

the informed frontline worker

Special responsibilities of frontline staff

This card is for all frontline staff who have direct responsibility for managing or delivering a social care service. All staff in a learning organisation need to address the responsibilities that are outlined in the 'key characteristics' (yellow) cards and the 'knowledge about learning organisations' (dark blue) cards. However, there are specific responsibilities for frontline staff, which include:

- Being clear about their organisation's principles and policies and being able to communicate these clearly to service users and carers.
- Being clear who are the primary service users.
- Understanding one's own role and that of the organisation and being able to communicate this to others.
- Recognising that one belongs to a team and organisation and being prepared to contribute to both.
- Ensuring that core social work values, particularly respect, are adhered to by everybody at all times. Those with responsibility for reception and answering phones are in a key position and may need support and training.
- Having a clear understanding of accountability and communicating this to all stakeholders, particularly service users and carers.
- Receiving feedback from service users and carers and ensuring that their views are passed on to management. This involves advocating for service users when appropriate. Use the 'informed service user and carer' (purple) card in this pack to act as a checklist to the kind of information that service users and carers say they need in order to take part in informed decision-making.

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- Ensuring that the premises are suitable and welcoming.
- Taking responsibility for one's own learning and utilising all possible sources of knowledge, including tacit and informal knowledge often held by experienced workers.
- Sharing knowledge gained from external sources e.g. research, training courses, post-qualifying training, other agencies, service users and carers.
- Ensuring that the style of management is appropriate for different types of people and the job they are doing.
- Valuing supervision as a two-way process.
- Taking action to prevent 'burn out' in order to maintain both the service and personal motivation. This involves having a realistic and balanced workload.

Frontline staff and supervision

Supervision is a key place for decision-making in social care. The following questions act as a guide to supervision:

- Is there a supervision policy in the organisation?
- Does it clearly outline the parameters and frequency?
- Does it outline the *purpose* of supervision and its core components? Are the following included:
 - ensuring quality of work
 - looking at the overall workload, in order to get the right balance between the various aspects: direct case-work; other forms of intervention (e.g. group work); inter-agency liaison; meetings and training etc.
 - sharing and defining particular problems, and when necessary admitting to mistakes (which can then be rectified)
 - getting feedback on performance and gaining insight into oneself
 - making it a protected time, free of interruptions, to reflect on practice
 - a place to make decisions
 - the recording and monitoring of decisions and agreements

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- an opportunity to consider *all* forms of knowledge, including research findings, local knowledge and service user/carer views, and demonstrate how this is being used
- a time to explore and examine tacit/implicit knowledge so that it can be articulated and described (why we do what we do)
- the encouragement of learning and continuous professional development, and the recognition of training needs
- accountability.
- Does it cover confidentiality (and to what extent it can be confidential)?
- Is it seen as a two-way process? That is, are there opportunities for the worker to feed back ideas, perceptions and judgements which contribute to and possibly influence decision-making?
- Are the roles and responsibilities of the supervisor and supervisee carefully spelled out? This would include expectations about preparation and the right or need to question and challenge.
- Are the learning needs identified in the appraisal addressed on an ongoing basis?
- Is there a written contract?
- What happens to concerns and complaints?

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Some additional relevant points

- Where is the training for supervisors?
- There is a lot of evidence that frontline managers, who deliver most of the supervision, are receiving little or poor supervision themselves.
- Trust and respect are essential to a good supervisory relationship.
- There is a fear that much of the supervision time is taken up with business matters and procedures, with the result that the emphasis on practice is lost. This is evident at all levels.
- The frontline manager is in a key position to promote learning but has few opportunities to learn from others in the same position within the organisation. Meetings with peers across the agency to focus on practice issues are rare but they offer important learning and development opportunities.

Useful reference

- L. Hughes & P. Pengally, Eds. (1997) Staff supervision in a turbulent environment: managing process and task in frontline services. London: Jessica Kingsley.