Reflective Supervision Community of Practice Learning Report

November 2026

Introduction

Reflective supervision continues to be a significant focus within discussions about social work learning, workforce wellbeing, professional judgement and practice quality. Members of this Community of Practice described a range of approaches to reflective supervision across Scotland. Examples included local supervision frameworks, policies, development opportunities and quality assurance processes, alongside ongoing questions about how reflective supervision is understood, supported and sustained in practice. At the same time, services continue to operate within increasingly complex environments, balancing workforce pressures, rising demand and ongoing organisational and policy change. Recognising the value of creating opportunities for shared learning, the Social Work Scotland Learning & Development Subgroup convened a three-session Reflective Supervision Community of Practice in 2026.

The intention was not to develop guidance or agree a single approach to supervision. Instead, the Community of Practice created space for members and colleagues from across Scotland to come together, share what was happening in their own organisations, discuss challenges, learn from one another and reflect on what helps make supervision meaningful and effective.

A key aim was to connect local experience with national conversations. Members brought perspectives from practice, management, workforce development, education and leadership, creating opportunities to explore both the realities of day-to-day supervision and the wider questions facing the profession.

Across the three sessions, members shared examples of local activity, explored common challenges and reflected on what supports meaningful supervision in practice. This report captures the key learning emerging from those discussions. It is not intended as guidance, nor does it represent agreed national positions. Instead, it offers reflections, observations and questions to support ongoing discussion among

organisations, partnerships, educators, leaders and national stakeholders with an interest in strengthening reflective supervision across Scotland.

Ultimately, the report seeks to contribute to a growing conversation about how reflective supervision can support learning, professional development and practice quality, while recognising that solutions are likely to emerge through continued dialogue, shared learning and collaboration across the sector.

About the Community of Practice

The Community of Practice brought together members and colleagues from across Scotland with an interest in reflective supervision, learning and workforce development. Over three sessions, members explored:

- Existing approaches to reflective supervision
- Organisational enablers and barriers
- Workforce development needs
- Supervision quality and impact
- Leadership and organisational culture
- Links between supervision, learning and professional development

The discussions evolved over the course of the three sessions. What began as a conversation about supervision policies, frameworks and approaches broadened into wider discussions about learning cultures, leadership, implementation, workforce development and practice quality. The themes presented in this report reflect the key areas of learning that emerged across those discussions.

What We Heard - Theme 1: Reflective Supervision Sits Within a Wider Learning Culture

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"Reflective practice is often the first thing to disappear when services come under pressure."

The Community of Practice began with a focus on reflective supervision but quickly expanded into broader discussions about learning, leadership, culture and workforce development.

Members consistently highlighted that reflective supervision does not happen in isolation. Conversations repeatedly returned to the organisational conditions that enable reflective practice, including:

- Leadership commitment
- Protected time
- Workforce capacity

- Psychological safety
- Trusting relationships
- Opportunities for learning and development
- Organisational values and culture

While supervision policies, frameworks and templates were discussed, members generally felt that these alone were insufficient to create meaningful reflective practice. Instead, supervision was often described as one expression of a wider learning culture.
By the final session, discussions increasingly focused on how organisations support learning, reflection and professional development more generally, with supervision seen as one part of a broader system rather than a stand-alone activity.

Reflection - Members consistently returned to the view that supervision cannot be strengthened in isolation. Efforts to improve reflective supervision need to consider the wider organisational environment in which supervision takes place, including leadership, culture, learning opportunities and workforce pressures.

Theme 2: Practice Education Has Lessons for the Wider Workforce

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"Practice educators learn reflective supervision. Many managers are expected to do it without the same preparation."

One of the most consistent themes across all three sessions was the perceived value of Practice Educator development. Members repeatedly highlighted strengths commonly associated with practice education, including:

- Reflective questioning
- Critical analysis
- Constructive feedback
- Professional curiosity
- Use of theory
- Learning-focused conversations
- Shared expectations between learner and educator

Many reflected that Practice Educators receive dedicated preparation to support learning and reflection, while practitioners moving into supervisory or management roles often receive less structured development in these areas. There was considerable interest in understanding whether approaches commonly used in practice learning could be applied more widely across the workforce. Members also noted that many of the methods routinely used with students and newly qualified

social workers, such as learning agreements, reflective conversations and structured feedback, often become less visible as practitioners progress through their careers.

Questions were raised about whether social work places greater emphasis on learning during the early stages of a career than it does throughout ongoing professional development. Members reflected that many of the approaches routinely used with students and newly qualified workers become less visible as practitioners move into more experienced roles.

Reflection - Across all three sessions, members repeatedly returned to a simple question:
What can supervision development learn from practice education?

Theme 3: Supporting New Supervisors and Managers Requires Greater Attention

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"People can leave on a Friday as a practitioner and turn up on a Monday as a manager."

Members described supervision as a complex professional activity requiring a broad range of skills and responsibilities.
Effective supervisors are expected to balance:

- Support and challenge
- Learning and accountability
- Professional development and performance management
- Reflection and decision-making
- Wellbeing and risk

A recurring concern was that practitioners often move into management or supervisory roles with limited preparation for these responsibilities. Members shared examples of staff moving quickly from frontline practice into leadership positions without opportunities to develop supervisory knowledge, skills or confidence. There was particular concern that many managers were expected to facilitate reflective supervision despite never having received specific development in reflective practice themselves. Several members noted a contrast between the significant investment made in developing Practice Educators and the more limited support often available to new managers. There was also interest in approaches such as observation of supervision, peer support, mentoring and supervision-focused development pathways as ways of strengthening confidence and capability.

Reflection - If reflective supervision is recognised as a key contributor to practice quality, workforce wellbeing and professional development, what support should be available to those expected to provide it?

Theme 4: The Sector Is Not Short of Resources

"There was no shortage of tools and resources. The challenge was embedding them consistently."

Across the Community of Practice, members shared a wide range of approaches, including:

- Supervision frameworks
- Policies and guidance
- Reflective models
- Creative tools
- Practice learning approaches
- Training offers
- Trauma-informed resources
- Compassionate leadership frameworks
- Digital solutions

Members also highlighted examples of local innovation, adaptation and resource development. Despite this, there was little sense that the primary challenge was a lack of tools or guidance. Instead, discussions consistently focused on the difficulties of implementation. Members described challenges including:

- Competing priorities
- Workload pressures
- Staffing shortages
- Organisational change
- Limited capacity for learning
- Difficulties sustaining change over time

There was recognition that while training and resources can support change, they do not automatically lead to changes in practice. Learning from previous initiatives suggested that implementation, reinforcement and leadership support are often more important than the initial training itself.

Reflection - The challenge identified by members was not necessarily developing more resources, but creating the time, capacity and organisational support needed to embed and sustain existing good practice.

Theme 5: Quality Assurance Is the Missing Piece

"We are good at checking whether supervision happened. We're less good at understanding its quality."

Discussions repeatedly returned to questions about how organisations understand, evaluate and improve supervision. Many organisations could demonstrate that supervision was taking place through:

- Recording systems
- Audit processes
- Policy requirements
- Compliance monitoring

However, members questioned whether this was enough. Throughout the sessions, members explored questions such as:

- What makes supervision genuinely reflective?
- How do we know whether good reflection is taking place?
- What should quality assurance look like?
- What happens when supervision is ineffective or absent?
- How can supervisees raise concerns?
- What evidence demonstrates impact?

Several members noted that while organisations often monitor whether supervision has occurred, there appears to be less attention paid to understanding its quality. Members were particularly interested in approaches such as observation, feedback, staff surveys, supervision audits and reflective quality assurance processes, while recognising the challenges associated with assessing such a relational and nuanced aspect of practice.
There was also discussion about the limited national data available regarding supervision arrangements, supervisory training and quality assurance approaches across Scotland.

Reflection - Counting supervision sessions tells us that supervision has happened. It does not necessarily tell us whether learning, reflection, professional growth or improved practice have taken place.

Theme 6: Reflection, Accountability and Consistency

"Something as fundamental to professional practice as supervision should not depend on where you work."

Members consistently rejected the idea that reflective supervision and accountability are competing priorities. Instead, supervision was described as a space where reflection, challenge, support and accountability should work together. Discussions explored the importance of:

- Professional curiosity
- Critical reflection
- Compassionate challenge
- Safe but honest conversations
- Learning from mistakes
- Openness about uncertainty and complexity

Alongside this, members increasingly questioned the variation in supervision approaches across Scotland. Discussions highlighted differences in:

- Supervision policies
- Training opportunities
- Expectations of supervisors
- Quality assurance activity
- Access to reflective supervision

Some members questioned whether something as fundamental to professional practice as supervision should be subject to such variation. While there was recognition that local flexibility remains important, there was also growing interest in whether greater consistency around expectations, standards and support could strengthen supervision across the profession.

The group discussed possible roles for national partners in supporting this agenda, while recognising that meaningful change ultimately depends on local implementation and leadership.

Reflection - Throughout the discussions, members challenged the idea that supervision has to be either supportive or accountable. Instead, they described the best supervision as creating space for honest conversations, critical reflection, professional challenge and learning. The question was not whether accountability belongs in supervision, but how it can be approached in a way that supports growth, confidence and good practice.

Final Reflections

This Community of Practice began with a request to share supervision policies and approaches. Over three sessions, the discussion grew into something much broader. Members shared examples of policy development, training programmes, quality assurance activity, reflective tools and local innovation. Just as importantly, they shared the realities of trying to embed these approaches within busy, complex organisational environments.

While perspectives differed, there was considerable consistency in the challenges being described. Questions about reflective supervision quickly became questions about learning cultures, leadership, workforce development, implementation and organisational priorities.

Perhaps one of the strongest messages from the Community of Practice was that the sector is not starting from scratch. Across Scotland there is already significant knowledge, experience and expertise. Members shared examples of thoughtful and creative approaches to supervision, learning and workforce development. The challenge was rarely identifying what good practice looks like. More often, it was finding ways to sustain and embed it.

In many ways, the most significant learning from the Community of Practice was that reflective supervision cannot be understood in isolation. It is closely connected to wider questions about how organisations support learning, professional development and practice quality.

The discussions captured in this report do not provide all the answers. They do, however, reinforce the importance of continuing to create opportunities for local experience to inform national conversations, and for national discussions to remain connected to the realities of practice.

A Final Question:
How do we create and sustain environments where learning, reflection and professional development are seen as an essential part of social work practice, rather than an additional task to fit around it?