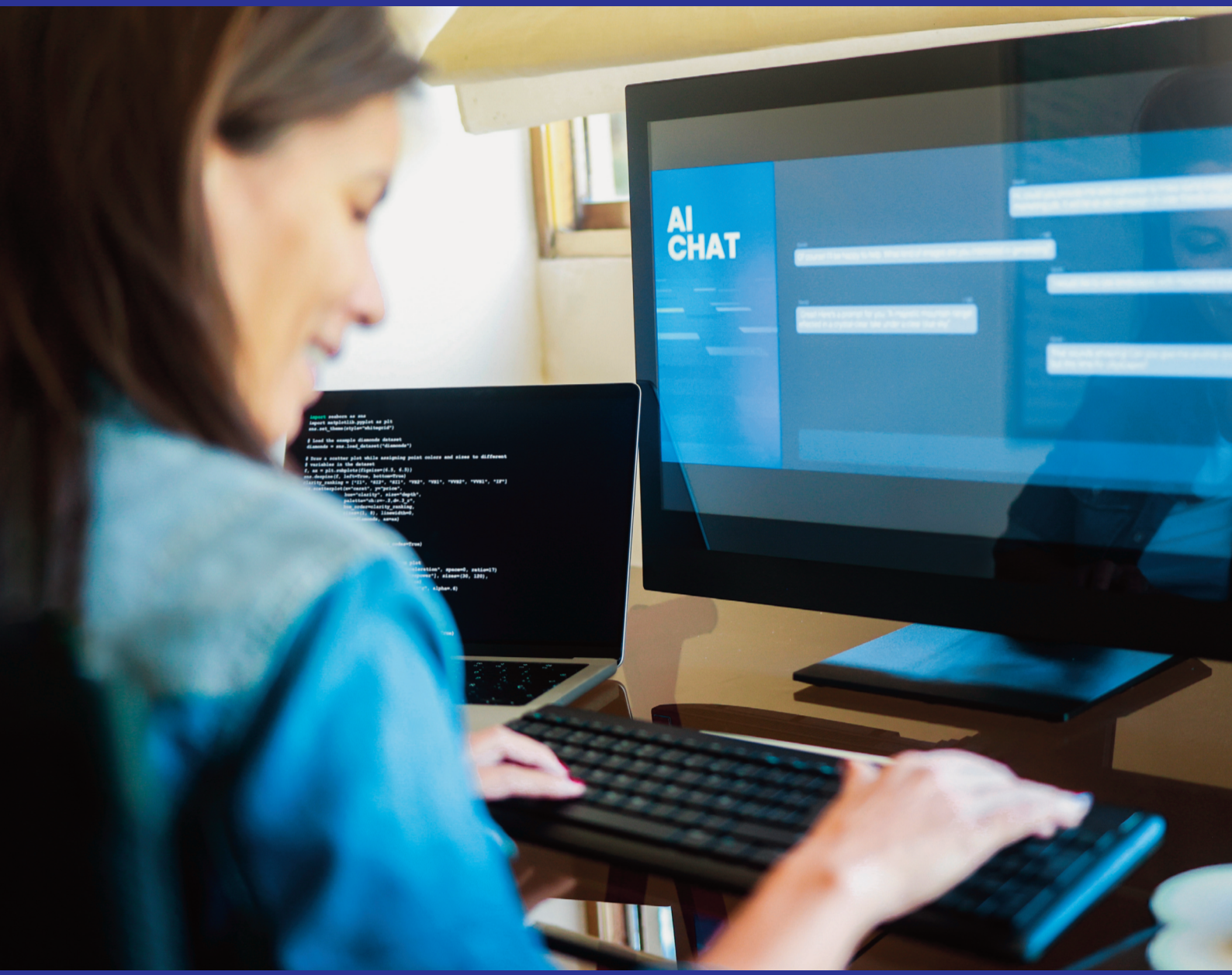
# The BASW Statement on Social Work and Generative Artificial Intelligence



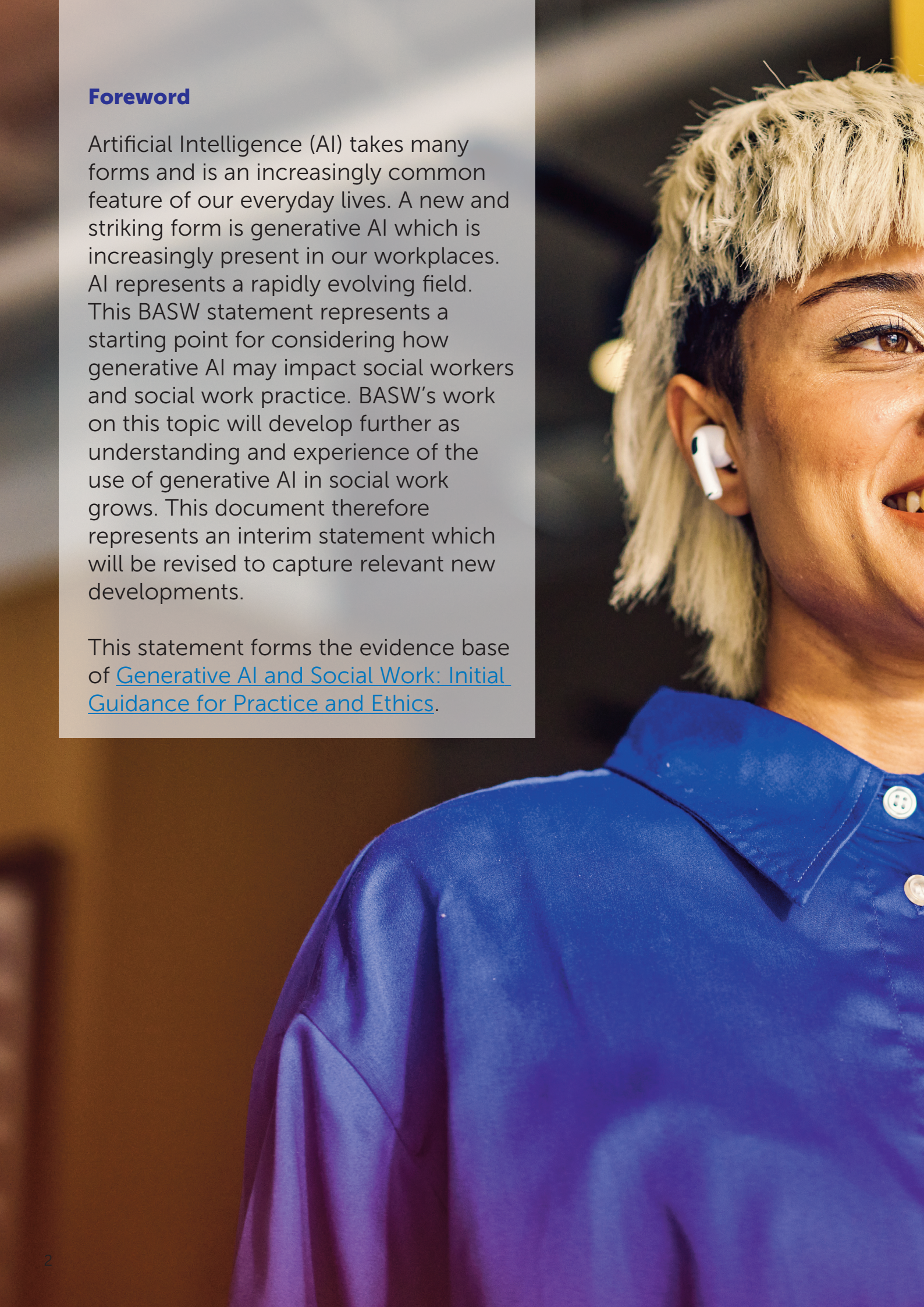

BASW

The professional association for social work and social workers

## Foreword

Artificial Intelligence (AI) takes many forms and is an increasingly common feature of our everyday lives. A new and striking form is generative AI which is increasingly present in our workplaces. AI represents a rapidly evolving field. This BASW statement represents a starting point for considering how generative AI may impact social workers and social work practice. BASW's work on this topic will develop further as understanding and experience of the use of generative AI in social work grows. This document therefore represents an interim statement which will be revised to capture relevant new developments.

This statement forms the evidence base of Generative AI and Social Work: Initial Guidance for Practice and Ethics.



## Introduction

This paper addresses issues relating to the use of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) in social work. It begins by considering the background to the growing use of multiple forms of artificial intelligence across many areas of life, before considering the potential advantages and disadvantages of generative AI in particular for the social work profession. It concludes by considering what needs to happen as a matter of urgency if generative AI is to be used safely and appropriately in social work.

We are grateful to a number of individuals and groups for their help in shaping the structure and content of this developing statement.

**Disclaimer:** A number of generative AI products are mentioned by name in this paper. BASW does not support or endorse any products named. They are offered as examples only.

## Background

Artificial intelligence is a broad term that covers a range of technological developments that allow machines to learn and problem solve in a human-like manner. Definitions of AI can be somewhat confusing and the terminology can be used very loosely. Forms of AI are increasingly present in people's everyday lives, whether that is as a voice-activated virtual assistant (for example, Alexa, Siri), a customer service chatbot, or an algorithm predicting posts, videos or products that might interest a user based on browsing and/or purchasing history.

AI is also, increasingly, a feature of public service in the UK and elsewhere. In November 2024, Meta, the parent company of Facebook, ran a 'hackathon' which awarded development funding to technology aimed at reducing A&E waiting times in the NHS. Microsoft has a five-year deal with UK Government departments in Whitehall to supply its Copilot AI to civil servants[1].

AI covers a wide range of technological developments. Currently there is no standardised definition of what constitutes generative AI and the boundaries between generative and other forms of AI are not always clear. In this paper, generative AI is understood to mean a form of AI that can be used to create new content in text, audio or visual form in response to the prompts that it receives. Generative AI learns on 'blocks' of 'content'. This content can be text ('Large Language Models'), sound, video or other content. These blocks of content can be huge (e.g. all text on the internet) or bounded (e.g. all the text in Wikipedia). Similarly, AI learning on sound might learn on all music online, or just a specific artist. Much of the output of Generative AI is highly convincing leading to phenomenon such as fake news, deepfake photos or videos and deepfake porn which is then promoted through social media.

**Generative AI is qualitatively different from other forms of machine learning. Unlike, for example, a search engine, which could only produce matches or near matches to a search prompt, generative AI can produce content in response to a prompt which may or may not be accurate.**

Recent UK governments have taken a strong interest in AI, with then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak establishing a regular international summit on AI, the first of which was held in Bletchley Park in November 2023. The AI Safety Institute (AISI) is a directorate of the UK Department of Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT). Its brief is focused on conducting research into the safety of advanced AI and its impacts on people and society in order to enable appropriate AI governance[2]. However, previous UK governments ruled out setting up any kind of AI 'watchdog', leaving gaps in existing AI governance in the UK.

With the speed of development of generative AI and its increasingly widespread usage, this raises a number of concerns and questions about whether there is an appropriate role for AI in social work and if so, what that role might look like. Similar debates can be found in other areas of public services such as healthcare[3].

**An example of a specialist app would be MagicNotes which can transcribe meetings, provide summaries and suggest actions. It is currently being piloted in a number of local authorities across the UK.**

To date, there has been no uniform or consistent approach to the introduction and use of generative AI in social work. Whilst some organisations have adopted a very cautious approach, others have been more willing to trial new technology. In some cases, this has taken the form of more specialised apps trained directly on social-care related materials[4]. In others it has been the adoption of one of the generalist Large Language Models (LLMs) such as Copilot, which is now embedded in many Microsoft products.

Generative AI offers potential benefits. However, it also comes with a number of risks and downsides that need to be taken into account at all levels of the profession and in IT teams, commissioning and procurement, when determining what the appropriate role of AI in social work might be, especially in the absence of sector-specific guidance.

## Potential Benefits

There are potential benefits to be gained with the use of generative AI, as with other forms of artificial intelligence and types of digital technology. The use of digital technology, especially for communication and also monitoring, and AI is firmly on the agenda in public services and elsewhere, with perceptions of its ability to streamline and automate processes and potentially reduce costs.

**Painchek is a tool that can be used to check the pain levels of those through indicators including facial recognition for those who may not be able to express their pain verbally. The data gathered is used to develop personalised pain profiles and improve pain management.**

In social care specifically, developments in AI have raised the hope of being able to address at least some unmet need and enhance the quality of life for people. Examples could be the use of a chatbot providing company for someone impacted by loneliness or a member of care staff using a chatbot to learn more information about the health conditions of someone for whom they are providing care[5]. Some of those drawing upon care and support are finding AI tools, including generative AI, empowering, for example in facilitating communication.

From the perspective of the social work profession, a principal perceived benefit of AI is its potential to provide administrative support, reducing both the time spent on administration and the overall administrative burden. It is clear from past BASW surveys that 'demands of administrative tasks' ranks consistently in the top five of respondents' biggest challenges in the workplace[6], with BASW's ongoing 80/20 campaign work focusing on concerns expressed by social workers about the amount of time being spent on administrative tasks.

Despite technological advances, social work has lagged behind digital solutions, resulting in additional burdens for social workers (for example, excessive paperwork). The integration of AI tools has the potential to enhance overall productivity by automating repetitive tasks, helping manage caseloads, providing valuable insights and supporting social workers to remain focused on the people they work with.

Thus the potential to use generative AI to undertake administrative tasks, for example transcribing meetings and providing a summary, is attractive to a profession that is understaffed and which has a notoriously high administrative burden that reduces the time available for direct work. There is also the potential for generative AI to be used in this way to support multi-disciplinary team working through production of meeting notes and actions.

Generative AI should be introduced where it can assist with practice, reduce the administrative burden on social work and improve the delivery of support services, all of which it has the potential to do if deployed appropriately from the benefit of those drawing on care and support. Factors such as these should drive the adoption of generative AI, not the quest for financial efficiencies. For generative AI tools to have the most beneficial impact, those who draw upon care and support and those who deliver it need to be involved in co-producing the tools that will be used[7]. Generative AI tools should be designed to enhance social work practices, allowing social workers to focus on their core responsibilities and not replacing them.

However, even when being used for limited tasks, there are a number of risks involved in the use of AI which anyone contemplating the use of AI in social work needs to be aware of so that possible mitigations can be developed and any ethical considerations explored.

## Downsides

Currently, there is a lack of evidence base demonstrating the effectiveness and/or appropriateness of the use of generative AI in social work and social care[8] and without such an evidence base, there is the possibility of unknown harms or unintended consequences that could arise as a result of its deployment. Development companies have a strong interest in promoting and marketing their products as a solution. In some instances, this may lead to the downplaying of ethical and practical challenges in their application.

In the absence of an evidence base with results that have been replicated by different researchers in a range of conditions, a broader lack of understanding of how such models work may lead to investment in inappropriate or unsuitable products. This may throw up particular challenges for the social work profession given the statutory duties attached to the role. Social workers, social work managers and those with whom they work need targeted training and clear guidance to help them improve their understanding of AI and how it is most appropriately used. Organisations introducing such tools also need to consider what their options will be should a company increase its charges or withdraw support for specific tools in a rapidly developing area where tools and versions may rapidly become obsolete[9].

One area of evidence where results have been repeated is the presence of bias in the content generated. This is a consequence of the nature of the data on which many LLMs are trained, especially for the generalist models which are often trained on large quantities of online data. Human biases present in that data are perpetuated, and even amplified, by generative AI, for example the appearance of racial and gender stereotypes. A report produced on behalf of UNESCO found that when given sentence prompts beginning with a person's gender, one LLM generated sexist and misogynistic content in approximately 20% of sentences, including referring to a woman as a 'sex object', a 'baby machine' and 'the property of her husband'[10]. A system used by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) to detect welfare fraud was found to demonstrate bias with regard to age, disability, marital status and nationality[11]. As a consequence of the known issue of bias, the equalities impact of the deployment of any generative AI applications requires serious consideration by any local authorities and other organisations employing them.

**Generative AI is also being used to create fake content, including AI images of child sexual abuse. This raises challenges for anyone involved in child protection work.**

Another challenge relates to what has become known as AI 'hallucination'. Generative AI has effectively learned to generate 'statistically probable' outputs in response to prompts. However, some of these results can be incorrect or misleading – AI 'hallucinations'. This information is, however, presented as fact and often sounds plausible[12]. Detecting and compensating for such hallucinations is a clear challenge in real world application. One lawyer involved in a court case suing an airline for causing injury to a passenger used an LLM to assist in producing the research brief – but at least six of the cases submitted did not appear to exist[13].

Detecting fakes is also an increasing challenge[14]. In generating 'statistically probable' outputs, AI currently remains unable to contextualise or 'understand' any potentially harmful implications of the content produced. There remains a mismatch between how the capabilities of generative AI are being measured and their application in real-world scenarios, creating concerns that policy-makers and members of the public assume these systems to be more accurate and reliable than is currently the case[15]. Safeguards put in place to prevent harmful output have been shown to be easily bypassed, should a bad faith actor wish to do so[16].

**The Office of the Victorian Information Commissioner in Australia ordered the state's child protection agency to ban staff from using generative AI services. This followed a report submitted to the children's court which was deemed to have been produced using ChatGPT in its preparation, including the use of sensitive personal information about the child. Multiple concerns were raised about the report, with the Information Commissioner's Office deeming that entering information into ChatGPT was an unauthorised disclosure of personal information.**

There are also concerns relating to data protection and security. As with all forms of data collection, it needs to be clear who controls the data, for what purpose and who may have access to it. This is especially true in the case of generative AI which requires access to large amounts of data for training purposes with developments looking for a wide range of data sources as a consequence. Given the sensitive and personal nature of much of the information used in social work, clear safeguards must be in place and in compliance with UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Organisations should consider what information is appropriate to be inputted into AI tools[17].

The sensitive nature of the data also means it should be as securely held as possible. Also, as noted above, research shows that chatbot safeguards can be bypassed by attempts to elicit harmful responses, something any organisation considering deploying chatbots as a first point of contact in public services must consider.

Questions of data protection and security also link to issues of privacy and consent. In the UK, this is bound by the framework of GDPR. People have rights with regard to the control of their personal information which must be respected. Consent should be gained where possible and a policy for those who may be unable to consent, for example due to reasons of mental capacity, should be developed. There must also continue to be viable alternatives for those who do not wish to have their personal information inputted into any generative AI tools. 'Digital by default' is already exclusionary for many of those who receive social work support.

Another issue that must be taken into consideration as the use of AI becomes more widespread in the public sector is where liability sits if a mistake is made in content generated by, or with the assistance of, an AI model. Many of the developers of LLM chatbots specify that the outputs created must not be used to make important decisions that may have a legal or material effect[18]. This requires a 'human in the loop' process of both checking the content generated and making any decisions on recommendations, even though it will be human nature to 'trust the computer'. There is also the question of whether any documents containing AI generated content should explicitly acknowledge this fact. Furthermore, it should be borne in mind that automated decisions can be challenged under Article 22 of UK GDPR.

Finally, there are growing environmental concerns about the physical infrastructure used to support AI which is both energy and water-intensive. This inevitably impacts on the availability of resources for local communities and may be increasingly the case where infrastructure is no longer needed to be located physically close to the work that it is supporting, encouraging companies providing the infrastructure to move to cheaper areas where they could exacerbate existing environmental degradation or water shortages[19]. Some interesting counter-measures are being trialled, for example using the heat created to warm public swimming pools, but these are small in scale by comparison to the data centres used to support AI[20]. Given current concerns about changes to the climate and damage to the environment, this is a further issue for consideration if social work is striving to become more sustainable.

## AI in wider society

Concerns have also been growing about the pace and direction of the development of AI, generative and otherwise. In part this is because its medium and long-term impact on society and the economy remain unknown whilst development continues at speed. The concentration of the principal generic LLMs in the hands of a relatively small number of private companies has also caused concern, for example around how some applications are increasingly embedded whether the user wishes it or not and the disrespect shown for copyright and intellectual property rights in the training of some models.

Many of the risks associated with the use of AI might be framed as manageable or 'priced in'. But there is a growing argument that AI might be an existential threat to humanity. This may seem like the realms of science fiction, but it is worth considering the following information. As humans we engage in conflict and seek to avoid and, if necessary, contest, any attempts at our own limitation or extinction. Why should not AI take the same perspective? Recently Geoffrey Hinton, who won his Nobel Prize in the field of AI, calculated a 10-20% chance of AI wiping out humanity in the next thirty years[21]. To apply this probability from a personal perspective, if every plane flight gave you a one in 10 chance, or a two in 10 chance, that it would crash and kill you, would you continue to fly?

## AI and Ethics

Ethics translates into what we do. With Generative AI there are essentially three options:

- Social workers don't engage with AI in their professional practice. This is hardly realistic given that many social workers, and many social work employers, are already using some form of AI and are planning to introduce more.
- Social workers use AI as the market determines. Social workers adopt the products that big tech serves up without thinking where the content comes from, who really benefits, what the risks might be and where all this might be going. This option is contrary to every social work value.
- Social workers use AI in a more nuanced way. This may include assessing the accuracy of content created, being alert to the potential of bias or hallucination in any material generated, being transparent in the use of generative AI, ensuring informed consent and challenging circumstances where the use of generative AI is aggravating pre-existing digital exclusion. This is the model that this statement advocates. AI can be used to enhance professional curiosity and reduce the administrative burden to improve outcomes, but should not undermine professional autonomy, analysis and evidence-based judgement.

Not all AI is the same and there is a risk that by seeing it as a single entity social workers lose the opportunities and don't fully understand the risks. There might be three types of AI in social work:

- Off the shelf AI tools such as ChatGPT or Co-pilot.
- Bespoke administrative tools e.g. employer adoption of CoPilot or Magic Notes.
- Decision making tools which include chat bots but also potentially front-line eligibility or advice assessments.

This statement now looks at these three types of AI in more detail.

However, whatever the categorisation, social workers who choose to use generative AI should do so consciously and remember that they remain accountable for any decisions and recommendations made. Generated content needs to be checked, revised where necessary, and all actions and decisions should be able to be justifiable and defensible.


## Recommendations for social work and social workers

**For off the shelf AI tools such as ChatGPT or Co-pilot**

Social workers:

- Must never use off the shelf generic AI tools to process any personal information (they are not GDPR compliant) including Practice Educator Reports;
- Must be aware of the risks of digital bias or hallucination when using of the shelf AI tools, for example to summarise complex documents;
- Apply BASW's Code of Ethics to all their work, including the use of AI tools, and understand the need to ensure that they reflect carefully and take full ownership of AI generated content.

Social work employers should issue clear guidance to their staff about this. In ensuring the use of generative AI is grounded in an ethical approach, use of local Ethics Boards, involving social workers and Experts by Experience could be considered as a way of enhancing appropriate use of generative AI and maximising its potential benefits. Ethical considerations should also be taken into account when licences for generative AI are being bought to ensure issues such as appropriate use of data and the protection of human rights are taken into account.

Student social workers should ensure that they comply with their university's policy on the use of AI in academic work. Social work education providers should consider how the use of AI in their institution relates to, and prepares students for, the use of generative AI in social work practice.

**For bespoke administrative tools e.g. corporate adoption of CoPilot or Magic Notes**

Bespoke administrative AI tools create a risk that social workers do not take enough care when accepting and using AI generated content in written notes and reports. Process is important in understanding, reflection and overall decision making.

Employers who introduce such tools should:

- Address issues of GDPR and consent.
- Complete and act on appropriate and robust impact assessments including data protection impact assessment and equalities impact assessment.
- Offer appropriate training and clear guidance to social workers and others using the tools, to avoid misuse and negative impacts.
- Establish what rights there are for people drawing on care and support to opt out.
- Develop clear and accessible information for people who draw on care and support.

**For decision making tools which include chatbots but also potentially front-line eligibility or advice assessments**

The use of chatbots can be a helpful way of gaining information quickly. However, it can also be a source of frustration when unable to respond to more nuanced or specific requests. Applied in a social work context there is a real risk that people with genuine needs (e.g. adult social care) are rejected by the chatbot.

It also seems reasonable to assume that chat bots, and by extension AI driven eligibility or advice assessments will improve. However, improvement does not equate to perfection. What is an acceptable 'failure rate' for a chatbot, and how will these failures be detected and managed? One response is a 'human in the loop' who authorises each assessment, however, this may well undermine the aims of introducing AI automation in the first place.

At this stage therefore automation of eligibility or assessments contains inherent risks. The applications being deployed may not be as effective as anticipated in real-world scenarios, as generative AI can still be seen as lacking in nuanced understanding of political and social circumstances[22]. As chatbots develop, this situation will need to be reviewed.

AI-generated summaries can overlook important nuances that social workers are trained to recognise. AI should serve as a tool in enhancing the professional judgement of social workers.

Human oversight remains essential.

## Wider Recommendations

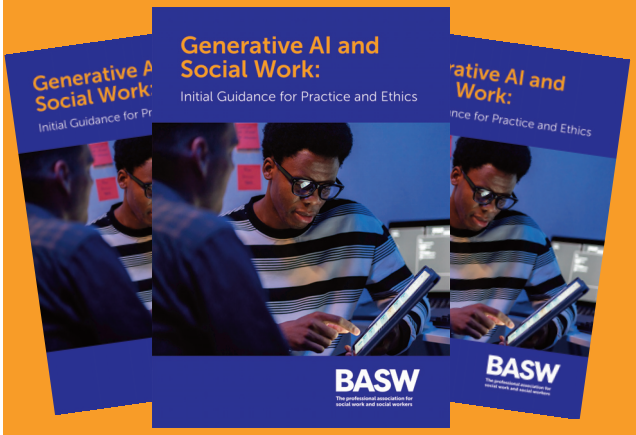
- The UK Government must act urgently to more closely regulate the use of generative AI. Generative AI is not currently regulated and has no appropriate quality assurance framework.
- The social work regulators need to produce guidance for social workers on acceptable and unacceptable use of generative AI to ensure situations such as that which emerged in the Australian state of Victoria are avoided.
- Organisations should develop internal policies on which data can and cannot be inputted into generative AI and such policies should align with UK GDPR.
- Employers and social workers should not over-estimate the time that will be freed up in the first instance as applications are deployed, due to the process of checking and correcting content that is required.
- Time that is saved by introducing generative AI should be reinvested in relationship-based practice and preventive work, rather than allocating more cases to staff or reducing the number of social workers. AI should be used to engage with people with lived experience to improve their outcomes.

This statement provides both resources and a direction for how this work is implemented.

## What needs to happen?

It can therefore be seen that the use of generative AI creates both practical challenges and ethical dilemmas. Increased use of generative AI potentially creates risks for the protection of human rights and the promotion of wellbeing. It also has the potential to lead to greater injustices and greater inequality. These are issues of concern for a profession grounded in the protection and promotion of human rights and committed to tackling social injustice and inequalities.

Generative AI is here and in use, whatever one may personally think about it. Social work as a profession needs to be in a position where the benefits can be harnessed whilst minimising both the known risks and the unintended consequences.




BASW has also produced *Generative AI and Social Work: Initial Guidance for Practice and Ethics* aimed at social workers and managers.

## Appendix A: Relevant Initiatives on generative AI in social work and social care

The BASW England 80/20 campaign which promotes relationship-based practice in response to the findings of how little time social workers had to spend upon direct work published their 'Top Tips for Relationship Based Social Work in the Context of Digital Transformation'[23] in November 2024 to enable social workers at all levels to reflect upon how to conduct relationship-based practice in the changing technological environment. This recognises the need for a national framework of ethical principles and promoting and awareness raising of the use of AI, as well as information in accessible formats.

In February 2025, Social Work England, the English workforce regulator, announced two pieces of research on the challenges and opportunities presented by AI that would shape its thinking on the use of AI in social work, including where its professional standards might be impacted by the use of AI by social workers, whether social workers feel confident in their use of the tools and how social work education providers are preparing their students for AI in their future work. Whilst welcome, developments in this area are taking place at pace and guidance should be provided to those in practice and their employers as soon as possible across the whole UK[24].

The work of contributors to the Oxford Statement on the responsible use of generative AI in Adult Social Care[25] provides a useful outline of the ethical framework and guidance that will be needed in order to ensure that generative AI applications enhance the quality of life of those drawing on care and support and supports those working to provide it effectively and safely. Whilst it deals with Adult Social Care and does not deal explicitly with the specific challenges faced by social workers who have statutory responsibilities, its focus on protecting human rights and avoiding inappropriate or irresponsible use is of great value in bringing core issues into focus.

A recent publication by Think Local Act Personal[26] has explored the principles and priorities for the responsible use of generative AI from the perspective of those who draw on care and support and those who provide unpaid care to them. Whilst recognising the potential for benefits in the delivery of care and support, concerns are raised especially around the use of generic generative AI tools. These include: the lack of current regulation; the importance of enabling informed consent; the need to support personalised care; data protection and accountability. In light of current limitations, the report finds that the use of generative AI tools in care assessment and planning would currently be inappropriate without direct human oversight.

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