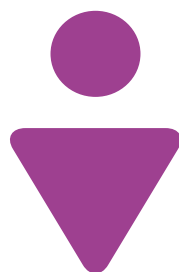




# SNAPSHOT OF THE PRACTICE OF PROVIDING SUPERVISION IN BULGARIA

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# Introduction



Supervision is of outstanding importance for professions whose role is to address someone else's needs and where stress, feelings of helplessness and emotional exhaustion are common (Hawkins and Shohet, 2006). In social work, supervision is specific in that it focuses on a process where a professional works with an individual or a group of individuals who are vulnerable, at risk, having complex needs and need support. Working with such people requires a solid training and understanding of the nature of a broad variety of issues such as poverty, marginalization, isolation, disability, parenthood, violence, various types of crises and crisis functioning, among many others. Dealing with vulnerability requires social workers to be resilient. They are often placed in situations where a solution has to be proposed according to available resources, which are often insufficient. In this regard, supervision is a mandatory part of the practice of social work. It has three main functions – administrative, educational and supportive, with the balance between these best defining the nature of supervision (Tsui, 2005).

## Purpose of the report

The purpose of this report is to present the findings of the study for Bulgaria and to interpret their implications in the local context.

Little research on the practice of child protection supervision has been done in our country, and the studies available are fairly partial and mostly quantitative although supervision has been applied in Bulgaria to services for children and families for years.

This study and its results provide a more comprehensive picture of the current situation. The local researcher has paid special attention to Bulgaria in an attempt to describe the history of supervision and its development in practice, especially in the field of social work in child protection.

## Research methodology

### **The data collection was organized in four directions as follows.**

The study design was provided by Dr. Wilkins, with each country having the opportunity to adapt and supplement issues and to explore in more depth some areas according to their needs. The study for Bulgaria does not include additions or adaptations to the research methods used. They were translated into Bulgarian and applied simultaneously in the period February - March, for a total of 35 days.

For the purposes of the research in our country, access to public information on supervision was requested from and provided by the Agency for Social Assistance (ASA). Additional studies of good practices were conducted, as well as examination of documents and interviews with representatives of organizations and other individuals.

This report will present the results of the Desktop analysis, interviews with key informants and the results from the online questionnaire.

## Limitations of the study for Bulgaria

The main limitation of the survey was the short time for its execution, which reflected mainly on the recruitment of a sufficient number of participants to answer the online questionnaire, as well as key informants. Due to time constraints and workload, we were unable to conduct an interview with a municipal representative, as was planned.

There were restrictions on the involvement of representatives from all institutions who served as members of multidisciplinary teams on child protection coordination mechanisms such as the police and the prosecution, doctors and education representatives. A minimum number of school employees were co-opted for the study, but no kindergarten or nursery school teachers were included. It turned out that the involvement of police officers and prosecutors required official permission, and the short time of the study stood in the way of preparing letters and obtaining permissions.

Some of the proposed research methods required prior in-depth consideration and adaptation, such as Q-sort, which offers 37 claims on supervision to be qualified on a scale from 'emphatically disagree' to 'fully agree', which were not fully relevant to the Bulgarian context. Participants from Bulgaria found that they would rank nearly 80% of them as 'fully agree', but the method did not provide such an opportunity. The study design did not allow changes in this method during its course.

*Supervision is widely considered to be the cornerstone of good social work and child protection practice (Laming, 2009). This report presents a snapshot of the practice of child protection supervision in Bulgaria. It was established that supervision is partially regulated in several pieces of legislation and methodological instructions. There are no standards for supervision in the social sphere. The latter is provided mainly by specialists with psychological and psychotherapeutic profile. There are two separate professional groups in the child protection system: those working in social services and those working for the child protection department. It is a long-standing and legally underpinned trend for supervision to be applied divergently to the two groups, and either has proven to have its own needs and expectations. Supervision is not provided regularly and consistently across child protection departments, as well as to those working on child cases in multidisciplinary teams.*

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# Results of the study in Bulgaria

**"Desktop analysis" - an analysis of supervision policies and procedures - a review of documents and practices of provision, history and development.**

## 1.1 How is supervision in social work understood

Supervision of child protection in our country is applied and understood mainly as a form of emotional care for those working with children and families. It is carried out mainly by supervisors with psychological and psychotherapeutic training.<sup>1</sup> This is associated with multiple benefits and challenges, because this type of professionals is outside the field of social work; they are not practitioners in it. According to some authors, "the supervision of social workers should be provided by professionals with knowledge and experience Precisely in social work, preferably by social workers" (Petrova-Dimitrova, 2011). However, this kind of supervision cannot become prevalent in practice.

In this report, as a starting point we use the latest definition of supervision set out in the Social Services Act: "Professional support for employees engaged in the provision of social services and for employees providing guidance to users of social services, designed to improve their professional skills, knowledge and attitudes in order to achieve and maintain professional competence, ensuring high quality of social work, as well as overcoming difficulties of a professional, psychological and emotional nature".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Supervision is a successful form of planned professional assistance. For the reporting period it was found that the specialists who provided supervision to the service teams were psychologists, clinical psychologists, psychotherapists, family therapists, supervisors, as well as social workers - consultants in private practice with extensive experience in the field of management and supervision of teams in various social services." (Analysis of the activity of licensed providers of social services, SACP 2015)

<sup>2</sup> <https://sapi.bg.org/bg/book/supervizia-v-socialnata-rabota-s-deca-jertvi-na-nasilie>  
Art. 19 of the Additional Provisions of the Social Services Act, 2020

# History and application of child protection supervision

## 1.2

Supervision in work with children is a practice introduced during the initial years of the establishment of the child protection system. It was launched in pilot projects for training of employees in child protection departments (CPDs).<sup>4</sup> After the completion of the projects, supervision to CPDs was no longer provided.

The first Legal act to regulate supervision was the Ordinance on the criteria and standards for social services. Supervision was actually stipulated by its 2007 amendment introducing service standards, including one for supervision (standard 13).<sup>5</sup> It applies only to those working in social services for children and is not intended for those working for CPDs. Although it only mentions supervision as mandatory once a month, this regulation imposed supervision as a systematic practice in social services for children. Its standard is being controlled by the State Agency for Child Protection (SACP) in the context of its monitoring of licensed providers performance. The data for the past years are only quantitative:

year	Share of social service providers, which expose teams to external supervision	Number of supervisions
2011		674
2012 <sup>6</sup>	48 %	1316
2013 <sup>7</sup>	45 %	2145
2014 <sup>8</sup>	60 %	2490
2015 <sup>9</sup>	65, 2 %	

<sup>4</sup> In the period 2002-2005, two projects were carried out, which provided supervision to the teams in the newly established child protection departments (CPDs). The training of the first supervisors was carried out in 2003 by French trainers within the project "Help for self-help – building a centre for mothers and babies". It was continued through the "Help for Helpers" project whereby, in the course of 18 months all social workers from CPDs in the pilot municipalities under the project "Reform aimed at enhancing child welfare in Bulgaria" received monthly individual and group supervision. (Petrova-Dimitrova, 2011). The project was implemented by the Institute for Social Activities and Practices and includes leading specialists in various fields of work with children from clinical practice.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2135474534>

<sup>6</sup> [http://sacp.government.bg/sites/default/files/licence\\_files/analiz-2012.pdf](http://sacp.government.bg/sites/default/files/licence_files/analiz-2012.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> [http://sacp.government.bg/sites/default/files/licence\\_files/analiz-2013.pdf](http://sacp.government.bg/sites/default/files/licence_files/analiz-2013.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> [https://sacp.government.bg/sites/default/files/licence\\_files/analiz-2014.pdf](https://sacp.government.bg/sites/default/files/licence_files/analiz-2014.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> [https://sacp.government.bg/sites/default/files/licence\\_files/analiz\\_2015\\_licenzirani\\_dostavchici.pdf](https://sacp.government.bg/sites/default/files/licence_files/analiz_2015_licenzirani_dostavchici.pdf)

Gathering information on the number of supervisions over the years allows for comparative analysis. As can be seen it increases with each passing year. There is also information about whether the supervision is external or internal: data show that external supervision predominates. Reports argue that supervision is often funded through projects and that financial standards for services are not enough to cover supervision as well. Quantitative reporting continued until 2015, with the latest report noting that the reason for not supervising is financial "and a lack of willingness and demand among staff" (ibid., p. 9). Providing supervision to social workers continues, but no other sources of information on this issue have been found for the purposes of this study.

Supervision is described in more detail for those working in residential services in the *'Methodological guide for the terms and conditions for running the centre for family-type accommodation for children and youth as a social service'* (2014).<sup>10</sup> It describes standard 22 for group, team and individual supervision, where group supervision is qualified as inclusive of every service provider and member of a multidisciplinary team on a case, if any. The standard describes supervision in finer detail, and its essential importance for the work is recognised.

Many years passed before legislation on supervision emerged for those working in child protection departments. Some sort of regulation on how CPDs can request supervision was first introduced in 2020, when the ASA supplemented its *methodological guidelines for work in cases of parental conflicts*, and for the first time introduced the possibility for CPDs to request supervision specifically in such cases.<sup>11</sup> The new Social Services Act (2020)<sup>12</sup> regulates supervision for all those working with children, including those working in child protection departments. The provision however has yet to be implemented due to still ongoing development of secondary regulations under it.

Since it isn't stipulated by law for child protection departments, supervision is only provided through projects and extremely rarely. Supervision was provided by SACP experts<sup>13</sup> during the period of development of the child protection departments only sporadically and on demand. The 2019 report, "Analysis of the child protection system in Bulgaria" offers data about participation in supervision/ intervention in several pilot areas in the country:<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> <https://asp.government.bg/bg/deynosti/sotsialni-uslugi/sotsialni-uslugi-za-detsa/sotsialni-uslugi-finansirani-ot-darzhavniya-byudzheta-deca>

<sup>11</sup> <https://asp.government.bg/uploaded/files/5257-Metodichsko-ukazanie-za-rabota-po-sluchay-na-detsa-v-risk-ot-roditi.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.lex.bg/bg/laws/ldoc/2137191914>

<sup>13</sup> SACP Constitution contains a commitment to carry out this line of work through the Policies and Programs for the Child, Strategic Development and Coordination Directorate. The provision reads that the Directorate: "shall provide methodological support and supervision of child protection departments and shall participate in multidisciplinary meetings discussing specific cases of children at risk" (Article 17, item 7 of SACP Constitution).

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/bulgaria/media/9371/file>

While interest in social norms theory has generated new pathways for research and action, scholars in child protection have been advocating for integrating a social norms perspective as part of multi-layered intervention designs. Rather than considering approaches that target exclusively the set of norms, child protection activists have reported greater success in understanding how norms intersect with other factors affecting parents' decisions and actions. Cislaghi and Heise (2019) have suggested a framework to look at how normative and non-normative factors intersect. In their work, they have urged researchers and activists to consider the ways in which these factors affect each other, to make better sense of the nuances in which normative influences spill over into other domains of people's life, including material, individual and institutional domains. Through this lens, it is possible to identify ways that may shift social norms.

Type of supervision	Received no supervision	Individual supervision	Group supervision	Intervision <sup>15</sup>
Supervision provided by ASA	356 (69,8%)	5 (1,0%)	86 (16,9%)	63 (12,4%)
Supervision provided by SACP	312 (90,4%)	2 (0,6%)	9 (2,6%)	22 (6,4%)
Supervision provided by a private contractor	312 (87,2%)	2 (0,6%)	21 (5,9%)	23 (6,4%)
Other type of supervision	303 (78,3%)	0 (0,0%)	46 (11,9%)	38 (9,8%)

It seems that a small part of CPD staff members have received supervision during that period.

A project titled, **Enhancing the capacity of employees in the fields of child protection, social services and social assistance** started in 2019. It covered all CPD employees and social services for children.<sup>16</sup> The project continues to this day by providing individual and group supervision, although due to the pandemic situation, supervision activities have been temporarily suspended (see Annex 2). In 2021, some CPD staff did receive supervision as members of multidisciplinary teams under the project "**Continuing change for the deinstitutionalisation of children and youth**"<sup>17</sup> over a period of six months (see Annex 2).

<sup>15</sup> Interventions are internal group discussions of cases. They are managed either by CPD heads or by team members based on rotation.

<sup>16</sup> Source – ASA letter, Annex 2.

<sup>17</sup> Project N - BG05M9OP001-2.012 "Ongoing support for deinstitutionalization of children and youths", Human Resources Development Operational Program 2014-2020, with ASA as specific beneficiary, includes a six-month group supervision for members of multidisciplinary teams. The multidisciplinary teams, which prepare individual assessments of the needs of children accommodated in HMSCC, HCDPC and Family Type Accommodation Centres, included 57 social workers from CPDs (data ASA, 2022).

Supervision in child protection is financed either by projects or through the so called state-delegated budgets for social services. The current study has found that they have not specifically earmarked funds for supervision. Supervision is an indiscriminate portion of the total budget, with each service planning these funds on its own.

## 1.3 Ways of providing supervision

The criteria for supervisors are fairly liberal, with specific regulation for their qualifications being present neither in the legal framework nor among professional communities. Such criteria have only been set for project applications, e.g. background training and a minimum number of supervision hours worth of experience. Supervision service can be provided by both internal and external supervisors for services and organizations, as described in the regulations. An internal supervisor is one who is a staff member of the organization (director, other specialists). An external supervisor may have different professional experience and qualifications – or even work in another field and come into contact with staffers only on specific occasions.

The country has several coordination mechanisms in place for the work of multidisciplinary teams in child cases, where teams include representatives mainly of the police, the school system, municipality and service providers. There are no regulations for the supervision of these teams.

The existing legislation segregates those working in child services from those in child protection departments in terms of access to supervision – while regulated (and therefore guaranteed) for the former, it is not for the latter. The lack of systematic and consistent supervision across CPDs is a serious problem of social work in our country. This is cited as a significant shortcoming in the management of the child protection system – and as one of the reasons for the overwhelming staff turnover and the low quality of work (National Children's Network, opinions from 2010<sup>18</sup> and 2017<sup>19</sup>, etc.).

In outline, the legal framework regulates supervision only partially. There is no separate document laying it down as a standard in social work. At the level of child protection system management, no action has been taken over many years to provide appropriate legal provisions or methodological guidance for the work of child protection departments. Even the new Social Services Act describes supervision as a "right to supervision"<sup>20</sup> for those working in child social services as well as in social assistance directorates who "provide referrals for service use". Even now, when a clear commitment is being made to provide supervision for all those working in child protection, there is still no talk about social workers or professionals, but about "those who provide guidance on the use of social services". Having said that, it should also be noted that there is no action on the issue of supervision, coming from the professional community of social workers.

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<sup>18</sup> [https://nmd.bg/sistema\\_socialni\\_rabotnici/](https://nmd.bg/sistema_socialni_rabotnici/)

<sup>19</sup> Opinion of the National Network for Children on the proposed operation 'Ongoing support for the deinstitutionalisation of children and youths - stage 2: Provision of social and integrated health and social services for children and families' (2017)

<sup>20</sup> Social Services Act, Art. 122, paragraphs 1-3.

Around the world the standards are mostly set within professional communities, without state intervention in this (NASW<sup>21</sup>, etc.). In Bulgaria, the Union of Social Workers has no position on the issue of supervision as a standard in social work. Social workers from child protection departments are not represented in a professional organization, their management being highly centralized.

Supervision is not applied in the field of education, although schools/kindergartens deal with child cases. Supervision is not applied to work with children at the police or across municipalities, or across services that work under basic legislation other than child protection.<sup>22</sup>

## Data on the participants in the research

## 1.4

Number of key informants	Number of respondents in the survey	Number of respondent in Q-sorts and follow-up interviews
10	64	6

**Profile of the interviewees:** one representatives of the Agency for Social Assistance and one from the Agency for Quality of Social Services, two representatives of the academic community and social work tutors, a practitioner from the school system, one CPD head, one representative of an organization that manages more than ten social services, and three supervisors – psychologists and psychotherapists.

The additional Q-sorts interviews included six individuals with experience as supervisors and supervised, three of them in the field of psychotherapeutic services and three in the field of social work.

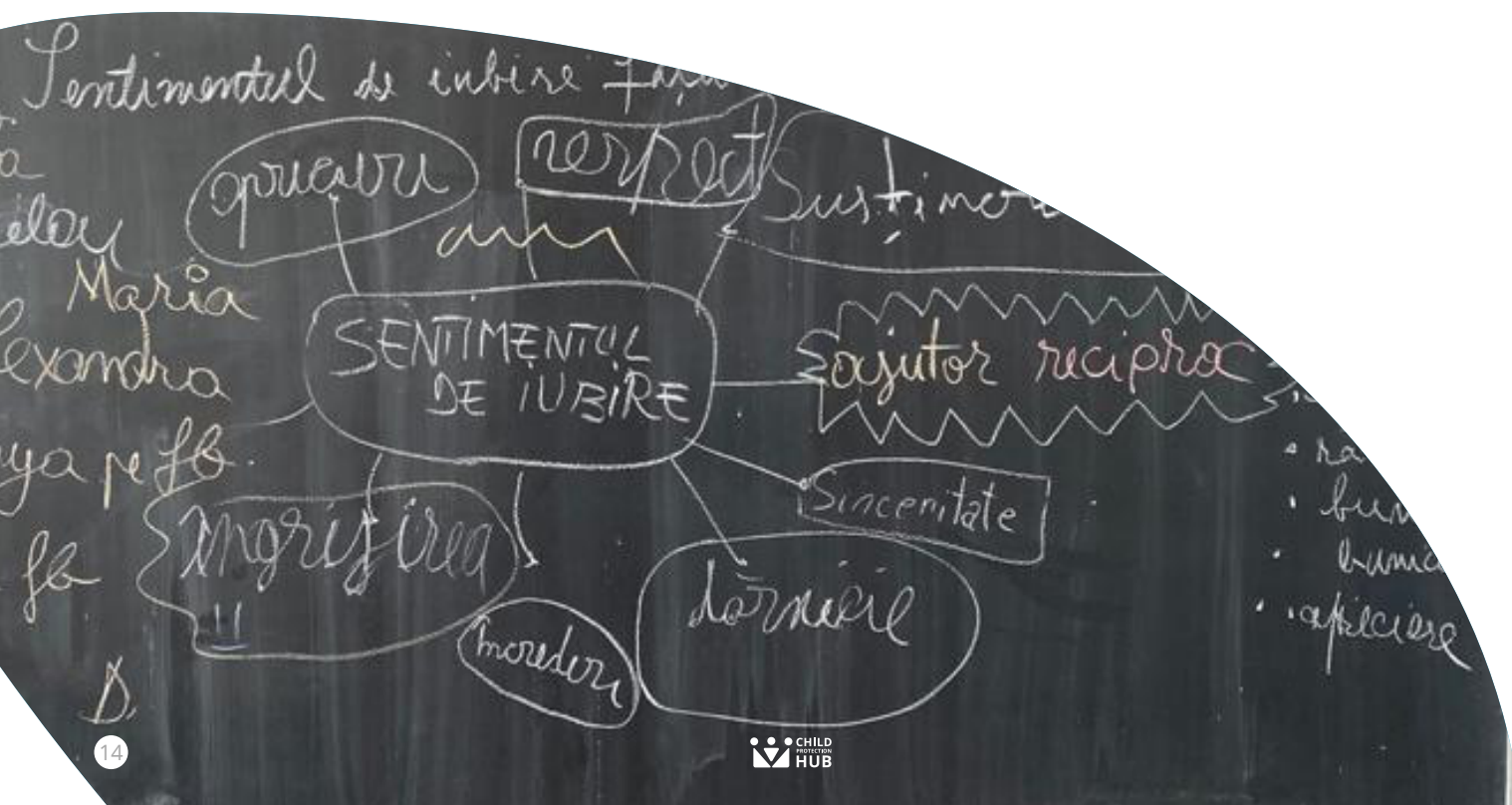
Number of respondents	Female	Male
80	69	11

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.socialworkers.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=GBrLbL4Buwl%3D&portalid=0>

<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, representatives of the so-called 'children's pedagogical rooms' of the police were invited to take part in the survey, but they refused due to inhouse bans on participation in such activities, even anonymously. Therefore, no such representatives are featured in the study, although they most often participate across multidisciplinary teams working on child cases. This is one of the constraints of this study.

Most of the participants hail from social work/social care (73%) and nearly 20% are academics, undergraduates, experts from institutions or municipalities, etc.). Here is a breakdown:

Occupation	Number of respondents
Social worker	24
Psychologist	25
Medical/Health expert	4
Academics	3
Education/School	10
NGO staffer	11
Other	3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>80</b>



# Results of interviews with key stakeholders

## Understanding of supervision

### 2.1

Psychological profile participants share an understanding of supervision as different from a meeting between a social worker and his/her manager. Rather, the line manager is not perceived as a supervisor because of the hierarchical dependence of the employee:

*"Supervision ought to be provided by an outsider so that there is no hierarchical dependence (supervisor)."*

Contrary to that, social work profile participants tend to believe that the manager does have supervisory functions: *"I think that often when a social worker experiences difficulties, he/she'd turn first to his/her immediate manager, who'd provide guidance. I think this is supervision, although we call it methodological support. I think it is the manager's role to listen, to understand and to give guidance. Here in Bulgaria, we do not like to think and say that the boss can be a supervisor and I am aware of that, yet I still believe your manager is the first one to offer help and support"* (a representative of the administration). Another participant shared that he *"... stepped in this role vis-a-vis social workers on the team on a daily basis. This might not be supervision per se, but given the absence of another type of supervision ... I am not trained to be a supervisor and what I do may not be supervision in the accurate sense. What I do is listen and give direction or help make a decision. Sometimes I have to give them comfort, hug them, encourage them, because working in a child protection department is really tough and emotionally stressful"* (a CPD head).

The supervisors talk mainly about their supporting function, to some extent about the training one and they avoid the talk about the administrative one altogether. The latter ones seems to go unrecognized as a task of the supervisor; instead, it appears to be more of a task for the immediate manager to carry out. *"Supervision has several functions and one of them is to prevent and reduce burnout. This is a safe place to share and discuss cases professionally. In my opinion, this is the key and most important function of supervision, the training one only coming second"* (a supervisor).

Respondents raise the question of whether supervision should be external or internal. The idea of the former is more related to the fact that in supervision the social worker should feel at ease talking about challenges without fear of penalties, which could arise with an internal supervisor, especially if the latter is a manager. Practitioners at the receiving end of supervision rely on the external supervisor to bring a different perspective and also to be less emotionally

involved in cases, which they find helpful. Some participants shared the opinion that the supervisor should be a person from the same profession and even from the same field of work:

"For me, supervision is important and meaningful if it is internal - just the opposite of what is being done now. The internal supervisor can be a social worker who does the same job as me, instead of standing between me and the manager, although this can also be useful"(social work tutor).

## 2.2 How supervision works

The supervisors interviewed paid the greatest attention to the peace of mind of the social worker during supervision. Those practicing as therapists put a great emphasis on the fact that supervision helps people to calm down, to make their situation easier for them emotionally, because it helps them work in more poised way on cases.

*"It helps the worker by calming him down. I have feedback that people feel inspired. I think this improves their quality of work, because when a person has moved away from personal preferences, it is helpful for the case"* (supervisor). Those outside psychotherapy were more focused on receiving support in resolving the case itself by considering various solutions:

*"I think I mostly help them make a decision"* (CPD head). According to supervised workers, the feeling that the supervisor gives them unconditional understanding and acceptance is key. This gives them the comfort of a safe place where one can talk about challenges: *"Supervision takes care of both the quality of work and of the professional himself in every aspect. It gave me space to think about the case from a different perspective"* (supervised from a social service for children).

Participants share an understanding that the goals of supervision are mostly related to work quality inasmuch as it is dependent on the social worker's well-being. There is an understanding that when a social worker feels emotionally secure, that would bolster the quality of his/her work. However, the supervisees provide a different perspective: *"The best thing that work under supervision gave me was reflection and respect. I have developed good skills for counselling and support, good skills for working with documents and institutions and I always keep my respect for customers, e.g. children and parents, just as my supervisor had for me "* (a supervised CPD employee).

According to respondents, supervision should be carried out from once a week to once a month, but not less often. Everyone agrees that the supervisor should be available whenever needed or when circumstances require: *"It depends on the specialist's workload as it is important that the latter is able to manage this process and seek the supervisor when needed. It is vital for supervision that it be requested and desired – and not required. This is an important principle of thinking when it comes to supervision. I believe CPD workers are very busy and this also prevents them from asking for and having weekly supervision: it might come as a burden on them, which is why they might not ask for it this often. And indeed the supervisor must be available in emergencies, he should be on standby"* (supervisor, social work tutor).

## The effectiveness of supervision for workers and families

2.3

Respondents (supervisors and supervisees) attribute the effectiveness of supervision mainly to the resulting emotional relief for employees. *"The effect is also noticeable when people simply survive amid a severe case by not getting sick or leaving work"* (supervisor and social service manager).

Respondent supervisors almost never refer to issues other than emotional support. Yet supervision is a complex process and a sophisticated professional work, going far beyond "comforting." It relates to many other issues such as: employees' professional competence and career development; the application of professional approaches and solutions; the development of a case; customers' state and needs. While supervisors evaluate performance on subjective criteria and their personal feel of being helpful to supervisees, no performance criteria have been agreed by professionals in the field.

*"To understand the effectiveness of supervision, we need to start looking at social work as something that can be studied, described and shared. There is no such thing at the moment. Instead, there is accountability for the work along vertical lines, but it is based on economic indicators that dominate the thinking of social care management"* (social work tutor).

## Group supervision and multidisciplinary teams

2.4

Group supervision is popular in social work in our country. According to the supervisors, working with a group differs in terms of its complexity, goals and results from individual supervision. Its participants have highlighted group dynamics as a crucial factor for the group.

In groups, supervisors are most often involved in interpersonal relationships and conflicts, even if they are not explicitly articulated or raised for discussion. This is a context that the supervisor always has in mind: *"Group work is more complicated. The group process ought to be used to train and support those who present a case and they should feel supported by the group. Group work also sets professional standards"* (supervisor).

According to supervisees, group work is useful in that it can tease out different opinions and solutions, which can be useful for the worker and the case itself.

Respondents have almost no experience in supervising multidisciplinary teams.<sup>23</sup> The practice is underdeveloped in our country due to the lack of regulations, but all participants say that it would be very useful:

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<sup>23</sup> Multidisciplinary teams on coordination mechanisms working on child cases include representatives of the police, municipalities, social services, etc. Representatives of the prosecutor's office are included less frequently (Bulgaria has no court and prosecution bodies specialized to work with children) as are as doctors. These teams are coordinated by CPDs.

*"I think that multidisciplinary teams work with different experts who have not received special training in children's rights and child development. Supervision can help them consider their cases more professionally and according to various circumstances. This can build trust and encourage the team to achieve better results"*(supervisor). Two of the interviewees shared their experience as supervisors of such teams within a project of the Naya Association - Targovishte, while working on child abuse cases. They testified that multidisciplinary teams enjoy better connections among their members and are able to develop a more robust professional partnership and higher efficiency while working on cases of abuse if supervised<sup>24</sup>.

**All respondents noted that at present supervision is either absent or insufficient for the existing demand. They talk about supervision in two separate areas - that of the CPD and that of social services.**

*"Unfortunately, although regulatory changes have been made, it still does not happen regularly either at CPDs or in services. Supervision has been even less frequent over the last two years during the pandemic. In short - insufficient, missing, both in CPDs and across services"* (representative of the state administration).

## 2.5 Participants touched on several other topics:

First of all, they talked about state of the child protection system. They are concerned by the fact that CPD employees are low paid and work in poor conditions. As a result turnover is high, the system is compelled to recruit untrained people who do not receive the care and support that could enable them to turn out better quality social work: *"Pitting people who are untrained against people who have severe social problems and plentiful needs - this amounts to a short-changing of both sides that continues to take place in our child protection system. It is unacceptable that those on top of the system continue to ignore this problem: the way care is organized abuses its clients, instead of supporting them"* (social work tutor).

Everyone talks about the lack of systematic and targeted supervision in child protection departments, which has repercussions in the entire child care system.

<sup>24</sup> *"For example, when multidisciplinary teams involving experts from different fields gather and exchange information and, more importantly, decide how to apply it in their work to achieve a common goal, then the effect is immediately visible to workers. Cases also tend to develop in a different fashion when based on a common vision and shared interventions"* (multidisciplinary team supervisor).

Their employees are highly dependent on the ASA management, which seems to be willing to provide supervision, but the task and role of supervision are still underestimated – and there is no intention to explore its benefits.<sup>25</sup>

All the efforts of the ASA to provide professional support to employees have been fairly haphazard, without any clear commitment to targeted action aimed at improving the system. *"Under the current system, supervision is not designed to train experts in how to work with bio-psycho-socially deprived children, but rather to merely help employees survive. Given the current mode of child protection work, supervision can do very little to help staffers understand what is needed to facilitate child development. This reality is increasingly recognized by both supervisors (who only supervise if there is a chance for their supervision to be paid) and supervised who are bureaucratically dependent and have almost no latitude. In short, it is my opinion that supervision in its current form is fairly ineffective."* (social work tutor)

Participants in the study talk about the **practice of selecting supervision providers**. "Another problem of ASA is that they hold competitions for supervisors and these competitions are won by companies without experience and qualifications. They prevail over their competitors by offering the lowest price, but do not have a good capacity to provide supervision. I know this because people who work in the CPD system and the services have told me that they do not get good supervision, and the supervisors are people who don't know the first thing about social work. This is useless, this is just money thrown in the wind" (service manager.) Participants in one way or another hint or openly talk about questionable practices in choosing supervision service providers: "I'd say that we have a long practice of the same supervisors or organizations almost taking over the services at the national level and this is not fair"(service manager).<sup>26</sup>

In this regard, the question is also raised of the quality of provided supervision services and the need for clear criteria or standards as to who can be a supervisor and who controls the work of supervisors: "Providing supervision has become a business. It's not right: on the one hand we have issues with accessibility, but on the other hand there is quality issue – who provides supervision and what it is like"(supervisor).

### **Challenges to providing supervision:**

Participants spoke in the first place about the **lack of understanding of the nature and importance of supervision** as one of the biggest challenges. When there is no appreciation of supervision at the highest level, at the level of policy-making ministries and agencies, this seriously frustrates its imposition as a professional approach to child protection work. **It reflects on the earmarking of proper budgets and the regularity of supervision:** *"Supervision is the last budget item. If there is money left it could be provided, if there is no money – there's no supervision either"* (administration representative).

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<sup>25</sup> No assessment of the satisfaction of social workers with the supervision provided by projects is carried out. Its effectiveness is neither planned nor quantified.

<sup>26</sup> The winner of the competition for providing supervision under the project "Continuing support for the deinstitutionalization of children and youths" is actually registered as a company operating in tourism.

## Factors that encourage the provision of supervision

What is conducive for the practice of supervision is the existence of a regulatory framework. Demand for this service also encourages the development of good practices. Many of those working with children and families pay for their own supervision as it supports their career development: "I am a school psychologist and I seek and pay for supervision myself, because I understand that I need it to be able to do my job"(supervised).

## 2.6 Results of the online survey

### Profile of participants

The study included **64 participants**, with 56 of them women and 8 men.

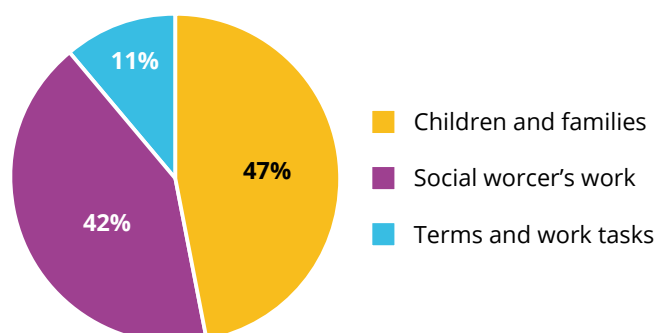
All participants have higher education, 8 of them have bachelor's degrees, 52 with a master's degrees and 4 with doctoral degrees. 87% of them work full time, and the rest either work part-time or are unemployed. The following graph presents the participants according to the professional role they come closest to.

Occupation	Social Worker	Psychologist	Teacher	Other
Number of respondents	25	25	3	11

Almost all participants, 59, are working in the field of child protection. 43 of them say that they have experience in working in multidisciplinary teams in child cases. The following table presents the composition of participants according to their experience as supervisees or supervisors.

	Yes	No	Neither
Current or past recipients of supervision	55	9	
Current providers of supervision	39	25	
Recipients and providers of supervision	37	20	7

Figure 2. Distribution of Romanian respondents according to their area of work and profession



The graph on the left shows the percentage shares of topics discussed in supervision. Participants have given more than one answer, with the results being presented as averages. Participants argue that the topics vary widely, being mostly related to children and adults as recipients of their work – and with social worker issues related to emotional support, performance analysis, and risk or needs assessment. ***The issues of delivery on tasks and deadlines are the least mentioned.***

The supervisors share they found supervision useful in working on cases and understanding them more thoroughly: *"What I find most useful is that we discussed my current work with child and family and adequate ideas on what direction my work should take and how it could be more efficient"* (supervised).

Both supervisees and supervisors say it is helpful for them to hear an external point of view and get support in formulating professional assumptions and in better understanding the processes that move families: *"It was useful for the social worker to feel he/she is running a case well and is able, jointly with the team, to suggest more than one work assumptions"* (supervisor).

Next, the participants rate the topics related to social workers – the hardships they face, as well as their reflections, emotions and professional role in their relationships with families and children across cases. *"Yet one more time I compared notes with my colleagues and realized that despite all differences we might have on issues, the methods I use in my work provide good results"* (supervised).

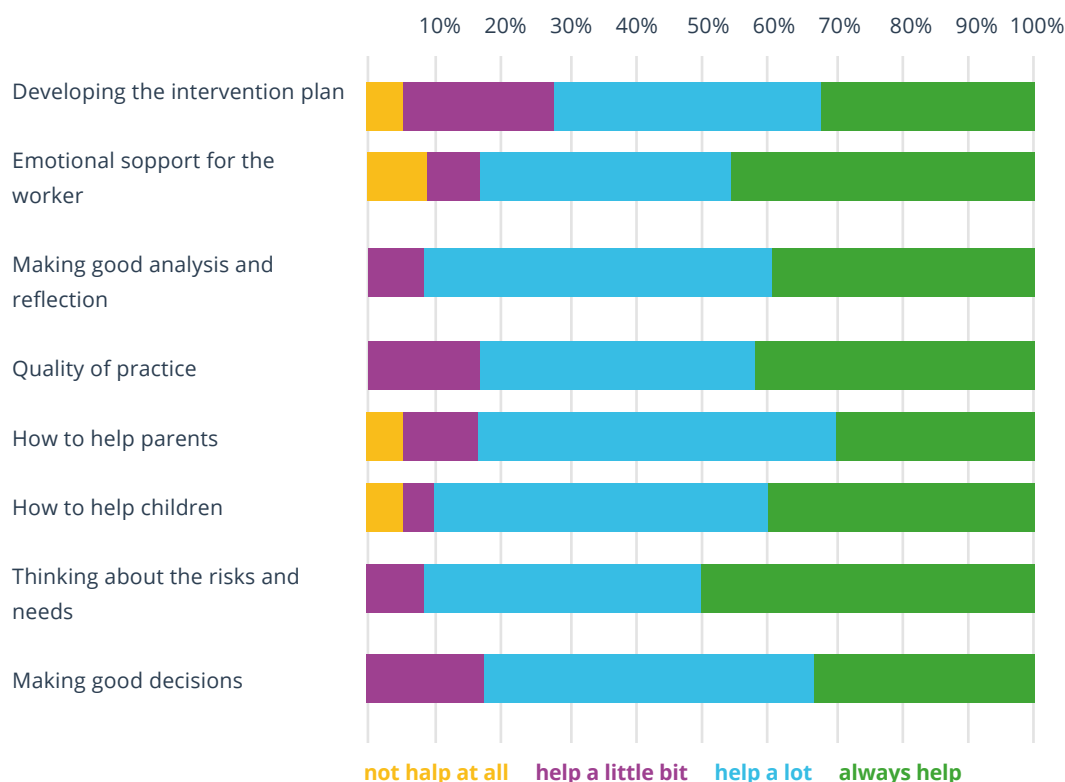
Respondents say that they receive specific advice or emotional support from their supervisor, and this has a motivating effect and boosts confidence. *"It was useful for me to hear the supervisor's conclusion that it was obvious I liked my job and I could still give a lot to the system I work for"* (supervisee).

A good relationship with the supervisee is also important for the supervisor, as it creates a safe environment to talk about challenges and increase comprehension of cases, overcome prejudices and give each family an individual approach according to its specific needs:

*"It is important to be aware that an anxious and reprimanded parent cannot clearly hear the advice of a social worker and cannot interpret his or her child's behaviour well. A better understanding of family dynamics helps parents to increase their trust in a social worker"*(supervisor).

Based on the topics covered during supervision, the participants think that it can support a social worker in several ways. The following table presents participants' understanding of how supervision helps social workers:

Figure 7. Specific subjects addressed during supervision meetings in Romania



The Survey on SWAI rapport and client focus in supervision scales<sup>27</sup> shows that survey participants have achieved and sustain good relationships in the process of supervision they currently receive or provide (score 5.98 against a norm of 5, 44).

On the customer focus scale, the results are 5.90 against a norm of 5.84. This implies that the respondents assume they have a good relationship with their supervisors/ supervisees and that the discussions during meetings are client-focused.

The data also show that a good relationship between supervisor and supervisee is reciprocal to client focus. The following table shows a comparison between participants who gave the lowest score on indicators and those who gave the highest score:

<sup>27</sup> The Supervisory Working Alliance Inventory (SWAI) form is one of the most commonly used tools for measuring the quality of the supervisor-supervisee relationship. SWAI (Efstation, Patton, & Kardash, 1990) is designed to measure three factors for supervisors (rapport, identification and focus on the Client) and two factors for supervisees (rapport and focus on the client). The form contains 12 statements about rapport that participants rank on a 7-point scale from 'almost never' to 'almost always' and 9 statements about client-centeredness on the same scale. Higher scores on each of the subscales and overall are indicative of alliances that are most effective. The norms are 5.85 for Client focus and 5.44 for Rapport (derived from the Efstation et al., 1990). The two forms for supervisors and supervisees (learners) are freely available at the following links:  
[https://drrebeccajorgensen.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Supervisory-Working-Alliance-Inventory\\_Trainee.pdf](https://drrebeccajorgensen.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Supervisory-Working-Alliance-Inventory_Trainee.pdf)  
<https://www.augusta.edu/education/advanced-studies-innovation/documents/cepsupervisorworkingalliance.pdf>

Average rating of rapport between supervisor and supervisee	Average rating of client focus
1, 83	1,43
4, 08	4, 86
3,00	There is no answer on this scale
7,00	6, 29
5, 83	5, 71
6, 57	6, 71

The following graph presents a comparison between the group of supervisors and the group of supervised. It seems that the group of supervisors has a more positive assessment than the supervisee group on the scales of rapport and client focus.

	Average rating of rapport between supervisor and supervisee	Average rating of client focus
Supervisees	5.98	5,88
Supervisors	6,09	5,99

Summary

The consistent study of supervision with a focus on child protection work and research methods applied allowed us to obtain a more comprehensive snapshot of its development and application.

*"What is happening is institutional and institutionalized supervision. It is mostly provided by people with psychotherapeutic competence and people outside the practice of social care and child protection. What is happening now is that supervisors are being recruited from the ranks of established psychotherapists and psychologists who have more political than academic power and use the psychotherapeutic model of supervision to do something more resembling psychotherapy, i.e. a mitigation of staff anxieties across services for children. But I don't think professional identification can happen in this type of supervision"* (social work tutor).

## Several things stand out:

There are **two separate professional groups** in the child protection system – those working in social services and those working in child protection departments. A long-standing trend (based on the existing legal framework) of supervision being applied differently to these groups probably contributes to them being thought of separately in the study.

Apart from that, the study highlights two viewpoints: that of the psychotherapeutically oriented and that of those working for the CPD system and the government administration. For those working in the "state system", social work is based more on legal provisions and methodologies, while for social service workers and freelancers, social work is based on thinking through psychological paradigms and therapeutic approaches.

*"When I train CPD social workers, they say that everything they hear is interesting and they are really eager to apply it, but they have little time for actually dealing with people because of paperwork. It takes time to sit down and listen to the client, to understand him – and it also takes space, which is unavailable to them. Most CPDs work in poor conditions, with several staffers occupying a single room where they meet with clients. This setting is hardly conducive to this kind of rapport or thinking about the client. The lack of standards for casework and the working conditions in some CPDs present a challenge for supervision as well" (social work tutor).*

Supervision for CPD staff probably has specific objectives and characteristics, which set it apart from those in social and psychological services. CPD social workers are more oriented towards finding solutions to cases within certain deadlines and legal requirements. Such an approach is not inherent in the operation of psychosocial and therapeutic services. The two groups diverge in terms of their goals and means, which should probably translate in divergent goals and means of the supervision provided to them.

*"I think what I'm doing comes pretty close to supervision, but it's not exactly that. It is a kind of in-house supervision from manager to employee and it is currently working for my team given the lack of anything else. But I think it would be much more useful and effective if supervision came from an external supervisor. I don't think the latter would be so emotionally involved in the cases, while we're running aground given the stress we're in, and that stands in our way while trying to see other possibilities. External supervisors – yes, but they need to be individuals with a heart and capable of understanding what we do – they wouldn't be useful to us if they weren't" (CPD head).*

For the social service group of supervisees, supervision is recognized as support for the overall development of both the professional and the case. They resort to different vocabulary, e.g. they talk about transfer and counter-transfer, about the functioning of families and the context of the environment, about interventions and professional boundaries.

*"In supervision, I would like to talk about the family process, the family-worker process and how to improve these two things, how to understand these processes and how to help the family "(supervised).*

For the group of supervisors, emotional support and offering a safe place to "vent emotions" seems to be the foremost feature of supervision. It's like a "warm welcome" that the worker probably needs. Almost all interviewed supervisors shared thoughts about working with emotions, personal experiences and fears, reflections, etc. of their supervised. They raise the issue of supervision standards, but more in terms of mandatory supervision than in favour of professional and ethical provision.

The key informants asked extremely important questions about the continuing neglect of the child protection departments by incumbent government institutions, which translates into poor working conditions and lack of professional support.

*"A severe de-professionalization of social work seems to be underway. This is a systemic problem, i.e. an academic and organizational over-institutionalization, which renders professionalism meaningless" (social work tutor).*

## What the participants in the study did not talk about

## 2.7

First of all, they didn't talk about the expectations in the process of supervision on both sides or how the task of supervision is agreed or what the role of the supervisee's organization is in formulating this task.

The role of supervision as a mandatory process of learning and career development, which makes the specialist more impartial while working on a case, was another underrated area.

Issues such as the ethics of relations with supervisees and their organizations, the ethics vis-a-vis clients and how supervisors deal with and communicate ethical issues if they arise during supervision were not touched upon.

The issue of confidentiality in our country seems to be perceived as more related to the discussion between supervisor and supervised than to client's history. Is there a culture of seeking the client's consent to discuss his/her case? What if he/she is an involuntary client and how the case is presented is the key challenge? These are important issues that were not addressed.

Why are professional discussions or research on the topic of supervision not being conducted? The same goes for social work.

How do people meet in different psychological paradigms, especially those who have no paradigm of psychological and social theories and how does supervision work for them? And why do supervisees who do not choose their supervisor, but receive him ex officio, fail to ask the question?

Recipients of supervision did not raise the issue of standards in its provision. Does this imply they have no requirements for the process or do not believe in the significance of their own role in the supervision process?

What role does university education play with respect to social work and the lack of supervision if this is where students should learn that supervision is mandatory in the training and professional practice of social work?

The study found multiple examples of good practices in the process of developing supervision in our country.<sup>28</sup>

## 2.8 Conclusion

Supervision is desirable and necessary for practitioners of social and psycho-social work. It is an integral part of the practice of working with vulnerable children and families and is important for child protection work. However, in our country it is **not provided regularly** in all areas of child protection work, especially to professionals that do not work directly with child protection legislation as police officers and educationists.

What encourages the practice of supervision is the existence of a regulatory framework and demand for the service. This is more typical for specialists with a psychological profile and less so for people with a social work profile (social activities, social pedagogy, etc.). In this regard, the role of education in universities is important as this is where work under supervision is defined as an integral part of the profession. In our country, social work and in particular work in child protection departments is not seen as a specific professional field. But this is what it is

*"...and it also demands considerable amount of sophistication, as it straddles two crucial and contradictory tasks – penalising and offering support. Sometimes these things have to go together, and this requires really highly qualified and well-trained people, not just machines allocating cases to social services" (social work tutor).*

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<sup>28</sup> In 2001-2002 the first handbook for supervisors in the field of helping professions was published by the CARE Bulgaria Foundation (now EKIP /TEAM/ Foundation). It describes "in most general terms the impact of supervision and the areas where it is applied mainly in the German-speaking world. It provokes a discussion in the field of psycho-social work in Bulgaria about the benefits of supervision for those working in this field." (not available online)

In the period 2002-2005, two projects were carried out, which provided supervision to the teams in the newly established child protection departments. The training of the first supervisors was carried out in 2003 by French trainers within the project "Help for self-help – building a center for mothers and babies" and continued through the project "Help for helpers" whereby all social workers from the Child Protection Departments (CPD) in pilot municipalities within a project titled, "Reform to enhance child welfare in Bulgaria" received monthly individual and group supervision over a period of 18 months. (Petrova-Dimitrova, 2011). The project was implemented by the Institute for Social Activities and Practices and involved leading specialists in various fields of work with children from clinical practice.

There are several major challenges to providing regular and effective supervision: first, the lack of secure funding, and second, the quality of the service itself. Everybody seems to be affected by shortages in funding and supervisors' qualifications. Another challenge is the fact that supervision of social workers from the child protection departments is provided centrally, i.e. workers do not choose the frequency, form and theoretical paradigm of their supervisors.

**It seems that the commitment of the child protection system managers to the introduction of systematic and targeted supervision across child protection departments remains a challenge. But the steepest challenge is the lack of a shared understanding of supervision in child protection and how to conduct it in a professional and ethical manner. At this stage, the participants in the study are focused on the personality of the supervisor as a person bound to apply a professional standard. However, we have neither discussion nor agreement on the standard itself. This study identifies the specific needs of child protection staff in terms of supervision.**



# 3

## What this study tells us

This survey was accidentally conducted at an important time for the child protection system, with the new Social Services Act just out to regulate supervision for all those working with children and families. This survey is not expected or commissioned by stakeholders. That this report does not end up with recommendations reflects the fact it has no one to address them to. By its end, we would like to bring out the gist of what this study found in conversations with various professionals and while exploring the existing practice in the field. They tell us important things that can be useful in developing a good child protection system.

### 3.1 There is a need to start researching social work in child protection

If the system were to develop and prosper, the proper environment for research on child protection work should be promoted.

It is necessary to encourage the development of team leaders' skills in the provision of emotional support to employees, as well as skills in areas such as working with groups and communities, families, child development, among others.

It is necessary to explore the role of the team leader as a supervisor as well as the pros and cons with regard to this function, because in reality we know too little in this area. Supporting managers to develop such skills can offer substantial benefits in improving the work climate and prevent burnout. Line managers acting as supervisors is a practice existing in many countries around the world.

The effectiveness of supervision and levels of satisfaction among supervisors and supervisees should be subject to research. Such research is important both for the quality of service and for the quality of the child protection work.

### 3.2 There is a need for a professional discussion on supervision

A professional discussion on the topic of child protection supervision is long overdue. The discussion might focus on standards of provision or on professional support practices. There are many types of the latter, which can be (or could have been) developed for social workers.

There is a need for a professional discussion on a shared understanding of supervision in child protection departments – as well as a higher number of trained supervisors to work with them.

## There is a need to find solutions to problems in the implementation of supervision

## 3.3

The practice that should be encouraged is for supervision to be executed by practitioners in the same field of work as supervisees. Conditions should be created for such practitioners to develop careers as supervisors.

Efforts should continue to find a sustainable and long-term solution to the issue of regular supervision for all those working in the field of child protection. This would at least reduce the turnover in the system.

The way supervisors are selected ought to be changed. The procedure of selecting the lowest bidder in a process of public procurement does not guarantee good quality service. A possible solution is setting a price of individual and group supervision in order to provide the basis of budget planning, and not the other way round. This will open a better window to select candidates according to their qualifications rather than according to the price they offer.

Supervision supply should be based on supervisors specialising in various child protection areas such as violence, children living outside their families, health challenges, learning constraints, etc., as well as on their specific expertise in work with children or adults, etc.

This could prove beneficial for the quality of work as enlisting supervisors who are highly specialized in particular fields would have a salutary effect on children and families. Within their expertise, such supervisors would be more effective in their support and interventions.

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# SNAPSHOT OF THE PRACTICE OF PROVIDING SUPERVISION IN BULGARIA

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