Supervision in Education – Healthier Schools For All

Barnardo's Scotland report on the use of Professional or Reflective Supervision in Education

Executive Summary

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In June 2019 we published our discussion paper entitled *"Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of education staff through professional supervision structures"*[1] In this paper we called for a national conversation about the support available for the mental health and wellbeing of teaching staff and consideration of the role of Professional or Reflective Supervision within Education. This was based on the experiences of Barnardo's practitioners who are working with and alongside schools across Scotland.

Following the publication of this paper we developed and published a consultation which was disseminated via a Survey Monkey questionnaire. This consultation was designed to engage those working directly in Education and find out about their experiences and views on the role of Supervision. We asked for responses from those *currently* working in Education in any Nation of the UK.

The survey was open for 6 weeks from the *22nd July to the 31st August* and was shared via the Barnardo's Scotland Twitter and Facebook accounts as well as via email to various networks of educationalists. *402 responses were received in total*, however not every respondent answered every question, a detailed breakdown of responses can be found in the full report along with additional evidence and case studies.

We made clear to respondents that throughout the survey when we reference Supervision we mean dedicated time, set aside regularly, for critical reflection where you can discuss and talk through the impact your work is having on you – and that this should be separate to anything related to performance management. These kinds of practices are used within Social Work, Clinical Practice and the Third Sector.

What follows is an executive summary of the key findings from this survey, a conclusion and key recommendations for next steps.

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1   https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/supporting-mental-health-wellbeing-education-staff-through-professional-supervision-structures.pdf

Respondent information

402

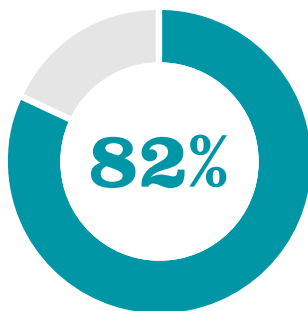responses were received in total.
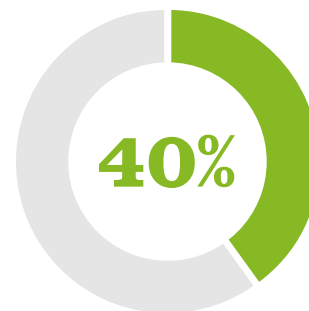
91%

of respondents were from Scotland.

20% of responses were from Head Teachers, Deputes and Principal Teachers,

33% were from classroom teachers.

Other respondents included additional support needs staff, teaching assistants and Educational Psychologists.

82%

82% of respondents were currently employed by their Local Authority.

40%

40% of respondents had experienced Supervision either within Education or within another sector.
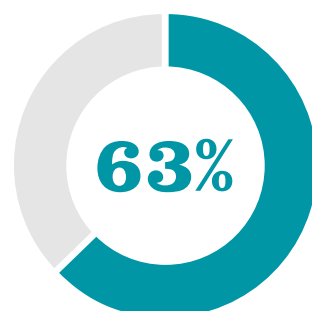
46% of respondents who had experienced Supervision had done so within Education,

42% had experienced Supervision in another sector and

12% had experience of both.

Of those who had experienced Supervision in Education,

44% were Supervised by a member of senior leadership within their school,

16% by an external organisation,

and 14% by Educational Psychology

(the rest other)

77%
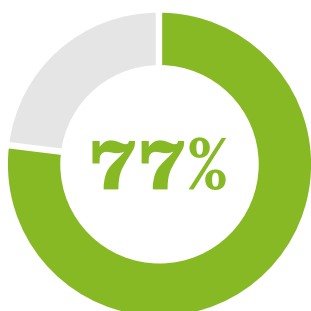
77% of these respondents had experienced 1:1 Supervision within Education rather than group, peer or other.

63%

For 63% of these respondents, their experience of Supervision in Education had been mandatory rather than optional.

Key findings

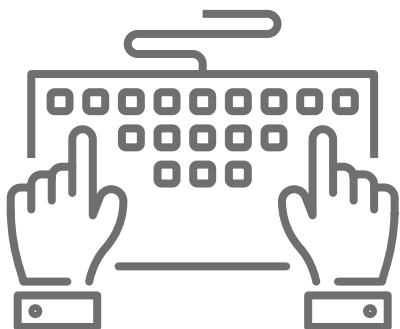## Experience of Supervision in Education

- Respondents who had already experienced Supervision in Education were broadly positive, although there were a few examples of where it had been implemented poorly or not been seen as beneficial by the member of staff.

- Themes that came out strongly from those respondents who said they valued the Supervision they received included - feeling supported but at the same time challenged; having a safe space for reflection and critical analysis; talking things through and de-briefing; exploring the emotional elements of the work; and receiving guidance, advice and reassurance from their Supervisor.


"As a Head Teacher I sought the support of a trained supervisor to work with myself and my pastoral team. I did this because I trained as a counsellor and experienced benefits, first hand of Supervision. The benefits were; helped me tease out how the Child Protection cases I was involved in were affecting my life; brought clarity; time to reflect and solve issues in a calm and designated space; my time to 'just be'; made me more efficient in work as it gave me more head space; explored strategies for helping others; reduced stress; increased my confidence; greater self-awareness and understanding; improved home and work life; helped me to see victims in my school of child abuse as survivors and gave me skills to deal more effectively with the children and their parents"

- Those respondents who shared negative experiences highlighted issues around lack of clarity about what the sessions were for and mission creep away from original purpose; lack of clarity and structure within sessions; sessions not being frequent enough; lack of trust between Supervisor and Supervisee; and it being a tick-box exercise rather than something valuable.

"It is really good when you trust the person you can talk to, but sessions are only yearly and this is not enough when supporting youngsters and families in harrowing circumstances. If you have someone you cannot trust or do not know enough then it is useless"

Views on the use of Supervision in Education

95%
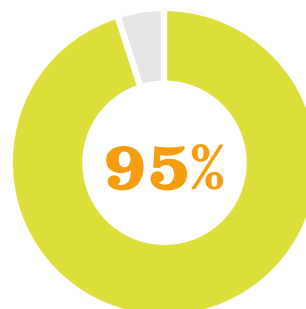
Experience of Supervision in other sectors

- The majority of respondents noted positive experiences of Supervision within other sectors with the general consensus being that the provision itself is very much needed and beneficial.

"Supervision is a most valuable process that gives everyone involved a voice. A safe space to talk honestly about what is happening and how you are feeling. I found it had a unique impact on my wellbeing"

- Respondents talked about what Supervision does and what it provides; they talked about practical and emotional benefits; they talked about relational as well as organisational and practical challenges, and they also talked about poor practice.

"I guess while it is great I receive Supervision I think it is vital to really ring fence that time and make the worker feel like you are a priority and that management take your practice seriously and are invested in the Supervision experience"

- Setting aside practical issues, **95% of respondents** said they would support Supervision in Education in principle, in the same way that it is in clinical practice and other health and social care sectors.

- Broadly speaking the responses from those who supported Supervision in Education in principle could be separated into two overarching themes – the first being **'Why Supervision is needed'** – here respondents talked about increasing levels of stress for education staff, pressures on schools, the inclusion agenda, unmet needs of pupils and parents, dealing with increased risk and vulnerability and the emotional load of teaching as a caring profession.

"I worry about pupils a lot and feel hugely frustrated at not being able to provide the support they need. I sometimes feel very alone in this and it has impacted my own mental health and wellbeing greatly to the point of being very unsure as to whether I can continue in my job"
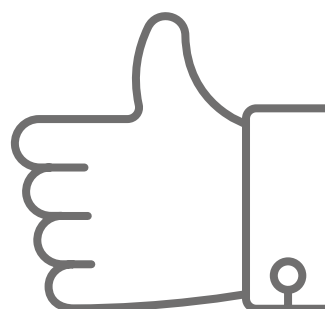
"Having worked with children with adverse childhood experiences, the transference is extraordinarily high. The pressure and worry that comes with working with these children does not stay at work, as our work does not stay at work. It comes home with us in marking, planning, report writing and stays with us. There have been times when I've had to close my classroom door and cry for the full of break time due to what's being disclosed"

- The second theme was **'What difference Supervision could make'** – and here respondents talked about improved professional practice, supporting staff mental health and wellbeing, ensuring safe practice, getting better outcomes for pupils, and allowing time and space for staff to process and reflect.

"Teaching is an emotional, tiring job and requires all staff to be mentally strong to carry out their job effectively. I feel passionately that good quality, regular Supervision would support teachers in this, giving them a chance to reflect on their practice and abilities"

"We contain a lot of emotions from children who have distressed behaviours and we need help to contain those, reflect, move on and let go. We need to know our own triggers and how they can affect our decisions – sometimes support is needed for this and Supervision can provide that"

65%
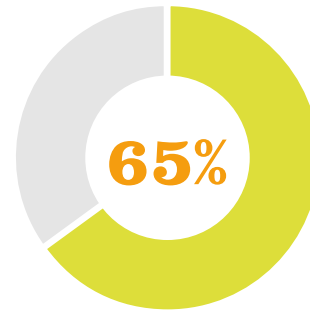
- **65**% of these responses were tagged as relating to 'mental health and wellbeing of staff',
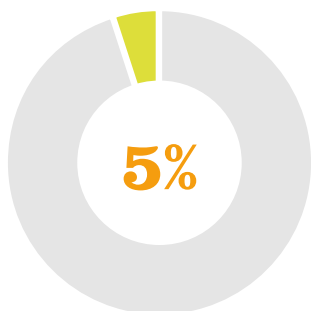
42%
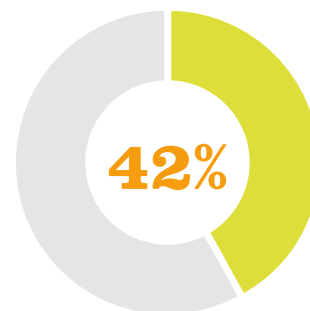
- **42**% were tagged as relating to the 'emotional impact or load of teaching' and

24%
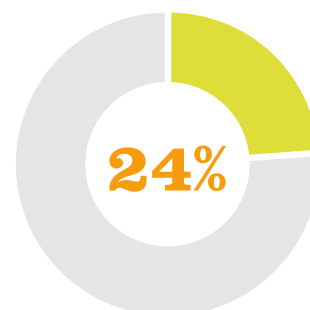
- **24**% of responses were tagged as relating to 'a space for discussion, processing and reflection'.

5%

- **5% of respondents** said they would not support the principle of Supervision in Education; some of their concerns were around terminology; it not being needed; and a lack of capacity and expertise within the Education sector to deliver Supervision.

- The highest level of engagement in the survey came in response to the question about practical issues and how these could be overcome. The top four themes in terms of frequency of mentions were

  1 **Time;**

  2 **Workload;**

  3 **Culture and Ethos; and**

  4 **Appropriate Staff.**

80%
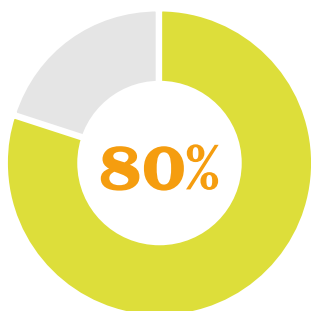
- **80% of the responses** highlighted **time** as a challenge to the successful implementation of Supervision. This covered Working Time Agreements, directed time, contact time with students, timetabling issues, class cover, time to train Supervisors and more generally finding dedicated and protected time to set aside in an already busy school day.

*"Time would need to be allocated and ring fenced, obviously involving Unions"*

"There will be significant issues in terms of working-time agreements, which are already extremely complicated in terms of working out time for development work, departmental meetings, whole school meetings etc."

27%
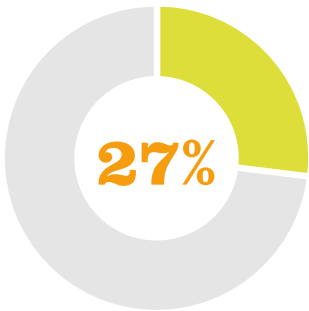
- **27%** of respondents highlighted **workload** as a potential barrier to effectively implementing Supervision; this included professional workload, managerial attitudes, and issues such as work/life balance.

"Teachers workload is highly pressured and finding or making time out for Supervision will undoubtedly be seen as not doing the job or preparing for it"

25%
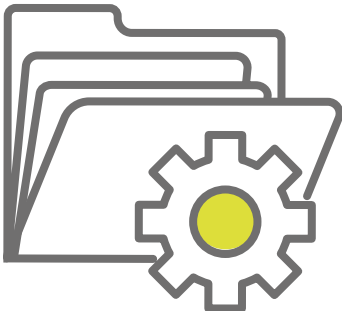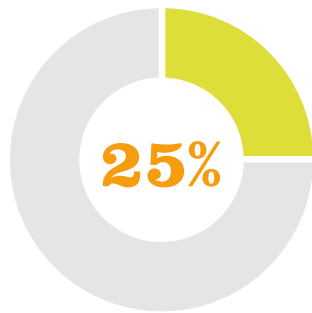
- Many respondents talked about the need for a culture shift as the starting point for beginning to embed Supervision within Education, with **25%** mentioning **culture** as a potential barrier. Responses under this heading covered the culture and ethos within the school, from individual staff members to Senior Leadership Teams, as well as Local Authorities and the wider culture of Education as a profession.

"Culture is a big one. It needs to be part of that and not associated at all with competence or performance review. It should be an integral part of professional practice and valued by all"

"There needs to be a shift to providing Supervision as the norm – it should be what we do from the very start of professional training/ education. The case needs to be made about the importance of looking after the self before we can look after others"

23%
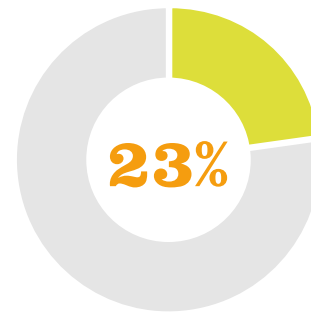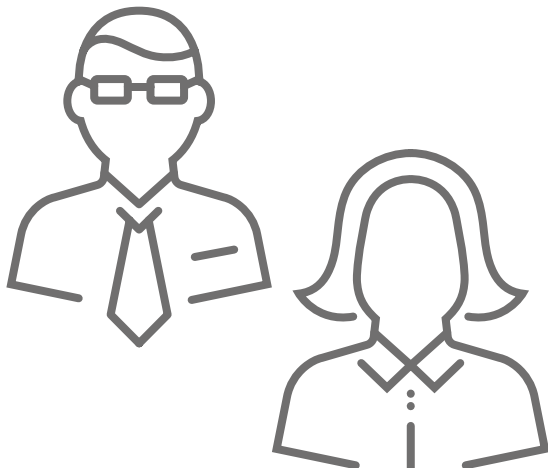
- **23%** of responses mentioned issues relating to **appropriate staffing**. Responses falling under this heading largely related to the training and expertise of those undertaking the role of Supervisor as well as the position of the Supervisor.

"We also need to consider who would be an appropriate person to be a Supervisor. A QIO with little experience of an HT post and therefore no knowledge of the type of support required would be of no benefit. An allocate social work team leader dedicated to a cluster of schools would have far more credence"

"Management would have to be given training in how to deliver Supervision in a manner that didn't feel judgemental"

- Other issues raised by respondents were practical concerns such as with physical space; cost and budgets; personal issues such as fear and stigma of showing weakness; the importance of relationships to good Supervision; as well as the clarity and purpose of Supervision.

"Need work to help staff understand what it is so shared understanding and not seen as something you get if weak and struggling – needs to be seen as normal part of working processes"

Conclusion

Although this report only reflects a small snapshot of the views of Education staff in relation to Supervision, we believe that the findings highlighted here are reflective of the broader feeling within Education across Scotland, that structured support for the mental health and wellbeing of Education staff is lacking.

The findings show that many of those working in Education can at times find they are struggling to deal with the complexity of their pupils' lives, alongside the requirement to achieve the required academic outcomes and the subsequent workload and associated stress that comes with that.

We heard that Head Teachers are dealing with extremely high level child protection cases, cases that social workers find difficult. Yet they have no formal structure of support to help them process and deal with these cases; no-one to support them with the decisions they have to make; decisions which weigh heavy on their minds even when they leave the school gates.

We heard that teaching assistants, pupil support assistants, nurture teachers and guidance teachers are often the ones at the forefront of supporting the most vulnerable pupils, pupils with complex and often unmet needs. We also heard about the isolation which can come with being a classroom teacher in some areas, a feeling of having to go it alone and the fear and stigma associated with showing weakness or that you are struggling and need support.

We hope this report can go some way in shifting the conversation in Scotland about how we can strengthen support for the mental health and wellbeing of Education staff and the potential role that Professional or Reflective Supervision can contribute to this.

We want to thank everyone who responded to and got involved in the survey, thank you for sharing your experiences so candidly and truthfully.

What next?

It is clear from the responses to this consultation that there is a place for Reflective or Professional Supervision within Education and the need is evident.

Ultimately, in the long run, we believe Supervision should be an entitlement within Education, universally available for those who wish to access it.

To consider:

- **Small pilots or tests of change to allow for the principles of Supervision to be embedded across Education by establishing what works, and for whom.**

- **Development of a Framework for Supervision to ensure consistency.**

- **Consideration of who is best placed to provide Supervision, taking into account different job roles and contexts.**

- **A critical conversation about terminology to avoid provision being met with resistance due to its unfamiliarity.**

- **The immediate introduction of Supervision procedures for practitioners involved in child protection within Education, in line with the National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland (2014)**

We firmly believe that children and young people's mental health and wellbeing could be vastly improved if the right support was available for the adults who care for them every day. Levels of stress within the teaching profession mean children and young people are marinating in these stressful environments when they come to school. It's not enough to have staff trained in mental health; if their own cup is empty how can we expect them to fill up their pupils'? Happy, healthy, regulated children and young people require happy, healthy, regulated adults around them.

That is why we believe that Reflective or Professional Supervision is crucial for Education, first and foremost for the staff themselves but ultimately for the children and young people in their care.

The mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, and their educational attainment, could therefore be enhanced by taking forward the following recommendations:

Key recommendations

1 Supervision structures should be developed and implemented as a matter of urgency for all practitioners involved in child protection within Education in line with the National Guidance for Child Protection for Scotland 2014.

2 Consideration should be given to the development of a National Framework for Supervision in Education. Any framework should set out key principles but allow for local flexibility in terms of implementation so individual schools, clusters, or Local Authorities can allow their structures to develop based on local need and context.

3 Local and National Government and Education bodies should consider the development of Supervision structures for Education staff as part of the wider commitment within the recent Pay Deal to support and improve teacher health and wellbeing and agency.

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