustainable change.

Summary of stages for enhancing supervisory practices

Stage 1: Create buy-in

Lay the foundation by building organisational commitment and identifying areas for improvement. Key actions:

- form a diverse steering group to lead the process including supervisors, quality assurance leads and service managers
- assess current supervision practices using STAR and define improvement goals
- communicate areas that require further support and planned actions
- set PACT goals to drive continuous growth

Stage 2: Plan

Focus on practical, achievable actions. Key steps:

- define PACT goals and prioritise small, immediate changes
- develop an evaluation strategy to measure progress over time
- assign tasks within the steering group and establish a communication plan
- determine who will provide training or support (internal or external)

Stage 3: Implement

Translate plans into action. Key actions:

- assign roles to steering group members
- role model best practices and provide training
- track progress towards long-term goals

Stage 4: Evaluate

Assess progress and support lasting improvement. Key steps:

- define the purpose of evaluation (e.g. improving supervision effectiveness)
- formulate key evaluation questions and track progress using appropriate methods

- reflect on lessons learned and revisit action plans as needed to adapt to organisational changes

By following these stages, organisations can enhance reflective supervision and foster continuous improvement.

Here is a downloadable version of STAR for use in practice, with guidance, and a worked example.

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ISBN: 978-1-83870-641-8
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