



The  
British  
Psychological  
Society

# Guidelines for the employment of Assistant Psychologists

# 1. INTRODUCTION

This document has been written for the benefit of assistant psychologists, their employers and managers, to provide guidance on the employment of assistant psychologists. This guidance document should be read against the background of the British Psychological Society Code of Conduct, the Guidelines for Professional Practice of the relevant division and the AFC profiles of psychology grades in the NHS. Employers should be reminded that it should be noted that the appropriate union for all Applied Psychologists including assistants is Unite (amicus section).

This guidance has been written primarily for Band 4 and 5 assistant psychologists in the NHS. However, the British Psychological Society and Unite would recommend that the principles contained in this document should apply to graduate psychologists who may either be employed in the NHS in other roles (e.g. graduate mental health care workers), or as research assistants with other employers (e.g. universities or in the voluntary or independent sector).

Assistant psychologist posts are often created to support services, to make efficient use of short term funds and to enhance the contribution of qualified staff. It is essential that these posts, and indeed established posts, have clearly defined, appropriate roles. These posts are normally held by those aspiring to become Applied Psychologists in Health. It is recognised that some psychology graduates may legitimately be employed in departments other than psychology, for example, as audit assistants. These guidelines will enable employers who are not psychologists, to optimise the skills available to them.

Members of the Divisions should be aware that the following guidelines on the supervision of assistant psychologists fall within the provisions of that element of the Society's Code of Conduct, which concerns responsibility for other practitioners. Failure to follow guidelines would, therefore, render the member liable to investigation by the Investigatory Committee in the event of an allegation by the assistant concerned or another member of the profession or management.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Psychology graduates working under supervision within the NHS are normally referred to as Assistant Psychologists. This title is used in Agenda for Change job titles but may change with the introduction of statutory regulation. It is important to emphasise that qualified psychologists are only those that have a psychology degree followed by three years' postgraduate training in applied psychology. All psychology graduates working under supervision in the NHS (e.g. assistant psychologists, graduate workers, etc.) should ensure that the public understand that their role differs from a fully qualified Psychologist.

## **2. RECRUITMENT**

Advertisements for assistant psychologists should not imply that the posts offer recognised professional training in applied psychology but should be clear on the support and training on offer, nor should there be any implication of the guarantee of subsequent entry to a recognised training course (unless this is appropriate to local circumstances). The recruitment process for all posts (both clinical and research) must include the involvement of an applied psychologist.

## **3. JOB TITLE**

A consistently adopted title should describe the post. Under Agenda for Change, although local titles are acceptable, the Society's Divisions of Applied Psychology and Unite (amicus section) recommend the title Assistant Psychologist.

## **4. ACCOUNTABILITY**

Assistant psychologists can be managerially accountable to an applied psychologist, or to a non-psychologist manager. However, they must be professionally accountable to and have access to the appropriate levels of supervision from a qualified psychologist. This is a requirement in order for them to be eligible for affiliate status of the Society (including those psychology graduates with a graduate basis for registration (GBR)).

## **5. RESPONSIBILITIES AND BALANCE OF WORK**

Some tasks which may be carried out under direction are:

- Research, audit and service evaluation.
- Literature searches, developing and maintaining training packs, information leaflets, libraries of equipment, and other tasks necessary to the efficient running of the service.
- Assessment of individuals and groups, e.g. direct observations, formal psychometric testing, semi-structured interviews, and writing appropriate reports.
- Assisting qualified applied psychologists carry out prescribed interventions with individuals or in groups, and writing appropriate reports.
- Undertaking supportive work with carers, family members, health staff and other professionals.

- Assisting qualified applied psychologists in delivering training for other professionals.
- Promoting applied psychology services by providing relevant information to referrers, commissioners and others.

The managing or clinically supervising applied psychologist must ensure that the assistant psychologist has a realistic balance of work, reflecting their qualifications and experience and need to gain relevant new experience. If the assistant psychologist is working with clients, they should have an agreed maximum of face-to-face contact work per week and there should be regular reviews of caseload. It is recognised as good professional practice that at least a minimum of two hours per week of quality supervision is undertaken (see Section 9).

An assistant psychologist should not be employed to:

- Substitute for qualified applied psychologists.
- Undertake solely administrative or clerical duties for which a clerical assistant should be employed.
- Undertake tasks in areas where there is not a highly competent supervisor.
- Carry out the duties of a care assistant.

The managing or clinically supervising applied psychologist has a responsibility to ensure that assistant psychologists are not given work to do that is over and above their level of competence. Assistant psychologists are managed rather than supervised except when undertaking clinical work. However, it is important when determining an assistant psychologist's workload and work content, to strike a proper balance between using their graduate level skills, and not giving them tasks beyond their remit. The balance of work should ensure a manageable spread of duties, and should include time for supervision, administration, personal study, and opportunities to meet other psychologists.

## **6. PARTICULAR ISSUES RELATING TO CLIENT WORK**

All clinical work is the responsibility of a qualified applied psychologist, who will assess all referrals, and decide on treatment. The assistant psychologist will only carry out prescribed assessment and treatments.

The assistant psychologist will receive a gradual introduction to client work (see Section 8). In conjunction with the assistant psychologist, the supervisor will decide on the degree of autonomy the assistant psychologist will have with each

case, and ensure that the client is told the involvement of the assistant psychologist in the case. Assistant psychologists will most usually work alongside qualified staff, not on their own. There should be a risk assessment review undertaken for work they do and adequate training and supervision should be provided for all work they undertake. All clinical letters and reports should be checked and countersigned by a qualified psychologist stating 'under the supervision of ...'.

Assistant psychologists should not:

- Work alone with complex cases, including those that might evoke strong emotional responses for the therapist, e.g. victims of abuse.
- Provide specialist or complex therapy.
- Work on their own in any sort of emergency service, e.g. helpline, drop-in, front-line crisis work.
- Be responsible for writing any report for Court, nor appear in Court to discuss a patient's treatment in place of the supervisor.

**Contingency Plans:** Supervisors should provide the assistant psychologist with a contingency protocol(s) for seeking appropriate advice regarding patient care (e.g. a first line of contact person and number for queries if an irregular situation arises at the end of the day/week, etc.

## 7. FORMAL INDUCTION

When starting a new post a written induction pack should be provided which include the specific requirements of the job, the assistant psychologist's role and responsibilities, and the supervisor's expectations of the assistant psychologist. Additional material may be provided for particular specialities. This should also include local support systems, e.g. assistant psychologists' group. The induction should include a minimum of two weeks structured introduction to the working environment, finding out 'who's who', making relevant contacts and visits, and being introduced to other professionals. There should be familiarisation with relevant legislation, mandatory training such as child protection and data protection, and familiarisation with local policies, procedures, information requirements and quality standards. It would be considered good practice for the assistant psychologist to become familiar with the 10 Essential and Shared Capabilities ([http://www.dh.gov.uk/Publications AndStatistics/Publications/ PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidanceArticle/ fs/en?CONTENT\\_ID=4087169&chk=fmaIxy](http://www.dh.gov.uk/PublicationsAndStatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidanceArticle/fs/en?CONTENT_ID=4087169&chk=fmaIxy)) if working within mental health.

## **8. INTRODUCTION TO WORK**

All staff should attend a Trust induction. After an initial introduction, the assistant psychologist should gradually be introduced to the work. The stages listed below are relevant to most types of work including client work.

1. The supervisor should provide relevant reading material, reading lists, etc., to inform the assistant psychologist of theory and practice of the skills needed for the task.
2. The supervisor should discuss with the assistant psychologist what they will be doing; like trainees they should be able to observe the supervisor and the supervisor will then observe the work being done.
3. The assistant psychologist will have the opportunity to discuss what they observed, and will receive training if appropriate.
4. This should lead to the assistant psychologist working alongside the supervisor, and agreeing the level of work they can take on.
5. The assistant psychologist will be adequately prepared for their initial sessions on their own.

## **9. SUPERVISION (based on whole-time equivalent)**

It is a requirement that assistant psychologists receive supervision from a qualified applied psychologist.

### ***Organisation***

- The quality and arrangements for supervision should at least comply with the good practice guidelines of the relevant division.
- The supervisor should be a qualified applied psychologist who has received training in supervision, and is working in the speciality area in which the assistant psychologist is involved.
- If there is more than one supervisor the minimum will be the total from one or more supervisors. In the case of more than one supervisor there needs to be a senior supervisor (or mentor).
- Alternative formal supervision arrangements should be made when the supervisor is absent.
- Supervisors have the responsibility of informing and liaising with staff with whom the assistant psychologists are to work. They should inform staff of the assistant psychologist's unqualified status, role and level of responsibility in writing and remind as required.
- Assistant psychologists should have access to a qualified applied psychologist within one working day, even if over the telephone.

## *Content*

- Supervision in this context will include: clinical, peer, case management, project/research supervision, and personal and professional development. Case management involves: reviewing caseload, complexity, discharges, referrals and communication. Clinical supervision involves: in-depth discussion of individual cases. Personal and professional development – see Sections 13 and 14.
- At least a minimum of two hours per week quality supervision should be provided and carried out in a confidential setting without interruption with additional supervision for clinical duties if needed. This should comprise at least one hour of formal supervision and at least a further hour of informal supervision/contact. The exact amount of supervision should depend on the context. If a number of assistant psychologists are working in the same department an element of group supervision may be appropriate. If a single assistant psychologist is working in an isolated service they may need to receive more supervision. (Supervisors and qualified psychologists should be mindful of risk and governance arrangements when agreeing to act as a supervisor in isolated services.)
- The length and amount of supervision should reflect the experience of the assistant psychologist, the balance and amount of work, particularly clinical work, and be at a mutually convenient regular time. There should be increased supervision directly related to the amount of clinical work.
- There should be a formal agenda for each meeting containing items for discussion during supervision. There should be a shared document as a record of the supervision. Supervision sessions should cover:
  - monthly objectives;
  - reviewing work done during the past week, including a discussion of each client where relevant;
  - planning the following week’s work;
  - both clinical and non-clinical issues;
  - personal and career development;
  - personal support and care.
- Supervision for research may require extra time.
- Supervisors should periodically observe the assistant psychologist’s work and evaluate their performance.
- There should be opportunities for assistant psychologists to directly observe their supervisor in practice.

## **10. STUDY TIME**

The assistant psychologist should be given at least 3.75 hours a week to study work-related issues. This time should be supported with the relevant reading lists and followed up during supervision.

## **11. VOLUNTARY POSTS**

These should not be a substitute for appropriately funded NHS posts which fulfil a defined workforce function in facilitating the local delivery of psychology services. We anticipate that voluntary posts will be for a limited time to enable the assistant psychologist to gain sufficient experience to apply for a paid post. Whilst in this position, these guidelines should apply. Please note that those employed in voluntary posts require letters of access and a proper legal status such as an honorary contract.

## **12. CAREER DEVELOPMENT**

Most assistant psychologists take these posts in preparation for an application to train on a postgraduate applied psychology course. Supervisors have a responsibility to ensure that career plans are discussed within the context of appraisals/individual performance reviews and continuing professional development. Assistant psychologists may have particular needs as regards types of clinical experience or working with particular client groups that would enhance their experience and the likelihood of applying successfully to a postgraduate training course. Where possible, supervisors and services should take these requirements into account when agreeing appropriate work plans. Releasing an assistant psychologist to gain experience with other client groups for a day or half-day a week in a neighbouring service can yield helpful development experiences for both the assistant psychologist and the services involved. However, this will depend both upon the nature of services available and the requirements and flexibility contained within the assistant psychologist post. Guidance on completing application forms and preparation for interview should be available either from the supervisor or the service within which the assistant psychologist is working. Currently, assistant psychologist posts are not considered as career paths in their own right, although there are discussions within the profession about more permanent assistant psychologist posts such as senior assistant psychologists or associate psychologists. When an assistant psychologist is unsuccessful at gaining a place on a training course, and particularly if they experience repeated rejections, other members of the service and the supervisor ought to debrief and discuss with the assistant reasons for

possible lack of success, suitability for the profession and alternative career options, if this is considered appropriate.

### **13. EMPLOYMENT ISSUES**

The Divisions of Applied Psychology recommend that a minimum contract for an assistant psychologist should be one year but it is advised that a contract of longer than this is preferable whilst recognising that there are some circumstances when a contract of less than a year might be appropriate.

Assistant psychologists have the same employment rights as other NHS employees on short-term contracts and should receive information from their employer which will allow them to exercise those rights. If an assistant psychologist feels unfairly treated or otherwise disadvantaged as an employee, they should be able to communicate these concerns through their line management or through their employer's agreed grievance procedure. The supervisor should ensure that the following safeguards are in place:

- Regular performance reviews.
- Formal and informal peer support from other assistant psychologists and applied psychologists in training as well as other applied psychologists in the service, supplementary to caseload supervision.
- Availability of local policies at induction, and the opportunity to discuss them when necessary.
- Discussion about termination of or extension of contracts well ahead of termination dates – preferably two months ahead.

### **14. PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Under Agenda for Change terms and conditions the assistant psychologist has access to a Personal Development Plan (PDP), regular review and the Knowledge and Skills Framework (KSF) when Continuing Professional Development (CPD) goals and access to training is agreed. Under Agenda for Change there should be a job review after the first six months and a personal development plan agreed. Training needs should be identified jointly by the supervisor and assistant psychologist and a plan agreed.

## **15. WHAT TO DO IF YOU FIND YOURSELF IN A SITUATION NOT IN COMPLIANCE WITH THESE GUIDELINES?**

Initially assistant psychologists should present to and remind managers and supervisors of these guidelines. If an appropriate response and arrangements are not put in place by those responsible, then people in such positions should initially contact their local union representative to ask for representation to Managers and Human Resources services to rectify the situation. If this cannot be achieved informally, then assistant psychologists may wish to take out a formal grievance against their employer with Unite (amicus section) support and seek professional guidance from the relevant professional division of the Society.

## **16. SUPPORT AND MENTORING**

When applying for an assistant psychologist post you should ask about the support or mentoring system. Employers should support this by including this information in job adverts.

## **17. POWER DIFFERENTIAL**

Working as an assistant psychologist, in order to gain a place later on a postgraduate training course, poses significant challenges for both the assistant and their supervisor as regards power differentials and roles. On the one hand, the assistant psychologist must be mindful that they are essentially an unqualified practitioner and should not go beyond their areas of expertise and competence when dealing with clients. Their unqualified and assistant psychologist status, together with the supervision arrangements, should be communicated to clients at all times. Similarly, supervisors have a responsibility not to require too much of assistant psychologists, and have a responsibility to ensure that their work plans are appropriate and suitable for their level of experience. The power which supervisors have in writing references and preparing assistant psychologists to successfully enter applied psychology training requires recognition. Many assistant psychologists feel that they have to comply with the wishes and guidance of their supervisor at all times: to question or appear as incompetent might jeopardise their chances of successfully gaining a place on a training course.

Such a power differential has the potential for abuse and exploitation, and all parties should be aware of this and if necessary address such issues within supervision.

Given the importance of references for assistant psychologists within the selection process, it is crucial that assistant psychologists identify relevant and appropriate referees who can comment knowledgeably about their clinical experiences and work performance. Employers, supervisors and assistant psychologists must all be aware of the Society's codes of practice regarding the limits of competency and expertise and ensure that assistant psychologists comply with this code of practice and are supported to do so by employers and supervisors.

## **USEFUL READING**

1. Woodruff, G. & Wang, M. (2004). Assistant Psychologists and their Supervisors: Role or semantic confusion? *Clinical Psychology* *Clinical Psychology*, 48, 33–36.
2. Phillips, A., Hatton, C. & Gray, I. (2004). Factors predicting the shortlisting and selection of Trainee Clinical Psychologists: A prospective national cohort study. *Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy*, 11, 111–125.

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- influence on public policy – through the work of its Boards and Parliamentary Officer;
- membership activities – to fully utilise the strengths and diversity of the Society membership.

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