Generative AI and Social Work:

Initial Guidance for Practice and Ethics

BASW

The professional association for
social work and social workers

Generative AI (GenAI) is increasingly in use in social work practice. This short guidance aims to offer some points of reflection for current and future social workers around the use of generative AI in their practice and relate these to ethical considerations raised by the interaction of the use of GenAI with the BASW Code of Ethics.

The development and deployment of GenAI is moving at speed. BASW therefore offers this as initial guidance. We welcome feedback as to whether this guidance is helpful, how it can be improved, as well as any experiences that you have had in using GenAI in your practice. You can share these with us via this form.

This guidance uses a range of examples. Use of an example does not represent endorsement of a specific product.

What is generative AI?

- There is currently no standardised definition of generative AI. It is understood here to mean AI that can be used to create new content in text, audio or visual form in response to the prompt that it receives.

What form of generative AI is available to me?

- This will vary from workplace to workplace.
- GenAI may be supplied to you by your employer in the form of a bespoke tool, like Magic Notes or a bespoke version of a mainstream product such as CoPilot.
- You should not be expected to use GenAI by your employer if you have not received training and clear guidance on this tool.

- GenAI applications can also be accessed through private devices (e.g. a phone) or through a work device without an employer's specific permission. In this instance, you could be exposed to much greater risk if something were to go wrong (see the section 'What are the risks?').

Will it benefit my work and how?

- Generative AI has the *potential* to enhance practice, reduce the administrative burden, assist social workers to be more efficient and flexible in addressing client needs, and improve the delivery of support services for those who draw on care and support.
- Whilst the benefits of AI are often discussed, they are not always well-defined. However, features like transcription of meeting notes can help to reduce the time spent on administration. It is important to check outputs produced by generative AI carefully and exercise professional judgement. Human oversight remains essential.
- Critical thinking and reflection remain an essential part of social work practice.

What are the risks?

- The need to check the outputs of GenAI carefully arise from the following challenges that have been identified in its use. These challenges are both practical and ethical. The guidance therefore links the practical problems with the relevant part of the BASW Code of Ethics ('the Code'):

  - Generic tools in particular are prone to bias, which is inherent in the datasets on which they are trained. An example of bias would be the use of racist or sexist language or assumptions in its output. In the Code, social workers are reminded of the need to challenge oppression wherever it is found and to respect diversity and this will include reflecting on potential bias in GenAI outputs.
  - GenAI tools can 'hallucinate', that is output can be incorrect or misleading, but it is presented as fact and may sound plausible. In alignment with the Code, ethical practice requires social workers to maintain clear and accurate records, so

3

check for accuracy and do not assume that everything presented in GenAI is correct.

- Transcriptions may contain transcription errors (as above) especially with regard to names and places. In addition, writing down information is a valuable exercise in developing understanding of a case and reflecting on future actions, nor should the importance of non-verbal cues that cannot be picked up by a recording be ignored.
- GenAI currently struggles to put facts into context. Central to the Code is the fact that professional judgement and being able to evidence the route to any consequent decisions, actions or recommendations remains a central element of social work and transparency is key.

The attention given to GenAI output needs to be proportional to the importance of the task. For example, using Gen AI to generate recommendations from assessment notes will require greater scrutiny than simply using transcription software to record a routine administrative meeting.

Employers considering adoption of GenAI tools should include an Equalities Impact Assessment.

Who is liable for any errors?

- Errors may occur through the use of GenAI, including bias and hallucinations.
- If your employer provides GenAI tools they should also provide training and clear guidance on the risks and limitations of GenAI. Nevertheless, as with any tool, be aware that accountability for use of the output that is generated by GenAI ultimately sits with you as the social worker. This emphasises again the importance of checking for accuracy, as emphasised in the Code.
- If you are using GenAI for work purposes, for example, through a private device, or through a work device without an employer's specific permission, and there is an error, your liability increases.

GDPR and professional responsibilities

- GenAI learns from inputted data, aggregates information and reuses it in other contexts. This would include any personal information that has been entered. For example, it may aggregate data around ethnicity and gender, conclude that these groups are 'higher risk' and feed that back to the next user.
- Sensitive personal information should not be entered into generic GenAI tools where it could become part of future training datasets without the informed consent of the person whose data it is. Data must be handled in line with UK GDPR. The Code covers the need to act with informed consent and the appropriate sharing of information.
- This also applies to using GenAI for practice educator purposes.

- This also applies to social work students, and social workers pursuing post-qualification courses.
- People drawing on care and support have rights with regard to the control of their personal data. Not all those drawing on care and support will wish to consent to the use of GenAI in handling their information. The Code highlights that information should be provided to people affected by social work decisions to enable informed decisions and choices. Those drawing on care and support also have rights of access to all information recorded about themselves (subject to any legal limitations).

Employers considering introducing GenAI tools should undertake a Data Protection Impact Assessment.

What's the role of my employer, the social work regulator and government?

The rapid development of technology means a range of organisations are struggling to keep pace with the implications of the development and deployment of GenAI in the workplace.

Employers:

- If not already doing so, employers who supply AI should provide appropriate training, clear guidance, and support on responsible use of GenAI.
- If not already doing so, employers should nominate a senior practice lead to ensure ethical use of AI in their services (for example, a Principal Social Worker in England).

- If the potential of GenAI to reduce the administrative burden is realised, the extra capacity should be directed towards relation based social work and not used to justify increased caseload or the cutting of posts.
- Employers need to undertake continuous evaluation and adaptation of GenAI to ensure they meet social work values and objectives.
- Given the known issue of bias in GenAI, the equalities impact of any GenAI applications should be considered by organisations deploying it.

Regulators:

- The increasingly widespread use of GenAI has important implications for practice and there is a need for the workforce regulators to provide clear guidance on what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate use.

The UK and devolved governments:

- The UK Government, working with the devolved governments where appropriate, needs to put in place clear legislative and policy frameworks for the development and deployment of AI, especially in public services.

What happens next?

- BASW will call for urgent action from the UK's governments to regulate the use of generative AI in public services.
- BASW is also calling for clear guidance from the regulator on appropriate and responsible use of generative AI in the workplace.
- Targeted training and support is needed for social workers and managers to assist in understanding appropriate use of generative AI, as well as its risks and limitations.
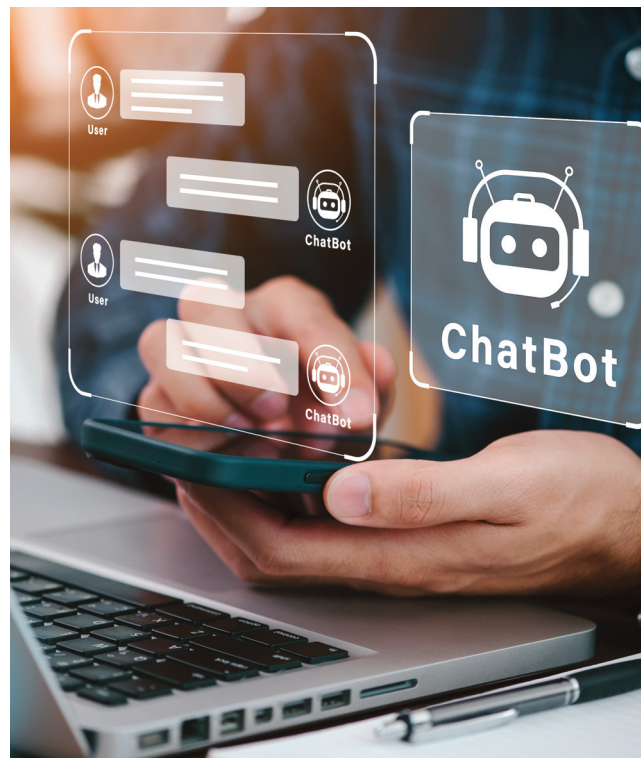
Are there any other points to consider?

- Generative AI is having a growing environmental impact, especially in relation to use of electricity and water. This may also provide grounds for employing generative AI moderately.

This is a rapidly developing area and one in which BASW will continue to work, including calling for government regulation and regulatory guidance. More information can be found in *The BASW Statement on Social Work and Generative Artificial Intelligence*.

If you found this guidance helpful but are not currently a member of BASW, you can find out more about the benefits of BASW membership here.

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