

Guidance on Supervision in Youth Work

Guidance

Guidance on Supervision in Youth Work

1. Introduction

Supervision is a structured, collaborative process that supports youth workers in their professional roles, promotes safe and ethical practice, and enhances both personal and professional development. Within youth work, where practitioners engage with young people experiencing diverse and often complex challenges, supervision is essential for safeguarding, reflective practice, professional growth, and staff wellbeing.

This guidance outlines what supervision is, why it matters, and how to deliver it effectively across a youth work setting. It aligns with the core values of Youth Work in England and the National Occupational Standards (2024).

2. Purpose of Supervision

Supervision in youth work strengthens practice and contributes to better outcomes for young people by:

- Providing clarity of purpose, roles, and responsibilities
- Ensuring accountability and ethical conduct
- Supporting worker wellbeing and resilience
- Encouraging reflective, anti-oppressive, and strengths-based practice
- Enhancing learning, competence, and professional growth
- Improving relationships, engagement, and service quality
- Supporting decision-making, especially in safeguarding and complex situations

Supervision is both supportive and developmental. It is a professional space where youth workers can reflect, learn, and build strategies for improvement.

3. Key Definitions

Supervision:

A formal process of professional support, reflection, and development delivered through regular meetings.

Youth Worker:

A practitioner—paid or unpaid—supporting the personal, social, and educational development of young people.

Supervisor:

A trained individual responsible for guiding, supporting, reviewing, and developing the practice of the supervisee.

4. Guiding Principles

- **Confidentiality:** Supervision is a secure and confidential space, except where safeguarding concerns arise.
- **Supportive:** Focused on wellbeing, emotional resilience, and restorative support.
- **Developmental:** Encourages learning, skill-building, reflective practice, and critical thinking.
- **Accountable:** Ensures legal, ethical, and organisational compliance.
- **Anti-Opressive:** Promotes equality, challenges bias and recognises intersectionality.
- **Collaborative:** Supervision should be a two-way process, empowering both supervisor and supervisee.

5. Structure and Process of Supervision

5.1 Frequency and Format

- **Frequency:** At least monthly for full-time staff; more frequent for new or less experienced workers.
- **Duration:** Typically 60–90 minutes.
- **Format:** Preferably face-to-face; virtual or telephone sessions are acceptable where necessary.
- **Choice of Supervisor:** Where possible, supervisees should have a say in who supervises them.

5.2 Types of Supervision

- **Formal Supervision:** Scheduled one-to-one meetings focusing on reflection, performance, development, and wellbeing.
- **Informal Supervision:** Ad hoc conversations offering guidance, clarification, and emotional support.
- **Group Supervision:** Facilitated sessions involving multiple staff to reflect on themes or shared challenges.
- **Peer Supervision:** Colleagues supporting one another through shared reflection.
- **Reflective Supervision:** A structured, emotionally safe space for critical reflection, exploring thoughts, feelings, and responses to practice.

5.3 The Supervision Process

Before the Session

- Agree a date, time, and location.
- Establish or revisit supervision agreements.
- Both parties prepare relevant updates.
- Set the agenda collaboratively.
- Review actions from previous sessions.

During the Session

- **Wellbeing Check-In:** Explore physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing, including the effects of secondary trauma.
- **Review Workload and Practice:** Caseload, successes, challenges, and ethical considerations.
- **Reflective Practice:** Explore emotions, biases, assumptions, and power dynamics.
- **Skills, Learning, and CPD:** Identify strengths, development needs, and possible training.
- **Goal Setting:** Develop SMART goals to support improvement and accountability.
- **Record Actions:** Agree and document decisions, tasks, and responsibilities.

After the Session

- Supervisor provides written notes within three working days or earlier if needed.
- Supervisee reviews, confirms accuracy, and raises amendments if needed.
- Both parties track progress on agreed actions.

6. Roles and Responsibilities

6.1 The Supervisor

The supervisor fulfils four key functions:

Restorative – Wellbeing and Emotional Support

- Provide space to explore emotional impact, stress, and achievements.
- Support healthy work/life balance.

Normative – Accountability and Quality Assurance

- Ensure practice meets legal, ethical, safeguarding, and organisational standards.
- Monitor workload, performance, and decision-making.

Formative – Professional Development and Reflection

- Create a safe, inclusive space for reflective, anti-oppressive practice.
- Encourage critical thinking, insight, and learning.

Mediative – Mediation and Advocacy

- Advocate for supervisees when needed.
- Address conflicts, inequalities, or structural barriers.

Additional responsibilities:

- Maintain psychological safety.
- Address any concerns or burnout indicators.
- Use appropriate leadership styles and remain open to learning and adaptation.
- Escalate safeguarding concerns appropriately.

6.2 The Supervisee

Supervisees are expected to:

- Attend sessions on time and prepared.
- Engage openly, honestly, and reflectively.
- Take responsibility for their own learning and wellbeing.
- Challenge their assumptions and be receptive to feedback.
- Actively work towards CPD through training, study, or reflective activities.
- Follow up on agreed actions.

7. Reflective and Anti-Oppressive Practice

7.1 Anti-Oppressive Practice (AOP)

AOP in supervision helps workers understand and challenge oppression, inequality, and bias.

Supervisors should support supervisees to:

- Critically examine how power influences interactions.
- Recognise intersectionality and its impact on young people.
- Avoid reproducing harmful or exclusionary practices.

7.2 Reflective Practice

Reflective practice enables youth workers to analyse experiences, emotions, strengths, and challenges. It may involve exploring:

- Emotional responses to work with young people
- Patterns of behaviour (e.g., conflict avoidance, over-responsibility)
- Ethical dilemmas
- Values influencing professional decisions

Reflective questions may include:

- Which part of your work this week had the biggest impact on you?
- Were there moments you felt stuck or unsure?
- How did your values influence your actions?
- What would you do differently next time?

8. Models and Tools Supporting Supervision

- **Supervision Agreements** outlining expectations, frequency, and confidentiality.
- **Supervision Records** documenting key points and actions.
- **Reflective Tools** such as Gibbs' Cycle, Kolb's Learning Cycle, or The Four Lenses Framework (Brookfield, 1995).
- **The CLEAR Model (Hawkins, 2021):**
 - Contracting – Set expectations and boundaries.
 - Listening – Attend actively and with empathy.
 - Exploring – Investigate issues, feelings, and perspectives.
 - Action – Identify steps, goals, and solutions.
 - Review – Evaluate actions and seek feedback.

9. Safeguarding and the Importance of Supervision

Supervision is particularly crucial in safeguarding roles due to the legal, ethical, and emotional responsibilities involved.

It supports staff to:

- Identify risks, abuse, or neglect
- Make sound and consistent decisions
- Reflect on ethical dilemmas
- Address vicarious trauma and emotional strain
- Navigate multi-agency complexity
- Maintain compliance with legislation and policy

Supervision protects:

- **Children and young people** through better, safer decisions
- **Practitioners** through clarity, support, and reflective space
- **Organisations** by reducing risk and strengthening public trust

10. Dealing with Difficulties and Continuous Improvement

- Address breakdowns in supervision openly and constructively
- Seek senior support if needed
- Review supervision arrangements annually
- Gather feedback from supervisees regularly
- Update supervision policies and training in line with sector standards

Summary

Effective supervision in youth work is not optional it is an essential element of safe, ethical, and high-quality practice. It nurtures reflective, anti-oppressive, and accountable practitioners who can confidently support young people, manage complexity, and maintain their own wellbeing. When carried out consistently and collaboratively, supervision strengthens the entire youth work system, benefitting workers, organisations, and most importantly young people.