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Understanding the emerging use of artificial intelligence (AI) in social work education and practice in England

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Research in Practice

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Executive summary

Social Work England commissioned Research in Practice to explore the emerging use of AI in social work education and practice in England. The research, conducted in 2025, aimed to understand the types of AI being used, opportunities and risks, workforce preparedness and identify implications for the professional standards for social workers.

AI is a fast-moving, ever-changing field, and the use of AI in social work practice and education is increasing every day. This report summarises the views, hopes and concerns shared with us about the use of AI in social work practice and education by social workers, social work employers, educators and AI experts.

As the use of AI changes and grows as technology develops, the implementation of the recommendations in this report become more urgent, so the potential of AI can be developed and implemented in ways that enhance and support the social work role and equitably amplifies the voices of people with lived and learned experience.

Social workers and employers

Generative AI[1] or GenAI is the most common use of AI by social workers and social work students. There is variation in GenAI use across social work employers, with some employers advocating for its use and providing guidance, other employers permit GenAI use without providing guidance. Some, often concerned about the implications and potential impact on practice, do not allow social workers to use GenAI in people-facing activities.

The use of AI by social workers has the potential to provide efficiency gains, including improving the quality of case recording and making better use of case record data. Reducing the cognitive load and stress of workload for social workers was identified as a benefit, particularly for neurodivergent social workers. Algorithmic bias in commercially available AI models may skew data and reinforce inequity, although awareness and understanding of this was currently low.

AI applications designed and customised to perform specific social work tasks are beginning to be developed and implemented in children's social care and adult social care, with early adopters leading the way. The cost of customised AI applications is prohibitive for many providers of social care, leading to inconsistent benefits for social workers and the people who access social work services. Customised AI applications can be trained to reflect the values of social work practice and may be a more equitable option for the people professions.

[1] Generative AI (GenAI) is a form of artificial intelligence capable of producing new content, including text, images, or music. This technology generates content from inputs provided in natural language, voice, or stored data. Commercial examples are Microsoft Copilot and Magic Notes

Other barriers to adoption include gaps in understanding of AI opportunities and products, current IT systems not supporting AI use, challenges in the quality, availability or interoperability[2] of data, lack of AI procurement and implementation expertise. The lack of a national framework for the use of AI in practice left many social workers and employers unsure about how they could use AI in practice.

Opportunities offered by AI must be weighed against the potential risks and ethical challenges identified by social workers and employers. These include data and privacy concerns, potential amplification of bias and discrimination, consent and transparency, alteration and modification of voices in case records, accuracy and quality and ownership and accountability of AI outputs. The ethical challenges and risks were significant factors for social workers and employers in making decisions about the use of AI, and lack of a framework for the use of AI in practice concerned them and often held them back from adopting AI use.

Social work educators

There is variability in the way that AI is being integrated into social work education programmes, often with more focus being placed on academic integrity issues by the education provider and less attention paid to potential opportunities, ethical issues and implications for practice.

Variability in AI use and permissions between education providers and employers mean that students and apprentices can receive mixed messages about AI use. AI offers an opportunity to enhance learning through virtual reality. Some social work educators have embraced AI, using virtual reality, augmented reality and personalised learning pathways. Some social work educators have embraced AI and have begun integrating it into the curriculum to support learning, while others are uncertain, lacking enough knowledge and expertise to inform decision-making.

Across the spectrum of adoption, social work educators identified concerns about the potential impact on critical thinking skills and over-reliance on AI potentially eroding professional decision-making and the social work role. Social work educators identified ethical challenges and risks as pivotal in decision-making. Like employers and social workers, social work educators said they would benefit from a framework for practice to implement AI ethically and consistently.

Implications for social work professional standards

The opportunities AI offers must be balanced with the risks and ethical challenges of using AI in social work practice. The professional standards set the threshold for safe and effective practice for all social workers. Ensuring the professional standards encompass the use of AI in social work practice is essential to guide safe and effective practice.

[2] The ability of different systems or devices to operate together effectively, especially in computing

The use of AI continues to grow, and the existing professional standards would benefit from early review to ensure they continue to guide safe and effective practice. They should be kept under review to reflect the speed of technology changes so they can be updated and continue to set the threshold for safe and effective practice for social workers.

Recommendations

Government departments, regulators, professional bodies and other organisations with responsibility for social work should work together to inform and shape the use of AI by social workers. Building on existing standards and frameworks, efforts should be made to collaboratively agree a national approach to the ethical and responsible use of AI in social work education and social work practice.

Social Work England should consider where updates may be necessary to their existing standards and guidance, including the professional standards, to reflect increasing use of AI and how this may impact social work practice. As part of this work Social Work England should consult with people with lived and learned experience of social work about the opportunities, risks and ethical challenges of using AI in social work and ensure that any updates to standards or guidance are produced in partnership.

Social Work England should continue to work with partner agencies to better understand the skills, knowledge and behaviours social workers need to use AI lawfully, ethically and responsibly.

Social work education providers should ensure that they are supporting social work students and apprentices to use AI responsibly both during their course and in their preparation for practice.

Introduction

Social Work England commissioned Research in Practice to undertake this research to better understand the emerging use of AI in social work education and practice in England. Research activities took place in the first quarter of 2025.

New technologies offer opportunities to improve efficiency, streamline workloads, and reduce administrative burden. However, their use can also pose risks to the public, depending on how their use is governed, regulated, and assured by employers and other bodies.

The regulator for the social work profession, Social Work England needs to understand the challenges and opportunities AI presents to social workers and social work employers, as well as its potential impacts on public safety, public confidence and public trust in the social work profession.

To support Social Work England's understanding of AI, two pieces of work were commissioned: a separately commissioned literature review and this research into the use of AI in social work education and practice[3].

The aim of this research into the use of AI in social work education and practice was to better understand:

- the types of AI being used in social work settings
- the potential opportunities, risks and challenges of using AI in social work
- how confident and prepared social workers feel to use AI ethically and appropriately, in line with Social Work England's professional standards
- how social work educators and employers are supporting social workers to use AI ethically and appropriately
- how social work employers are balancing risk, opportunity and governance when buying, testing, using or evaluating AI tools
- how social work employers and educators are collaborating to explore AI in social work, ensuring the workforce is prepared to use AI technologies ethically and appropriately
- how people with lived experience of social work services feel about AI being used in social work
- the areas of Social Work England's professional standards which may be impacted by social worker's use of AI in their work

The report provides useful insights that will be of interest to social workers, practice supervisors, practice leaders and practice educators who are using, or considering using, AI in social work education and practice. It provides an overview into how AI is already being used in social work, and a window into what might be possible in how AI might be used in social work education and practice in the future.

[3] Social Work England, 'Artificial Intelligence (AI) in social work' (Social Work England, 4 February 2025) accessed 23 June 2025.

The report explores how AI might have the potential to transform social work for social workers and people with lived experience of social work, and identifies key issues, examines implications for professional practice and education and training standards, suggesting recommendations for future action.

The separately commissioned literature review referenced earlier explores the available international research evidence of the impact of AI on social work practice.

Understanding artificial intelligence

At the start of this research, it was useful to acknowledge that AI has become a part of our work and lives and is expected to play an increasingly significant role. The government's AI Opportunities Action Plan is likely to accelerate this adoption[4],[5].

Many social work employers have already experimented with AI, and more are planning to implement it. Social workers report they have experimented with AI, sometimes without the direction of their employer, and social work students use AI in various aspects of their studies. Some social work employers have adopted AI as part of Department for Education (DfE) funded programmes, however much of the adoption has been organic and there is a need to understand this better.

There are many claims made about the potential impact of AI on social work, however, little research has been done at scale to understand how AI is being used in social work in England and the impact this may have on practice and professional activities. Social workers and social work employers have a professional responsibility to use AI lawfully, ethically and responsibly, to maintain public safety, public confidence, and public trust in the social work profession. This report shares insights into the risks and opportunities presented by AI and how they might be addressed.

Introduction to AI

AI is here to stay and is changing the way we live and work. All social workers and social work employers should understand what AI is, and what it can and can't do, so that they can make informed decisions about the use of AI in their personal and professional lives.

Artificial intelligence, or AI, is not new. It is a term first coined in 1956, and the technology has progressively developed over time. Now, many of us interact with AI daily, whether we realise it or not.

[4] Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, 'AI Opportunities Action Plan' (13 January 2025) accessed 4 July 2025.
[5] Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, 'AI Opportunities Action Plan: government response' (13 January 2025) accessed 4 July 2025.

AI, though challenging to define, is defined by OECD countries as[6]:

> "An AI system is a machine-based system that, for explicit or implicit objectives, infers, from the input it receives, how to generate outputs such as predictions, content, recommendations, or decisions that can influence physical or virtual environments. Different AI systems vary in their levels of autonomy and adaptiveness after deployment"

In simpler terms, AI refers to machines and systems that can perform tasks that typically require human intelligence.

It can be helpful to think about the characteristics of AI to better understand it. AI is[7]:

- **Adaptable:** Finding new ways to meet objectives set by humans
- **Autonomous:** Can be programmed to function with different degrees of independence, potentially operating without human intervention

The effects of AI will be experienced in education and employment[8] in two key ways:

- **Automation:** This involves using technology for tasks typically done by humans. It is commonly implemented for routine, repetitive tasks such as data entry, basic administration, or simple enquiries.
- **Augmentation** is where technology helps humans with tasks instead of completely replacing them

Automation and augmentation intersect and cannot be easily separated. Some tasks are more efficiently performed by AI, while others need human interaction and oversight. Finding a balance between human capabilities, oversight, augmentation, and automation is crucial.

Types of AI

AI encompasses diverse fields with interconnected algorithms, models, and processes. There are various types of interrelated artificial intelligence, each evolving swiftly and being implemented to address real-world issues across multiple sectors. Some types of AI are[9]:

- **Neural Networks (NNs)** are complex models inspired by the human brain. They excel at pattern recognition, data processing, prediction, and continuous improvement.
- **Machine Learning (ML)** analyses data to uncover relationships. ML could offer the public sector valuable and previously inaccessible insights.
- **Deep Learning (DL),** a subset of machine learning, which requires significant resources but is proficient in managing complex tasks and large data sets

[6] OECD AI Policy Observatory, 'Updates to the OECD's definition of an AI system explained' (OECD AI Policy Observatory Intergovernmental, 2023) accessed 4 July 2025.
[7] Tom Calvard, 'From skills erosion to complex resilience: How AI will transform L&D', (Training Zone: University of Edinburgh Business School, 2025) accessed 10 April 2025.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Government Digital Service (GDS), 'Artificial Intelligence Playbook for the UK Government' (HTML) (Guidance: 2025) accessed 22 April 2025.

- **Speech Recognition (SR)** is an area of machine learning focused on processing spoken language. Speech recognition can transform speech into text or convert speech from one language to another.
- **Natural Language Processing (NLP)** is about handling human language. It lets people use AI type queries naturally for responses or outputs. NLP helps manage large amounts of language data from emails, letters, and forms for efficient analysis.
- **Agentic AI** are autonomous systems that make decisions and take actions with minimal human input. They assess their environment, choose tools, and achieve objectives independently.
- **Generative AI (GenAI)** refers to a form of artificial intelligence capable of producing new content, including text, images, or music. This technology generates content from inputs provided in natural language, voice, or stored data.

GenAI

GenAI is the most common type of AI currently used in social work. The uses of GenAI can be described by three categories and nine subcategories[10] (see Table 1)

Table 1 GenAI categories and subcategories

Creation	**Artifact**	Generate a new artifact (document, image, video, audio) to be used directly or with some modification
	Idea	Generate an idea, to be used indirectly
Information	**Search**	Seek a fact or piece of information
	Learn	Learn more about a new topic more broadly
	Summarise	Generate a shorter version of a piece of content that describes the important elements
	Analyse	Discover a new insight about information or data
Advice	**Improve**	Generate a better version
	Guidance	Get guidance about how to make a decision
	Validation	Check whether an artifact satisfies a set of rules or constraints

[10] Michelle Brachman and others, 'How Knowledge Workers Use and Want to Use LLMs in an Enterprise Context' (in CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems: New York, 2024) 1–8 accessed 4 July 2025

The lawful, ethical and responsible use of AI in public services

The Government Digital Service (GDS) created the Artificial Intelligence Playbook for the UK Government[11] with input from many government departments, public sector institutions, academia, and industry. The playbook offers guidance to government departments and public sector organisations to help harness the power of a wider range of AI technologies lawfully, ethically, and responsibly. The playbook proposes six values that should govern the ethical and responsible use of AI:

- safety, security and robustness
- transparency and explainability
- fairness, bias and discrimination
- accountability and responsibility
- contestability and redress
- societal wellbeing and public good

The playbook defines 10 common principles to guide the safe, responsible and effective use of AI in government organisations:

- Principle 1: You know what AI is and what its limitations are
- Principle 2: You use AI lawfully, ethically and responsibly
- Principle 3: You know how to use AI securely
- Principle 4: You have meaningful human control at the right stage
- Principle 5: You understand how to manage the AI life cycle
- Principle 6: You use the right tool for the job
- Principle 7: You are open and collaborative
- Principle 8: You work with commercial colleagues from the start
- Principle 9: You have the skills and expertise needed to implement and use AI
- Principle 10: You use these principles alongside your organisation's policies and have the right assurance in place

The playbook and other guidance, such as the Responsible AI Toolkit[12], offer a foundation for social work and social care to build on.

[11] Government Digital Service (GDS), 'Artificial Intelligence Playbook for the UK Government' (HTML) (Guidance: 2025) accessed 22 April 2025.
[12] Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), 'Responsible AI Toolkit' (2024) accessed 4 July 2025.

Methodology

Approach

NCB is a member of the Social Research Association and the research was designed and delivered in accordance with National Children's Bureau (NCB) Ethical Guidelines.

A mixed methods approach captured diverse AI use cases and experiences across social work practice and education settings. Using a desk review of relevant literature, the key themes were explored iteratively in the fieldwork to narrow the focus and identify significant insights. Stakeholders were recruited to participate in a survey and focus groups or interviews during March 2025. Self-selected participants included practising social workers, social work employers, social work educators, sector leaders and subject matter experts. We invited existing participation groups of parents/carers and young people to contribute to the study, but the timescale of the work meant that only one participation group was able to respond.
The feedback was collected in March 2025 within a rapidly evolving environment, reflecting a snapshot of AI technologies and their adoption.

Limitations

The study's findings represent a snapshot of the current use of AI in social work, capturing a moment in time amidst the rapid evolution of AI technologies. The relatively small sample size of social work employers and limited feedback from participation groups, despite an extended timeline, underscores the need for broader engagement. The sample size of people with lived experience of social work services is very small and lacks diversity. It may not be representative of the views of a broader sample; however, the feedback does offer insight into themes that could be explored in more depth. Future research should integrate diverse and representative perspectives from people with lived experience of social work services to deepen understanding and address gaps in adoption and impact.

Further details on the methodology can be found in Appendix A.

Use of AI in social work

How AI is currently being used in social work

The research findings identified a range of ways that AI is being used by social workers and social work employers in England. We heard that generative AI is the most used type of AI in children's, adults and NHS social work settings. Although advanced models are being developed and used in some areas, most appear to be in the pilot phase or have not yet implemented AI models. The consultation highlighted many opportunities and benefits of using AI in social work but usefully identified potential barriers to adoption. This section summarises the current use of AI in social work across the adult and children's social care sector, as reported in the survey, focus groups and interviews and informed by the desk review of relevant literature.

Generative AI, or GenAI, is the most common type of AI used in social work, although it is still not widely adopted. Of the social workers that responded to the survey, 40% said they have used AI **with direction** from their employer (either piloted or implemented). Most use cases were GenAI, such as:

- AI virtual assistant
- transcription software
- case recording support (generated documentation)
- chatbots

The use of GenAI by social workers and social work employers aligns with how other knowledge workers use GenAI tools. Social workers using AI reported GenAI is used to transcribe recorded conversations from visits, supervision or meetings (by consent), streamline administrative tasks and generate case recordings and other documents, and assist with ideas and learning and development. Social workers using Gen AI described a range of benefits for a variety of tasks.

> "Transcription allows me to speak my visit details while I drive between visits and transcribed them to text. I'm then able to copy/paste the text to the system and make any necessary (smaller) edits … as opposed to having to type all of it up from scratch, when I finally get back to my desk. This is especially helpful as I have several out-of-area placements and can be home very late … being able to pick up my transcript in the morning is helpful." (social worker)

> "We are using [GenAI] regularly for transcription and minute taking. We are also using it to help draft emails and other documents. We are involved in a pilot project to look at how AI can support social workers with case recording and form completion. Our current view is that we are expecting some processes to become more automated, so social workers are spending less time behind computers and more with children and families." (social work employer)

> "[GenAI] is very helpful in drafting therapeutic letters, re-writing emails in a different tone (i.e. empathetic, stern, softer, professional, more casual, etc.), suggesting changes to analysis, giving information about different approaches to working with families that are experiencing particular difficulties (i.e. substance abuse, MH, DA, etc.), brainstorming aid." (social worker)

There was variation between social work employers about how GenAI was used and when its use was permitted. Feedback from surveys and focus groups indicated some social work employers have rolled out Gen AI tools to some employees but not all. Participants reported that some employers do not allow GenAI to be used in person-facing activities while others encourage the use of GenAI during home visits with consent of the person.

> "[GenAI is] used to support assistant team managers and above, in general. We expect to see significant time saved around time consuming tasks such as completion of supervision notes, complaint and FOI responses and analysis of reports. We foresee more focus on the conversation and relationship in supervision with the support of note taking." (social work employer)

> "We are currently deploying some of the [AI] tools in non-person-facing services such as sickness recording and monitoring, some aspects of supervision recording in its very initial stages. We are not using any in direct practice." (social work employer)

> "[We use customised and standard GenAI] to support with taking notes and supporting practitioners with reducing recording time and enable better face to face conversations. This should have an impact on productivity and job satisfaction." (social work employer)

Some social workers are experimenting with GenAI without direction from their employer. Of the 155 social workers that responded to this survey question, 24% (37) said they have used GenAI without direction from their employer. This could be an underrepresentation of the true proportion because feedback from the focus groups indicated that social workers can be reluctant to disclose AI use to their employer. Focus group feedback and employer survey responses both noted that social workers often use AI without proper guidance, support, or monitoring.

Benefits and opportunities of using AI in social work practice

There are numerous claims about the potential benefits from using AI in social work practice, including many that remain to be realised. While the integration of AI appears promising, many of the claims are not well researched. As an emerging technology, the opportunity to conduct any meaningful large scale or longitudinal studies to measure impact in real world context has not been possible. Many of the claims about time savings or saved time being reallocated to people who access services are untested outside of small local evaluations.

The survey gathered opinions from social workers, employers, and educators on the perceived benefits of using AI in social work practice. The responses were optimistic about the potential of AI to assist with workload management and administrative tasks, as well as to enhance information utilisation. Respondents indicated that they strongly agree or agree with the following statements:

- The integration of AI in social work can help reduce administrative burden for social workers (83%)
- AI technologies can help improve the quality and consistency of case recording (69%)
- AI technologies can help make better use of information in case records (67%)
- AI technologies can make better use of information in case records through enhanced analytical capabilities (62%)
- The integration of AI in social work can help reduce the workload of social workers (62%)
- The use of AI in social work can enhance the overall effectiveness of social services (61%)

Responses showed less optimism about AI's ability to aid in decision-making, support, and identifying risk and need in social work. Respondents indicated that they strongly agree or agree with the following statements:

- The use of AI in social work practice could enable more personalised support to people with lived experience (54%)
- AI can support social workers in making more informed decisions (48%)
- AI technologies can help with earlier identification of needs and risks (46%)

Some social workers already use GenAI to support decision making in different ways.

> "I have used the tools to write emails, analyse parts of data that I have compiled from my assessments to enhance my critical analysis of the data and to support my decision making based on the data analysed." (social worker)

> "I have recently started using [GenAI] in my work to help search and summarise data from research which helps to work in an evidence-based way and using research to support decision making." (social worker)

Experience and impact of using GenAI in social work practice

GenAI was generally recognised by participants as a tool that offers various opportunities for social workers to handle administrative tasks, assist with case recording, learning and development, and enhance practice. Responses about the experience and impact of using GenAI in children's services, adult services, and NHS settings was similar across settings.

Many social workers using AI said that GenAI saves time and makes the administrative burden more manageable.

> "I have used [GenAI]. It can save time in summarising emails, meeting transcripts etc." (social worker)
>
> "[Customised GenAI] is a very useful tool. I use it for assessments, case notes, team meeting minutes. It is one of the only things I can think of in the 13 years that I've been a social worker that has been introduced to save time. We often add more time intensive things and more processes in adult social care which is not welcome." (social worker)
>
> "[Customised GenAI] is incredibly beneficial for the work I do. I chair multiple strategy discussions daily and without this AI I would be burdened with mountains of administrative work." (practice supervisor)

These time savings allowed some social workers using AI more face-to-face time with people with lived experience, and this is often used as a reason in business cases by social work employers to support the use of AI.

> "Overall, my documentation time for [case] notes has been reduced by about 50 to 30%, this allows me more direct time with my clients." (social worker NHS)
>
> "We have [entered a partnership] focused specifically on safely incorporating AI into a software system which is safe, effective and alleviates the administrative burden across all areas of the agency and to maximise the time our staff can spend directly supporting our children and families." (social work employer)

GenAI assistance can potentially help with cognitive load and stress reduction, which could have a positive impact on staff retention and wellbeing. One team reported that GenAI use in case recording was associated with decreased sickness leave related to stress and mental health issues. Some social work employers see the opportunity to develop and implement AI tools to alleviate chronic social work stressors.

> "The opportunity [of AI] lies in its potential to ease practitioners' workloads, reducing stress and the burden created by high caseloads and limited support - realities faced by many local authorities. When used safely, with the right checks and balances, AI can be a valuable tool to enhance efficiency while allowing practitioners to focus on relationship-based practice." (social worker)
>
> "AI could provide emotional support for social workers by offering stress management resources or real-time guidance during challenging cases. In the future, we might see the development of new applications specifically designed to enhance efficiency, support decision-making, and improve overall being of practitioners." (social work educator)

GenAI can potentially improve the quality and consistency of case recording and communication. Focus group feedback from a practice leader, whose team has piloted GenAI, indicated that practice supervisors were approving social worker reports with fewer revisions and the overall quality of case recordings and communications had improved. Feedback from surveys and focus groups indicated that GenAI outputs can:

- help improve the quality of written work by correcting grammar, spelling, and abbreviations
- enhance clarity and structure in written documentation
- create more accurate and comprehensive case notes
- use customised templates that ensure workers cover all necessary points in correspondence and other case recordings
- save time by generating first drafts which improves the timeliness of correspondence and case recordings

While AI can improve the technical quality of writing and help with documentation efficiency, human oversight remains essential to ensure accuracy, appropriate analysis, and that the social worker's professional judgment is maintained in all case recording and correspondence. This is explored further in the chapter on the Risks and ethical challenges of using AI in social work.

AI Assistive Technology

Participants said that AI assistive technology can help bridge learning and language gaps and improve accessibility. AI assistive technology refers to tools and systems that use artificial intelligence to support individuals in performing tasks they might find challenging due to disabilities, age-related conditions, neurodiversity, or other factors. Improved communication and accessibility were identified as useful to people with lived experience and to professionals:

- **Accessibility:** AI assistive technology enhances accessibility by providing solutions like speech-to-text, text-to-speech, and voice recognition systems.
- **Communication:** Tools like predictive text and communication apps assist individuals with speech or language needs.

  "AI can support better information-sharing between professionals, generate plain language summaries for families, and assist with translation services to bridge language barriers." (social worker)

There were mixed responses about whether GenAI has an impact on protected characteristics. Survey responses from social workers showed that 29% reported having a protected characteristic. Of this cohort:

- 50% said their protected characteristic **does not** impact how they experience and use AI in their work
- 29% said that their protected characteristic **does** impact how they experience and use AI in their work
- 21% said they did not know if there was any impact

Most of the responses indicating that protected characteristics did impact how they experience and use AI in their work were from neurodivergent social workers, who said that AI helps them to do their jobs.

GenAI can assist neurodiverse social workers with case recording and practice. Many neurodivergent social workers, particularly those diagnosed with autism, ADHD, and dyslexia, described GenAI tools as 'transformative' and 'game changing' for their professional lives. Focus group participants and survey feedback indicated that social workers who previously struggled with case recording due to neurodiversity found that AI transcription tools significantly improved their confidence and wellbeing and their ability to do their jobs.

> "As a dyslexic and undiagnosed ADHD person, AI changes social work completely. I have been on the verge of leaving the profession a number of times due purely to the admin aspect. I have integrated AI into my daily life and seen how my anxiety has fallen. In addition, I have seen my work improve as I am able to properly express what I am trying to convey." (neurodivergent social worker)
>
> "I have ADHD, so AI helps me plan my time and keep track of tasks." (neurodivergent social worker)
>
> "AI helps with grammar and spelling." (neurodivergent social worker with dyslexia)
>
> "I have autism, and the logical approach used by AI is welcomed." (neurodivergent social worker)
>
> "We've got social workers who are saying that they used to dread going to child need meetings or corporate meetings, and really feel anxious about having to check, not so much the chairing, but the recording of it, and that has completely changed their lives to the point where their morale is so much higher and so much more confident in themselves." (practice leader)

GenAI can potentially support social workers in face-to-face interactions. One participant provided a powerful example of a social worker with dyslexia who found that using AI tools allowed them to maintain better eye contact with people during visits. A child they were working with noticed this improvement and commented that the visit was better because the social worker "really looked at me and had eye contact". The social worker realised that previously they had been so focused on note-taking it affected their ability to fully engage with the child.

GenAI can potentially reduce cognitive load and improve wellbeing for neurodivergent social workers. Examples from focus group participants and survey feedback highlight how AI is helping neurodivergent social workers by:

- reducing anxiety around documentation and note-taking
- improving confidence in professional settings
- enabling better engagement and eye contact with people accessing services
- allowing workers to focus on their strengths in relationship building rather than administrative tasks

This could indicate potential for GenAI to be used as part of a plan for 'reasonable adjustments' to support neurodivergent social workers to complete work activities, as well as support the recruitment and retention of neurodivergent social workers.

Advanced AI models

Responses indicated that current applications of AI in social work predominantly focus on generative AI addressing workload issues, with some emerging uses in automation. Evidence from some stakeholders and the literature predicted that as AI evolves, new use cases will be identified, and there is potential for AI to help solve more complex problems in the future.

Advanced AI models have been tested, developed, and used in children's social care. Some innovators have developed models that make better use of information through AIs enhanced search and analytical capabilities. Survey and focus group feedback indicated the emerging use of advanced models, such as:

- automated processes
- AI enhanced search
- AI data mapping tools
- predictive analytics

These models have been designed to make better use of structured and unstructured information in case records, enhance analysis, and reduce retrieval burden for social workers. Three examples from North Yorkshire, used in children's social care, include:

- Policy Buddy, an enhanced search tool, that allows a query to be written in natural language to retrieve a succinct summary of legislation, policy and guidance
- A data mapping tool that uses unstructured information in case records to map comprehensive child and family networks
- An enhanced semantic search tool that can identify patterns in unstructured information, such as retrieving all examples of neglect even if the word neglect is not used in the case recording

There were also examples of AI applications designed and customised to perform specific social work tasks, such as:

- life story work applications that can generate age-appropriate stories and images from prompts
- tools that generate education, health and care plans (EHCP) from case records
- quality assurance tools that can be used to evaluate reports and plans against a specified set of criteria
- predictive analytics tools that can identify when a young person is at risk of becoming not in education, employment and training (NEET)

In one example, North Tyneside and Northumberland used a set of customised direct work tools that enabled children, families and social workers to type or draw directly on a tablet. This supported them to work together, so families could contribute to their care, support, and case recordings in new and more inclusive ways.

Advanced AI models have been tested, developed, and used in adult social care and NHS settings. The desk review and interview with the Digital Care Hub project lead illustrated the innovative approach being taken in adult social care and NHS social work settings, particularly aged care.

Adult social care and the NHS have fostered a cross-discipline, collaborative approach to innovation. The NHSX AI Lab was established to tackle challenges and promote innovation by collaborating with government, health and care providers, academics, and technology companies. NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) established the Digitising Social Care programme, which aims to transform adult social care through digital innovation. The programme, through its partnership with the Digital Care Hub consortium, provides free information, guidance, and support for safe and effective use of digital technology by adult social care providers.

Adult social care has trialled a range of AI-driven products designed specifically for aged care. The Digital Care Hub website showcases a range of examples trialled by public and private providers that aim to enhance independence and 'at home' care, safety and wellbeing, prevent avoidable trips to A&E, and reduce pressure on the NHS. Examples include:

- An AI platform that uses predictive analytics to support residents to connect more easily with their GP and manage health and wellbeing in their current care setting. This resulted in 71% fewer visits by GPs to the care home and 36% fewer visits by residents to A&E.
- An AI tool was used to analyse data collected from care workers' visit reports to produce a regional risk assessment to predict the likelihood of falls and hospital admission
- By analysing workforce data, an AI tool was used to generate insights about factors influencing workforce retention
- The use of smart devices to detect and alert staff when a patient has had a fall
- The use of care robots to perform a range of domestic or care tasks

Barriers to adopting AI in social work practice

Social workers in children's social care, adult social care, and NHS social work settings reported that they are using GenAI to varying extents. Some organisations have fully implemented GenAI or are developing and testing other more advanced AI models, while others reported small, randomised trials or early implementation, or have not yet adopted AI. There is significant interest in adopting AI in social care settings and some local authorities are making centralised decisions about AI adoption rather than department level plans.

While there is significant interest, social work employers survey responses indicate a range of barriers to adopting AI. In order of priority, these are:

1. Cost
2. Gaps in understanding of AI opportunities and products
3. Organisational culture (including resistance to change, fear of the unknown)
4. Computer system requirements (current IT system does not support AI)
5. Data challenges (such as data quality, availability, or interoperability)
6. Gaps in expertise to procure and implement AI
7. Other reasons like a lack of national guidance related to practice or ethical standards and a need to make a business case for implementation

These themes were reinforced by social work employers during the focus groups. This points to a need for comprehensive support to implement artificial intelligence in social work organisations to ensure the social work sector and people with lived experience of social work services share in the benefits.

Risks and ethical challenges of using AI in social work

The survey, focus groups, interviews, and desk review raised a range of risk and ethical challenges. These concerns are diverse. Some relate to the general application of AI, while others specifically address its use in social work and interactions with vulnerable populations.

Privacy and data protection

There is a need to raise awareness about privacy and data protection in relation to sharing sensitive personal information with publicly available AI models. Some focus group participants and subject matter experts shared examples where personal sensitive information was shared with publicly available unpaid GenAI, such as ChatGPT, Claude or Microsoft Copilot. What AI does with information, and how it processes it and stores it, is often unclear to the user. This is particularly concerning in relation to AI applications originating from outside the UK and not subject to GDPR or data protection laws (Box 1).

Box 1: Privacy and data-handling policies in paid and unpaid GenAI subscriptions

The difference in privacy and data handling policies between paid and unpaid subscriptions for AI models like Copilot, ChatGPT, Gemini and others is a critical consideration for social workers and social work employers, especially when handling personal sensitive information [13],[14],[15],[16],[17].

- **Data usage for model training**: Generally, free versions of AI models use user inputs and conversations to train and improve their underlying models. This means any information shared with the model could potentially be logged, stored, seen by developers, and used to train future public AI models. In some cases, this data could even be accidentally shown to other users external to the organisation. Paid subscriptions, particularly enterprise-level plans, often come with stronger data privacy commitments to protect sensitive and proprietary information. Providers typically commit to not using your prompts, responses, or data to train their foundational models.
- **Data retention**: Data retention policies for free versions can be less stringent. Conversations may be retained indefinitely by default, or for a significant period, unless you manually delete them or opt out of history (if available). Paid versions often offer more control over data retention.

Security measures and compliance: While basic security measures are in place, free versions may not offer the same level of security features, dedicated support, or compliance with industry-specific regulations (like GDPR). Paid services typically come with enhanced security features and adherence to stricter compliance standards.

[13] BytePlus, 'What Is the Difference Between ChatGPT Paid and Free Security' (BytePlus, 2025) accessed 4 July 2025
[14] John K. Waters, 'Study: 1 in 10 AI Prompts Could Expose Sensitive Data' (Campus Technology, 22 January 2025 accessed 4 July 2025.
[15] Association for Talent Development, 'Free vs. Paid AI Services: Navigating the Privacy and Security Landscape' (ATD Blog, 1 August 2024) accessed 4 July 2025.
[16] Microsoft, 'How does Microsoft 365 Copilot use your proprietary organizational data?' (Microsoft Learn, 2025) accessed 4 July 2025.
[17] Securiti, 'What Is Enterprise AI? An Ultimate Guide for Businesses' (Securiti Knowledge Center, 18 February 2025) accessed 4 July 2025.

There were mixed responses from professionals about the ethics of sharing personal information with GenAI and what constitutes personal information. While some social workers will share personal information with AI, others will not.

> "I'll use the voice recorder to record everything I've said to a person I'm speaking to, including me, paraphrasing what they're telling me as their answers. I then get a long transcript from my monologue, which I then put through [GenAI] … and with the right prompt it can give me very detailed case notes." (neurodivergent social worker with dyslexia)

> "I've tried to use [AI] to help write a letter … I got some decent reflective questions from it, but that's kind of where I'm limiting it. Absolutely nothing related to patient information is ever going through [GenAI]." (practice supervisor)

Some focus group and survey responses gave examples of social workers that had copied case records and transcripts into publicly available GenAI and considered it ethical because they had changed some identifying information, such as names, addresses, and dates of birth.

Social work employers should consult with partner agencies before implementing GenAI in multiagency contexts. One social work employer emphasised the importance of consultation and aligning privacy and data protection protocols when introducing AI technologies. In this instance the police did not provide consent for GenAI to be used in meetings where they were present until they could be assured the AI met their data protection standards. This had a significant impact given that resourcing decisions about administrator time had already been made. While the issue was resolved, this experience underscored the importance of ensuring partner organisations are confident in the tool's data governance measures before implementation.

Storing and retaining transcripts raises concerns around information access requests, dispute resolution, or care proceedings. Focus group feedback raised questions about what information governance should be in place and what this could mean for case recording.

> "I am concerned about the long-term retention of transcripts and the implications if these become part of Subject Access Requests. Transcripts are not always accurate, and there is a responsibility with AI to prioritise the worker's recall, by checking and editing. My concern is that in the event of a dispute, a transcript might be shared and considered the more trustworthy data source, potentially overshadowing the worker's input." (social work systems developer)

Evaluating risk and deciding on information governance processes is difficult without knowing how AI uses and stores data. This points to a need for a suitably qualified professional to be involved in procurement, testing, implementation, and monitoring phases.

Fairness, bias and discrimination

AI systems can amplify existing biases in the data they are trained on or access, which can result in disproportionality and unfair outcomes for some demographics. AI systems can amplify societal biases, like racial or gender prejudices, if trained on biased data. In social work, this could result in unfair treatment based on these biases. Recognising and addressing bias in AI to ensure fairness and equity needs careful attention from social workers and employers. This becomes challenging with AI systems where bias may not be evident[18].

Fairness, bias, and discrimination were not strong themes in the feedback from social workers and social work employers. Some social workers using AI were aware of these issues and said it was important to check GenAI outputs for bias during the editing process. Innovators and subject matter experts spoke to the issues with data quality and the potential for bias and unfairness to be amplified in more advanced systems.

> "We are going into this too quickly and not thinking enough about the inbuilt biases of AI, e.g., marginalised communities may become more marginalised. Social work is a nuanced activity that involves all of your body and senses and not just the fingers you use to type." (social worker)

> "It is also critical we confront issues of privilege, bias, and power and how these play out in data sets, how and what labels and codes are being created, and how and in what spaces and places AI systems are deployed. AI is currently used with little or no socio-cultural contexts." (social work educator)

Inherent biases could impact social workers with protected characteristics. While neurodivergent social workers reported positive experiences, social workers with other protected characteristics shared their concerns about how AI might impact them including some unknowns. Some survey responses raised questions about whether the inherent bias in AI models or use cases might impact on protected characteristics such as gender, ethnicity and faith.

> "... my religious beliefs affect my morality and ethics and as such I would strive to use AI in ways which would be in keeping with those (meaning using AI with integrity and not dishonestly or against any code of practice and not compromising confidential information about service users)." (social worker)

> "AI products, particularly LLMs, are known to replicate the biases of the material they are trained on. As someone who does not identify with the gender assigned at birth and is disabled, I am not interested in using tools that will perpetuate my oppression." (social worker)

[18] Government Digital Service (GDS), 'Artificial Intelligence Playbook for the UK Government' (HTML) (Guidance: 2025) accessed 22 April 2025.

> "AI is new in social work, I do not know if my faith, ethnicity or gender will be impacted upon." (social worker)

> "AI has been developed largely by white males. I am an older female, someone not stereotypically linked with the use of AI." (social worker)

It is crucial to address these concerns and ensure that the integration of AI in social work is approached with sensitivity and inclusivity.

There is potential for AI to help resolve issues of bias, unfairness, and discrimination. For example, bias and unfairness can be identified through language, sentiment analysis, and data analysis that identifies disproportionality in provision of support or resources or at decision-making points. There are already use cases, or examples, where AI quality assures Education Health and Care plans and reports. Interviews with computer scientists illustrate the potential for AI to be trained to identify bias in case recordings or to act as a practice coach to prompt social workers to reflect while writing. Social workers using AI also emphasised that customised and purpose-built AI tended to yield better results than general models.

Transparency, explainability, and informed consent

Issues of informed consent were explored further with subject matter experts and discussed in focus group sessions. In the context of social work practice, transparency and explainability intersect with informed consent and becomes complicated when issues of vulnerability and capacity emerge. There was a sense that issues of consent are limited to consent to record conversations, and more complex issues have not been thoroughly explored. Participants were supported to reflect upon some of the complexities.

The question of informed consent is complex in the context of AI. Feedback from the focus groups indicated consent to record a conversation or meeting for transcription is clear-cut, but some scenarios are less straightforward. Issues of informed consent are linked with issues of transparency and explainability. People should know how AI uses their information and should ideally be able to consent or decline. This becomes problematic when AI is integrated into the case management system or other systems. Another challenge involves ensuring that consent is truly informed, as social workers may struggle to effectively communicate the complexities of AI processes and how AI utilises the information provided.

> "I believe that AI could be a very useful tool and deliver positive outcomes for people who draw on support, and people working in social care. However, I do not feel confident in my own ability to use AI yet, and I am concerned about information governance as I do not fully understand how AI uses and stores information. For that reason, I would not yet feel able to explain to somebody else in order to establish their capacity to consent to the use of AI in their assessment for example." (social worker)

Each AI application will have its own specific explanations. It can be difficult to explain these processes to people who may not grasp their complexity or importance for various reasons. Further, there is a question about whether it is necessary to have consent if adequate privacy and data protection rules are followed. The issue of informed consent needs further examination to determine when it is required and when it can be waived. Transparency, explainability and consent become more challenging if AI goes beyond GenAI and more advanced models are developed, especially if they have more automation and autonomy.

Box 2: Transparency and explainability

Transparency in AI systems refers to the clarity and openness about the use of AI. For example, information on how, when and for which purposes an AI system is being used. A lack of transparency can lead to[19]:

- harmful outcomes
- public distrust
- a lack of accountability and the ability to appeal

Explainability describes the ability to clarify how an AI system arrives at a given output or decision. This involves the ability to provide understandable and justifiable reasons for the decisions made by AI, ensuring that its recommendations or actions can be scrutinised and trusted. Transparency and explainability in AI systems are critical issues, and it can be challenging to explain what AI is doing and how it arrives at decision. There are a range of reasons for this[20]:

- **The 'black-box' effect** refers to the lack of transparency and understanding of the internal workings and decision-making processes of AI systems
- **Proprietary** limits placed by some providers restrict access to their algorithms and data, preventing external scrutiny and modification
- **Explainability** may not be possible for certain forms of machine learning or may only be achievable at the cost of performance

[19] Ibid
[20] Ibid

The limitations, quality and accuracy of AI outputs

While GenAI can produce quick results, there are concerns about the quality and accuracy of the outputs. While there are some indications that GenAI could improve the quality of case recordings, this is contingent on rigorous editing processes.

AI can generate inaccurate outputs or even fabrications, also known as 'hallucinations'. This is particularly problematic in social work, where accurate and reliable case recording is a social worker's responsibility, as set out in Social Work England's professional standards. Social workers using AI described case recording outputs appearing reliable at first glance only to find that the AI had missed, misinterpreted, misrepresented, or completely fabricated some information.

GenAI struggles with accents, technical language and jargon, and cultural context although this seems to be improving. Social workers work with diverse communities and cultural context is important. Social workers using AI described a lack of nuance in GenAI outputs which can strip conversations of meaning and context that is important for case recordings.

Transcribed recordings can be limited because they capture verbal interactions but no non-verbal information. A social work educator experienced in using GenAI emphasised that transcriptions can miss out on important non-verbal information such as body language and non-verbal cues, environmental factors in the home, emotional atmosphere and tensions, and other contextual information that could be important. Some customised GenAI provides prompts for social worker observations and contextual information and output to customised templates, which helps with contextual information.

> "Some social workers are using a system where they can tag moments in the recording with quick observations like 'notice child's reaction' or 'home condition note' during the visit. These tags then appear in the transcript at the right points, prompting them to add their observations during the editing phase." (computer scientist)

GenAI outputs can appear impressive at first glance but can often be inaccurate or misleading on closer inspection. This issue is compounded by the fact that social workers using AI may place undue trust in GenAI outputs, potentially overlooking errors and biases. Rigorous quality assurance processes and disciplined editing are essential to mitigate these risks and ensure the reliability of AI-generated content.

> "To date I am finding that [GenAI] requires careful editing and reviewing." (social worker)

Ownership and accountability

The quality of AI-generated outputs was consistently linked to the discipline of editing and rigorous quality assurance processes. Social workers using AI advised setting aside dedicated time for editing and emphasised that quality assurance shouldn't be seen as an afterthought.

> "It is a helpful tool. Nothing more nothing less. It will help save time. However, it is only as effective as the worker. AI requires a lot of editing and so you must possess good editing skills to use them effectively." (social worker)

Survey and focus group responses highlighted that AI tools are most valuable when viewed as aids rather than substitutes for professional skills and judgment. Human review and customisation were seen as indispensable to the process. Social workers using AI reported that outputs can be improved through prompt engineering - the practice of refining and structuring queries to ensure AI systems produce the most accurate and helpful responses possible. They emphasised that whatever strategy is used to improve the output, the onus is on the individual to cross-check AI-generated content to ensure its accuracy and make sure that it is a true representation of what was seen and heard. There were mixed responses from social work employers about the steps being taken to prepare and support social workers to use AI lawfully, ethically, and responsibly and how AI generated case records are quality assured.

Many social workers using AI think there should be limitations on what GenAI is used for. One social work manager proposed that GenAI should not be used to generate case recordings but should instead be used to critique and improve writing and as part of the quality assurance process. Some social workers think GenAI should be limited to administrative work or restricted from certain tasks where it has performed poorly.

> "Social workers should retain the overall assessment and critical thinking when working with families and AI should be used for admin tasks that can then be checked over by a human." (social worker)

> "We don't use it for generating chronologies." (practice leader)

A range of quality assurance strategies have been implemented. While some examples were restricted to the supervisory relationship, others demonstrated a more systematic approach to develop a shared understanding of AI capabilities and limitations.

> "We did a QA activity where we looked at 20 cases where [GenAI] had been used, and we found that while it saved time, there were instances where critical information was missed. We're now developing a more robust QA framework specifically for AI-generated content." (practice leader)

> "We've started having 15-minute case note review sessions where we look at AI generated notes together. It helps us identify patterns in what the AI misses and improves everyone's editing skills." (practice leader)

Consideration should be given to how locally developed and tested strategies can be disseminated more broadly, allowing others to benefit and enabling the integration of effective strategies nationally.

Many were sceptical that disciplined editing would happen consistently and cited factors that could influence the process, such as workload, tiredness, experience, and trust in GenAI outputs. Many focus group participants raised concerns that GenAI has been implemented without training and guidance and social workers using AI may not recognise these risks and responsibilities.

> "In a fast-paced world, I worry that SW will become careless and not thoroughly check AI notes leaving them inaccurate and potentially [biased]." (social worker)

> "Generative AI is a huge concern generally, more than AI. It needs legislation and safeguards. For help with recording case records from voice notes following a visit or meetings AI could be really helpful but will still need a human to edit and tweak - There is a risk that the human won't!" (social worker)

Participants were concerned that case management systems could become saturated with case records that have not been subject to rigorous quality assurance processes. This creates issues with reliability of information in case records, decision-making, and information requests.

> "We saw [inaccuracy] when reports were "pulled through" from systems then submitted unedited. We see it in case recording when incorrect names are not picked up. The idea of saving time is true but the onus [is on] the social worker to [check] for accuracy. Similarly, my concern is computer-led thinking will be difficult to disagree with, leading some social workers more inclined to be data-driven rather than [use] professional judgement." (social work employer)

> "I worry it will be used to cut corners…and ultimately result in less critical thinking, and nobody proof-reading what the AI writes. Additionally, we have to be mindful people can request to see their records at any time, and they may be reading things written bluntly, generally or insensitively by an AI without the analysis and legal context that a social worker case note would have." (social worker)

Ultimately, participants emphasised that social workers should be responsible for the quality and accuracy of their case recordings and how they use AI. Survey and focus group responses emphasised that critical thinking and reflection are important skills for case recording and are intrinsically linked to ownership and accountability. Some customised systems have mechanisms to ensure social workers maintain ownership of the analysis.

> "Critical thinking must be encouraged and fostered as well as ensuring staff know they are accountable for their work, not a piece of software." (social work employer)

> "In our home visit write-ups, we've always got a section at the bottom for the social worker analysis of that visit, and that is always left blank. We've trained [customised GenAI] to never fill that in, so the social worker is forced to analyse everything and write that analysis in there. We're not going to have AI doing the thinking for our social workers." (social work employer)

"AI must be used as a tool to support - not replace - social workers. Ongoing scrutiny, clear ethical guidelines, and robust regulatory frameworks are essential to ensure that AI is used in ways that enhance social work practice while upholding core values of fairness, dignity, and human rights." (social worker)

Box 3: Transcribing Trust, Ada Lovelace Institute

The Ada Lovelace Institute is undertaking research, called Transcribing trust, to examine how AI tools are being incorporated into social work in the UK and develop principles for evaluating these tools more effectively.

Ada Lovelace Institute are working with social workers, technology leads and managers from a variety of local authorities already piloting AI transcription tools to answer the following research questions:

1. Why are local authorities adopting AI tools in social care and what are their metrics of success?
2. How are social workers using AI transcription tools?
3. Have social workers adapted their care work to accommodate to AI transcription tools?
4. How are local authorities currently evaluating the use of AI tools in social work?
5. What should the core principles of an evaluation framework for AI in social work be?

Critical thinking skills and overreliance

Feedback highlighted concerns about AI's impact on social workers' critical thinking, especially for students and new graduates. 70% of survey respondents were worried about reduced critical thinking skills due to AI use in practice.

There were concerns that over-reliance on AI may lead to 'uncritical acceptance' of AI outputs and a gradual loss of critical thinking skills if social workers become overly trusting and dependent on AI. This was especially concerning for newly qualified workers and for social work students and apprentices who have not yet developed foundational knowledge and skills.

"If AI is heavily relied upon for tasks like report writing, risk assessments, or matching, there is a risk that social workers may lose some of the critical thinking and analytical skills that are essential to good practice." (social worker)

"[My concerns] primarily stem from human error. Ultimately, the risks and ethical challenges of AI in social work depend on how individuals choose to engage with it. Those who are adept at using AI will likely harness it to enhance their existing knowledge and practice, while those who resist change may still find themselves having to use it - potentially without sufficient understanding. This lack of familiarity increases the risk of data protection breaches, over-reliance on AI, and a decline in critical thinking skills.

If practitioners passively accept AI-generated responses without critically evaluating or tailoring them to their specific cases, they risk compromising professional judgment and decision-making." (social worker)

The engagement of critical thinking could also be impacted by other factors such as workload and burnout, or competing priorities, where social workers might not have the time or cognitive capacity to thoroughly evaluate AI outputs. Responses were balanced with the understanding that GenAI and templated outputs could also be designed to support critical thinking.

The impact of GenAI on critical thinking for knowledge workers. One research report found that GenAI shifts the nature of critical thinking toward information verification, response integration, and task stewardship. Knowledge workers tend to enact their critical thinking skills to ensure the quality of their work and verify GenAI outputs from external sources or their own knowledge. The study found there are three factors that influence **if** and **when** knowledge workers enact their critical thinking skills:

- **Self-confidence**: a user's confidence in their own ability to perform the task
- **Trust in GenAI**: the degree of trust the user has in the GenAI to perform the task to the same standard as the user
- **Confidence in evaluation**: a user's confidence in evaluating the output that AI produces for the task

A user's confidence in GenAI is predictive of the extent to which critical thinking is exercised in GenAI-assisted tasks. Both quantitative and qualitative results suggested that higher confidence in GenAI is associated with less critical thinking. Less confident and experienced knowledge workers are less likely to enact critical thinking skills because they might lack knowledge of what 'good' looks like. The knowledge workers predisposition to critical thinking was also a factor[21].

Survey responses indicate that only 38% of social workers strongly agree or agree that they feel confident in the ability of generative AI to complete the tasks requested. It is a positive sign that social workers have low confidence in GenAI outputs because this indicates a higher likelihood they will enact critical thinking skills and quality assure the outputs. There would be benefits in replicating the knowledge worker study in a social work context with social workers of varying experience and AI literacy levels.

[21] Hao-Ping Lee and others, 'The Impact of Generative AI on Critical Thinking: Self-Reported Reductions in Cognitive Effort and Confidence Effects From a Survey of Knowledge Workers' (Microsoft/Carnegie Mellon University, April 2025) accessed 25 April 2025.

Voice

Use of GenAI for case recording may not accurately reflect the voices of social workers and people with lived experience of social work services, resulting in the GenAI voice being dominant. GenAI has a specific style that has the potential to enhance the quality and consistency of case recording. However, it may also dilute or change the voice of the social worker and will not be able to record the context of the conversation, such as the emotional response or physical surroundings. Case recording is a reflective process that draws social workers' observations, skills, knowledge, and expertise. Using GenAI to standardise writing style may not adequately recognise individual voices, including the voices of people with lived experience of social work services and social workers.

Many neurodivergent social workers find that GenAI enhances their communication. Participants and respondents reported that many neurodivergent social workers find writing (particularly report writing) difficult. GenAI has helped bridge this gap and helped neurodivergent workers to articulate their assessment more effectively.

Voice is a part of effective communication. Feedback from social work employers and subject matter experts suggests that social work recordings can be overly detailed and not always effective. They reported that GenAI has helped improve this. For example, a professional who is also a foster carer noticed better communication, clarity, spelling, and grammar when their social worker used GenAI. This shows that while GenAI can enhance communication, it's important to balance it with voice and other key factors. Participants wondered if AI could be trained to capture diverse voices and act as a reflective coach for social workers, enhancing the expression of wishes and experiences of people accessing social work services more effectively.

Monitoring

There are concerns about AI being used to monitor social workers and people with lived experience. Feedback from the focus groups indicates AI is already being used by some social work employers to monitor sickness, annual leave, and other HR processes. There are various methods by which AI can monitor social worker activity and efficiency, and some participants raised questions about how this information might be used in performance appraisals, supervision, or case allocation. Informed consent may be a concern for social workers if they are not aware of how their performance and work habits are being monitored.

Predictive analytics is not currently widely used, but there have been previous projects to explore methods for identifying risk and need early. If similar projects are restarted, there are considerations regarding the use of a personal information and how this may be viewed as monitoring or surveillance regardless of the intention.

AI technologies have been deployed in aged care homes and devices to monitor patients for age-related risks. These devices monitor activity through cameras or other sensors. Such devices have demonstrated many positive outcomes such as improved safety and quality of care and offer reassurance for carers and family members. While these benefits are clear, a balance should be struck between risk reduction and reassurance, the rights of a person being monitored, and changes to the care they are provided.

> "I'm worried elderly people might accept monitoring technologies to avoid feeling like they're burdening their families, even if they might not be completely comfortable with the technology themselves." (subject matter expert)

> "I am concerned about how AI might be integrated into service delivery in care homes or in people's homes, how this might lead to the reduction in human contact for people who need it most, for example if it is used to monitor the safety of someone at home with dementia, might that person then have less face-to-face contact with other people." (social worker)

An important consideration in this discussion is around the ethical use of monitoring and surveillance and at what point it is being used as a convenience or becomes a potential deprivation of liberty which would not align with professional standards.

Relationships

The use of AI in social work will have an impact on relationships. Feedback from surveys, focus groups and interviews predicted that it is likely that the use of AI in social care will influence dynamics between:

- the social worker
- people with lived experience
- social work employers
- other members of the organisation and wider social care system

These changes come with opportunities, risks and challenges. It should be noted that this focus group feedback was somewhat speculative and was grounded in the assumption that AI will continue to evolve and be more widely adopted in the workplace and community.

The relationship between the social worker and people with lived experience

AI could influence the relationship between the social worker and people with lived experience in positive and negative ways. Feedback emphasised the risk that relationships could be augmented and replaced in part by AI, and this could feel dehumanising and isolating, but these risks should be balanced with potential benefits.

> "AI is not going away. Those who resist its adoption risk being left behind as it becomes increasingly embedded in professional practice. A balanced approach may be necessary - one that acknowledges AI's benefits while preserving spaces where human judgment and direct engagement remain central. While AI is not yet the norm in social work, its gradual integration suggests that finding this balance will be crucial." (social worker)

Some wondered if it would impact on reflective practice which is an important part of getting to know people with lived experience and making sense of what they are saying and could make assessment less person-centred.

> "I have tried [GenAI] and whilst it can be a time saver I am not 100% sure it is suitable for me. Yes, it makes the writing of assessments etc quicker but are they person centred? I [believe] that it takes away the need for the worker to understand and know their client. I do not use it as I prefer to write about the client with information I have gathered … You can get an assessment written without thinking about it and therefore I am of the opinion that this does not inform my knowledge about the adult and impacts on my relationship as I have not spent time thinking about and writing about the issues that are presented." (social worker)

Feedback from the survey and focus groups also suggested that use of GenAI could potentially improve and enhance some interactions. As described earlier, some social workers saw improvements when they were freed up from note taking to focus more on human interaction. There are other examples where practice has been enhanced through more interactive and engaging AI tools. This suggests that there is potential for the relationship to change in both positive and negative ways, and this is likely to be dependent on how the AI is developed and used.

The relationship between the social worker and practice supervisor

AI could influence the relationship between the social worker and practice supervisor in both positive and negative ways. AI could potentially enhance the level of supervision and support for the social worker. There were examples where recording and transcribing supervision freed up practice supervisors to engage more fully in the supervision discussion, which became more reflective, rather than focusing on notes of the discussion. Some focus group participants wondered if AI could become a proxy supervisor, which could have positive and negative effects. While supervision might be more readily available, it could feel more isolating and unsafe.

There are opportunities, risks and ethical challenges associated with augmenting the supervision dynamic. While some social workers might experience more consistent supervision if AI was introduced, it may lead to reduced human interaction and understanding. Social workers might feel isolated or less supported if they perceive that their supervisors are relying too heavily on AI rather than engaging with them directly. This could impact morale, and the quality of the

supervision experience.

Job security and augmentation

Some concerns about job security and augmentation were raised. While AI holds potential for increased efficiency and the potential to reduce administrative burdens, focus group participants shared some anxieties about the possible displacement of people in favour of more automated systems. The fear is that AI could replace certain jobs particularly administration, data and performance, quality assurance, and learning and development. Some feedback from social work employers indicated concerns about a reduction in administrative staff because of efficiencies from AI and automation. They emphasised the crucial role of many administrators in engaging with people with lived experience and supporting social workers. This indicates a potential for administrative roles to shift more towards connecting with people with lived experience.

Social workers appear to feel less worried about job security because AI cannot replicate core social work functions such as care and support, real relationships and connection, or professional judgement. Focus group feedback indicated the potential for more repetitive tasks and processes to be reduced through the use of AI, allowing workers to focus on the more impactful and rewarding aspects of their job, such as face-to-face interactions or reflective practice. While there is less concern, there is still some scepticism about possible attempts to replace the core functions of social work with AI or robotics and what that would mean for people with lived experience and for job security.

AI and automation are likely to augment the role of practice supervisors and leaders and people with quality assurance roles. There is a clear need to assure the quality of case recordings involving GenAI as well as oversight of any automated systems. Safe, responsible and effective use of AI in public services requires meaningful human oversight to monitor AI's behaviour and prevent any harmful effects on social workers using AI[22]. This is referred to as having a 'human in the loop'. While there is a role for IT and data professionals to monitor automation, there is a practice component to this oversight. Some wondered if they would become 'AI handlers' as AI is more widely integrated.

The business case for AI in social work

Concerns about social work job security and augmentation overlapped with the business case for AI adoption. Focus group participants and some survey respondents have heard mixed messages about the business case for AI. While it is often pitched as a tool to support and benefit social workers, this is contrasted with messages around efficiency, productivity, and cost saving. This raises concerns about augmented expectations, higher performance targets, and more sophisticated forms of performance monitoring and surveillance.

[22] Government Digital Service (GDS), 'Artificial Intelligence Playbook for the UK Government' (HTML) (Guidance: 2025) accessed 22 April 2025.

These factors raised questions for participants about the impact on organisational relationships. Some wondered if more efficient processes and reduced administration might result in higher caseloads, 'artificial supervision' and 'artificial support'.

It is important to inform the business case for AI adoption and job augmentation with accurate information about the impact of AI in social work. There were mixed messages about how much net time savings were achieved from using AI and where those time savings were reallocated. Social workers using AI note that some time is saved through AI generating outputs, but time is also reallocated to verification and editing AI outputs. It is not clear what the net time saving is, how any net time savings are reallocated, or what factors influence this in different contexts. For example, social workers work an average of 45 hours per week[23] and time savings could be reinvested in finishing work on time, rather than be reinvested in face-to-face contact. Some social workers using AI wondered how social work employers would expect net time savings to be reallocated, concerned that improved efficiency might result in more allocated work and no difference in overall workload. Additionally, research into knowledge workers use of AI found that more skilled and experienced workers benefit less from using GenAI than less experienced workers[24].

Risks and ethical challenges associated with the wider adoption of AI

The adoption of AI in social work mirrors its broader integration into public services and commercial sectors, where efficiency, innovation, and automation are reshaping traditional roles and processes. However, these advancements are accompanied by shared risks and ethical challenges. Feedback from focus groups, surveys and subject matter experts indicated broader concerns around:

- **The environmental impact of AI**: The significant energy consumption of large-scale machine learning models, highlight the need for sustainable development practices. While AI-related energy and resource demands are set to grow, AI could also unlock major efficiency and operational gains for the energy sector that could offset the energy demands[25]. Social work's commitment to social justice inherently intersects with addressing climate change and environmental impact, as vulnerable communities often bear the greatest burden of ecological degradation and require advocacy for equitable solutions.

[23] British Association of Social Workers (BASW), 'BASW Annual Survey of Social Workers and Social Work: 2023' (BASW, 2024) accessed 4 July 2025.
[24] Hao-Ping Lee and others, 'The Impact of Generative AI on Critical Thinking: Self-Reported Reductions in Cognitive Effort and Confidence Effects From a Survey of Knowledge Workers' (Microsoft/Carnegie Mellon University, April 2025) accessed 25 April 2025.
[25] International Energy Agency (IEA), 'Energy and AI: World Energy Outlook Special Report' (IEA, April 2025) accessed 11 April 2025.

- **The safe and ethical development of AI**: The privatisation of AI technologies, concerns around algorithmic bias and harm and privacy and data handling policies. Privatisation raises questions about equitable access, data ownership, and accountability.
- **Equalities**: These ethical concerns are further compounded by issues of digital poverty and unequal access to the benefits of AI, which risk exacerbating existing social inequalities and limiting the transformative potential of these technologies for vulnerable communities

In social work, these challenges are compounded by the sector's reliance on trust, empathy, and nuanced human judgment, which AI must augment without undermining. These dynamics necessitate a balanced approach to integrating AI that prioritises ethical considerations and responsible innovation.

Preparing and supporting social workers to use AI lawfully, ethically, and responsibly

This section of the report explores how social work employers and social work educators currently prepare and support social workers to use AI lawfully, ethically, and responsibly in social work practice. Ideally, this preparation would begin during social work education and training, continuing through practice education, and extending to ongoing professional development opportunities. AI has the potential to transform social work education and training, presenting opportunities, risks and ethical challenges for social work educators and social work students.

AI in social work education and training

AI is being integrated into some social work education and training programmes in a range of ways. Some social work educators have begun to explore how AI can be used in social work education and there are examples to draw on from other jurisdictions. Some potential use cases, or examples, include[26],[27]:

- **Administrative support for students and educators**:
  - drafting emails, letters, scheduling and reminders
  - application and enrolment, financial and administrative processes
  - monitoring course progression and graduation
- **Teaching and learning processes**:
  - generating reflective questions, assignments, scenarios, and scripts for professional interactions
  - personalised and adaptive learning pathways
  - enhanced learning environments, such as virtual reality and augmented reality
  - enhancing or replacing tutoring with chatbots ('teacherbots')

[26] David Hodgson and others, 'Problematising Artificial Intelligence in Social Work Education: Challenges, Issues and Possibilities' (2022) 52(4) British Journal of Social Work 1878–1895 accessed 23 March 2025.
[27] Kangwa Daniel, Msafiri Mgambi Msambwa and Zhang Wen, 'Can Generative AI Revolutionise Academic Skills Development in Higher Education? A Systematic Literature Review' (2025) 60(1) European Journal of Education.

- **Use in completing assignments and course work**:
  - learning and language support
  - research tool (enhanced search capabilities, analysing academic literature, data analysis)
  - writing assistant
  - grading and feedback on assignments with predetermined answers and essays
- **Skills and knowledge**:
  - developing critical thinking and AI literacy and competency
  - use of AI in practice, including to support and enhance practice, case recording, assessment, support and planning, decision-making, and other core social work activities
  - AI for social good and social justice
  - Impact of AI on wider society and potential demand on social work services
  - Impact of AI on relationships, including relationships between people with lived experience and social workers, and social and family relationships

Some social work educators are embracing AI in social work education and practice while others are at the beginning of their journey. Some of the participating social work educators have introduced AI into social work curricula through assignments designed to foster critical thinking and ethical use. They said the choice to integrate AI into the curriculum was described as a personal choice of the educator rather than strategic or institutional direction. Educators have received mixed messages about the use of AI from universities and many universities lack clear guidance.

> "Generative AI technologies have garnered significant attention in social work education, and this has major implications for our school, our students, the profession, and the community. Embracing the inevitability of AI technologies in social work, in my view, facilitates a much needed and urgent dialogue about how we establish critical principles and ethical guidelines." (social work educator)

GenAI use is often viewed as an academic integrity issue rather than a tool to support and enhance learning. Social work educators said that attitudes towards using GenAI in social work education and practice vary widely. While academic integrity is an important issue, some educators think institutions are too focussed on GenAI as an academic integrity issue.

Universities use AI to monitor academic integrity, such as with the Turnitin platform, however, social work educators have mixed views about how effective these platforms are. While 45.5% of social work educators surveyed believe they are very effective or effective, 45.5% are less confident, remaining neutral or think they are ineffective or very ineffective, or don't know 9%. An educator provided an instance where four students were flagged for plagiarism by an AI detection system because of the high standard of their work.

However, upon further evaluation, three of these students were found to be exceptionally bright and capable, rather than guilty of academic dishonesty. Consequently, the university decided to discontinue the use of the tool due to its inaccuracy and potentially demoralising effect on students if falsely accused.

Focus group and survey responses from educators indicated attitudes about academic integrity appear to transfer to students who are often reluctant to disclose they have used GenAI because it could be perceived as 'cheating'.

Guidelines about using GenAI in social work education and training are inconsistent and unclear. Often university policies aren't clear about when it is or isn't appropriate to use AI. For example, some survey responses said GenAI is strongly discouraged but not banned, or students can use GenAI but need to declare where it has been used. Other respondents incorporate AI into some assignment work but don't teach social work students and apprentices how to use it in practice. This creates a kind of 'AI shame' even where GenAI use is endorsed by the educator.

> "There is a disconnect between what students say they use and what we suspect. There is concern that AI is cheating rather than considering it like any tool needing to be used ethically and critically. There is a need for social work students to be better prepared for using AI in order to mitigate concerns and be better prepared for emerging practice." (social work educator)

Social work educators that responded to the survey believe 36% of social work students are willing or very willing to use AI in social work education and training and their future social work practice. However, this may not be representative because it was a small sample and social work students can be reluctant to disclose AI use.

Educators that participated in the focus groups and interviews pointed to the futility of banning GenAI in social work education and instead see an opportunity to teach critical thinking skills and embrace a technology that will be used in practice and their personal lives. They considered it necessary to have a permission structure and clear guidelines about when AI should and shouldn't be used in social work education and training.

Social work educators need to be supported to integrate AI into the curriculum. Social work educators participating in the research recognise that AI is here, and that they have a responsibility to support social work students and apprentices to develop the necessary skills to use it lawfully, ethically, and responsibly in their education and practice. Several educators said they and their colleagues need support to better understand AI and how it can be effectively integrated into the curriculum. Some educators acknowledged that they are not technologically proficient and wouldn't know where to start with AI even though they can see the potential and are curious. DfE policy documents about the use of GenAI in education indicate that it is likely that AI in learning will begin earlier in K-12 education as educators integrate AI into the curriculum. Future cohorts of social work students and apprentices are likely to have some

experience of using AI either through personal use or via formal education, although this may take some time to emerge given the social work student population is more mature. Ideally the learner's journey across academic and employment settings would be consistent.

It is important that social workers are prepared and supported to use AI lawfully, ethically, and responsibly in social work practice. Survey responses show that 86% of social workers graduating in the last five years did not receive any specific preparation on using AI in social work practice during their education and training. Those who did receive support said their education focused on one or more of the following themes:

- using AI to reduce administrative burden and manage workload (11%)
- using AI to support research and evidence informed practice (9%)
- ethical use of AI in social work practice (9%)
- using generative AI for case recording and other outputs (6%)
- using AI in alignment with Social Work England's professional standards (6%)
- exploring the social, economic, and political impact of AI on wider society (6%)
- critical evaluation of AI outputs (3%)

Some newly qualified social workers are using AI in social work practice, sometimes without preparation and support. Of the social workers that qualified in the past year completing the survey, 75% said they did not receive any specific preparation about how to use AI in social work practice. Of the newly qualified workers, 60% have gone on to use AI in practice, 50% have not received learning and development opportunities about AI from their employer, and 33% have used AI that hasn't been provided by their employer. This is a small sample and may not be representative, however it does illustrate that AI is a part of practice for some newly qualified social workers, and that there may be insufficient preparation or support available to them.

Skills and knowledge necessary for lawful, ethical and responsible use of AI

This section of the report draws some conclusions from the research evidence about the skills and knowledge social workers need to be able to use it ethically.

Developing AI literacy and competencies should be a priority for the social care sector. AI literacy refers to the understanding of artificial intelligence technologies, their capabilities, limitations, and ethical implications. It provides a foundation for individuals to critically assess AI outputs and integrate AI into education and professional practice without compromising their critical thinking skills or professional values. **AI competency** is the ability to *apply* AI tools effectively to achieve specific professional goals, while actively *managing* risks to ensure use is lawful, ethical, and responsible. AI competency is context dependent. It is not a static body of knowledge but a dynamic set of competencies that shifts depending on *who* you are, *what* you are doing, and *which* tools you are using.

Further research should be undertaken to better understand what AI literacy and competency mean in the context of social work, professional standards, and professional capabilities.

The development of AI literacy and competencies should ideally begin during social work education and training, or earlier. Some educators are developing approaches that help students understand AI's potential and limitations, focusing on how these tools can support, not replace, professional social work skills. The examples often used the PAIR Framework (Box 4):

- Generating outputs on certain themes, such as working with asylum seekers, and then analysing the outputs, individually or in groups. Students are encouraged to verify accuracy and reflect upon bias, decision-making processes, and transparency.
- Using generative AI to support the initial research processes by brainstorming research questions and ideas or identifying literature. Student can compare AI outputs with their own attempts.

These assignments proactively engage student's critical thinking skills and develop AI literacy by supporting students to better understand AI's capabilities, limitations, and ethical challenges.

Box 4: The PAIR Framework

The PAIR (problem, ai, interaction, reflection) framework guidence was seen as a helpful approach for educators to integrate AI into the curriculum. The Framework, developed by Professor Oguz A. Acar, King's College, London, aims to support students to harness the potential of GenAI while not becoming overly dependent. The PAIR process includes:

- **Problem formulation**: Students define the problem or challenge they aim to address.
- **AI tool selection**: Students identify and choose the most suitable generative AI tools for their needs. This involves exploring, comparing, and evaluating the features of various generative AI options.
- **Interaction**: Students deploy the selected generative AI tools to tackle their problem, experimenting with diverse inputs and critically evaluating the outputs.
- **Reflection**: Students assess and report their experiences with the generative AI tools.

The three key tenets of the framework are:

- **Human-centric**: Viewing AI as a tool to augment, not replace, human insight, judgment and creativity.
- **Skill-centric**: Focusing on the development of transferable skills (such as problem formulation, exploration, experimentation, critical thinking, and reflection) over mastering specific tools.
- **Responsibility-centric**: Promoting effective and responsible use of generative AI tools.

Social work educators recognise that AI could fundamentally change how social work education is delivered. They emphasised that integrating AI into the curriculum is an ongoing process rather than a one-off exercise. AI was described as a tool for supporting learning and future social work practice. A variety of approaches were identified by the participating social work educators and in the literature review:

- **Rethinking how learning is assessed**: Some universities are redesigning assessments to be "AI-proof" or to incorporate AI meaningfully into the learning process to complement and enhance information synthesis[28]. Some examples include:
  - creating assignments that require personal reflection and specific application of learning that AI struggles to replicate
  - presentations (video or in person) where students demonstrate their learning
  - in-person examinations and knowledge tests
  - assessments that require critical analysis rather than just information synthesis
  - having students complete assignments in class rather than taking them home
  - asking students to critically evaluate AI-generated content
- **Personalised learning pathways can support learning:** AI holds the potential for more personalised and adaptive learning pathways. 'Intelligent tutoring' can work out what stage a student is at in the learning process and supply new course content, and assessments are introduced at the student's pace[29].
- **Technology-assisted learning:** The inclusion of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) in social work education and training offers immersive learning experiences by simulating real-world scenarios and environments[30].

Computer science educators and social work educators proposed a cross-disciplinary approach to education and training. Consideration should be given to ways interdisciplinary expertise could be further developed. This approach could support social work students to develop AI literacy skills and computer science students to develop insights into domain expertise and ethical use of AI in the context of social work. There were also suggestions for social work educators to reach further to collaborate with education and nursing to build relationships, share learning and approaches.

Some universities are already developing AI research centres and post-graduate programmes focussed on the intersection of AI and social care, such as University of Southampton Interdisciplinary Masters in Artificial Intelligence, the Centre for Social Care Artificial Intelligence Learning (SCALE) at Cardiff University and Oxford University.

[28] Nora McDonald, Aditya Johri, Areej Ali and Aayushi Hingle Collier, 'Generative artificial intelligence in higher education: Evidence from an analysis of institutional policies and guidelines' (2025) 3 Computers in Human Behavior: Artificial Humans 100121 accessed 4 July 2025.
[29] Helen Crompton and Diane Burke, 'Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education: The State of the Field' (2023) 20(1), International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education.
[30] David Hodgson and others, 'Problematising Artificial Intelligence in Social Work Education: Challenges, Issues and Possibilities' (2022) 52(4) British Journal of Social Work 1878–1895 accessed 23 March 2025.

The conversations emphasised that cross-disciplinary collaboration is essential for responsible innovation and might usefully begin at an undergraduate level.

Opportunities of using AI in social work education and training

Social work education and training could be enhanced by the use of AI. A systematic literature review[31] about the impact of GenAI tools on developing academic skills in higher education showed:

- **Cognitive skills**: 94% of the 158 sampled studies reported significant improvements in cognitive skills, like critical thinking, problem-solving, analytical and metacognitive abilities, facilitated by personalised learning and feedback
- **Technical skills**: Improved technical skills in research (24%), writing (26%), data analysis (33%) and technical literacy (18%)
- **Interpersonal skills**: Fostering interactive and engaging learning environments helped improve communication (24%), organisation (26%), empathy (5%) and teamwork (45%)

The study underscored the importance of ethical and responsible use of GenAI with clear frameworks, guidelines, and monitoring to support use and realise the benefits. There is also potential for AI to help improve the quality and consistency in social work education and training.

> "AI can also be a powerful tool for tutors, helping them explain complex concepts and their practical applications more effectively. In the past, students were at a disadvantage if their tutor was not skilled at delivering content, but AI has the potential to bridge that gap - provided that tutors themselves understand how to use it to enhance learning. On the flip side, if students do not receive quality teaching, AI can still enable them to develop a solid understanding of subjects independently, as long as they use it correctly." (social work educator)

Risks and ethical challenges of using AI in social work education and training

The use of Gen AI in social work education and practice comes with risks and ethical challenges that overlap with social work practice, with some additional risks specific to students and apprentices. Social work educators are concerned about the impact of GenAI on student and apprentice learning and skill development. Social work educators say they are grappling with questions of academic integrity, students and apprentices learning and development, the risk of over-reliance on technology, and the need to maintain the fundamentally human-centred nature of social work practice.

[31] Kangwa Daniel, Msafiri Mgambi Msambwa and Zhang Wen, 'Can Generative AI Revolutionise Academic Skills Development in Higher Education? A Systematic Literature Review' (2025) 60(1) European Journal of Education.

> "If you can imagine doing a 3-year degree and not having written a single assignment because you've got AI to write it for you, then that's going to really put you at a disadvantage." (social work educator)

> "Issues like plagiarism have long existed in education - not necessarily due to AI, but often because students struggle to access or engage with the necessary texts or lack sufficient pedagogical support. AI now provides an easier way for students to generate responses on topics they may know very little about, raising concerns about how this can be effectively monitored or regulated." (social work educator)

Social work students and apprentices are particularly vulnerable to the misuse of GenAI because they might miss out on developing core skills and knowledge that could disadvantage them in the short and long term. Social work students are at a critical stage where they are learning the skills for practice. Likewise, apprentices are still learning and may be expected to use AI in the workplace (for example, within organisations such as local authorities or NHS) before they have qualified and registered with Social Work England. Examples from social work educators, practice educators and social work employers during the focus groups and survey responses include themes around:

- **Writing skills**: Misuse of GenAI could mean students and apprentices graduate without essential writing skills
- **Knowledge acquisition**: Dependence on AI may lead students and apprentices to interact with learning material superficially, potentially affecting their learning and knowledge acquisition
- **Critical thinking skills**: There was significant concern that students and apprentices (and social workers) might become overly reliant on AI, potentially undermining the development of critical thinking skills that are essential for social work practice. This might mean they will be less able to analyse, evaluate, and synthesise information to form well-reasoned professional judgments.
- **Reflective practice skills**: GenAI in social work education and practice risks undermining reflective practice. If students and apprentices increasingly rely on AI to complete coursework, they may not develop reflective practice skills. Reflection is an important part of social work development and students and apprentices could miss out key learning that helps make positive changes to future practice.
- **Academic integrity issues**: Students and apprentices may be tempted to rely heavily on AI-generated content, potentially compromising the authenticity of their work and learning journey
- **Equity and access**: There were concerns that students and apprentices experiencing digital poverty might have varying levels of access to and proficiency with AI tools, potentially increasing inequities in the educational experience. Digital poverty might relate to lack of connectivity, access to devices, and/or lack of digital literacy.

Practice education

There are significant challenges in aligning the expectations of social work educators and social work employers on the use of AI during practice education. Practice educators reported challenges with setting boundaries about AI use during practice learning placements due to inconsistent expectations between and across education and practice settings. Some social work employers and practice educators say they are awaiting guidance, while others have developed their own methods. Currently social work students and apprentices are navigating the inconsistencies between educational institutions and employers. If universities view AI as cheating but employers expect proficiency, it complicates transitions. Consideration should be given to how to achieve consistency and optimise learning opportunities during the learner's journey. There is a need for social work educators and employers to work in partnership to understand how AI is used in the workplace and what experience social work students and apprentices might have of AI before they register as social workers.

Developing effective communication skills and an authentic voice is a fundamental aspect of social work education and training. Feedback from practice educators emphasised a need for consistency and judicious use of AI during critical learning stages. For example, some ASYE social workers use GenAI for reflective logs, aiming to enhance writing and grammar. However, this can result in losing the social worker's voice, which is crucial for learning and development and assessment. There can also be doubts about the ownership and authenticity of the reflections. Consequently, some have banned GenAI from reflective logs.

Preparing and supporting social workers in the ethical use of AI

Consideration needs to be given to how social work employers prepare and support social workers to use AI lawfully, ethically, and responsibly, and in line with Social Work England's professional standards. Consideration should be given to what AI literacy means in the context of social care and the AI system being developed.

Social Workers should be prepared and supported to adopt and use AI ethically. Responses indicate that only 47% of social workers are confident in using AI lawfully, ethically and responsibly in line with Social Work England's professional standards and may not be receiving enough support to do so. Social workers that responded to the survey **strongly agree or agree** that they feel confident:

- in their ability to perform their social work duties without AI (89%)
- in their general IT skills (meaning I have good digital literacy skills) (86%)
- feel confident in evaluating the quality of output that generative AI produces (68%)

This suggests that social workers may have lower confidence in AI, despite being confident in their own practice and general IT skills.

Many social workers are using GenAI without appropriate training or support. Of the social workers responding to the survey and using AI in social work practice, 37% have not received any learning and development opportunities related to using AI in social work practice from their employer, with 8% accessing learning and development opportunities about the use of GenAI from outside their employer. Some social workers using AI commented that they are self-taught or were taught by a colleague.

Where learning and development opportunities are available to social workers using AI (55%) they were provided with one or more of the following approaches:

- written instructions / guidance on using the AI product (24%)
- privacy and data protection when using AI in social work practice (16%)
- ethical use of AI in practice (13%)
- encouraging critical evaluation of AI outputs (11%)

Other support has come through supportive leadership and supervision that guides ethical use of AI in social work practice (10%). In some instances, employers provided guidance and ethical guidelines and frameworks that align with Social Work England's professional standards (8%).

These findings highlight the lack of appropriate employer-led support for the use of GenAI in social work practice settings that supports the lawful, ethical and responsible use of AI in social work practice.

Developing AI literacy should be a priority even if AI has not been adopted by social work employers. The adoption of GenAI is accelerating and many social workers using AI report they are using it without direction from their employer. This points to a need for training and guidance as a matter of priority, even if social work employers aren't planning on adopting AI immediately. Social work employers and other agencies with oversight of the quality of social work practice have a shared responsibility in ensuring that social workers use AI in alignment with social work professional standards.

Social workers that were inexperienced with using AI in practice raised similar concerns about risk and ethical challenges as more experienced social workers using AI. The noticeable difference was the level of anxiety attached to mitigating the risks. Several AI-inexperienced contributors said they work for employers that have run small-scale pilots, and they have heard feedback from AI-experienced colleagues. This suggests that developing some level of AI literacy or AI exposure could help with resistance and ambivalence about AI adoption.

Foundational AI literacy helps social workers to make informed, lawful, ethical and responsible decisions about AI use and understand misuse. Social workers would benefit from more specific training and support being provided by employers to support the use of any AI application being adopted.

Box 5: The Centre for Social Care and Artificial Intelligence Learning (SCALE)

The Centre for SCALE at Cardiff University launched in April 2025, aiming to foster collaboration between computer science and social care, focusing on public involvement and practitioner needs.

SCALE aims to place people with direct experience of services at the centre of AI development, including people with lived experience from adult and children's social care, as well as practitioners and policymakers.

SCALEs research will cover all areas of Children's and Adult Social Care with Artificial Intelligence (including Natural Language Processing, Data Science and Analytics, Robotics, Visual Computing). Research will initially focus on:

- supporting the social care workforce and leadership
- supporting adults, children, carers, and families
- analysing data in new and interesting ways

Cardiff University is planning to introduce a new module for the Masters in Artificial Intelligence on AI for social good. Students will be expected to make a presentation prior to their dissertation that will help guide responsible development for the project. There is a potential long-term plan for the module to expand into a Master Programme about AI for social good for computer science students and students from other disciplines.

Balancing opportunities, risks and ethical challenges

The emerging use of AI means social work employers and social work educators face the critical task of balancing the lawful, ethical and responsible use of AI in social work education and practice. Effective governance of AI in social work is crucial to mitigate risks and ensure benefits are equitably shared. The government's AI Playbook outlines the responsibility of public services to ensure AI is used 'lawfully, ethically, and responsibly'. This involves governing the lifecycle of AI development and deployment, including involving people with legal and technical expertise to ensure compliance with ethical and legal requirements, and involving end users (such as social workers using AI) and people with lived experience[32].

[32] Government Digital Service (GDS), 'Artificial Intelligence Playbook for the UK Government' (HTML) (Guidance: 2025) accessed 22 April 2025.

Survey respondents (203) leaned towards optimism when considering the balance of benefits and risks of using AI in social work. Most people (70%) said there were equal or more benefits to using AI in social work than there are risks:

- 36% believe there are more benefits than risks
- 34% believe there are equal benefits and risks
- 15% believe there are more risks than benefits
- 15% said they don't know if there are more risks or benefits

Some social work employers have implemented GenAI without governance structures in place. While some social work employers are in the early implementation stage or have fully implemented policy and guidance to govern use, many have not developed any governance mechanisms or are at the planning stage. AI governance varies across organisations that have tested, procured, or used AI applications indicating that many mechanisms are only partly implemented.

Social work employers have drawn on a range of sources to develop governance mechanisms, which creates inconsistency. Although the survey responses from social work employers comprised a small sample size and may not be representative, these insights were corroborated by feedback obtained in focus groups.

Some social work employers have recognised the need for good governance structures and have employed a range of strategies. Some organisations have adopted a collaborative approach that involves a range of stakeholders.

> "The introduction of AI is being overseen by our change board which has key leaders from across the local authority … Our principal social worker is leading in terms of discussions around ethical implications." (social work employer)

> "We have recognised that many of our staff are experimenting with AI … and the potential risks this presents. We are therefore seeking to combat this by incorporating the benefits of AI within a framework which is safe and effective. The staff will be fully involved in the development and implementation of this, ensuring that our end product is compliant, effective, and maintains the safeguarding of our children and young people as the highest priority." (social work employer)

> "We are currently exploring as a Local Authority and wider region how best to incorporate AI into our work ethically." (social work employer)

Social work employers are procuring AI without clear guidelines. There were examples where usual local authority procurement guidelines were being used, which might be suitable for some common general GenAI applications, however, may raise questions about whether normal procurement guidelines are adequate for more advanced models.

> "Procurement process will follow LA regs. We are working closely with our [learning and development team and principal social worker] to develop appropriate practice guidance

and assurance process for use of AI products in social work practice in our LA." (social work employer)

"Normal procurement rules applied [and a] Quality Assurance Framework is being rewritten to incorporate best practice on assuring AI outputs." (social work employer)

Specific AI procurement guidelines that support social work employers to apply best practices and support decision-making during the procurement phase including what expertise should be involved and how would support consistency and quality in AI implementation.

Monitoring and evaluating the impact of artificial intelligence to ensure it is used lawfully, ethically, and responsibly is necessary. Some social work employers using AI have taken one or more of the following steps to evaluate use and impact:

- **Impact evaluation:** To understand the impact of a system on environmental, equality, human rights, data protection, or other outcomes (43%)
- **Productivity impact:** Evaluate the impact that an AI system has on productivity, such as time saved, accuracy and relevance of outputs, adoption and utilisation (36%)
- **Conformity assessment:** Assurance that a product, service or system being supplied meets the expectations specified or claimed, prior to it being used (36%)
- **Performance testing:** Used to assess the performance of a system with respect to predetermined quantitative requirements or benchmarks (29%)
- **Compliance audit:** A review of user's adherence to internal policies and procedures, or external regulations or legal requirements (21%)
- **Bias audit:** Assessing the inputs and outputs of algorithmic systems to determine if there is unfair bias (7%)

In considering the expected outcomes, including potential unintended consequences, and how they will be managed we noted that a significant proportion of responding social work employers (36%) are in the early procurement and implementation stages and have not completed governance frameworks. However, the sample size was small and may not be representative.

Involving people with lived experience and the people that care and support them

People with lived experience and the people who care and support them should have a say about the use of AI in social care, including defining the principles of safe and ethical use. Considering the views of people accessing social work services is essential if their information is to be added to AI applications. This should include children, young people, parents, carers, and friends and family. Approaching AI in an open and collaborative way will improve the likelihood that AI delivers tangible benefits to individuals and society. Social work employers should be open with the public about where and how algorithms and AI systems are being used[33].

[33] Ibid

People with lived experience and the people that care and support them should have the opportunity to participate in research that seeks to understand and guide the emerging use of AI in social work education and practice. While this research project made significant efforts to include diverse voices and consult with people with lived experience, the time frame meant that it was not possible to include their voices to a significant degree. There is significant interest in AI and what it means for people with lived experience, however, participation group[34] facilitators struggled to convene groups within the timescale for the research. These logistical constraints point to a need to:

- consider ways to engage people with lived experience in an ongoing dialogue about AI
- allow adequate and extended timeframes to ensure people with lived experience can meaningfully participate in research about AI
- ensure people with lived experience have access to accessible materials about what AI is, how it can or will be used, and its limitations so that participation is informed and meaningful

While there was a good amount of interest, participation groups have a lot of competing demands, and ultimately feedback was limited and may not be representative. However, the responses provide some helpful insights into themes that could be explored in further research projects.

Some social work employers have employed strategies to involve people with lived experience in the procurement, use, and evaluation of AI systems that will interact with their personal information, however, there is need to do more work in this area. Feedback in focus groups indicated that AI has been implemented in many instances without consultation with people who have lived experience of social work.

Participation group for people with lived experience

There was recognition from the small group of participants that AI could be beneficial to people with lived experience and social workers, although there were some anxieties. As one participant stated:

> "I do think it's a positive thing, but it's got to be done right."

The participants had some experience with AI, for example:

- **General Internet and Chatbot Use**: One participant regularly used the internet and tools like ChatGPT to find information or answers, such as locating local breastfeeding groups or getting advice

[34] A participation group is a group of individuals with a special interest who come together to engage in activities and discussions aimed at achieving a common goal or addressing a shared issue. Participation groups are characterised by their focus on member involvement, shared experiences, and mutual support. For example, a participation group for disabled children or adults might provide opportunities for support and advocacy for that group.

- **Smart Home Technology Use**: Using smart home devices like Amazon Alexa extensively, indicating a comfort with voice-controlled AI in their daily lives. One participant also uses a smart watch.
- **University Project on AI for Older People**: One participant was involved in a university project aimed at encouraging older people to use AI and computers in general. As part of the project, the participant evaluated a range of equipment. For example:
  - robotic pets for people with dementia, which are designed to soothe through stroking
  - bed sensors that alert if someone is out of bed and might be wandering or in need of help
  - door sensors for people with Alzheimer's that alert when someone leaves the house
  - GPS trackers for confused individuals prone to wandering

While the group was small and may not be representative, the themes are valuable for shaping future conversations. The small participation group highlighted several additional important messages about the risks and ethical challenges of AI for people with lived experience:

- **Data protection and privacy**: There was worry about where data collected by AI is kept and how it is used. Participants feared that AI-related data could be stolen, citing recent data breaches at large companies. Concerns were raised that companies, including insurance providers, might use collected information to influence pricing or decisions. The idea that some smart home devices are "always listening" and sending data was a cause for concern.
- **Intimidation and fear**: The process of review by social services can already be intimidating, and the introduction of AI could make people "more scared". The term "AI" itself can be a "buzzword" and cause confusion or fear for those unfamiliar with it.
- **Lack of personal understanding and context**: AI might not "see you as a person" or understand the "level of impairment". This could lead to a lack of "personal touch", and AI might not comprehend the full context of a person's life or household situation. Participants worried that AI assessments might lack the empathy and compassion necessary in social work, potentially overlooking important nuances in an individual's situation and might not understand individual circumstances. There was concern that AI assessments could make conversations "very much about people's deficits and what might be missing in their lives" instead of focusing on their strengths or what makes their life worthwhile.
- **Removal of common sense and compassion**: A key ethical concern was that AI "could remove a common sense" and "a compassion that people have". As one participant stated, "It doesn't have compassion, does it? It's a machine" ... "I think compassion is a big thing".
- **Bias and manipulation**: There's a risk that AI could have an "inherent bias" and might be designed to "please you, tell you what you want to hear, rather than what actually you should be doing to respect people's rights"

- **Transparency and accountability issues**: Participants worried about the transparency of AI's decision-making process, especially as it becomes more complex. It's difficult to understand "what it's using to make that assessment" or "how it uses data that it's collected on me". This lack of transparency undermines trust.
- **Difficulty in challenging AI decisions**: A significant concern was what happens "if an AI got it wrong" and "how could I challenge that?". There's a fear that social workers might be "reluctant to move away from" an AI-produced answer because it feels like a "certainty". Participants noted that people might not know the root cause is the AI if something goes wrong.
- **Digital exclusion and language barriers**: There are concerns that AI may not be accessible to everyone, particularly "people from different backgrounds, ethnic minority," who may not have computers or understand what AI is. "Language barriers" were also cited as a potential issue.
- **Equitable access to benefits**: One participant mentioned a personal experience where they were denied the ability to record an appeal due to GDPR concerns, however, a note taker was permitted. This raises questions about who will and will not benefits from AI technologies. Consideration should be given to the circumstance when it is and is not appropriate for professionals and people with lived experience to record conversations for transcription and assistive purposes.

Fostering participation group

Involving people who provide care and support in buying, developing, testing, using and evaluation of AI systems is essential. One fostering team working group, which included supervising social workers and two foster carers, provided feedback. The working group is involving foster carers and supervising social workers in developing the vision for integrating AI into the system. Feedback from their working group emphasised the values they are bringing to their ambition to integrate AI into their system.

> "We're coming together to learn together and grow together and hopefully look at how we bring new systems in place … that can really enhance and improve what we have already and take us to the next level in terms of service development, service growth, smarter ways of working, but more importantly, finding a way to develop and grow a system that works for everyone."
>
> "We're keeping not only the values of … fostering at the forefront of our piece of work, but that we're also integrating the values of social work and the profession that we all operate within alongside the project. And ultimately to keep us at the very face of innovation."
>
> "The engagement of our foster carers is integral to the [new AI] system because they will be using it alongside us. It needs to be fit for purpose."

One foster carer pointed out that they could also benefit from a reduction in time spent completing administration and navigating systems and processes. The working group noted that foster carers also have personal and financial information and supervision records stored within the system and have responsibilities that require them to navigate system processes, such as sharing information and raising alerts such as reporting a young person missing. The working group has identified tools that will support foster carers in their role and help them meet their statutory requirements and improve ways of working.

Box 6: Involving people with lived experience

Some examples of ways to involve people with lived experience, include:

- **Establish feedback loops:** People with lived experience provide input on the procurement, design and functionality of AI systems. This ensures the systems meet their needs and preferences. Ongoing feedback is provided throughout the AI procurement, implementation and evaluation processes.
- **Support understanding of AI:** People accessing services are supported to understand what AI is, how it is being used and how it interacts with their personal information. Understanding includes exploration of the opportunities, risks and ethical challenges.
- **Right of reply and redress:** People accessing services have a right of reply regarding how their information is used by AI. Organisations should publish guidelines explaining the processes for addressing any concerns or misuse of information, including clear instructions on how to report concerns and seek redress if information is not used or represented correctly.
- **Co-develop ethical guidelines:** Co-develop guidelines for the ethical and responsible use of AI in social work practice with people with lived experience to ensure alignment with their expectations
- **Informed consent:** Seek informed consent from people with lived experience for AI to interact with their personal information, however, informed consent can be complicated with some types of AI
- **Reducing digital poverty:** Local initiatives to ensure people with lived experience share the benefits of AI, such as improving digital literacy, improving connectivity, and improving safe online presence

Analysis

Social work in an age of artificial care and support

Social work is a rights-based profession that aims to improve the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable children and adults. AI is a field focused on simulating human intelligence and abilities through technology and information. Although it seems challenging, integrating social care and AI is essential for developing AI safely and ethically. AI development for societal wellbeing and public good should prioritise ethical considerations and problem-solving over technical possibilities.

There are many recommendations in the literature for achieving this. A Unified Model for Artificial Intelligence Enhanced Social Work attempts to find a balance between the opportunities and risks by reflecting on the professional, human, organisational and technical dimensions of using AI in social work[35]. Another proposal is an 'AI Book of Laws' that draws on law, ethics, and human norms and proposes encoding the concept of human dignity into AI systems[36]. Numerous, ethics frameworks have been developed to shape the development and use of AI [37],[38],[39]. Ultimately, safe and ethical AI is the responsibility of both the developer and the user.

Guiding and governing the lawful, ethical and responsible use of AI in social work education and practice

There is a role for the regulator, Social Work England, to guide lawful, ethical and responsible AI use so that social workers can make informed decisions about the use of AI and understand how this aligns with professional standards. There is also a role for government departments, universities and employers with a role in the development of social care and social work to work together to develop governance structures and guidance that support the social care sector to navigate the adoption of AI.

Stakeholders identified that a national principles-based framework with guidance is an important first step and suggested this should:

- encourage critical reflection and support decision-making
- be principles based, providing broad guidelines which can be flexibly applied across different contexts
- responsive and able to adapt to the rapid pace of AI innovation

[35] Chahna Gonsalves, 'Generative AI's Impact on Critical Thinking: Revisiting Bloom's Taxonomy' (2024) Journal of Marketing Education.
[36] Henry, A. Kissinger and others, 'Genesis: Artificial Intelligence, Hope, and the Human Spirit' (Little, Brown and Company, 2024).
[37] The Alan Turing Institute, 'AI Ethics and Governance in Practice' (The Alan Turing Institute, 2025) accessed 29 April 2025.
[38] Government Communications Headquarters, 'Artificial Intelligence', (GCHQ, 2025) accessed 29 April 2025.
[39] UK Government, 'The Model for Responsible Innovation' (UK Government, 2025) accessed 29 April 2025.

The framework and guidance should seek to align the adoption of AI in social work education and practice with:

- social work education and training standards
- practice education guidelines
- social work professional standards
- the Department for Science Innovation & Technology (DSIT) 10 principles to guide the safe, responsible and effective use of artificial intelligence (AI) in government organisations
- other relevant frameworks

It may be appropriate to consider reviewing the existing regulatory standards, This would ensure that they are sensitive to the use of AI in social work education and practice and provide a clear progression pathway, emphasising the importance of ensuring social workers experience clarity, consistency and coherence during their social work education and training, and as they transition into practice and advance professionally.

Governance, monitoring, and evaluation require resources and expertise. A national framework would help operationalise the governments expectations about lawful, ethical and responsible use of AI in social work, however, consideration should be given to how AI will be assured and what resource and expertise is required. For example, Ofsted's publication 'How Ofsted looks at AI during inspection and regulation states that it is not within Ofsted's remit or skill set to evaluate AI models. However, Ofsted inspectors will need to have a degree of AI literacy and competency to be able to detect its use and understand its implications for people with lived experience. Ofsted have said they will not evaluate the AI model itself during inspection but will look at whether good decisions are being made for children. Ofsted recognises that AI has the potential to have positive and negative impacts for people with lived experience. Ofsted is also working on further publications regarding the use of AI internally and externally:

- a statement on Ofsted's use of AI – relating to Ofsted's obligations under the government's AI Opportunities Action Plan
- a blog on Ofsted's internal AI strategy which focuses on Ofsted's AI vision and three strategic aims

Consideration should be given to whether self-evaluation is adequate to ensure lawful, ethical, and responsible use of AI. While the Department for Science, Technology and Innovation (DSIT) has set benchmarks and provided guidance, it is not clear how AI assurance will be resourced and reinforced and who should be responsible for this. There are some important questions to consider:

- Who should have oversight of AI assurance in social work and public services more broadly?
- When does external independent evaluation using suitably qualified experts become necessary?
- How should oversight be approached and what are the risks and benefits of decentralised and centralised approaches?

It is essential that people with lived experience and end users, such as social workers using AI, are part of the development, testing, buying, use, and evaluation of AI to ensure alignment with their expectations. Their involvement helps to ensure that AI systems are designed to meet the real needs of those who are affected by them. By including end users, such as social workers, in these processes, it is more likely that trustworthy and transparent AI systems will be developed and used. This participatory approach also helps to identify potential issues early, ensuring that AI systems are both practical and sensitive to the nuances of social work practice. Ultimately, this leads to AI tools that are not only technologically advanced but also socially responsible and human centric.

AI will continue to evolve, and new use cases will be identified

Using AI in social care has captured the imagination of social workers, social work employers, and social work educators. As AI advances, new use cases will likely shift towards enhanced analytics and greater autonomy and decision-making abilities. It is important to balance ambition, imagination, and 'what's possible' with problem-solving and social good.

While social care is currently focused on GenAI, any principles-based governance structure should have the capacity to review and adapt to the potential opportunities, risks, and ethical challenges of more advanced models that could be developed to respond to complex problems (see Appendix C for some examples).

The research surfaced a range of concerns about the privatisation of AI and what this means for vulnerable populations and social work. Establishing standards for AI development might help mitigate the risks by potentially reducing dependence on private international companies (a more significant risk in an unstable political climate). Aligning the ethics of private providers with social care and social good, especially when advanced models are in development, would strengthen the implementation of common standards for AI development in social care.

As AI advances, it will become more autonomous, and its analytical capabilities will grow. Consequently, AI presents evolving opportunities, risks and ethical challenges, driven by rapid research and innovation. The social care sector, and those involved in regulating, educating and supporting social workers, should be clear about the tasks reserved for social workers and those that can be completed by AI. There is a balance to be struck to ensure social care keeps pace with emerging developments so people with lived experience share the benefits of AI while the risks are effectively mitigated.

Leading AI adoption

The lawful, ethical and responsible adoption of AI in social work will be shaped by leaders. They will need support and preparation to do this effectively, specifically those in roles such as practice leaders, practice supervisors, principal social workers, people with quality assurance or learning and development responsibilities, as they will need to lead and assure the adoption of

AI in social care. Consideration should be given to what AI literacy and competency looks like for each role. For example, evidence from this research highlighted the potential role of practice leaders and practice supervisors in AI adoption. However practice leaders and practice supervisors are already under strain, working in environments where resources are reducing and need is increasing. The stark reality is that AI development won't wait for social care to be ready to engage. Practice leaders and practice supervisors will need additional capacity to be able to support the ethical adoption and use of AI while also undertaking their existing responsibilities. The following details summarised from the focus group and interview evidence highlights the criticality of these roles in supporting the ethical implementation and adoption of AI to be used in social work practice:

Practice leaders play a pivotal role in guiding organisational changes when adopting AI technologies. Leaders play a vital role in navigating the complexities of AI adoption. There is a role for leaders to:

- understand AI and how it can be used in social work practice
- understand the limitations, risks and ethical challenges of using AI in social care
- provide clear guidance about the lawful, ethical and responsible use of AI
- provide clear guidance around authorised and unauthorised use of AI
- arrange foundational learning and development opportunities on AI literacy and competency for staff
- foster an organisational culture oriented toward lawful, ethical and responsible use of AI
- monitor the impact of AI on people with lived experience and other identified outcomes
- establish mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the proper use, oversight, and quality assurance of AI

Practice supervisors play a pivotal role in the safe and ethical use of AI in social work, particularly in relation to quality assuring Gen AI outputs. There is a role for practice supervisors to:

- understand the AI the organisation has adopted and how it should and should not be used
- understand the limitations, risks and ethical challenges of AI in social work organisations
- participate in developing clear guidance about the safe and ethical use of AI that align with social work professional standards
- support social workers to use AI in line with guidance and social work professional standards
- quality assure AI outputs and support social workers to develop and maintain critical thinking skills
- support social workers to maintain ownership and authenticity of their work
- find ways to benefit from AI efficiencies while maintaining professional standards
- foster a culture of safe and ethical AI use through the supervisory relationship
- respond to unauthorised, unethical, unlawful, or irresponsible use of AI in social work practice

In addition to extra capacity, practice supervisors and practice leaders would benefit from continued professional development opportunities designed for their roles to accelerate confidence and capability in leading AI conversations. For example, advanced qualifications like the Digital Leaders Qualification aim to equip adult social care leaders with skills for effective leadership in an AI-driven world.

There is a role for social work educators and employers to work together to prepare the workforce to use AI lawfully, ethically, and responsibly. Social work educators and employers view this as a necessary step to lead the transition. Social work educators and employers are eager to work together, suggesting forums where joint working between educators and employers already takes place for this purpose, while emphasising the need for a coordinated national approach and clear national guidelines.

Box 7: Level 5 Digital Leaders qualification (Adult social care)

Adult social care appears poised for widespread adoption of AI to help manage the care of England's aging population. On 9 April 2025, the Department for Health and Social Care (DHCS) announced plans for a Level 5 Digital Leaders qualification as part of the government's Plan for Change. The qualification aims to ensure adult social care leaders and managers have the skills they need to adopt digital innovations and new technology to help transform the sector. The qualification supports leaders to develop understanding and knowledge in the following areas:

- the use of technology and data in adult social care
- implementing technology in adult social care
- leading change, learning and improvement in adult social care

Organisations can choose to focus on a variety of technologies, including:

- smart home technologies
- assistive technologies
- technologies worn by staff
- telecare
- diagnostic tools
- digital social care records
- business software
- AI and robotics technology

The social work professional standards and AI use in practice

The professional standards for social workers apply to all registered social workers in all roles and settings. They are the threshold standards necessary for ensuring safe and effective practice. The use of AI by social workers in practice is a significant change and ensuring that the professional standards apply to the use of AI in social practice will provide direction to social workers and employers. This may reduce potential Fitness to Practice referrals. While in some instances the potential areas of breach are clear, others are more ambiguous and will emerge as AI evolves and new examples of use and misuse of AI are identified. Developing role-based competencies specific to the AI tool and social work context would provide clarity about quality assurance and professional responsibility regarding the use of AI in social work practice.

Privacy and data protection were the clearest risks based on current ways of working with AI. Social workers who share people's personal information with publicly available AI effectively release this information into the public domain and cannot be sure how the information will be used or stored. This information typically results from developing a professional relationship that could be adversely affected if privacy and data protection are compromised, or the information is misused or misinterpreted in some way. Relevant professional standards include:

- *2 Establish and maintain the trust and confidence of people*
- *2.2 Respect and maintain people's dignity and privacy*
- *2.6 Treat information about people with sensitivity and handle confidential information in line with the law*

Issues of fairness, bias and discrimination associated with AI algorithmic bias are misaligned with social work professional standards yet are difficult to manage particularly in AI applications that lack transparency. Social workers need a foundational level of AI literacy to be able to critically reflect upon potential bias and unfairness emerging from an AI application, including understanding when and how AI should and should not be used. Social workers have a responsibility to recognise discrimination, especially when it is systemic.

Consideration should be given to what this means if AI is used or integrated into the system and contributes to the replication or amplification of bias, unfairness or discrimination. Conversely, there is potential to develop AI to detect and support the organisation to respond to bias, unfairness or discrimination. Relevant professional standards include:

- *1.5 Recognise differences across diverse communities and challenge the impact of disadvantage and discrimination on people and their families and communities*
- *1.6 Promote social justice, helping to confront and resolve issues of inequality and inclusion*
- *3.7 Recognise where there may be bias in decision making and address issues that arise from ethical dilemmas, conflicting information, or differing professional decisions*

It may be helpful to consider AI as an employee when reflecting upon the impact on professional standards given it performs work for the organisation.

Social workers will likely develop some type of working relationship with AI as it is more widely adopted and will rely on it in different ways. People using AI draw upon the skills and knowledge of the AI application and delegate work to it. Social workers will make some assumptions about its competency to complete tasks, which will be influenced by their AI literacy and their own competency with the task. GenAI has many problems with quality and accuracy that could impact case recordings and ownership over decisions. As more advanced AI applications are adopted, accountability, ownership, and transparent decision-making could become more complex. Clarifying where the accountability lies for work delegated to AI is important, as are decisions about how AI use is supervised and quality assured. Relevant professional standards include:

- *3.6 Draw on the knowledge and skills of workers from my own and other professions and work in collaboration, particularly in integrated teams, holding onto and promoting my social work identity*
- *3.8 Clarify where the accountability lies for delegated work and fulfil that responsibility when it lies with me*
- *3.11 Maintain clear, accurate, legible and up to date records, documenting how I arrive at my decisions.2.2 Respect and maintain people's dignity and privacy*
- *5.3 Falsify records or condone this by others*

Some professional standards or guidance may need to be revised to explicitly include reference to AI, including its capabilities and limitations and where it should and shouldn't be used and the potential role for AI in the supervisory relationship and continued professional development. Relevant professional standards include:

- *3.10 Establish and maintain skills in information and communication technology and adapt my practice to new ways of working, as appropriate*
- *4.2 Use supervision and feedback to critically reflect on, and identify my learning needs, including how I use research and evidence to inform my practice*

Professional standards and guidance may need to be revised to include explicit reference to lawful, ethical, and responsible use of AI including how it could potentially harm or discriminate. This may include considering what AI literacy and role-based competencies look like in the context of social work; what skills and knowledge social workers need to use AI lawfully, ethically and responsibly; and what mechanisms should be in place to raise any concerns about any AI applications or processes that misalign with professional standards. Relevant professional standards include:

- *5.1 Abuse, neglect, discriminate, exploit or harm anyone, or condone this by others*
- *5.6 Use technology, social media or other forms of electronic communication unlawfully, unethically, or in a way that brings the profession into disrepute*
- *6.2 Reflect on my working environment and where necessary challenge practices, systems and processes to uphold Social Work England's professional standards*

Conclusion and recommendations

The emerging use of AI in social work practice and education presents opportunities, risks and ethical challenges that will require a coordinated approach from those engaged in providing or supporting social work education and practice. This approach should be balanced by the active engagement of social workers and people accessing social work services in the development and implementation of AI in social work practice. While social workers have ownership and accountability for how they use AI, it is essential that they are prepared and supported to use AI lawfully, ethically, and responsibly by employers and government bodies. The social work sector must quickly develop AI literacy and competencies to better understand what this means in the context of social work education and practice, and to lead the development of AI products which are developed responsibly and ethically for use in social work practice.

Foundational to this developmental journey are clear and consistent national guidelines that set out the expectations for how AI should and should not be used would act as a firm foundation to develop the effective and appropriate use of AI in social work practice. Existing governance structures may need to be reviewed and updated to ensure that social workers feel confident that they are using AI in alignment with Social Work England professional standards and are supported by their employer to do so. By fostering clarity, consistency through the implementation of ethical guidelines, social workers will be better prepared to leverage AI to improve their experience and quality of practice while also benefitting people accessing social work services. Ongoing research and collaboration of regulatory bodies, social work employers, social work educators, social workers and people with lived experience will be essential to ensure that the development and use of AI in social work is lawful, ethical and responsible in the longer term.

The lawful, ethical, and responsible adoption of AI in social work is predicated on a collaborative effort between all who have an interest in social work and social good. These recommendations reflect a systemic approach to AI adoption.

Recommendation 1

Government departments, regulators, professional bodies and other organisations with responsibility for social work should work together to inform and shape the use of AI by social workers. Building on existing standards and frameworks, efforts should be made to collaboratively agree a national approach which:

- addresses the increased use of automation technology for routine social work tasks and how this may impact decision-making over time
- guards against improper use of personal or confidential information
- ensures that professional tasks which require social work skills and knowledge such as record keeping, assessment and analysis continue to be undertaken by social workers

- responds to the risk and ethical challenges of using AI with vulnerable and ageing populations and is alert to potential biases regarding those from global majority and other backgrounds
- clarifies the responsibilities of social work employers to prepare and support social workers to use AI lawfully, ethically, and responsibly
- clarifies who is responsible for monitoring and evaluating the lawful, ethical, and responsible use of AI, what expertise is required, and when external independent evaluation is necessary
- considers the views, rights and needs of people with lived experience of social work who may be impacted by the use of AI
- produces new ethical frameworks where needed, considering the different contexts for social work practice and variation in employment settings for social workers
- encourages social work employers to involve subject matter experts independent from organisations seeking business opportunities in the development or procurement of AI tools and technologies, and to implement robust quality assurance frameworks to support decision making

Recommendation 2

Social Work England should consider where updates may be necessary to their existing standards and guidance, including the professional standards, to reflect increasing use of AI and how this may impact social work practice. Any updates should:

- clarify the position of the regulator on the use of AI by social workers
- support social workers to have confidence they are meeting professional standards when using AI
- support social workers to know when to raise concerns about AI use, systems or processes that may misalign with professional standards
- support decision making in relation to the use of AI by social workers in the context of fitness to practise concerns
- affirm the responsibility of social work employers to support social workers to meet the professional standards

As part of this work Social Work England should consult with people with lived and learned experience of social work about the opportunities, risks and ethical challenges of using AI in social work and ensure that any updates to standards or guidance are produced in partnership.

Recommendation 3

Social Work England should continue to work with partner agencies to better understand the skills, knowledge and behaviours social workers need to use AI lawfully, ethically and responsibly to:

- better understand AI literacy needs in the social work context
- better understand how to support the development and maintenance of critical thinking skills during social work education and training, practice education, and continued professional development
- inform the review of the qualifying education and training standards (2021) and associated guidance
- enable students, apprentices and social workers to develop the required behaviours, skills, knowledge and understanding to meet the professional standards
- encourage inter-disciplinary training and learning on the use of AI beyond qualification through continuing professional development (CPD)

Recommendation 4

Social work education providers should ensure that they are supporting social work students and apprentices to use AI responsibly both during their course and in their preparation for practice. This should include the following considerations:

- the broader use of AI in higher education as it is embedded in teaching, learning, assessment and administration, and the impact of this for social work cohorts
- how the use of AI by students and apprentices will change their approach to learning and assessment, and the information they may need in relation to issues such as academic integrity
- what AI literacy looks like in the context of social work education and practice, and how to embed digital skills in social work programmes
- working in partnership with social work employers to explore the use of AI by the social work workforce and how this can inform teaching and learning, as well as opportunities for further research
- developing cross-disciplinary partnerships to share skills, knowledge, learning and increase mutual understanding of how social workers can use AI responsibly
- how the evolving use of AI in social work may impact practice educators, the delivery of practice education and experiences of practice-based learning
- where AI can be used positively to support reasonable adjustments for social work students and apprentices, such as those who are neurodiverse or who have disabilities

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Appendix A

Detailed methodology

Methods

The research was designed and delivered in accordance with National Children's Bureau (NCB) Ethical Guidelines. NCB is a member of the Social Research Association.

A mixed methods approach captured diverse AI use cases and experiences across social work practice and education settings. The key themes were explored iteratively to narrow the focus and identify significant insights. The research began with a survey of social workers, social work employers, and educators. An initial analysis was conducted to understand the emerging use of AI in social work practice and education settings as a basis for the qualitative research. The qualitative research, which included focus groups and interviews with subject matter experts, enabled more focussed and nuanced discussions, along with detailed insights into the current and prospective applications of AI. Considering the views of people accessing social work services was essential because their information will be used in AI applications. Existing participation groups in adult and children's social care were offered the opportunity to contribute to help explore AI's impact on public safety, trust, and confidence in the regulatory system.

Stakeholder recruitment

The research invited social workers, social work employers, and social work educators to participate in a survey and focus groups. To recruit stakeholders Research in Practice and Social Work England leveraged established national networks and organisations, such as Ofsted, Local Government Association (LGA), DfE, Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS), Joint Universities Social Work Association (JUSWA), and the British Association of Social Workers to elicit interest and involvement in the project. This was supported by a social media campaign to generate interest with stakeholder groups.

The stakeholder groups included:

- **Practising social workers**: social workers registered with Social Work England, currently practising social work for a social work employer
- **Social work employers**: organisations that employ social workers, such as:
  - local authority adult social care
  - local authority children's social care
  - NHS Trusts
  - Children's Trusts

    - other organisations employing social workers to provide statutory or voluntary support to children and families or adults
- **Social work educators**: providers of approved social work qualifying education and training courses[40]
- **Sector leaders**: people with oversight and interest in social work, such as Ofsted, DfE, BASW
- **Subject matter experts**: people with specific expertise, such as computer scientists, innovators, and AI proficient social work educators
- **People with lived experience**: involvement was invited via existing participation groups

Quantitative approach

Survey

A survey was distributed by Research in Practice and Social Work England via established national networks and social media channels. The survey design included three pathways tailored to social workers, social work employers, and social work educators. A fourth pathway was included for other people with an interest in the emerging use of AI in social work education and practice. The survey included qualitative and quantitative responses. A total of 203 surveys were completed between 3 and 25 March 2025:

- Practising social workers (76.4%)
- Social work employers (6.9%)
- Social work educators (5.4%)
- Other (CAFCASS, independent fostering, independent social workers, and voluntary sector) (11.3%)

Social work employers were invited to identify one well informed person to complete the survey on behalf of the organisation, such as a social work senior leader, principal social worker (PSW), IT/Data and performance lead, project/innovation lead, practice educator or learning and development lead.

See Appendix A – Survey: social worker demographics for more information.

Qualitative Approach

Qualitative research was undertaken with social workers, social work employers, social work educators, subject matter experts, sector leaders and people with an interest in AI in social work education and practice. All focus groups and interviews were undertaken online using Microsoft Teams and were recorded, transcribed, stored, and discarded in accordance with NCB Ethical Guidelines.

[40] Courses that have been through Social Work England's approval process and appear on the approved list of courses.

Focus groups

Focus groups were advertised by Research in Practice and Social Work England via established national networks. Three 2-hour focus groups, held between 11-17 March, had the following focus:

- AI use in children's social care (number of participants 32)
- AI use in adult and NHS social care (number of participants 21)
- AI use in social work education (number of participants 22 – social work educators 15, social work employers 5, other 2)

Participants for the AI in children's, adults and NHS social care focus groups were screened to ensure they had experience of using AI in practice. The focus groups provided an opportunity to explore specific examples (or use cases), opportunities, risks and ethical challenges, and insights into augmented tasks, and roles and responsibilities. Mixed representation from stakeholder groups enabled rich discussions about current and planned use. The AI in social work education focus group allowed educators and social work employers to think about how to work together to prepare and support social workers to use AI lawfully, ethically and responsibly in their future social work practice.

Due to a demand from social workers without AI experience, an additional one-hour focus group was scheduled to learn more about perceptions of AI and learning needs. Sixteen participants attended.

Interviews

Seven (7) in-depth interviews with subject matter experts from a range of disciplines, including computer science (2), social work academia (3), Ofsted (1), and innovation lead (1) were undertaken during March 2025. The interviews aimed to gather insights into current practices, challenges, and the potential future directions of AI in social work education and practice.

Participation groups

Participation groups are established in each local authority to better understand and incorporate the voice of lived experience in practice and system improvement. Rather than recruit participants with experience of accessing social work support through contacting individual local authorities, we proposed to use existing Participation Groups. Ten participation group facilitators expressed an interest in convening a group to provide feedback and a consultation pack was developed and distributed. The consultation pack contained a discussion guide for participation group leads to explore with their group, with virtual support offered by Research in Practice for those who wanted it.

Participation group facilitators reported they would struggle to convene a group within the timescale for the research, so the timescale was extended by six weeks. However, only one small

participation group ultimately provided feedback. This points to a need to consider ways to engage people with lived experience in the conversation about AI using slower, established processes over time to achieve meaningful engagement. While there was a good amount of interest, participation groups have a lot of competing demands, and enough time needs to be set aside to ensure participation group members are involved.

Consent

Focus group, participation group, and interview participants completed a consent form before participating in the research. The consent forms explained the ethical boundaries of the research and set out how participant personal data would be used, stored and destroyed.

Desk review

A desk review was undertaken in parallel to the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the research to better understand emerging themes. Policy documents were reviewed to understand the wider regulatory and policy context, particularly national initiatives to drive AI adoption and assurance in the public sector. The desk review also looked at the use of AI in social work practice and education in England and other UK jurisdictions. This desk review was complemented with a wider search around AI ethics, generative AI in higher education, generative AI in social work, and the use and impact of generative AI on knowledge workers. The desk review also explored ways that AI could be adopted in social work in the future.

Limitations

The study's findings represent a snapshot of the current use of AI in social work, capturing a moment in time amidst the rapid evolution of AI technologies. The relatively small sample size of social work employers and limited feedback from participation groups, despite an extended timeline, underscores the need for broader, longer-term engagement. The sample size of people with lived experience of social work services is very small and lacks diversity. It may not be representative of the views of a broader sample. However, the feedback does offer insight into themes that could be explored in more depth. Future research should integrate diverse and representative perspectives from people with lived experience of social work services to deepen understanding and address gaps in adoption and impact.

Appendix B

Survey: social worker demographics

Surveys completed

A total of 203 surveys were completed. The surveys were completed by:

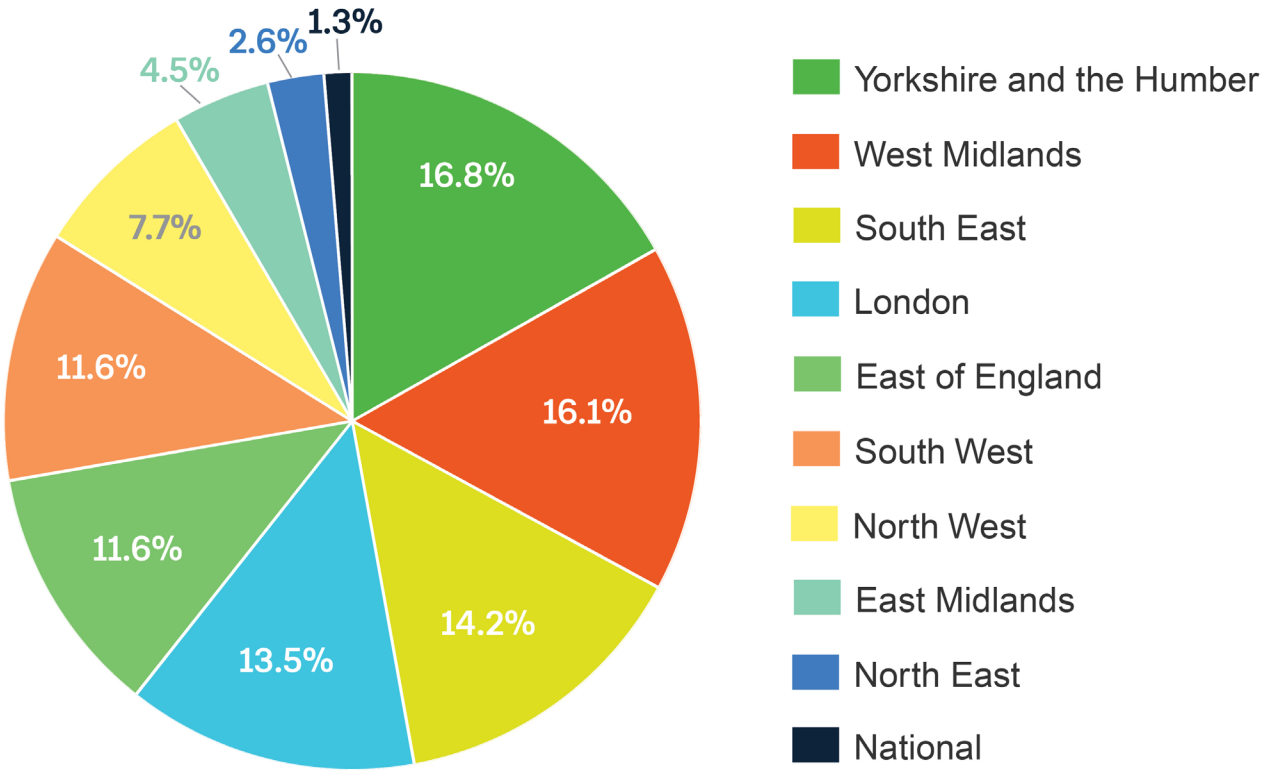
- Practising social workers: 155 (76.4%)
- Social work employers: 14 (6.9%)
- Social work educators: 11 (5.4%)
- Other (CAFCASS, independent fostering, independent social workers, and voluntary sector): 23 (11.3%)

Social work employer

There was even representation from social workers from children's (47.7%, 74) and adults (49%, 76) social work settings, while social workers employed in NHS trusts (3.2%, 5) were under-represented.

Region

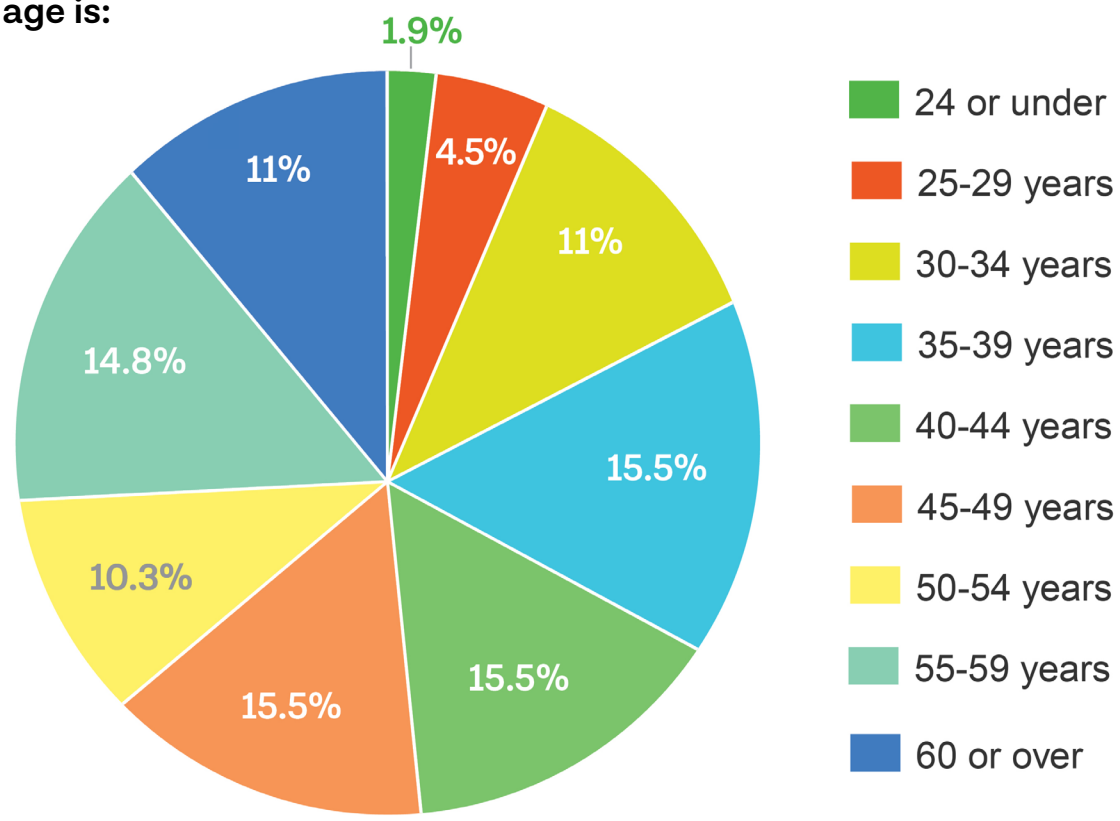
Survey responses were submitted from across England, although the North East (2.6%), East Midlands (4.5%), and North West (7.7%) regions were underrepresented.



Age

There was a relatively even distribution of age, although social workers under 29 years of age were underrepresented.

My age is:



Social worker ethnicity

There was a good ethnic diversity in the responses to the survey with some under and over-representation relating to specific groups.

Ethnicity	Response percent	Response total	England	Representation
Asian or Asian British	4.5%	7	9.30%	-4.78%
Black, Black British, Caribbean or African	11.6%	18	9.30%	7.61%
Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups	4.5%	7	2.90%	1.62%
White	75.5%	117	82%	-6.22%
Arab	0.0%	0	0.60%	-0.60%
Any other ethnic group	0.6%	1	2.10%	-1.45%
Prefer not to say	2.6%	4	0	-
Other	0.6%	1	2.10%	-1.45%
	Total	**155**		

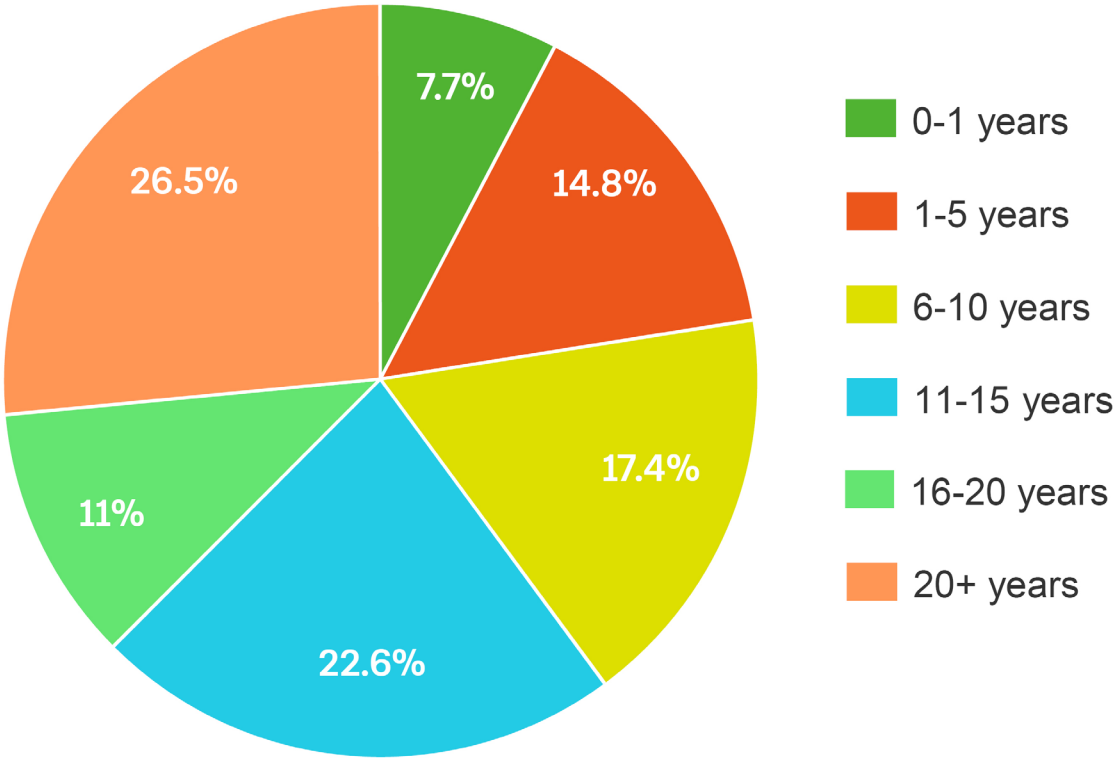
Protected characteristics

Social worker responses to the survey indicated that 29% (45) identified as having a protected characteristic.

Years qualified

There was a relatively even distribution of the number of years social workers had been qualified, although newly qualified social workers were underrepresented and social workers with 11 to15 years and 20+ years' experience were overrepresented.

How many years have you been a qualified social worker?



Appendix C

Developing more advanced AI models

- **Predictive Analytics**: Uses historical data, statistical algorithms, and machine learning to predict outcomes. Previous projects have examined the possibility of predicting need and risk to provide timely support. These had poor predictive capabilities, and the projects concluded[41]. Current examples of predictive analytics operate as alert systems if a cluster of vulnerabilities is detected. They do not make decisions and rely on a human to follow up and check in if support is needed. As AI progresses, there may be renewed interest in more advanced predictions that are typically the responsibility of a social worker.

  "We understand, and are actively looking at, the importance of technology in social work practice and the scope of our role in developing and positioning these emerging technologies. The use of AI in predictive risk assessment can be used for example in connecting electronic health records(eHRs) across all aspects of a person's life with the goal of improving wellbeing and identifying risks before harm or injury, or impact can happen." (social work educator)

- **AI Agents**: Agents are autonomous systems that make decisions and take actions with minimal human input. They assess their environment, choose tools, and achieve objectives independently. AI agents are currently not very reliable, but they are getting better. They could be used to automate some social work tasks or run processes in the background. Reliable and widespread adoption of AI Agents could improve efficiency for many tasks but would also likely result in greater job insecurity and augmentation.

- **Large concept models (LCMs)**: LCMs are designed to enhance AI's ability to reason, structure knowledge, and provide explainable outputs. LCMs incorporate different types of AI to create more sophisticated models. LCMs aim to address the limitations of GenAI and make them 'smarter' by using structured knowledge bases, logical relationships, and domain-specific expertise. It's like giving AI a social work degree, which could potentially result in better performance and different use cases in social work settings but could also delegate more responsibilities that are currently reserved for social workers.

- **Artificial care and companionship**: There have been numerous pilots worldwide considering how AI and robotics could be used in social care, to perform care tasks, domestic duties, and provide companionship. This field will continue to advance, and governance structures should consider how to balance the opportunities, risks, and ethical challenges, including how vulnerable and aging populations might experience artificial care and companionship.

[41] What Works Centre for Children's Social Care, 'Machine Learning in Children's Services: Does it Work?' (WWCSC, 2020)

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