



Hints and tips on remote supervision of trainees

1. Be aware that the nature of supervision may change

Trainees and supervisors should be aware that there will be numerous potential working patterns. For instance:

- Supervisor at home, trainee in office.
- Supervisor in office, trainee at home.
- Both supervisor and trainee in office.
- Both supervisor and trainee at home.

All of these may lead to different approaches from supervisors and trainees. As we move into an era of greater levels of hybrid working it may well be that numerous types of supervision occur over the course of a month.

2. Planning ahead

Each organisation will find a way of working that suits its own needs – some may have more in-office time, some may have more remote working. It will be useful for supervising solicitors and trainee solicitors to think about how the training environment can be replicated and maintained during hybrid working.

For instance: plan ahead for time when you are both in the office and use that time for tasks that lend themselves well to in-person meetings (e.g. quarterly reviews, support meetings, meetings that require collaboration) whilst maintaining existing good practice around remote supervision for other days.

There are some tasks that lend themselves to face to face and similar some that lend themselves to remote working (working through emails, research, focused writing, certain short meetings etc).

Of course, people can be just as collaborative and creative remotely but connecting with colleagues over video can be more draining and sometimes we can be slower to process non-verbal clues in meetings. All workers are different and have different working styles and it is the skill of the supervisor – within company guidelines – to make the calls that bring out the best of their team.

3. Be clear who is supervising and, where possible, offer additional support

Trainees will know who their supervising solicitor is but make clear when working remotely if there is a specific point of contact when the supervisor is off (on leave, ill, in meetings etc). If the size of your organisation allows it consider linking trainees with an NQ "buddy". This will help the development of the NQ solicitor and will likely give a lot of benefit to the trainee.

4. Work out a schedule of communication with your trainee, stick to it but be prepared to change when needed



When we spoke to trainees some felt that their supervisors on occasion overlooked them when working remotely and didn't check in as often as they might. Others noted their supervisors were speaking to them many times during the day. Aim for a balance that works for both. As one trainee summed it up: *"we need supervising solicitors to keep in touch with us without letting us feel adrift or badgered"*.

There is no one size fits all approach. When working remotely (particularly if over an extended period) a mix of the following may be helpful:

- A quick daily call at the start of the day (5-10 minutes) to check in that the trainee has the right level of work, knows what they are doing, when it needs to be delivered, who will be reviewing it, and is an opportunity to ask questions.
- At least one slightly longer call per week to brief/debrief on work or to explain more complex matters. In hybrid working it may be beneficial for this face-to-face.
- Weekly wrap-up feedback sessions: what went well, what went badly etc. Make sure the feedback is fair and constructive. Trainees don't want sugar-coated advice.
- For larger organisations, team catch-ups at least weekly.
- Consider how to recreate the social aspect of office life to help all feel connected to the team and colleagues (e.g. virtual coffees, catch-ups etc).

Do your best to prioritise these and, if they do need to be moved, do rearrange them. Be prepared to be flexible – what works in month one of the traineeship may be too much in month 12 etc.

5. A balance of proactive and reactive communications

As well as the scheduled updates supervisors will need to think about a blend of proactive and reactive communications to their trainees. This might include:

- email round-ups covering progress, organisation news, new clients, new cases etc
- regular exchanges between supervisor and trainee – either in person or via video call/phone call.
- a group chat with the wider team as well as a one-to-one chat between supervisor and trainee.

6. Be approachable... a supervisor's door should almost always be open

It is easy to focus on *"day job"* and easy to forget our wider management duties. It is important that supervisors are approachable to trainees contacting them with questions and concerns over and above the scheduled times. This might be done via a messaging service or email.

Trainees mentioned to us their questions sometimes went unanswered. Where possible answer as quickly as you can. When catching up with them ask for open feedback on how communication is going.

7. Use the right technology for the task

Consider what is most appropriate form of technology for each situation. For example, if a



supervisor is offering feedback on some drafting then technology that allows for screen-sharing may be helpful (this sort of feedback may be better via remote working than in-person). Sometimes though a phone-call or email will be quicker and more effective than a video-call.

8. Brief, Reassure, debrief

Trainees may be reluctant to check a point or highlight where they are struggling. Supervisors should consider detailed briefings when assigning work and then checking the trainee understands (by asking them to explain rather than simply affirm they understand).

Similarly, after a task is complete discussions about *"how do you think that went?"* are important. We do not learn from experience we learn from reflecting on experience. As part of the training process mistakes will happen. Make it clear everyone makes mistakes. Instil confidence. Ask trainees to outline in emails/discussions where they struggled or highlight anything they found difficult on a task. Whilst this may seem time-consuming it will likely save time. Take the time to debrief thoroughly.

When working remotely think about how and when you debrief. For instance, when working in-person it is quite easy after a meeting to speak to your trainee face to face about how the meeting went. When on a video call it is very easy for everyone to switch off at the end.

9. Osmosis by design

A lot of observational/learning by osmosis may be missed when WFH and can be difficult to replicate (e.g. the overheard phone call, the observation of body language, the calling of someone into a short-notice meeting). When working remotely thought needs to be given to how you can recreate that all important aspect of the traditional traineeship. If you have a client call, client meeting, or virtual court appearance ensure that the trainee is included as often as possible. This gives them the opportunity to learn, take notes, and you can debrief after.

Thought will need to be given when working in a hybrid way to ensure that such learning opportunities are fairly spread amongst trainees.

10. Be aware of their situation

Don't assume that everything is ok just because your trainee isn't raising issues. Take the time to check if they have the equipment they need to do the job properly (including Wi-Fi) and that they understand the software or systems (or if they need additional training/guidance). Trainees may be reluctant to raise such issues but performance may well suffer if they don't and you don't ask. Trainees may well be parents and/or carers. Consider how you can make flexible arrangements for them. ([Some additional advice on flexible working can be found here](#)).

11. Be willing to offer support

In the office if a phone call a trainee is on becomes difficult it is easy for a supervisor to step



in. Remotely you might only hear about that after the fact and you will be relying on the trainee's ability to explain what happened. Where possible offer assistance to be on the call or in the meeting even if the trainee leads it. This can help build a trainee's confidence, improve quality of feedback, and demonstrate your support as a supervisor.

12. Additional focus at certain points

There may be points in traineeships where trainees need additional support and guidance. For instance, when undertaking new tasks or if their roles are changing in some (e.g. when supervision changes or a seat change for those organisations that work in that way). It can be difficult to integrate into new teams or undertake new tasks – particularly if not used to working hybrid or remotely – so supervisors should give thought and plan how they can support trainees in advance where possible.

13. Wellbeing

Remember the importance of wellbeing (yours and that of the trainee). It is easy when working from home to sit all day and not take breaks. Supervisors may need to be alive to issues like isolation and stress, and it can be easy for mental and physical health symptoms to be masked when working remotely.

A more proactive approach to checking in with wellbeing is recommended. A good starting point for wellbeing is our own resources: Lawscot Wellbeing (<https://www.lawscot.org.uk/members/wellbeing/>).

These hints and tips were last reviewed on 1 September 2021