

AI & social work: understanding the evidence

AI and the future of social work
20 May 2026



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Purpose: Explore some of the recent research on the emerging use of AI in social work, share key findings and consider the future implications for the profession

Speakers

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Programme Leader for the Doctorate in Health and Social Care (DHSC), The Open University

Declan McAllister

Director of Registration & Corporate Services, Northern Ireland Social Care Council

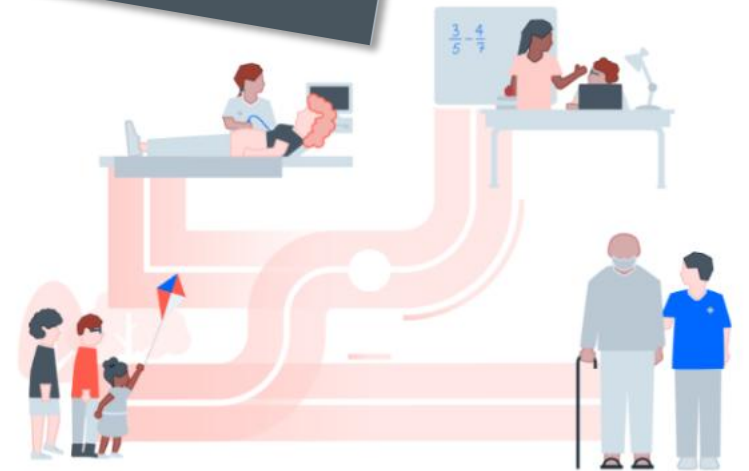
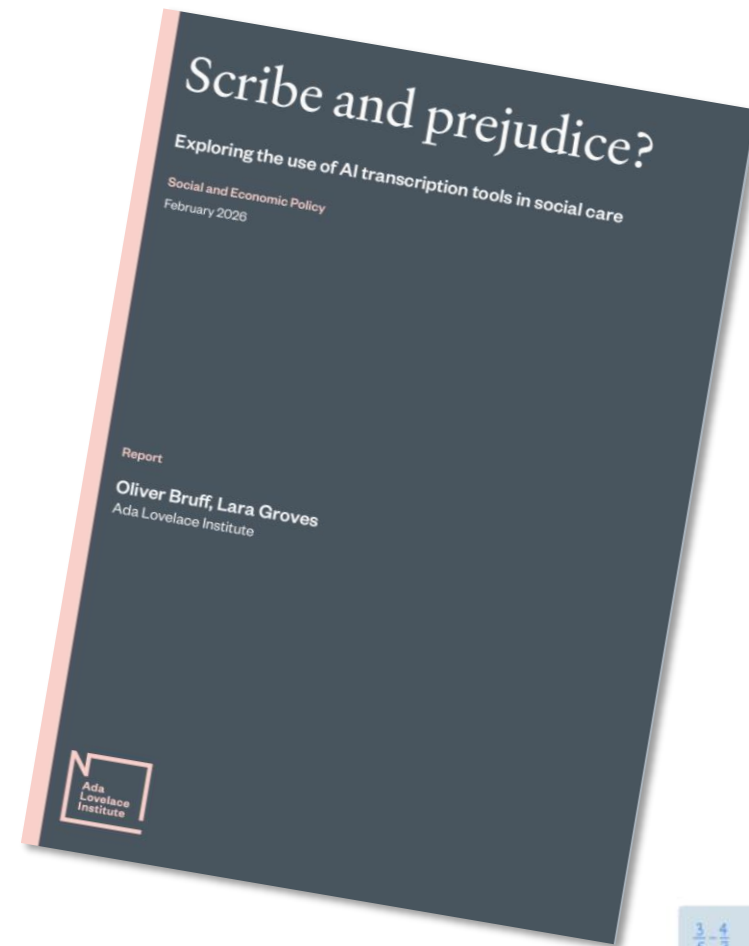
Building the evidence



Scribe and prejudice?

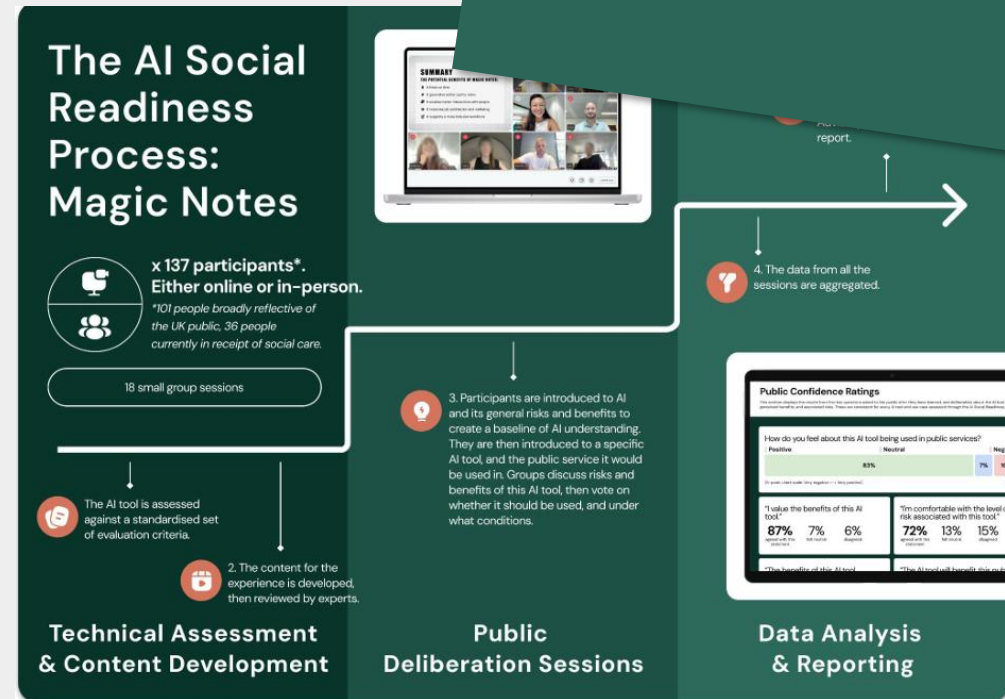
Exploring the use of AI transcription tools in social care.

1. Resource constraints driving widespread piloting, adoption and evaluation.
2. Local authorities focus evaluations on efficiency over impact on people.
3. Almost all social workers report benefits to their work, but they're not uniform.
4. Perceptions of tool reliability, accuracy and 'human in the loop' vary.
5. No consensus on appropriate use of tools.



How does the public feel about social workers using AI?

1. 83% felt positive about using AI, 74% thought benefits outweigh risks.
2. Perceived benefits included easing administrative burdens.
3. Perceived concerns included inaccuracy of outputs or complacency from social workers.
4. 89% thought human oversight is a necessary safeguard.
5. Participants stressed the value of involving social workers and people receiving care in assessing AI tools.



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Why we commissioned research

We wanted to know:

- What AI tools were being used
- Opportunities, risks and challenges
- How social workers are being supported
- How risk / governance is being managed
- How stakeholders are collaborating
- How people with lived experience feel



Emerging use of AI in social work: what we found

What does AI mean for social work?

1. The AI landscape for Social Work

2. The trust in AI is also mixed

3. So what now?

4. Things to consider when using AI



Click on a social worker to read some thoughts on AI



Recommendations

[Read the full report](#)

[Sign up to be part of future research studies on AI](#)

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

December 2025

Research in Practice
Authors: Sarah Rothera and Mairi-Anne Macdonald

Building collective responsibility



Raise awareness of ethical
practice when using AI



Consider how AI can
enhance practice



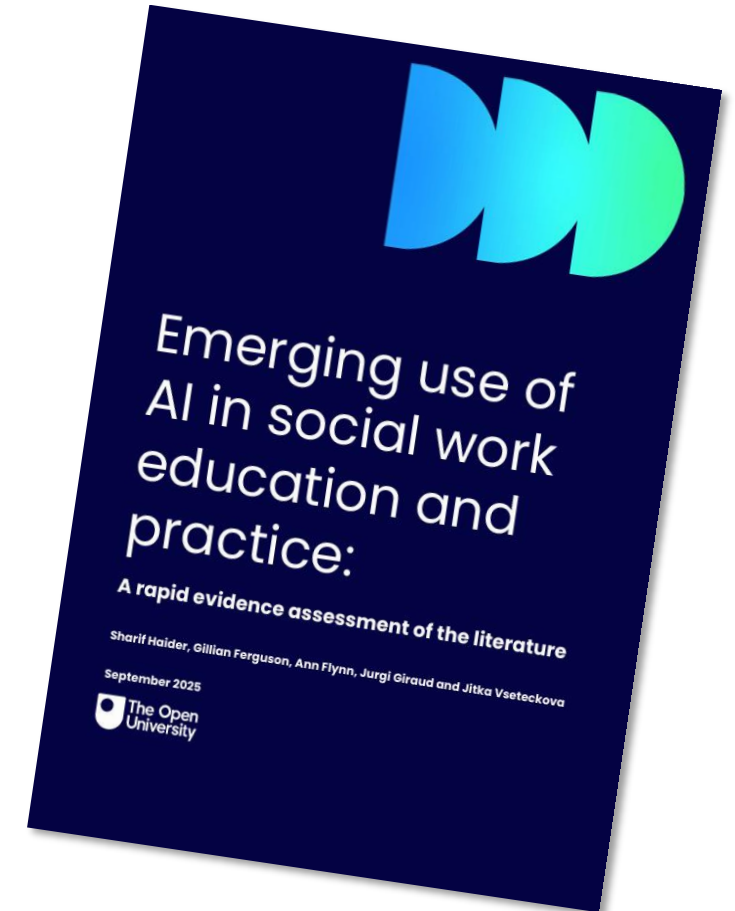
Emphasise the need for critical
thinking and professional judgment



Stress the importance of having
people at the heart of support



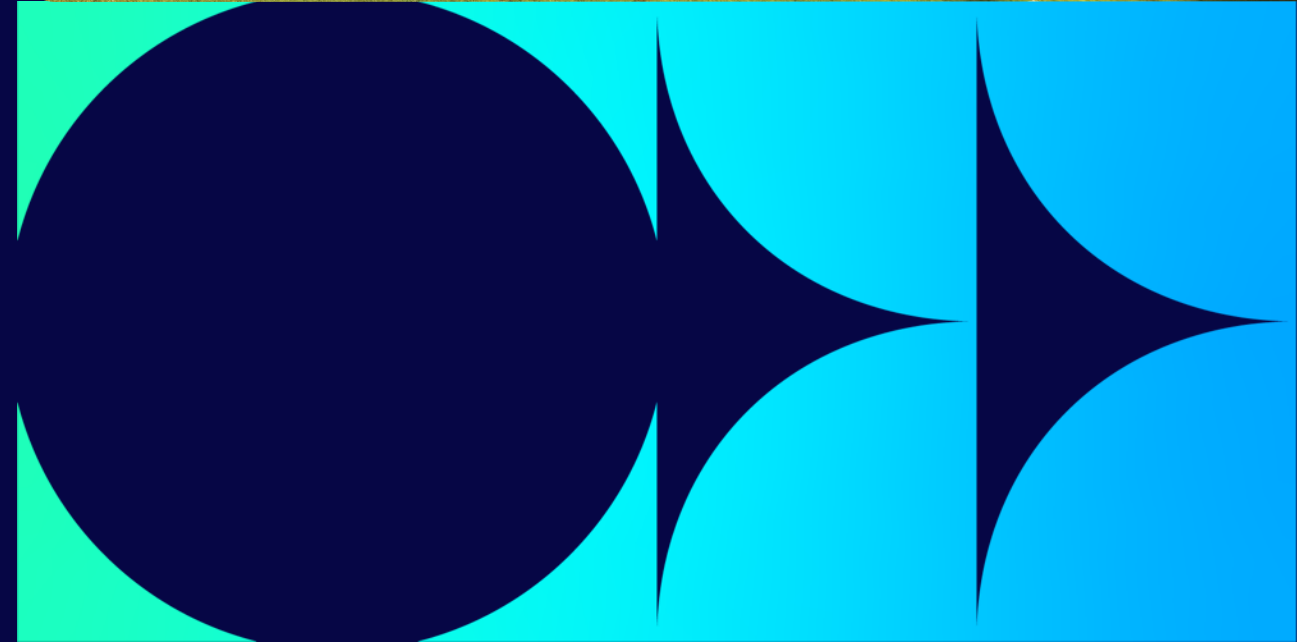
Think about the value of CPD where
AI is evolving



Exploring the emerging use of artificial intelligence (AI) in social work education and practice – insights for the present and future

Social work AI summit

Gillian Ferguson, The Open University



2024 ... a point in time



Emerging use of
AI in social work
education and
practice:

A rapid evidence assessment of the literature

Sharif Haider, Gillian Ferguson, Ann Flynn, Jurgi Giraud and Jitka Vseteckova

September 2025





Seven themes

1. AI in social work intervention
2. Efficiency, accessibility & reduction of costs
3. Ethical challenges of AI
4. Integration/ implementation of AI
5. Governance and regulation of AI
6. AI social work training and education
7. Importance of humans

Writing as social work

Writing as Social Work: Thematic Review of the Literature

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Abstract

This article offers a thematic review of research and analysis of academic and practice-based social work writing. It aims to highlight specific challenges, arguing that support is needed in the development of writing as a core element of professional practice. Social work writing in the United Kingdom has been framed as a 'problematic', time-intensive activity [Lillis, T. (2023) 'Professional written voice "in flux": The case of social work', *Applied Linguistics Review*, 14(3), pp. 615-41]. It records practice, but is also a vital tool for undertaking assessments, formulating professional judgements, decision making and multi-agency collaboration. However, the centrality of writing to social work practice is not reflected in the regulatory frameworks for the profession in the United Kingdom where it only appears in the context of 'report writing' and loosely 'communication'. The discussion is contextualised within a theoretical framing of social work writing followed by a discussion of student writing and then writing in professional practice. The article addresses the themes related to academic writing of concerns about the quality of writing; disciplinarity; conventions and implicit codes; and challenges to teach professional writing. In relation to practice-based writing, the article addresses the themes of social work as a 'writing intensive' profession; writing as enacting practice; and the challenges and experience of social work writers.

Keywords: documentation, recording, practice-based writing, professional practice, student writing, written communication

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Artificial intelligence: implications for social work writing

Updated Friday, 23 January 2025

From case notes and formal reports to basic emails, a crucial but time-consuming part of a social worker's job is writing. Dr Gillian Ferguson and Dr Maria Leedham look at the opportunities and drawbacks of implementing artificial intelligence into the role.

Find out about The Open University's Social Work courses.

Social workers write some of the most important records and reports about people's lives, which have a lifelong impact (Harris, 2022). Although writing is often mentioned as a burdensome sideline of what social workers do, writing and recording are core aspects of the practice of social work (Rai et al., 2024). The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) has led to developments in social work writing. Findings from previous research into social work writing (Lillis et al., 2017) can help us consider the current opportunities and challenges that AI brings. Understanding the core elements of social work writing and how social workers learn to write effectively is crucial. Social workers need to consider how to use AI effectively in their writing without compromising their professional ethics and skills in analytical judgement.

What we know about social work writing

Writing occupies a huge amount of time in social work. The WSH* project explored exactly how much time social workers thought they spent and how much time they actually spent engaged in writing while at work. The image below shows that 40% of social workers said that they spent more than 70% of their time writing and 100% of social workers underestimated how much time they spent writing (Lillis et al., 2017).



Figure 1 Social workers estimated time spent writing compared to actual time spent.

Show description

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Maria Leedham

(School of Language Applied Linguistics)

I am a Senior Lecturer in Linguistics and English and am involved in professional writing a awarded discourse at means of exploring it was Co-I on the ESRC funded Writing in...

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Become an OU



BA (Hon Open)



BA (Soci (Cris)



BA (Health Soci

Some important things

Practice = Learning

Other knowledge, evidence and practice priorities

Digital capability

Integral aspect of the practice & education landscape

Human interaction and decision-making

Social work professional integrity

Taking a short cut (and a power cut)

Importance of humans



*“Adult social work is certainly going to become a victim of AI. I cannot see how a slightly more sophisticated AI system than Magic Notes is unable to complete assessments for a package of care. It is a matter of time”.
(E_SWE_4).*



Questions