

Ethical and Effective AI: Friend or Foe? CELCIS

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AI and Social Work Practice

Context: AI already supports tasks such as transcription, summarising assessments, generating actions, and retrieving case information.

Example: Magic Notes generates case notes and assessments from recorded conversations.

AI literacy is now essential: understanding strengths, limitations, ethics, and effective prompting.

Policy context: UK and Scotland emphasise ethical, inclusive AI; concerns remain about rights, transparency, and governance.



Impacts and Implications

AI research in social work and social care tends to be normative, juxtaposing efficiency gains with ethical concerns.

Yet evidence on impacts in social work is limited; many tools are being implemented ahead of evaluation.

Public and service users see efficiency benefits but worry about accuracy, oversight, privacy, and consent.

Risk: delegating reflective sense-making to AI may dilute professional judgement.

- “...risks dilution if not forfeiture if delegated to AI.”

Critical Thinking and Decision- Making

Key concerns: lack of contextual understanding, replication of bias, misinformation, ethical risks.

- *“These are not minor issues... workers deal with complex and nuanced issues...”*
- AI’s conversational style can support critical thinking, but its influence on professional reasoning is still unclear.
- Risk of passive, uncritical use and over-reliance, undermining autonomy and judgement.
- Sycophantic tone of tools like Copilot may increase trust while eroding judgement.

Efficiency or Cognitive Offloading

AI can summarise text, generate materials, structure information, and support meeting prep.

- *“One of the most cited benefits of AI is its potential to increase efficiency.”*

Practitioners value AI’s ability to synthesise information quickly and create coherent narratives.

Research shows mixed results: perceived efficiency gains may not match actual performance.

Core tension: AI can augment critical thinking—or displace it entirely through cognitive offloading.

- *“...practitioners can lean too heavily on the tool rather than exercising their own professional judgement.”*

Ethical Use in Social Work

AI should only be used with organisational approval and in compliance with governance, confidentiality, and data protection.

Clients should be informed and able to opt out where appropriate.

AI cannot replace relationship-based, person-centred practice; it cannot apply cultural sensitivity or empathy.

Major concern: algorithmic bias harming minoritised or vulnerable groups.

Key take-aways

Impact depends on the type, form, function and purpose of the tool.

AI can enhance decision-making but may also reduce critical thinking.

AI can synthesise information rapidly but cannot think, feel, or judge.

Need for scrutiny of impacts on practitioners and service users

Limited evidence that people override or resist AI recommendations.

- *“The evidence that people intervene, override or resist AI is thin.”*

Users may be influenced by AI’s perceived objectivity and sycophantic tone.

Practitioners may feel unable to challenge outputs or lack time to verify accuracy.

Some guidelines ...

If We Are Going to Use Gen-AI, We Need To...

1. Educate practitioners on responsible use.
 2. Be clear about limitations.
 3. Understand risks (confidentiality, inaccuracies).
 4. Provide training in critical, effective use.
 5. Develop guidelines and policies to prevent unregulated uptake.
- *“...the temptation to use this technology unregulated should not be underestimated.”*