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Perceptions of Formal Supervision in Social Care Services (2016)

The change to a bureaucratic style of service delivery coupled with an escalation in violent challenging behaviour has resulted in stressful working conditions for social care practitioners in Ireland. Supervision provides a safe place where practitioners are supported to be accountable for their practice, supported with challenges and can reflect on their work. While an abundance of studies exist pertaining to the allied professions of social work, nursing and mental health, there are no Irish studies which reflect the perceptions of supervision in social care settings. Studies of social work suggest that supervision is unstructured and inconsistent with many practitioners receiving very little support with the challenges and complexities of their work.

This study bridges this gap in research, providing insight into supervision practice in this sector. An explanatory, sequential mixed methods study, conducted with 65 social care practitioners in a quantitative survey and followed up with 17 qualitative interviews, aims to establish if managers, supervisors and supervisees share similar perceptions of supervision.

Findings confirm that managers in privately operated youth residential agencies perceive supervision as a forum to manage the performance of employees, while their frontline staff consider it is a safe place to be supported with challenges and learn from reflection on their practice. In the disability sector, there is considerable confusion around the terminology of supervision with findings suggesting that it is more akin to the historical context of sheltered work.

Respondents identify time management issues, poor supervisory relationship and non-prioritisation of supervision as challenges to the process. The findings of gallows humour is identified as a precursor to poor practice if the theoretical safe place of supervision is not provided.

Because respondents report that supervision is unstructured and unsupportive, this study recommends that it is prioritised at government, statutory and agency level with directives incorporated into policies at every level.