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**Introduction**

Guidance from The College of Social Work (TCSW, 2012) states that understanding of the social work role and context can be developed through ‘work shadowing opportunities’ for students undertaking social work training. This is equally applicable to social workers who may have had a break from practice and wish to return.

The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) has set out some requirements for returning social workers that have to be met in order to register as a social worker in England. You can find out more about these in Module 1 of the return to social work open-learning package; a summary of this guide and a selection of the included exercises are also included in Module 1: Returning to social work.

As you consider how to begin the process of coming back to social work and meeting the HCPC requirements, you might choose to use some of your days of preparation by shadowing a professional social worker.

Shadowing can provide you with a range of experiences – including understanding the organisation of social work and the range of roles a social worker in current services may perform. However, regardless of the type of shadowing experience you are looking for there are some key things you will need to consider.

This guide is designed to help you think about and make the most of your shadowing as a learning opportunity that will contribute to your capabilities as you return to practice.

**Identifying shadowing experiences**

Where you are and whether or not you are already employed will affect the opportunities available to you in terms of shadowing social workers or teams. It is beyond the remit of this guide to provide specific information about opportunities and you will need to think carefully about who and where you approach to try and secure appropriate opportunities.

As set out in Module 1 of the return to social work materials, the HCPC requires you to demonstrate the currency of your practice to be able to register as a social worker in England. This makes it likely that you will need to undertake some shadowing if you have been out of practice for some time.
Some of the things you will need to think about when looking for appropriate shadowing options to support your return to practice include:

- What development needs have you identified?
- What type of social work do you want to do?
- What type of organisation do you want to work for?

Do you, for instance, want to work in general children and families services or with children with health/disability needs or sensory impairment or learning disability? Do you want to work in the voluntary/independent sector, or in a statutory agency? Once you know your preferences in relation to these questions, you are in a position to start looking for your host organisation and arranging for your shadowing to start.

The following checklist is designed to help you think about what type of experience you are looking for and the learning outcomes you are hoping to achieve as a result.

**Useful checklist: Identifying shadowing opportunities**

**If you are already employed:**
- Are there any particular roles or responsibilities within your team or service that you would benefit from observing?
- What other services or organisations do you work with? Is there an opportunity to shadow a different area as part of your learning opportunity?
- What are the expectations of your employer for any shadowing experiences you undertake?
- What supervision do you have to help you reflect on shadowing experiences?

**If you are not currently employed:**
- What organisations provide services locally that you would benefit from observing?
- What are the requirements and expectations of local organisations in terms of offering shadowing experiences and are you able to meet them?
- What supervision do you/would you have to help you reflect on your shadowing experiences?
**What is shadowing?**

The term ‘shadowing’ is used a lot in social work, particularly in relation to qualification and training of social workers. In the context of returning to practice the term is used to describe experiences where you are accompanying, and directly observing, the practice of a professional social worker or social care worker in the undertaking of their duties.

Typically, you might undertake the following activities during your period of shadowing.

- Accompanying an experienced social worker, including visiting service users.
- Meeting with practitioners and managers – this could be formally structured as seminars, opportunity to review procedures, etc.
- Meeting service users, possibly talking about their experience of social work interventions (e.g. planned visits to day care centres, residential units, voluntary agencies, arranged with due regard to ethical considerations, especially the rights and wishes of the service users themselves).

Below are some examples of activities you should try to undertake. (Please note that observation of service users requires permission from the service users involved.)

- Observe part of an assessment, e.g. initial, core, court.
- Observe face-to-face contact between a social worker and service user.
- Have a meeting/discussion with the team manager to discuss the role of supervision in social work, caseload expectations and support for social workers.
- Observe a formal meeting – e.g. core group meeting, case conference, network meeting.
- Explore how integrated services are working for the benefit of the child’s needs. (As the assessment and management of risk is core to social work practice you should reflect on this throughout your observations as well as considering issues of equality and diversity.)
- Contact visit.
- Formal meeting – core group meeting, case conference, network meeting, family group conference, looked after review.
- Meet with health or education – school nurse, health visitor, GP, teacher, home liaison worker.
- Visit to an early years centre.
- Fostering and adoption processes.
- Team meetings.
The types of opportunities you need to shadow will depend on your professional development needs and the range of opportunities that may be available to you.

**Reflective exercise:**

*Thinking about the last time you were in practice:*

- What are your previous experiences of shadowing?
- What do you think are the benefits of shadowing?

**Matching development needs to shadowing opportunities**

Any shadowing experience you engage in needs to be designed to support your learning and development. Being clear about what you want to achieve by undertaking shadowing is a good first step in making sure your shadowing experiences are appropriate and relevant.

You might find it helpful to undertake the following ‘SWOT’ analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) before you start your shadowing. It will help you to focus on your own learning needs and the way you might use this experience.

**Learning activity: Matching needs with experiences**

*Use the template below to complete your own SWOT analysis and then answer the following questions:*

- What types of shadowing experiences would help you to address those areas you identified as learning needs?
- What type of organisation, team or services would provide those types of experiences?
### Strengths (Current) | Weaknesses (Current)
--- | ---
- What do you consider you do well?  
- What do you consider your greatest strength to be?  
- What do you think other people see as your strengths?  
- What has been your major achievement in your most recent role?  
- What knowledge or skill can you share with others?  
- Under what circumstances do you learn or develop most effectively?  |  
- What skills or knowledge do you think you could improve?  
- What weaknesses have other people observed and pointed out to you?  
- What feedback have you been given about areas you might want to develop?  
- Under what circumstances do you find it most difficult to learn?  

### Opportunities (Future) | Threats (Future)
--- | ---
- Do you know what you will need to do to return to social work in the immediate or medium term?  
- What resources will you need to help you to improve your identified areas of weakness?  
- How can you try to make sure the resources are available?  
- Where can you get help for things that concern you?  
- What opportunities are there for you to build on your strengths?  
- What method(s) would you choose for your own development?  |  
- Do you have any personal issues or barriers that could stop you from developing?  
- Can you anticipate events that might prove a barrier to you developing?  
- Are you able to reflect accurately and honestly on your development?  
- Are you realistic about your capabilities?  

### The benefits of shadowing
Shadowing in different contexts has a range of benefits in terms of contributing to your learning and providing you with the opportunity to reflect on social work practice in context. Some of the key benefits you can expect to achieve as a result of a shadowing experience are:

- Refreshing your memory of practice contexts  
- A chance to observe current practice first hand  
- Gain insight into different services and environments  
- A safe space to see what may have changed since you last practised.
Learning activity: Identifying learning outcomes

Following on from identifying your areas of development need in the SWOT analysis exercise, identify three learning outcomes you would hope to achieve from a shadowing experience and consider how these will contribute to your overall development within the domains of the PCF.

Organising your shadowing

Once you have identified your shadowing opportunities and the organisation and relevant professional have agreed the terms of your shadowing experience, you will need to think about how the experience is organised and what you need to get the best out of it. The following checklist will help you to think about and organise your shadowing experience.

Useful information: Shadowing checklist

Consider the following to get the best out of your shadowing experience:

- Meeting with the person you will be shadowing to discuss learning outcomes and expectations of each party within the shadowing opportunity?
- How do you intend to learn from the experience and use it to improve/develop your capabilities?
- How involved will you be in the experience? Are you simply an observer or will you have the opportunity to get involved?
- Do you know where you need to go to meet the person/team you are shadowing and what time you are expected to arrive/leave?
- Have you made any practical arrangements needed to carry out your shadowing? (E.g. childcare responsibilities, transport and travel requirements etc.)
- What do you need to take with you when you go to your shadowing experience?

Observing practice

Observation describes the process of watching, listening and taking note of what is seen in order to reflect, draw conclusions and learn.

Shadowing experiences are based on the observation of another’s practice: this might be an individual or more complex team and relationship dynamics or how a system or organisation works. Learning is achieved by observing practice and reflecting on the effectiveness and impact of what was observed.
Learning activity: Observing practice

Think about a colleague that you professionally respect as a capable and skilled social work professional. Now ask yourself the following questions:

- What does the colleague do that makes you feel they are capable and skilled?
- Make a list of the characteristics you believe they demonstrate in their practice.

Now take this list with you when you go on your shadowing experience. Which characteristics do you observe in this experience; are there any others you have seen?

✓ A useful template you can use to record your observations is included in the additional resources section of this guide.

A number of key skills are needed in order to carry out an effective observation in practice. These include:

- Understanding what you are looking for – there is a difference between looking and seeing, and as you undertake your shadowing experience you will need to be clear about what you are observing, why, and how it contributes to your learning.
- Listening – as with looking and seeing, there is a difference between hearing and listening. You will need to listen for both verbal and non-verbal interactions across a range of relationships and dynamics.
- Recording – keeping a note of important observations and reflections is a core skill for both making the most of your shadowing experience and evidencing your ongoing learning.
- Questioning – questions should be used to clarify and test out ideas in the context of shadowing.
- Reflecting – describes the process of critically considering your experiences and applying them to your own practice.

Reflective exercise:

Thinking about your own skills and capabilities, how would you rate your observational skills on a scale of 1 (being poor) – 5 (being excellent). What evidence do you have to support your score?
Models of reflective practice

Critical reflection in social work practice means thinking about different situations and breaking them down to identify what you did, why you did it, what influenced it and how you can improve it in the future. Module 3: Reflective self of the return to social work package considers a range of reflective models that you can use to reflect on and learn from your shadowing experiences. However, one model you may wish to use is that outlined by Kolb (1984), illustrated below:

![Kolb Learning Cycle Diagram]

Your reflective log should help you to work through each of the stages, with the aim of applying your learning to practice.

Using reflective logs

An effective reflective log offers guidance for commentary on your observations and suggests learning opportunities that will enhance your current knowledge and skills. Completing the log after each shadowing experience will allow you time for reflection on your day’s activities and learning.

The purpose of the shadowing experience is to provide a learning opportunity that acts as a refresher for what you already know about social work in children’s services. It will also provide the opportunity to observe and learn new information and practice interventions that may be different since you last worked as a social worker. This is a
Shadowing practice guide

There is a lot to think about and a reflective log is one of the ways you can record and work through to help you critically reflect on your experiences and apply your learning to practice.

A template for a reflective log is included in the additional resources section of this guide. There are many templates available and you may wish to make your own to fit your particular experiences and development needs. Regardless of what template you choose to use you will need to familiarise yourself with the process of reflection and apply an appropriate model to help organise your thoughts.

The rest of this guide now goes on to consider some of the points you may wish to explore during your shadowing experience to help you to make the most of your experiences. There are also templates you can use to record your learning.

**Making the most of shadowing**

Understanding the context you are working in is a vital part of being an effective practitioner. As such, first you will want to familiarise yourself with the team structure and its role in children's services:

- How does it fit into the structure of children’s services within the local authority?
- What is the main function of the team and where does safeguarding feature in the work?
- How do service users contribute to the work of the team?
- How does an inter-professional approach contribute to the needs of the service users?

Throughout your shadowing experience, you should try and keep a note of your observations and key learning points. Try to do the following:

- Give brief examples of what you have observed – what were the
Shadowing practice guide

- Describe any new learning, e.g. methods of intervention, assessment process and timescales.
- Reflect on your shadowing experience. Were there any surprises? How did you feel at both the beginning and end of the day?
- Are there any unanswered questions?
- Who could you take these to?

*Remember that your reflective logs and observations from shadowing form part of your evidence to meet the HCPC requirements for returning to practice. You should keep them and store them in your CPD portfolio.*

### Critical incident analysis

‘Critical incidents’ in the context of shadowing and learning, mean a practice situation that you have observed and which can be used as a trigger to help you with your professional reflection (Bogg and Challis, 2013).

There are four stages to consider, which parallel the learning cycles you will be using to frame your reflections on your shadowing experience. These stages are:

1. Describe the incident/event/practice
2. Explain or interpret the incident/event/practice
3. Identify the wider context of the incident/event/practice
4. Draw conclusions about the significance of the incident/event/practice and decide how those conclusions will be applied in practice.

The following table gives some suggestions about questions you might ask yourself as a starting point and can be used to apply critical incident analysis to your shadowing experiences.
### Stages | Questions to ask | People involved
--- | --- | ---
Descriptive | What happened? | Who was involved?
 | What made it happen? | Who acted?
Diagnostic | What does it do? | For whom?
 | What does it feel like? | For whom?
 | What does it mean? | To whom?
 | Why does (did) it occur? | With whom?
Reflective | Do I like it? | Do others like it?
 | Is it a good thing? | How does it affect them?
 | Why? | 
 | What is it an example of? | Whose definition?
Critical | Is it just? | For whom?
Practical | What should I do? | For and/or with whom?
 | How? | 
 | When? | 
 | Where? | 

**Source:** Bogg and Challis, 2013 pp146-9.

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### Learning activity:

*Think about something you observed in practice – either in previous practice or as part of your current return to social work activities. The example should be something that made you stop and think or gave you a new insight into social work practice.*

*Make a note of the incident and then answer the following questions:*

- What happened?
- How did you feel?
- How did others react?
- What was good?

*Consider your answers to these questions and then identify the key learning points from this exercise.*
Activities to support learning

While the shadowing experiences you take part in may vary, there are some key themes that you will observe across all children and families services.

The following exercises can be used to help you reflect on your shadowing experiences and consider some of the key themes of social work with children and families.

Don't forget to keep a record of your observations and reflections. You can revisit these at different points to revisit your learning, and they can also be used to demonstrate your ongoing CPD as required for your registration as a social worker.

Learning activity: Key priorities for social work with children and families

Safeguarding practice

Keeping children safe is the main priority for children’s services, so throughout your observations you should take note of how the assessment and management of risk is managed in different practice settings and situations.

- Consider what skills you already have in this area.
- What appears different or new?
- How can you bring your skills in line with what is required?
- What are the key learning points from your shadowing experience in relation to risk and safeguarding?

Learning activity: Key priorities for social work with children and families

The voice of the child or young person

Children and young people should be central to social work practice and assessments, decisions and interventions should take account of and represent the child or young person’s views and wishes.

- In the activities you observe, how are the child or young person's views and wishes taken account of?
- What are the challenges of ensuring this is the case?
- How confident do you feel in making sure you represent the child or young person’s voice in your social work practice?
Learning activity: Key priorities for social work with children and families

Working together to safeguard children

Working together for the benefit of children and their families is a significant feature of modern social work practice. You should familiarise yourself with the guidance ‘Working together to safeguard children’ (2013) prior to undertaking your shadowing experience.

- How does multi-agency or integrated working impact on social work practice you observe?
- What are the challenges of working this way?
- How will you meet these challenges for yourself?

Learning activity: Key priorities for social work with children and families

Service user involvement

Over recent years there has been significant emphasis on the role of service users and carers in contributing to the development of services. During your shadowing experience find out how this has developed in the organisation and identify any evidence of its impact.

Learning Activity: Key priorities for social work with children and families

Equality and diversity

Equality and diversity is an essential consideration throughout all social work practice; as such it should also form a core component of your observations and reflections.

- How is equality and diversity integrated into the social work practice you observe?
- What do you think the challenges might be in achieving a genuine anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive approach to your practice?
Learning resources

Pre-shadowing checklist
This checklist sets out some things you should consider and clarify before undertaking your shadowing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practical details</th>
<th>Date, time and physical location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who you report to and who you will be shadowing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transport and travel arrangements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Confidentiality and consent arrangements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Range of activities you will shadow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How you will be introduced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Where you will be placed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boundaries of shadowing – whether you can be involved or purely an observer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supervision arrangements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expectations of all parties</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus of shadowing</th>
<th>What will you be observing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The purpose of the activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The desired outcomes of the activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How you will know if the desired outcomes are being achieved</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post-shadowing review</th>
<th>Arrangements for critical reflection, supervision and debriefing following the shadowing experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expectations of all parties</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reflective log
The following template is an example of a reflective log that you can use to keep a note of and reflect on your learning while you undertake your shadowing experience.
### Observation template

As well as maintaining a reflective log you may also wish to keep a note of particular observations while you are undertaking your shadowing.

The template on the next page provides a format for you to record these.
| Date of observation |  
|---|---|
| Details of situation being observed | *(description of the shadowing experience and the circumstances being observed)* |
| Key observations | *(list of key facts or points noticed in the situation you are observing – including what evidence you have to support your observations)*  
|  | •  
|  | •  
|  | •  
| Reflection on observation | *(your analysis of your observations using one of the reflective cycles)* |
| Key learning points identified from observation | *(list of key learning you took from your observations and reflections)*  
|  | 1.  
|  | 2.  
|  | 3.  