

## Supervision for *nextstep* Advisers in Berkshire

### A Review of the First Year

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Supervision has traditionally been seen as a necessary support mechanism for counsellors and social workers. They need to share some of the strong feelings and concerns that they experience in their work with needy clients in order to deliver the best possible service. More recently it has become part of Connexions, where advisers are now dealing with a wide range of young people's situations. In autumn 2006 it was taken up by the *nextstep* adult advice and guidance service in Berkshire.

### Why Introduce Supervision at *nextstep*?

The client group seen by *nextstep* advisers has been gradually changing over the last few years. The focus is now on reaching clients with various difficulties and encouraging them to enter the world of learning and work. Consequently, advisers are seeing more and more clients with multiple social problems, mental health issues, disabilities, language and learning difficulties.

In Berkshire, *nextstep* manager Lesley Reilly realised that her advisers were dealing with an increasingly wide range of client issues. She decided to encourage them to widen their skills by increasing their reflective practice and then acting on the outcome. Her answer was to offer one-to-one supervision, allowing advisers to meet with a supervisor external to the organisation to discuss their practice. All eight eligible advisers (those delivering Advice or Guidance to clients) accepted the offer, including two who took part in pilot supervision for six months ending in April 2007. A full supervision service has been in place since May 2007.

Supervision fits in with *nextstep* Berkshire's strong commitment to training and continual professional development (CPD) for *nextstep* advisers and for the advisers working in partner organisations. These include monthly CPD meetings, at which outside professionals discuss their specific career area, and a range of workshops and courses leading to qualifications. The *nextstep* Berkshire survey of 2007 shows that partner organisations appreciate these opportunities for learning, networking and sharing experiences.

One of the benefits of supervision is that it can act as a reminder to advisers to make the most of the networking and training opportunities that are available. It can also be the place where new training and information needs are identified.

### The Aim of Supervision at *nextstep* Berkshire

The overall aim of supervision is to support effective practice and to ensure the delivery of a high quality service to *nextstep* clients.

Supervision allows advisers to openly discuss issues that have arisen in their work (maintaining client anonymity), professional quandaries and uncomfortable situations. Advisers gain another perspective and positive feedback. Alternative ways of coping with particular clients or types of situation may be developed jointly although the adviser often develops their own ideas just through the process of exploring the issue.

Advisers are encouraged in their reflective practice and their professional development. As a result of supervision they sometimes identify issues that they want to discuss with their manager or colleagues, such as gaps in their career knowledge or ethical issues and dilemmas. The idea is to link theory with practice and encourage conscious choices about how to handle similar situations in the future.

It is vital that advisers see supervision as a positive time for them (within working hours, comfortable and easily accessible) rather than an extra commitment or somewhere where their practice is under critical view.

Like supervision in Social Work or Connexions, the work aims to benefit first the *nextstep* clients, then advisers and the organisation:

- **Clients** should receive a more professional, focussed, reflective and person-centred service based on ethical principles and current legislation. They should be enabled to make good choices about learning and work.
- **Advisers** should start to be able to deal better with those client issues that they find challenging or uncomfortable. They should also improve skills such as reflection, structuring meetings or holding boundaries, following the example of the supervisor.

- **Nextstep** should gain staff that deal well with the pressures of the job, are more enthusiastic, share ideas and promote good practice. This should encourage staff retention, a developing workforce and an improving standard of quality.

### **Setting up the Service**

Advisers were sent an outline of what supervision is about and were invited to contact the supervisor if they were interested in attending an initial one-to-one meeting. At this meeting the adviser's role and typical week were explored, along with what they thought the value of supervision might be to them – expectations, hopes and fears. The supervisor's background and qualifications to be a supervisor were also discussed.

Supervision was described in terms of:

- Helping to understand the client better
- Becoming more aware of reactions and responses to clients
- Understanding the dynamics of how advisers are interacting with clients
- Looking at what happened in a client session and the consequences
- Exploring other ways of working with this client and similar ones.

### **The Supervision Agreement**

A very important element of providing a safe place to explore issues and feelings is holding to boundaries. These were carefully explored, written down and agreed at the initial meeting including frequency and location of meetings, ethical practice and confidentiality issues.

Sessions normally remain confidential between the two attendees (this is discussed in detail at the initial meeting), and all personal material remains anonymous. This boundary allows advisers to raise issues that they might hesitate to discuss with their line manager.

Should a malpractice or legal issue arise during supervision, the supervisor would try to persuade the adviser to deal appropriately with it. If they were unwilling to do so, the supervisor may break confidentiality, with the adviser's knowledge.

Both the adviser and the supervisor are responsible for the success of the supervision process, so a list of responsibilities of each party is included in the supervision agreement, including:

- Preparing for supervision sessions;
- Making space and time to reflect on previous sessions;
- Protecting the time for each session and not cancelling;
- Being open to giving and receiving challenge and being willing to learn;

The sessions are not counselling sessions. Should in-depth personal issues arise the adviser would be encouraged to seek professional counselling help with them. The supervisor also encourages the adviser to pursue any work issues that they need to with other relevant staff in their organisation.

Sessions are recorded on a brief form completed by the adviser, summarising the theme of the meeting and any action points that they want to note down. This record is then freely available to the adviser's manager without revealing the in depth material covered in the supervision session. The use of a personal reflective diary for detailed recording of thoughts and feelings is also encouraged. A list of questions to help advisers reflect on any tricky client sessions is provided.

### **Ongoing Supervision Sessions**

Supervision sessions are 45 minutes long and are arranged every 6 weeks. They are held at the supervisor's office, away from normal work pressures, to give advisers the chance to raise any issue that is important to them. Two advisers have described the environment as "an oasis", though it can also be a challenging place where both supervisor and adviser learn and grow.

The adviser sets the agenda for the session and the supervisor listens actively. Her role includes sometimes raising uncomfortable issues to help advisers with their professional and personal development. The adviser brings one or more particular client situations (anonymously) and talks through the situation - how they handled it and what they found difficult or challenging.

Sessions tend to follow a pattern of:

- Adviser introduces the client background
- Exploration of what happened in the session
- Look at reactions / feelings / issues which arose
- Relate theoretical IAG training to this real life scenario
- Explore possible courses of action

Issues arising might be about the client's actual behaviour in the room, the adviser's response to a particular 'type' of client situation, a wish to find out more about particular career issues, or just some general uncertainties. The outcome of a supervision session is often an action plan to help the adviser deal better with those issues.

Advisers may leave supervision with questions, requests for Continuing Professional Development, or with information to share. Supervision is making a contribution to the growth and development of the whole organisation, not just the individual. For example one adviser realised that the Job Centre was recommending training to some of her clients which she hadn't heard about before. She investigated and shared her knowledge with colleagues at their team meeting. Other advisers are investigating the network and broadening their knowledge of other organisations that can help their clients.

The supervisor's role is to demonstrate good practice, for example being reflective and writing a diary after each session, referring back to it before advisers come for their next session. She has her own professionally-trained supervisor with whom she can discuss her supervision work without revealing the identity of advisers or their clients.

### **Where are we now?**

Supervision at *nextstep* Berkshire has now been in place for over a year. Each supervisor / adviser relationship is unique. Advisers have settled into the idea of having supervision with varying degrees of comfort, although all are willing to keep using the service at present. It has become a place for advisers to bring tricky clients and wonder if they could have worked differently with them, it is sometimes a place to let off steam and think about how to organise things better. From a wider perspective, there has been a distinct lack of staff turnover running in parallel with the period of supervision provision.

Some advisers are naturally more reflective than others, so there is a delicate balance to be held by the supervisor, encouraging advisers to develop their own ideas about what happens in one-to-one situations, whilst occasionally making a suggestion for them to consider. One of the supremely important aspects of supervision is the reinforcement of confidence and praise for work well done. It has been noticed that the atmosphere in the *nextstep* office has palpably altered. Lesley Reilly says that although the service is now in the throes of major change, she sees her staff as coping better than she would normally expect during such a period of transition.

The advisers themselves have commented on supervision so far as:

"A boost to my confidence";

A way of developing "awareness of the importance of looking after yourself as well as the client";

"It has made me think through situations in more detail and how to deal with them positively";

"Although these meetings dealt with retrospective cases, it was useful to discuss how I could have followed different angles/approaches."

One of the values of supervision is the opportunity to use a "parallel process". In supervision, the adviser can be the "client". This has been used for example with one adviser to help her realise the amount of work that is possible in forty five minutes so that she can be realistic about her own client work. This adviser is highly committed to her clients and wants to cover as much as possible in each session. Consequently she often runs over time and is late for the next client. She builds up a lot of follow-up tasks and is overworked much of the time. The supervisor's task is to model a different way of working, sticking to forty five minutes for sessions and generating little follow-up work. This has helped the adviser focus on her boundaries as an issue that she can work on.

There is one major difference between supervision for *nextstep* staff compared to Counselling, Social Work or Connexions staff. Because *nextstep* advisers often see clients only once, they have few opportunities to test out possible interventions with the same clients after bringing that situation to supervision. Instead advisers are developing a toolkit that is useful with similar client situations in the future, and a way of thinking about clients that will help them reflect better on their own.

### **What next?**

The supervisor and the advisers are monitoring the effectiveness of supervision – spending one session in six reviewing the last five sessions and what has been covered, considering if there are things that can be improved on. So far the advisers are making good use of their supervision time to explore a whole range of client and work-related issues. They are actively encouraged by their manager to attend sessions and there is a joint commitment to the process.

There is a generally-held view that supervision is benefiting the advisers and therefore should be aiding their work with clients. Observation of client sessions could perhaps contribute evidence to support this supposition. As with all 'soft' outcomes it is difficult to be objective about the benefits of the process, but the subjective view is generally yes – supervision is encouraging reflective and professional attitudes. The advisers are choosing to attend and are working hard to improve their practice.

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