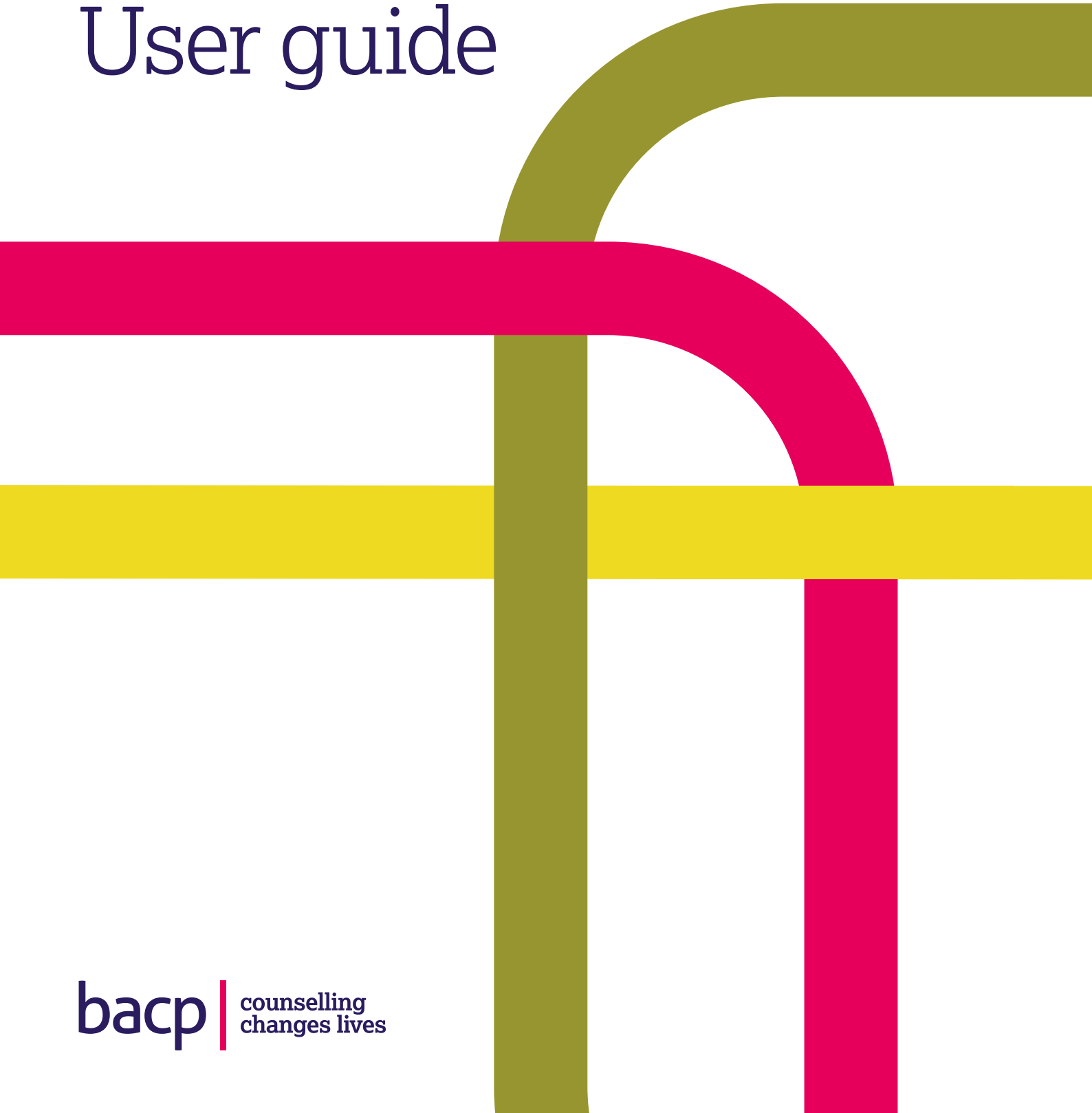
Supervision competence framework

User guide



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Executive summary

This user guide identifies the competences associated with the effective fulfilment of the role of supervisor to counsellors and psychotherapists, as set out in the BACP Supervision competence framework (2021). It outlines the activity involved in the development of the framework, provides a description of its significance for effective practice, and considers some of the issues involved in its application. This guide, and the framework itself, recognise the critical role of supervision in maintaining and enhancing effective therapeutic practice, as well as the need for standards and criteria for competence to reflect recent and current scholarship and research.

The user guide sets out the background to the project, acknowledging major precursors to the work. It provides a definition for the activity of supervision and explains key terms. The methodology and stages of development of the framework are described, highlighting the roles of the Expert Reference Group and the Peer Review Panel. The guide identifies a range of professional groups and sectors for whom the framework constitutes a potential resource.

The framework is divided into eight domains of Core competence, intended to be applied across the complete range of work settings, supervisee populations and modes of delivery. The Specific competences include three further domains that are devoted to areas of specialism in supervision, each of which has its own additional set of competences.

The domains of Core competence are arranged as follows:

1. Theoretical foundation
2. Ethical and professional practice
3. The supervisory relationship
4. Equality, diversity and inclusion
5. Individual needs of the supervisee
6. Facilitation of supervision
7. Professional development of the supervisor
8. Supervisor self-awareness.

The Specific competences refer to particular contexts, modes of delivery or practitioner activity, and appear under the following headings:

1. Modes and methods of providing supervision

   1.1 Working with creative methods

   1.2 Group supervision

   1.3 Online and phone supervision

2. Organisational supervision

3. Supervision for specific client groups

   3.1 Supervising work with children and young people

   3.2 Supervision of trauma therapy

   3.3 Supervising therapists working with interpreters.

The authors of the guide offer a list of applications for the framework, recognising the dynamic nature of supervision, and the requirement that it be responsive to changing social, environmental, and organisational conditions.

Acknowledgements

This project was commissioned by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). The competence development process took place in 2019/2020, and was led by Caroline Jesper, BACP Head of Professional Standards, and was overseen for BACP by Fiona Ballantine-Dykes, Chief Professional Standards Officer. The project team was headed and the Expert Reference Group (ERG) chaired by Caroline Jesper. Dr Alan Dunnett acted as Independent External Consultant to the project. The ERG comprised: Dr Mary Creaner, Dr Ann Dalzell, Dr Alison Dart, Dr Dagmar Edwards, Melanie Lockett and Dr Elspeth Schwenk. Dr Emma Broglia, Information Analyst and BACP Senior Research Fellow, undertook the literature searches, the initial screening and prepared the literature report for the ERG.

BACP and the ERG would like to thank the Peer Review Panel , whose feedback and comments represented a valuable resource in producing the final iteration of the framework.

Further thanks go to Eve Orton, BACP Professional Standards Operations Manager, in her capacity as Clerk to the Project team and ERG.

Background and rationale

The UCL Competences for the supervision of psychological therapies were commissioned in 2007 by the Care Services Improvement Partnership (CSIP), Skills for Health and NHS Education for Scotland to inform the development of the IAPT programme (UCL, 2007).

In 2009, a BACP Working group on supervision developed the 'Key components of supervision training' and in 2011, BACP commissioned an 'evaluation of Roth and Pilling's competence framework for clinical supervision' (Owen-Pugh and Symons, 2013).

In 2014, BACP produced the Counselling supervision training curriculum which is underpinned by the UCL competences. Early in 2017, a review of the supervision curriculum was undertaken informed by the findings of the above documents, the UCL competence framework and contemporary supervision research. This review concluded that BACP's Counselling supervision training curriculum (2014) required significant changes for relevance to current counselling and psychotherapy supervision practice, supervision training and the varied needs of BACP members.

BACP commissioned the current project to produce up-to-date, evidence-based counselling and psychotherapy supervision competences, which are intended to inform supervision training and practice. The development of the supervision competences is based on a comprehensive review of the research literature, the process of which was overseen by an Expert Reference Group (ERG), recruited based on their experience and specialist interest in the field of supervision. The intention is that the framework will be used to resource training, practice and research, as well as to inform the development of a new, revised supervision training curriculum for the profession.

Definition of supervision

It has long been established in the UK that regular supervision of practice constitutes part of the ongoing professional responsibility of counsellors and psychotherapists at every stage of their career. For the purposes of this Supervision competence framework, the following definition has been applied:

'Counselling and psychotherapy supervision is a formal but collaborative process that involves regular 'consultative support', and in which two or more people form a 'supervisory alliance' with shared objectives about how to work together constructively to provide a safe, ethical and competent service to clients' (BACP, 2018a, p.5).

An effective supervision framework is held by the supervisor to promote open and honest discussion and to provide the opportunity for practitioners to reflect in depth about all aspects of their practice (BACP, 2018b).

Whilst distinctions in emphasis may be drawn between trainee supervision and post-qualification supervision (Hobman, 2018), supervision is deemed essential to how practitioners maintain good practice; work effectively, safely and ethically; attend to their own self-care and sustain the personal and professional resilience and resourcefulness required to undertake the work (BACP Ethical Framework, Good practice, point 60).

Terminology used in the framework

- The principle adopted in formulating the Supervision competence framework has been to communicate impartiality in respect of practitioner approach and orientation. Whilst the authors recognise that such theoretical impartiality may be a worthy aim, but one which is hard to achieve in practice, it has nonetheless been the intention to formulate the competency statements in terms which are meaningful to counselling and psychotherapy professionals and organisational stakeholders across the field of practice.
- Working to the same principle of application across the field of practice, the terms 'counselling' and 'therapy' are used interchangeably, as are the terms 'counsellor','therapist' and 'practitioner'.
- The somewhat unwieldy terms 'supervisor of supervision' and 'supervision of supervision' have been replaced respectively by 'supervisor consultant' and 'supervision consultancy'.
- The term 'supervisee' has been used interchangeably in its singular and plural forms with the intention of maximising comprehensibility and enhancing the flow of the statement. Where there is a particular emphasis on the specificity or uniqueness of individual needs, the singular form is preferred.

Methodology and development process

Developing a comprehensive set of competences requires a strong foundation of evidence that has been critically evaluated. The methodology employed a mixed-methods approach which involved undertaking an in-depth systematic review of relevant research literature and also 'grey' literature which included textbooks and associated teaching materials. Braun and Clarke's (2012) 6-phase approach to thematic analysis was then utilised to undertake a detailed thematic review of the full range of sources to extract competences, which were further developed by practice-based evidence from experts in the field.

The process consisted of the following stages:

1. The first stage of development included searching and screening relevant literature, both published and unpublished, from a diverse range of sources including peer-reviewed and international academic papers from the last 20 years. The screening procedure included developing a search term framework of key words and inclusion criteria, which was used to search six databases to identify relevant articles in the field of counselling and psychotherapy supervision. The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) was used to synthesise and assess the quality of evidence (see Tricco et al., 2018). This phase of the work yielded 7,356 articles.

2. During the second stage and following feedback from the ERG, the inclusion and exclusion criteria were revised and a total of 710 titles were returned from the databases. The abstracts for all 710 were screened and reduced to 86 potentially relevant full text articles.

3. In the third stage, a total of 269 additional resources (including unpublished dissertations) were identified and screened. This stage of the screening process addressed the core research questions:

   - What works in supervision and what are the essential ingredients in good supervision?
   - What are the characteristics of good supervision with regards to professional background, qualities, styles, approaches, methods, and types of interventions used?
   - What is unhelpful in supervision?

   This process identified 155 research articles and papers that included relevant data corresponding to the above questions which could be utilised to develop competences.

4. The fourth stage of the work involved a detailed thematic analysis of the findings to extract preliminary competences from the 155 literature sources. This process generated initial codes or headings which formed the very first draft of the framework. The thematic analysis was then further expanded to include existing competence frameworks, textbooks and teaching materials to identify further themes which enabled the competences to be expanded. The whole process involved several phases of review and refinement by the project team and the ERG, incorporating practice-based evidence from experts in the field to ensure there were no areas of omission. To further enhance rigour, the thematic analysis was also subject to an audit by the ERG.

5. Following the first iteration of the framework, a panel of 11 peer reviewers were recruited from invitations issued to senior experienced practitioners in the field of supervision training and practice, including members with a particular specialism (such as in online and phone supervision). Peer reviewers were asked to respond to the following questions:

   - What are your thoughts about the structure of the framework?
   - Do you think the competences in the Core and Specific sections are situated and organised appropriately?
   - How relevant and appropriate do you think each area of competence is for supervision practice?
   - Are there any gaps in the framework?
   - Do you see any potential problems with the competences?

6. The feedback and proposed amendments from the peer review stage were collated, analysed and discussed by the ERG which informed the development of the final version of the competence framework.

7. Following a last phase of editing, the complete framework was circulated to the ERG for ratification.

The role of the expert reference group (ERG)

The function of the ERG has been to share members' knowledge, skills and experience in the construction of a framework that in their view best describes the competences necessary for a supervisor to deliver good quality supervision for the benefit of the practitioner's development and their clients' wellbeing. The specific functions for ERG members included:

1. Making recommendations for refining the parameters of the literature search according to own knowledge of the research literature on counselling/ psychotherapy supervision

2. Consideration of pertinent research so as to identify and support the process of extracting the competences required for effective counselling and psychotherapy supervision

3. Assisting in filtering relevant competences for inclusion or exclusion in the framework

4. Alerting the project team to any gaps in the competence map

5. Sharing knowledge and experience and where a lack of research evidence existed, recommending textbooks, training materials or own resources to inform the development of the framework

6. Supporting the framework consultation process by suggesting other stakeholders/experts to join the Peer Review Panel

7. Agreeing the iterations of the framework as discussed by the ERG membership and to ratify the final version.

Who is the framework for?

The Supervision competence framework aims to provide training institutions, supervisor practitioners, supervisees, service providers and researchers with an up-to-date resource to inform and enable such activities as curriculum development and delivery, commissioning, clinical governance, research, and engagement in continuing professional development (CPD). It is envisaged that the application of the framework will extend beyond the realm of counselling and psychotherapeutic practice as, for example, in cases where supervisees from an allied discipline make the choice to access supervision as set out in this guide.

The authors' intention is that the framework can serve as a point of reference for trainers, supervisors, supervisees and services of all modalities and across all practitioner orientations.

Using the framework

The qualified supervisor of counsellors and psychotherapists will, by definition, be a therapeutic practitioner who has accrued considerable experience of professional practice. The practice of supervision '...requires additional skills and knowledge to those used for providing services directly to clients' and so it is considered best practice for practitioners who wish to offer supervision to develop their expertise through supervision training (BACP Ethical Framework, Good practice, point, 62).

The role of supervisor, as described in the literature, combines a number of functions and tasks, including those variously identified as managerial/ administrative, educative, and supportive. As the moment demands, the supervisor may occupy the position of mentor, ethical gatekeeper, monitor of the supervisee's development, supporter, role model, practical guide – or any number of these in a single session. If these elements are available over time to the supervisee, it is likely that the supervision space will be experienced as containing, reflective, creative and restorative.

The order in which the competences are presented here does not imply a hierarchy. What the literature informs us is that those competences which have found their way into the framework, represent the elements of evidence-based best practice, not to be set one against another. Much as when we consult professionals in other sectors (healthcare, education, the law etc.), we expect that they will have a relevant body of knowledge and be able to draw on this and on their specialist skills, experience and competence – so supervisors must anticipate that their own knowledge, capacities and experience will be called upon in a myriad of different ways. This is neither a call to be 'all-knowing' nor an expectation that every supervisor will offer a formulaic version of the supervisor role. Every supervision dyad – like every therapeutic dyad – has its own features, emphases, and style. Every supervision session calls for a response which is unique to that supervisee, that issue, that current professional need. The framework makes it clear that supervision constitutes a space for reflection and learning for both the supervisee and the supervisor, since both parties will be developing and learning throughout their careers. There will be elements of the framework which seem a natural part of the repertoire of some supervisors; others where the supervisor will be less practised or less experienced, and which may well constitute a focus for further professional training.

The lists of competences may well appear daunting. What can never be encapsulated in a single statement or set of statements is the overarching ability to bring skills and competences together in a consistent way of working which is sensitive to the needs of the supervisee – requiring awareness of self in the relationship just as much as a well-developed ethical mindfulness; the ability to facilitate problem management just as much as the capacity to know how and when to offer challenge.

Overview of the supervision competence framework

The Supervision competence framework is structured into eight domains of core competence, with a further three domains covering specialist areas of context, modality or practitioner activity.

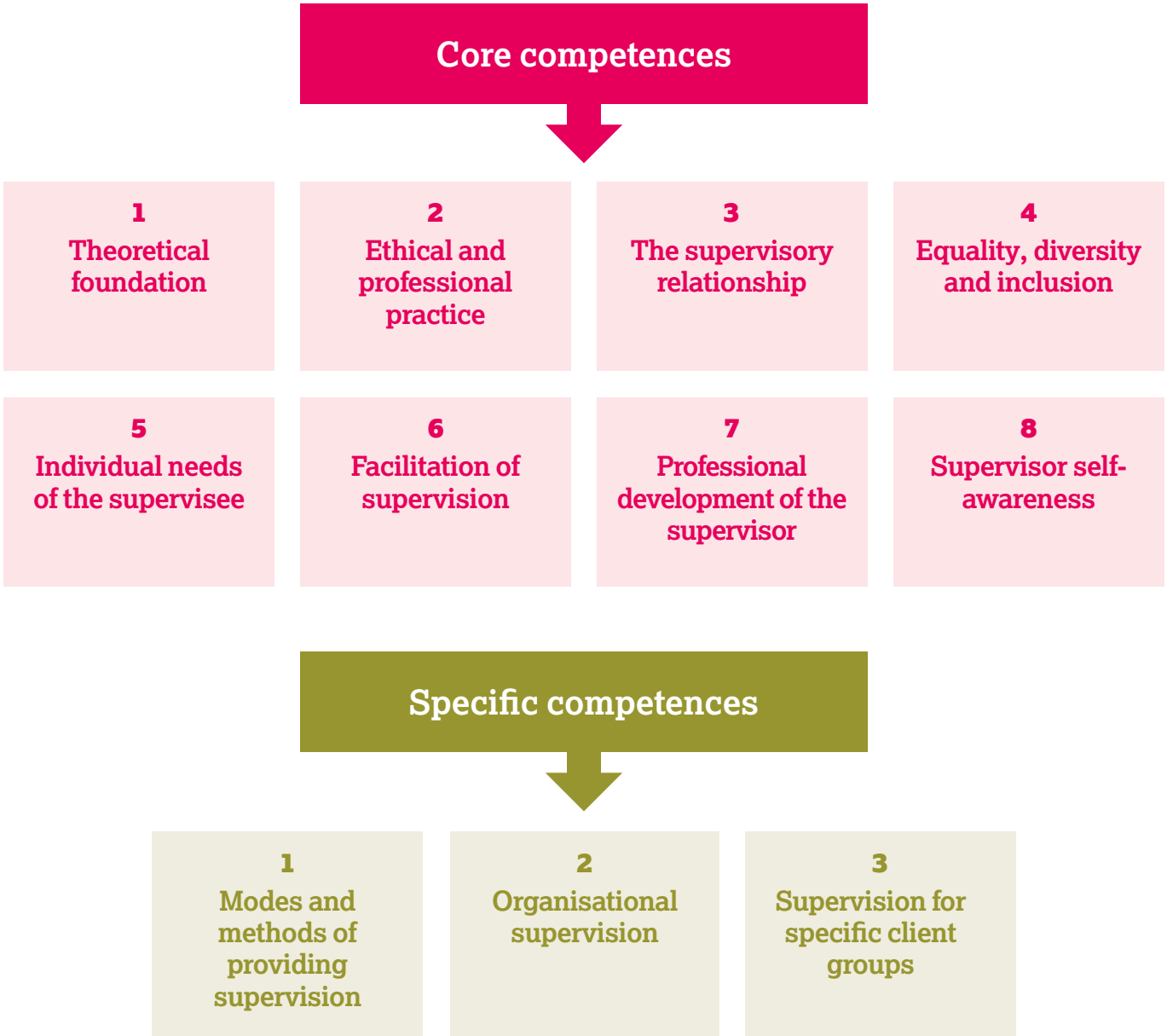
The Core competences refer to knowledge, skills, abilities and qualities which all supervisors may be expected to possess and on which all supervisors may reasonably be expected to draw.

The knowledge, skills, abilities and qualities which appear in the Specific competences apply to specialist contexts, client populations or modalities. Examples of these are:

- supervision provided for counsellors and psychotherapists working with children and young people
- supervision provided in group settings
- supervision provided online or on the phone.

The Core and Specific competences have been organised into the following map:

Supervision competence framework



Overview of the competence domains

The competences associated with effective counselling and psychotherapy supervision have been organised into 11 domains, of which eight apply to all supervisors across the range of work settings, supervisee populations and modes of delivery - these are the Core competences.

The remaining three domains include specialist areas of supervision practice – these are the Specific competences.

Core competences

1. **Theoretical foundation** recognises that supervisory competence is predicated on awareness of and the ability to draw on defined areas of knowledge and understanding. These relate not only to supervision theory, models and approaches, and to functions and processes within the supervisory encounter. They extend further to encompass supervisors' understanding of the influence of their own therapeutic orientation and the capacity to formulate and articulate their own consistent supervision approach grounded in supervision theory.

   Competency in this domain is maintained by the ability to critically reflect on relevant contemporary research and theoretical developments.

2. **Ethical and professional practice** highlights knowledge and understanding of ethical, professional and legal responsibilities, requirements and norms as applied to the supervisory process. Specific references are made to the areas of ethical gatekeeping and client welfare.

   The competent supervisor will be informed about and have the capacity to act in accordance with responsible management of boundaries, including in respect of such aspects as contracts, dual relationships, confidentiality, ethical non-compliance and the maintenance of sessional focus.

   Competency implies knowledge and awareness of potential conflicts and challenges in supervision and the ability to work respectfully in partnership with supervisees, including in situations where supervisee fitness to practise is a concern.

3. The supervisory relationship draws on the large body of writing and research devoted to this aspect of the supervisor's activity. Competency in establishing and maintaining an effective supervisory relationship demands knowledge and understanding of the components of what is experienced by supervisees as trustworthy and collaborative, supportive and appropriately challenging, and as promoting of their development.

It follows that the supervisor needs the ability and commitment to build and maintain safe and respectful relationships which promote exploration and disclosure, and which facilitate monitoring and regular review of the supervision process.

The competent supervisor's relational abilities comprise such elements as consistently employing appropriate listening skills, communicating effectively, and demonstrating acceptance, empathy and responsiveness towards the supervisee.

Knowledge and understanding of the sources of power and of the potential for misuses of power resource supervisors in their ability to foster an egalitarian relationship and in promoting supervisee autonomy.

Working effectively with relational dynamics requires the ability to work from the knowledge and awareness that interpersonal dynamics from other contexts, including the therapeutic relationship, may be enacted in supervision.

Knowledge of the potential for strains and tensions to emerge in the supervisory relationship informs and supports the supervisor's ability to recognise, acknowledge and process these events collaboratively and non-defensively.

4. Equality, diversity and inclusion recognises and details the knowledge, understanding and skills needed by the supervisor to respond sensitively, respectfully and openly towards all aspects of diversity, to use and model inclusive styles of communication, and to promote diversity awareness in the supervisee.

This core domain is predicated on understandings of the uniqueness of the individual in regard to context, multiple intersecting identities and personal history. It acknowledges the influence which issues of equality, diversity and inclusion can have in both the supervisory relationship and in client work.

The supervisor needs the ability to facilitate appropriate exploration which acknowledges the potential for prejudice and oppression, and helps supervisees to develop self-understanding as well as greater understanding of client experience.

5. Individual needs of the supervisee defines the knowledge and abilities required to respond to the individuality of the supervisee. Competency in the supervisor includes the capacity to respect and take account of the supervisee's theoretical approach and level of experience.

Recognising that beginning and experienced supervisees are likely to require different emphasises (such as greater or less time for reflective space and self-challenge or for educative input) implies working collaboratively to determine developmental needs.

Attention to supervisee wellbeing is demonstrated by the supervisor's ability to facilitate discussion, and to model and support the maintenance of self-care strategies.

Supervision with trainee and novice counsellors presupposes a knowledge of relevant standards and course criteria, the ability to provide information on tasks and bonds, and the skill to enable trainee/novice counsellors to develop their understanding of the potential of the process. Acknowledgement of the significance of assessment and feedback informs the capacity to provide timely and balanced evaluation which the supervisee can understand and make use of.

6. Facilitation of supervision brings together the competences required to establish and maintain a coherent supervisory frame and to apply a range of methods and interventions within it. These include the skills and abilities associated with contracting, negotiating and maintaining focus, and boundary-keeping.

Effective challenge from the supervisor provides a prompt to supervisee development and the expansion of reflexivity. The competent supervisor is able to notice and respond when aspects seem to be left unsaid, or to be out of supervisees' awareness.

The use of audio or visual recorded practice requires the supervisor to understand the legal and professional framework, as well as the range of ways in which recordings can be employed productively in supervision.

7. Professional development of the supervisor takes as its premise that supervisors are engaged in an ongoing process of reflection and development. The section on supervision consultancy details the abilities which the competent supervisor brings into the consultancy process, including recognition and responding to own limits of experience and knowledge, gaining support for ongoing reflection, and exploration of the impact of self in the supervision relationship.

Supervisors have the ability and commitment to develop and update their own base of theory and experience through ongoing professional development, ensuring their preparedness to occupy the supervisor role.

In their ongoing professional activity, the supervisor needs the ability to learn from the supervisee and the supervision process and to be open to developing within and through its skills, strategies, strengths and values.

8. Supervisor self-awareness defines those abilities required to inhabit the supervisor role with self-understanding, including the capacity for and willingness to undertake supervisory self-examination and reflection.

Supervisors require the ability to understand and attend to their own responses to aspects of fulfilling the role, and to take appropriate and timely measures where the impact of the work requires this.

Effective use of self in supervision includes being able to regulate and manage own emotions, as well as using awareness of 'in the moment' responses and reactions for the benefit of the supervisee and process.

Specific competences

1. Modes and methods of providing supervision

1.1 Working with creative methods recognises and identifies specific knowledge and abilities associated with offering creative approaches in supervision. The supervisor offering these approaches requires understanding and competence in deploying the processes involved, together with the ability to make informed choices about its use.

1.2 Group supervision defines the areas of knowledge required by the practitioner when offering supervision across a range of group settings.

The supervisor will require skills and abilities in the areas of developing and facilitating group process, managing dynamics, understanding responses in a group context, and in attending to the different needs of individual members.

The supervisor needs judgment in the use of self so as to model professional and personal openness and to share what is relevant to the group and its process.

1.3 Online and phone supervision sets out the skills and abilities required when offering supervision remotely, including those pertaining to supervisory relationships, to specific ethical, legal and professional considerations, and to the management of practicalities of supervision at a distance.

The supervisor requires knowledge of the medium and the technology as well as the ability to set up and monitor the relationship, and explore the impact of the chosen mode of delivery.

Specific to online and phone supervision are such aspects as procedures for assessing risk, establishing informed consent and supporting supervisees to adapt and develop their theoretical approach to use the medium to best effect.

2. Organisational supervision highlights specific areas of knowledge required of the supervisor working within an organisational setting or supporting supervisees in organisations.

The supervisor's field of competence will need to cover understanding aspects of organisational culture, the impact of power and authority structures, and regularly occurring dilemmas relating to such matters as dual roles, confidentiality and accountability.

There is a requirement to balance professional responsibilities towards the supervisee with those held in relation to the organisation. The supervisor may be especially called upon to maintain counselling values and identity when support for supervision and counselling is lacking from the organisation, including in the task of ensuring adequacy of supervision and training.

3. Supervision for specific client groups

3.1 Supervising work with children and young people sets out specialist knowledge, theory and experience relevant to supervision of therapeutic work with younger age groups, including legislation, policies and procedures and organisational systems.

The supervisor needs the ability to make informed ethical and professional judgments in such areas as consent, safeguarding, confidentiality and capacity.

Supervising counselling in schools involves such aspects as supporting the supervisee to develop professional relationships within the organisation and with parents/carers and external colleagues with responsibilities for the young person.

3.2 Supervision of trauma therapy highlights the requirement for knowledge and understanding of the theory and mechanisms of vicarious traumatisation, the complexity of issues faced by the practitioner, and the significance of supervision. The supervisory relationship will be characterised by a calm and collaborative approach.

The supervisor needs the ability to focus on and normalise the impact on the therapist, to emphasise supervisee self-monitoring and self-care, as well as to work with unconscious dynamics emerging as a consequence of the work.

3.3 Supervising therapists working with interpreters identifies the knowledge required to offer supervision to practitioners working triadically in a therapeutic role.

The supervisor will be alert to and be able to give consideration to the complexities of the working relationship and to such issues as relate to power and control, development of trust, and avoiding exclusions and collusions.

Applications of the framework

It is anticipated that the Supervision competence framework will be used, as and where deemed appropriate, to resource and enhance activity in the following areas:

Supervisor training

The framework is available for training providers to harness so as to underpin curriculum development, definition of programme and module learning outcomes, and assessment criteria.

Supervision practice

Supervisors in current practice are invited to use the competence framework to map their existing knowledge and skills so as to identify areas for further development/CPD.

Practitioners interested in learning about supervision can also use the framework to make an assessment of their readiness for the supervisor role and to identify training needs.

Supervising other professionals

Whilst the framework is grounded in research within the counselling and psychotherapy profession, it is recognised that professionals from other disciplines such as coaching, education, healthcare, and pastoral staff, may wish to access supervision as set out in this guide. Clear contracting and transparency about the offer will be a pre-requisite to such work, which has the potential to offer significant benefit to members of other professional groups such as healthcare workers, pastoral staff, coaches and mentors.

Research

The framework contributes to research in the field by establishing a common set of principles and practices that can be utilised in practice-based research studies. The gaps identified during the current literature search process (as, for example, in the area of supervision of couples counselling and supervision of outdoor/walking therapies) may, additionally, constitute useful pointers for those intending to embark on future research studies in the area of supervision.

Commissioning

Those organisations whose remit includes recruitment and management of professionals in the field of counselling and psychotherapy will have a commitment to the maintenance of good practice and the ensuring of good quality provision. The framework provides clear guidance on what constitutes competent supervisor practice, thus resourcing decisions in such areas as recruitment and quality management practices.

Services

Services providing counselling and psychotherapy within the community or to specialist populations are invited to employ the framework as a reference point to inform and support staff in making appropriate choices in regard to accessing competent and appropriate supervision.

Where organisations provide in-house supervision, the framework can inform decisions about service structures.

More broadly, the framework offers a resource to inform job descriptions, recruitment processes and to identify staff training needs.

Clinical governance

The framework aims to resource the process by which NHS organisations are accountable for continuously improving the quality of their servicing, and safeguarding high standards of care. What are termed the seven pillars of clinical governance are echoed in the framework in its desire to foster supervision effectiveness, ensure safe and ethical practice, to enhance supervisee experience and involvement, to promote good communication between supervisor and supervisee, and to develop a climate of learning for all parties within the supervision space.

Future developments

This framework has been developed on the basis of research studies and published materials representing research evidence from the first two decades of the 21st century. Since the profession is constantly developing, its authors anticipate that the BACP Supervision competence framework (2021) may reasonably be expected to be developed to incorporate, for example, the expansion of specific areas of work as more research is undertaken in various practitioner contexts e.g. supervision of couples counselling and supervision of outdoor/walking therapies.

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Appendix A: ERG membership

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Eve Orton Clerk to the ERG

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