

Chapter 1

Introduction

The origins of this practice guide stem from the recognition that, while the role of a supervising social worker is unique, complex, and requires a range of social work skills, far more research could, and should, be carried out into it. There are also few dedicated training courses available that can equip social workers with the techniques needed to perform this role effectively.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY SUPERVISION?

A number of authors have provided definitions of the term “supervision” over the years. Kettle (2015, p 1) stated that ‘effective supervision provides a safe space for workers to reflect on their practice, as well as to develop skills and knowledge’. Morrison, writing in *Staff Supervision in Social Care*, defined supervision as ‘a process in which one worker is given responsibility to work with another worker in order to meet certain organisational, professional and personal objectives’ (1993, p 13).

The Social Work Reform Board (2010, p 13), meanwhile, stated that:

Supervision provides a safe environment for critical reflection, challenge and professional support that operates alongside an organisation’s appraisal process. It includes time for reflection on practice issues that arise in the course of everyday work, and can help social workers and their managers to do their jobs more effectively. It enables social workers to develop their capacity to use their experiences to review practice, receive feedback on their performance, build emotional resilience and think reflectively about the relationships they have formed with children, adults and families.

Yvette Stanley, writing about ‘Supervision and effective social work practice’ in a blog on the Ofsted website in 2018, noted that supervision:

...involves talking through the impact the work has on you personally, as well as exploring decision-making. It is vital for practitioners’ well-being, professional development, and management oversight. Most importantly, supervision helps you to achieve the best possible outcomes for children.

Therefore, we can deduce that a supervising social worker works with a foster carer to meet the organisational needs of the fostering service, and the professional and personal needs of the foster carer themself.

HOW DO SUPERVISING SOCIAL WORKERS VIEW THEIR ROLE?

While preparing this practice guide, the author discussed the role of the supervising social worker with staff members at one local authority and one independent fostering service. Although the number of interviews conducted was limited, largely due to the impact of Covid-19 on workloads, the results gained shine a light on the views, feelings and experiences of some of those performing the role.

The interviewees were asked which aspects of the role they enjoyed most, and reported that these were:

- seeing fostered children thrive and develop;
- developing a working relationship with a family;
- working with foster carers who are receptive to new ideas and learning;
- seeing foster families grow and flourish as carers;
- seeing fostered children and families “fall in love”;
- watching foster carers provide skilled transitions for fostered children.

The supervising social workers interviewed found that the role was fulfilling and provided them with a range of experiences. As a result, many had remained in the role for a considerable period of time. However, they also noted that it is a challenging role, with the most difficult aspects including:

- managing allegations against carers;
- defining and differentiating between complaints and allegations;
- feeling helpless when watching placements “fall apart”;
- balancing the various requirements of the service, such as record-keeping and direct work with foster carers;
- ensuring adherence to the regulations when they conflict with parenting instincts;
- working with foster carers who are avoidant or chaotic;
- building close professional relationships while maintaining boundaries;
- managing their own feelings while dealing with emotive issues;
- working with foster carers who appear to lack empathy;

- helping family and friends carers to understand their changing role as foster carers.

The supervising social workers interviewed all felt that they had received very little training specifically targeted at those performing the role. Whilst acknowledging that there was some training available, for instance, from organisations like CoramBAAF, they all felt that further specialist training would assist them in fulfilling their tasks, which ranged from the very practical aspects of ensuring that equipment and finance were in place to supporting foster carers to offer therapeutic homes for children and advising on complex behavioural issues.

WHAT DOES THIS GUIDE COVER?

Given the messages received from the supervising social workers above, this book was created to provide good practice guidance and recommendations for those who take on this role. It first considers what the role of the supervising social worker entails and how it is defined in legislation. Consideration is then given to the way in which the role came into being and how it has changed over time. The guide examines the small amount of research that has been carried out into the role, and explores case reviews to identify what learning points can be found there regarding this role. The guide then follows the foster carer's journey, through induction, personal development and training, detailing the challenges faced by foster carers relating to the children they care for and the role that the supervising social worker should play in this journey. It examines some of the key aspects of the supervising social worker's role, as well as practice issues identified by those performing it. It is hoped that this guide will assist those undertaking this challenging occupation.

The guide concentrates on legislation in England, although many of the practice recommendations will be valid UK-wide.