AI Glossary for Children's Social Care

Adapted from the NHS AI & Digital Regulations Service

Glossary Terms

Adopter

A service that chooses to use an AI tool created by someone else.

A children's services department becomes an adopter when it brings in an AI-powered system for triage, analysis, or admin support.

Algorithm

A set of rules a computer follows to make decisions.

In children's services, an algorithm might help prioritise referrals or flag patterns, but it must never replace professional judgement.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Technology that performs tasks that normally require human thinking, such as spotting patterns in case data, summarising long documents, or predicting possible risks.

Automated Decision-Making

When a computer makes a decision without human involvement.

This is not permitted for decisions that significantly affect children or families.

Bias

When an AI system produces unfair or unbalanced results because the data it learned from was incomplete or skewed.

In social care, bias can lead to unfair treatment of certain groups, so tools must be monitored carefully.

Data

Information used by AI systems, such as case notes, demographics, or service-use patterns.

Children's data is highly sensitive, so strict safeguarding, consent, and privacy rules apply.

Data Minimisation

Using only the smallest amount of personal data necessary for a task.

Important when working with children's records to reduce risk.

Data Protection / GDPR

Laws that ensure personal information, especially children's information, is used safely, fairly, and only for the right reasons.

Any AI tool must comply with these laws.

Developer

The organisation or team that creates an AI tool.

Local authorities must understand who built a tool before using it, especially for safeguarding-related decisions.

Explainability

How clearly an AI system can show why it made a particular suggestion or prediction.

This matters for accountability, especially in child protection.

Hallucination (in AI)

A hallucination in AI is when it confidently gives you a wrong answer that sounds correct.

This can happen when the AI guesses based on patterns, even if it doesn’t really “know” the answer.

Human Oversight

Ensuring that trained professionals, not AI, make final decisions.

AI can support practice, but it must never replace social workers' judgement.

Large Language Model (LLM)

AI trained on huge amounts of text so it can generate human-like language.

Useful for drafting reports or summarising notes, but outputs must always be checked for accuracy and safeguarding risks.

Machine Learning (ML)

A type of AI that learns from examples.

If trained on past social care data, it may learn patterns, but it can also learn past biases, so oversight is essential.

Risk Assessment (AI-related)

A structured process to identify whether using an AI tool could cause harm, introduce bias, or affect safeguarding.

This is essential before using AI in any part of the child's journey.

Testing / Validation

Checking whether an AI system works properly, is accurate, and is safe to use in real-world settings.

For children's services, this includes checking that the tool does not introduce safeguarding risks or unfair outcomes.

Transparency

Being open about how an AI system works, what data it uses, and how decisions are made.

Families and practitioners should be able to understand how a tool influences decisions.
