

Social Work Reform Board

**Standards for Employers
of Social Workers in
England and
Supervision Framework**

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Introduction

Good social work can transform people's lives and protect them from harm. In order to achieve consistently high outcomes for service users, social workers must have the skills and knowledge to establish effective relationships with children, adults and families, professionals in a range of agencies and settings and members of the public. Social workers need to be confident, articulate and professional with highly developed listening, oral and written skills. They also need stamina, emotional resilience and determination.

Evidence submitted to the Social Work Task Force highlighted the need for a set of standards and supervision framework for all employers of social workers. These standards and framework set out the shared core expectations of employers which will enable social workers in all employment settings to work effectively. Good supervision has been shown to provide more consistent outcomes for children, adults and families.

The Standards for Employers and Supervision Framework build on existing guidelines for employers of social workers, and it is envisaged that these expectations will be incorporated within the emerging self regulation and improvement framework for public services. The Standards should then inform the revised inspection frameworks that will be aligned to this developing approach to public service regulation.

The Standards apply to all employers and relate to all registered social workers that they employ, including managers and student social workers within the organisation. However, the landscape in which social work is delivered is changing. Social workers may be sourced through an employment agency, may provide their services as independent social workers on a locum or consultancy basis, and may be employed in the statutory, private, voluntary or independent sector, as well as in other organisations such as higher education institutions. Employment arrangements and responsibilities have become more complex but it is expected that these Standards will be relevant to and adopted in all settings in which social workers are employed.

Employers should ensure that their systems, structures and processes promote equality and do not discriminate against any employee.

All employers providing a social work service should establish a monitoring system by which they can assess their organisational performance against this framework, set a process for review and, where necessary, outline their plans for improvement.

Standards for Employers of Social Workers in England

1. Have in place a social work accountability framework informed by knowledge of good social work practice and the experience and expertise of service users, carers and practitioners.

To achieve the best possible outcomes for the children, adults and families who use their services, it is essential that employers have a sound understanding of what constitutes good social work practice, the theories, research and evidence that underpin it and the ways in which their organisation can achieve it. They should establish how this drives the planning and delivery of specific services. All employers should:

- Develop a strategy to monitor the effectiveness of their social work service delivery.
- Ensure that processes are in place to seek and collate the views of service users, carers and practitioners.
- Implement a system to analyse and act upon the views of service users, carers and practitioners so that continuous feedback informs and supports the delivery of quality services.
- Establish clear lines of accountability within the organisation for social work service delivery.
- Identify a strategic lead social worker who will be responsible for implementing the Standards for Employers and Supervision Framework.
- Complete, review and publish an annual 'health check' to assess the practice conditions and working environment of the organisation's social work workforce.
- Promote social work practice awareness amongst service directors and strategic managers, local politicians, community leaders, voluntary sector stakeholders and professionals in universal services such as schools, health and the police.
- Establish and maintain strategic partnerships with partner agencies, higher education institutions and other organisations.
- Explain and promote the role of social work to the public.
- Meet the career needs of social workers.
- Work with the College of Social Work and allow all social workers to be engaged in the work of the College.

2. Use effective workforce planning systems to make sure that the right number of social workers, with the right level of skills and experience, are available to meet current and future service demands.

All employers should be able to show that they have appropriate workforce planning systems in place in order to meet the needs of local service users now and in the future. Effective workforce planning systems should both determine immediate staffing requirements and help to ensure that sufficient numbers of social workers are trained to meet future demand. These should be based on an understanding of the factors that influence need and demand, including the size and specific circumstances of the local population. Workforce planning procedures should be regularly monitored and reviewed. All employers should:

- Undertake an assessment of current and future need and feed this into local, regional and national supply and demand systems.
- Ensure that workforce planning systems involve strategic partnerships with higher education institutions and other agencies.
- Provide good quality practice placements, other types of practice learning, and effective workplace assessment to help ensure that the right numbers of new social workers of the right calibre are trained.
- Engage with the social work education sector in order to facilitate exchanges of personnel and expertise.
- Facilitate further learning and development across partner agencies.

3. Implement transparent systems to manage workload and case allocation in order to protect service users and practitioners.

In order to deliver consistently high quality services and outcomes for children, adults, and families, employers should manage workflow effectively and respond quickly to changing demand. Workload management and case allocation processes should prevent work overload and safeguard staff and service users from the risks associated with high caseloads and unallocated cases. All employers should:

- Put in place transparent systems to allocate work and a means to collect information about workload within teams.
- Use this information to assess and review the workload of each social worker, taking account of their capacity and allowing sufficient time for supervision and CPD activity.

- Have contingency plans in place for resolving situations where workload demand exceeds the staffing capacity.
- Have a system in place which generates relevant information to be used as part of regular reporting to strategic leaders and feeds into supply and demand models, and the social work accountability framework.

4. Make sure that social workers can do their jobs safely and have the practical tools and resources they need to practise effectively. Assess risks and take action to minimise and prevent them.

- A social worker's working environment, resources and access to practical tools and support should be designed to deliver safe and effective professional practice. Employers should meet the safety and welfare needs of social workers. All employers should:
- Make a quiet space available for formal supervision, informal confidential professional discussions between colleagues, and team meetings. There should also be a suitable space for confidential interviews with adequate safety measures to protect practitioners.
- Foster a culture of openness and equality in the organisation that empowers social workers to make appropriate professional judgements within a supportive environment.
- Enable social workers and managers to raise concerns about inadequate resources, operational difficulties, workload issues or their own skills and capacity for work without fear of recrimination.
- Have in place effective systems for reporting and responding to concerns raised by social workers and managers so that risks are assessed and preventative and protective measures are taken.
- Ensure that the risks of violence, harassment and bullying are assessed, minimised and prevented. Where such instances do occur, there should be clear procedures in place to address, monitor and review the situation.
- Make employee welfare services available for all social workers.
- Provide social workers with appropriate practical tools to do their job including effective case recording and other IT systems, access to the internet and mobile communications. They should have safe means of transport for visiting service users and for field work.
- Provide social workers with access to fellow professionals including legal advisors, translators and interpreters.

- Provide skilled administrative staff to support social workers and help to maximise the time social workers are able to spend working directly with the children, adults and families who use services.

5. Ensure that social workers have regular and appropriate social work supervision.

Reflective practice is key to effective social work and high quality, regular supervision should be an integral part of social work practice. All organisations employing social workers should make a positive, unambiguous commitment to a strong culture of supervision, reflective practice and adaptive learning. Supervision should be based on a rigorous understanding of the key elements of effective social work supervision, as well as the research and evidence which underpins good social work practice. Supervision should challenge practitioners to reflect critically on their cases and should foster an inquisitive approach to social work. All employers should:

- Ensure that social work supervision is not treated as an isolated activity by incorporating it into the organisation's social work accountability framework.
- Promote continuous learning and knowledge sharing through which social workers are encouraged to draw out learning points by reflecting on their own cases in light of the experiences of peers.
- Provide regular supervision training for social work supervisors.
- Assign explicit responsibility for the oversight of appropriate supervision and for issues that arise during supervision.
- Provide additional professional supervision by a registered social worker for practitioners whose line manager is not a social worker.
- Ensure that supervision takes place regularly and consistently.
- Make sure that supervision takes place at least weekly for the first six weeks of employment of a newly qualified social worker, at least fortnightly for the duration of the first six months, and a minimum of monthly supervision thereafter.
- Ensure that supervision sessions last at least an hour and a half of uninterrupted time.
- Monitor actual frequency and quality of supervision against clear statements about what is expected.

6. Provide opportunities for continuing professional development, as well as access to research and practice guidance.

It is essential for social workers to be able to build a robust and up to date knowledge base through ongoing continuing professional development (CPD) and access to research, evidence and best practice guidance. Employers should facilitate career-long learning and knowledge of best practice in order to empower social workers to work confidently and competently with the children, adults and families they have been trained to support. All employers should:

- Provide time, resources and support for CPD.
- Have fair and transparent systems to enable social workers to develop their professional skills and knowledge throughout their careers through an entitlement to formal and informal CPD.
- Provide appropriate support to social workers to progress through the national career structure.
- Have effective induction systems and put in place tailored support programmes for social workers in their first year in practice, including protected development time, a managed workload, tailored supervision and personal development plans.
- Support their social workers to make decisions and pursue actions that are informed by robust and rigorous evidence so that service users can have confidence in the service they receive.
- Enable social workers to work with others engaged in research and practice development activities in universities, professional bodies, and the College of Social Work to develop the evidence base for good practice.
- Ensure that practice educators are able to contribute to the learning, support, supervision and assessment of students on qualifying and CPD programmes.

7. Ensure social workers can maintain their professional registration.

Designated social work posts should only be filled by suitably qualified and registered social workers. Existing guidelines for employers and social workers demonstrate their mutual responsibilities for maintaining professional registration, re-registration, and regulation of the profession. All employers should:

- Support social workers in maintaining their professional registration and accountability as well as their competence, credibility, and currency.
- Support staff in continuing to meet the requirements of the regulator.

- Work closely with the regulator to maintain professional standards and investigate professional conduct issues.
- Take appropriate steps to inform the regulator, co-operate with investigations and hearings carried out by the regulator, and respond appropriately to its findings and decisions if there are concerns that an employee's fitness to practise is impaired.

8. Establish effective partnerships with higher education institutions and other organisations to support the delivery of social work education and continuing professional development.

Strong partnerships and good collaboration between employers and higher education institutions will lead to a more strategic approach to meeting workforce needs, providing high quality placements and designing and delivering good quality training and development for social workers. Partnerships should be effective joint decision-making forums that enable communication, joint planning and shared activities to produce high quality social workers. All employers should:

- Implement formal partnership arrangements that promote and contribute to shared outcomes in the delivery of social work education and CPD.
- Ensure that the strategic lead social worker manages these partnerships for the organisation.
- Have a clear policy for recruiting, training and supporting practice educators.
- Support staff to access qualifying social work education.
- Provide support for social work students on placements.
- Contribute to efforts to recruit social work students.
- Work collaboratively with partner organisations to develop the skills and knowledge required to deliver high quality social work education.

Supervision framework

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.

The key elements of effective supervision encompass:

1. Quality of decision making and interventions

This aspect of supervision provides the opportunity to focus on the challenges faced by social workers in carrying out their work. It includes reflection on what work has been done, plans for future interventions and actions, and discussions on improvements in practice. There should be a focus on protecting the public and delivering effective services, with time spent reflecting on the relationships that have been formed with children, adults and families, and the mental and physical health of the social worker. Barriers to effective working on particular cases, including levels of stress experienced by the social worker, should be identified and addressed. The supervisor should be an experienced and registered social worker, usually with expertise in the same area of practice, and should encourage shared professional decision making.

2. Line management and organisational accountability

This element of supervision provides mutual organisational accountability between the employer and the employee on behalf of the public. It is a tool for monitoring the quantity and the quality of the work being done. It involves the evaluation of the job and the organisational effectiveness of the employee, and includes appraisal. This aspect of supervision is essential for all staff in the organisation, and is carried out by the line manager.

3. Caseload and workload management

Supervision should include an analysis of caseload and workload management, and address any issues relating to the extent to the time available to work directly with children, adults and families as well as meeting other demands. There should be a focus on protecting the public, delivering effective services and identifying barriers to effective practice. This may be included in the line manager's role.

4. Identification of further personal learning, career and development opportunities

Supervision in this context is about monitoring and promoting continuing professional development, including maintaining social work registration. This could include career development advice and time to explore professional development opportunities such as further qualifications. This can be included in the line manager's or professional supervisor's role.

Guidance for providing supervision in different settings:

Supervision for child protection and adult safeguarding teams

Where social workers have safeguarding and protection work as a core role then lines of accountability should be clearly identified, and elements 1 - 3 of individual supervision should normally be undertaken by the line manager who would be a registered social worker.

Supervision in multi-professional teams

Where social workers are located in multi-professional teams or project groups, with a manager from another experience background, the various elements of supervision identified above may be split amongst several people. Models of shared supervisory and managerial responsibilities are well tried and tested with social work students and newly qualified social workers, and can be managed effectively via a written supervision statement clarifying respective roles and responsibilities.

Supervision and peer learning

To see supervision as only an arrangement between an individual and their manager (or a group of supervisors) is to miss rich learning opportunities provided through formal and informal peer networks. This is an important and often underplayed part of the supervisory process. Where social workers are situated within co-located teams this is a normal part of work interaction, e.g. in case discussions and debriefings. Trends towards more home working, dispersed teams, sole social workers in multi-professional teams, and other models of working, mean that this important peer network interaction may have to be explicitly created. This should be promoted by managers, but also by trade unions, professional associations, and increasingly by the College of Social Work. Employers should support these networks which make a significant contribution to effective service delivery and the morale of social workers. The richer this experience is for employees, the less pressure it puts on an organisation's supervisory systems to provide professional challenge and updates on professional practice.

The combination of effective supervision arrangements, together with a suitable working environment, manageable workloads, supportive management systems and access to continuous learning, will help to ensure that social workers are able to provide good and responsive services for children, adults and families. By creating these conditions, employers will help to provide a setting in which social workers choose to work and remain. The Social Work Reform Board believes that all social workers should be able to expect that the Standards for Employers and Supervision Framework will form the basis for everyday social work practice in any setting in which they choose to work.