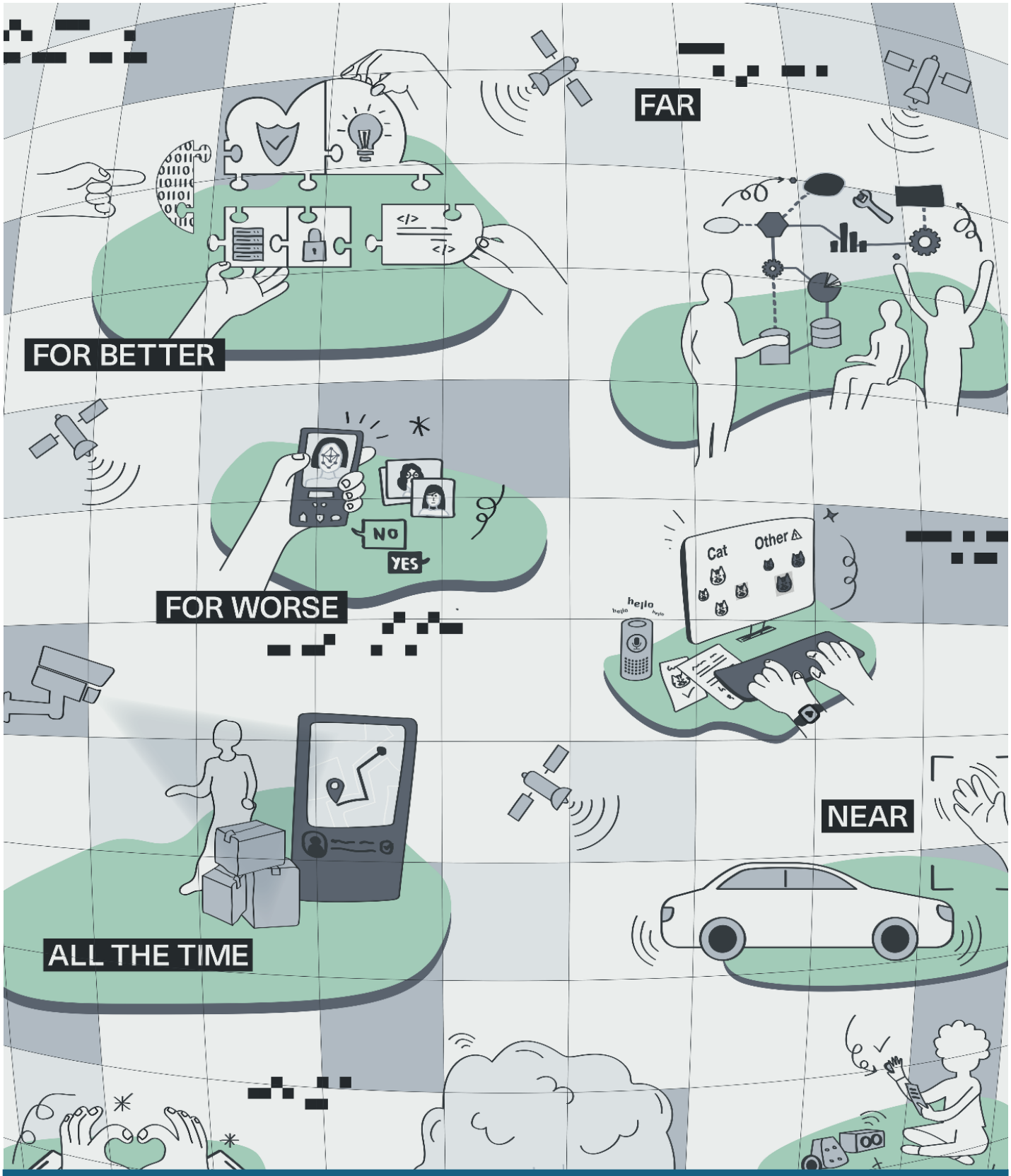

‘A Double-edged Sword’

Potential Uses of AI in the Children’s Hearing System

The Scottish Children’s Reporter Administration

February 2026

SCOTTISH CHILDREN'S REPORTER ADMINISTRATION

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1. Introduction and Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

Chapter Summary

We have defined AI as: 'Technologies that can learn from and respond to the information they receive. To do this, they use algorithms, which are sets of rules or instructions that have been written by humans'. This definition aligns with OECD and Scottish AI Alliance definitions.

Several international and national guidelines and frameworks have been produced in recent years with the aim of ensuring that AI is developed and implemented ethically and responsibly but some think they do not have enough practical impact, and children are not usually explicitly considered in these guidelines.

There are ethical and practical issues to consider when deciding whether and how to use AI in the public sector, including around transparency, bias, accuracy, human oversight, and privacy and consent.

Although AI is increasingly being used in the public sector, and public awareness of AI has increased in recent years, in-depth understanding of AI does not appear to be commonplace.

Research with children and adults has found that although people can see the potential benefits of AI, they are often concerned about data protection, online safety, inaccuracy and misinformation, decision-making, impact on human relationships, wider quality of life, inequalities, and real-world uses.

Any decision to use AI at SCRA should be well thought through and based on good evidence, which is why we carried out this research project.

The Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA) is part of the Children's Hearings System - the child protection and youth justice system in Scotland. At SCRA we have been thinking about whether or not we should use Artificial Intelligence (AI), and if so, how we should use it. It is very important that any decision to use AI is based on good evidence and is thoughtful and transparent. To help us decide, we carried out a research project to gather the views of a wide range of individuals on the ethical, legal and rights-based issues around the potential uses of AI within and beyond the Children's Hearings System. This report presents the findings of this research.

This chapter will firstly consider what is meant by AI and explore the ethical and rights-based issues around AI, including for the public sector and SCRA. Secondly, it will review what existing research tells us about children and adults' knowledge, uses and views of AI.

1.1.1 What is AI?

Defining AI can be complex, and what is meant by AI can vary depending on the time, place, and context. For the purposes of this project, we have defined AI in the following way:

> *'Technologies that can learn from and respond to the information they receive. To do this, they use algorithms, which are sets of rules or instructions that have been written by humans.'*

This definition aligns with OECD and Scottish AI Alliance definitions (OECD, 2024a; Scottish AI Alliance, 2025). We settled on this wide definition of AI because we wanted to seek views on a range of potential uses of AI, ranging from relatively straightforward tools to support administrative tasks, such as directing emails to the correct folder, to more complex tools to support decision-making or risk-analysis (see **Methods**

for further detail).

Although AI is often understood to mean "Generative AI" tools such as Chat GPT, that is only one type of AI technology. AI is not new, but the use of AI is becoming much more common in society, sometimes without our knowledge. It is something that we are all exposed to in our day-to-day lives. This is because AI is routinely used in videogames, online search engines, customer service chatbots and social media photo tagging. AI is also used by social media companies and home entertainment services to make suggestions about the media we should consume and the products we should buy (Royal Society, 2018; Scottish AI Alliance, 2025).

1.1.2 How could AI be used in SCRA?

There are lots of different ways that AI could be used to help SCRA improve the service we deliver to children and families. It could help with admin tasks, like inputting information into databases; screening emails, then sending them to the right person;

removing/redacting sensitive information from reports; transcribing meetings; and arranging times for hearings.

AI could also be used to help us analyse information. Every year SCRA receives thousands of reports containing information that could be used to help us understand how best to support children and families or to check that they are being treated fairly. At the moment it can take a lot of time and money to answer questions like these. This is because the written information in these reports is not as easy to analyse as numbers in a spreadsheet. AI could be trained to read through reports and collect this information for us.

If SCRA decided to use AI, all of the written information we hold would be scanned using computer software that can turn any written document into a fully searchable digital document. We would then develop, train and test the AI to perform the task that we wanted it to do. By getting AI to do some of these tasks, SCRA staff could have more time to support children, young people and families coming to Hearings.

In addition to this research project, SCRA is currently exploring the use of two AI tools; one to support the redaction of sensitive information from reports, and one to aid Reporters when creating witness statements. More information about these can be found in the Scottish AI Register

1.1.3 AI, ethics and rights

Several international guidelines and frameworks have been produced in recent years with the aim of ensuring that AI is developed ethically and responsibly. This means acknowledging the opportunities and potential benefits offered by AI, while grappling with the risks AI systems and tools can introduce or exacerbate (see **'What are the issues with using AI in the public sector'** for further information on these risks). UNESCO have consistently taken an ethics-based approach to AI by encouraging member states to consider the impact of AI on humans, societies, the environment and ecosystems. They highlight the importance of responsible AI, including with specific reference to the judiciary (UNESCO, 2022; 2023).

The EU AI Act, which constitutes a comprehensive legal framework to govern the use of AI in the EU, has now passed and will be fully in force by 2026. The Act emphasises risk management and transparency, classifies AI according to risk, and places obligations on

developers of AI systems to meet strict conditions in order to access the EU market. These conditions include ensuring that AI systems are rigorously tested, that algorithmic processes are transparent and that human oversight for the tools are in place (Future of Life Institute, 2025). Although the EU Act does not apply to the UK, Scotland's current AI strategy foregrounds ethical, responsible practice, and cites the OECD's (2025b) five values-based principles for the responsible stewardship of trustworthy AI:

- AI should benefit people and the planet by driving inclusive growth, sustainable development and well-being.
- AI systems should be designed in a way that respects the rule of law, human rights, democratic values and diversity, and they should include appropriate safeguards – for example, enabling human intervention where necessary – to ensure a fair and just society.
- There should be transparency and responsible disclosure around AI systems to ensure that people understand AI-based outcomes and can challenge them.
- AI systems must function in a robust, secure and safe way throughout their life cycles and potential risks should be continually assessed and managed.
- Organisations and individuals developing, deploying or operating AI systems should be held accountable for their proper functioning in line with the above principles (Scottish Government, 2022).

In addition to this general guidance on using AI ethically, a range of guidance and frameworks have been published about protecting children's rights within AI policy and practice. Organisations including the World Economic Forum, the United Nations, and the Digital Futures Commission have underlined the importance for children of AI being safe, ethical, transparent, fair, accessible, and inclusive (UNICEF, 2021a; United Nations, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2022).

UNICEF's 2021 policy guidance aims to promote children's rights in AI policies and practices and to raise awareness of how children's rights can be respected in the context of AI systems. The guidance assesses how children are impacted by AI systems and establishes nine requirements for child-centred AI:

- Support children's development and well-being,
- Ensure inclusion of and for children,

- Prioritise fairness and non-discrimination for children,
- Protect children's data and privacy,
- Ensure safety for children,
- Provide transparency, explainability, and accountability for children,
- Empower governments and businesses with knowledge of AI and children's rights,
- Prepare children for present and future developments in AI and
- Create an enabling environment (UNICEF, 2021a).

These approaches acknowledge the risks posed to children by the use of AI and other technologies but also point to the need for children to have access to them. UNICEF highlights that this means governments should support safe access to AI technology, while safeguarding against the associated risks. This safeguarding should include the consideration of the impacts of AI on children in legislation, and working with children and their families and associated professionals to develop children's confidence (UNICEF, 2021b).

The focus on ethical frameworks has been criticised by some academics in recent years because of the 'principles/ practice gap' (Munn, 2023) between frameworks and action. Critics argue that this gap renders the field of AI ethics largely pointless because it remains highly abstract and therefore has little practical consequence (Munn, 2023; Lauer, 2021; Morley et al., 2023). These concerns have led many academics to argue that instead of ethical frameworks that focus narrowly on the potential risks and harms of AI use, the focus should instead be on wider data justice (Munn, 2023; Lauer, 2021; Ulnicane, 2024). They highlight that AI reflects and reproduces, and sometimes exacerbates, existing structural inequalities. This leads to 'structural bias'; disadvantages and discrimination including around gender, race, ethnicity, and age. In short, AI, like all technology, is not neutral and must be considered in the context of the wider inequalities in which it exists (Allhutter et al., 2020; Benjamin, 2019; Broussard, 2018,2023; Noble, 2018; Søraa, 2023; Ulnicane & Aden, 2023).

In addition to AI systems reflecting existing bias, inequalities of access can also impact the data that AI systems can draw on for training, learning and data gathering, known as 'data driven bias'. Research continues to highlight that there is still a stark digital divide across the UK and Scotland (Audit Scotland, 2024), and the Covid-19 pandemic illuminated and exacerbated this divide (McCluskey et al., 2023). People can experience digital poverty due to a lack of access to digital devices and internet, a lack of digital skills

(their own or those of their teachers or parents), or a lack of a safe place to access the internet (Bowyer, Grant and Nielsen, 2021). Digital poverty makes people less able to access the internet, and therefore less represented in online spaces. This has implications for the data that AI can draw from to train, learn and create outputs, thus potentially further exacerbating the digital divide.

Taking a data justice approach to AI involves:

- considering AI within its wider social contexts,
- reflecting on existing inequalities and wider ethical concerns,
- considering the potential for AI to exacerbate and/or reduce these inequalities or concerns, and then,
- using technology as a tool to build more just societies (Munn, 2022; Lauer, 2021; Leslie et al., 2022).

1.1.4 AI in the public sector

Most of our day-to-day exposure to AI is based on how large companies use AI. However, thought is increasingly being given to how AI could be used by public services like local councils, the NHS and Police Scotland, and we are beginning to see AI being used by some of these organisations. As part of our review of evidence around AI uses, we looked at how AI is currently being used in the public sector. AI is currently being used by a number of UK Government Departments, including the Home Office and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) (Public Law Project, 2026). It is also being used across a range of public sector organisations, including those based in education, healthcare, social care, policing and the fire brigade (Defend Digital Me, 2022; NHS England Digital 2025; Big Brother Watch 2021; Metropolitan Police, 2024; The University of Edinburgh, 2022). Within these organisations, AI is being used to automate workflows, to make predictions around risk, help manage large volumes of complex data, support decision making, improve safety, and support the care of individuals. A range of AI technology is being used, including machine learning, natural language processing, data matching, biometrics and profiling.

In healthcare AI is being used to predict health risk and hospital admissions in order to improve the care and support to patients, as well as disease management. It can save time and alleviate pressure on the NHS. Within policing, AI systems are being used to

categorise risk and support investigations. These systems include the use of live facial recognition to identify individuals on police watchlists, profiling systems to predict the level of risk posed by individuals with suspected gang involvement, and the scanning of large volumes of visual information to identify potential cases of childhood abuse. Within Central Government, AI is being used for a variety of tasks. AI technology has been used to address inefficiencies, by managing, categorising and summarising large volumes of information. It has also been implemented as a tool to profile risk and identify threats to national interests, including: the identification of fraudulent applications for citizenship and benefits; recouping lost revenue from fraud; disrupting terrorism; preventing modern slavery; and safeguarding children.

1.1.5 AI in social care and justice

We identified very few studies exploring how AI is being used at work by social care professionals in the UK. Those that are available report that many social care staff are already using AI in their work lives, although a smaller proportion of social care workers are using it than public sector workers overall. A 2025 UK survey found that 45% of public sector workers overall (in education, health, social care, and emergency services) were aware of generative AI being used by colleagues in their profession compared to 36% of social care workers. Similarly, although 22% of the public sector workers surveyed said they had used generative AI themselves, this figure was only 11% for social care workers (Bright et al., 2025).

A 2025 study commissioned by Social Work England found that 40% of social workers had used AI with direction from their employer, and 24% had used it without guidance, support or monitoring from their employer (Rothera and Macdonald, 2025). The same study found that social workers often agreed that AI technologies could reduce administrative burden (82%), improve case recording (69%) and reduce workloads (62%). Participants did, however, share their concerns about quality assurance, inaccuracies, and whether AI outputs were always appropriately checked. They also raised concerns about over-reliance on AI and potential impacts on critical thinking.

Although there are many publications discussing the potential risks and benefits of AI use in the criminal justice system (for example Završnik, 2020; Zakaria, 2023), most of these are theoretical and very few explore the views and experiences of justice professionals.

Criminal justice professionals in a qualitative study in the US highlighted that AI could help to help with report-writing and improve consistency, but also emphasised the need for human oversight. Participants raised concerns about AI's lack of nuance and discretion, and potential impacts on privacy (Dement and Inglis, 2024). A qualitative study in Switzerland which considered the use of algorithms in criminal justice highlighted the importance of transparency, and found that the ways in which humans interact with AI are key to the effectiveness of AI in criminal justice (Simmler et al., 2023). Overall, the apparent lack of studies exploring the knowledge, views and experiences of justice professionals is concerning in the context of increasing use in justice systems worldwide (Borgesano et al., 2025).

1.1.6 What are the issues with using AI in the public sector?

While there are many positives to be found in the use of AI, there are specific concerns regarding its use in the public sector. These concerns are often highlighted within the mass media and reports from charities and public watchdogs. We drew on a wide range of sources, including descriptions of AI systems within the Tracking Automated Government (TAG) Register and the Scottish AI Register; annual reports, case studies and strategies published by the UK and Scottish Governments; industry reviews of AI systems being used within the public sector; and academic papers, newspaper articles and papers written by human rights and civil liberties groups. We identified the following key concerns.

Transparency: Although transparency is an important principle of ethical AI, this can sometimes be difficult or impossible to guarantee in the public sector. Sometimes information is purposefully redacted to prevent individuals being aware of decisions taken in examples such as disrupting terrorism, safeguarding children, and preventing modern slavery (Public Law Project, 2026). However, in these situations, it is possible to provide a degree of transparency by telling people that AI technology is being used.

Bias: Reflecting wider biases and inequalities in society, some public sector uses of AI, particularly those using predictive modelling, have been criticised for disproportionately impacting specific ethnic groups, people living in poverty, people with disabilities and the elderly (see 'AI, ethics and rights'). These biases could be both built in structural biases or reflect a lack of digital inclusion. (Baroness Casey Review, 2023; Hill, 2024; Liberty Human Rights, 2022, Department for Work and Pensions, 2023). An example of bias in AI systems is

the ‘gangs matrix’ used by London’s Metropolitan Police to identify gang members. Young Black men were disproportionately represented on the matrix, despite being only a small proportion of serious youth offenders, and the matrix was discontinued in 2024 (Metropolitan Police, 2026; Public Law Project, 2026).

Accuracy: AI systems can make inaccurate predictions, misidentify individuals or misclassify risk. Inaccuracy can stem directly from bias. Studies have found that predictive analytics involving children and families in social care systems can have negative long-term consequences, either by missing families at risk or by leading to unjustified interventions (What Works for Children’s Social Care, 2020; Politico, 2022). The harmful consequences of misidentification by AI models is exemplified by the AI-based child benefit claiming system that pushed a significant number of Dutch families into poverty after welfare claims were incorrectly rejected (Politico, 2022).

Human oversight: AI tools are commonly being used to flag individuals for assessment across the public sector. Where a human worker does take over to carry out the investigation, it is sometimes unclear whether the decision to investigate in the first place was made by a human or an AI system (Big Brother Watch, 2021). According to the GDPR, individuals have the right not to be subjected to a decision based solely on automated processing, including profiling (Intersoft Consulting Art. 22 GDPR, 2018). The inclusion of human oversight for high-risk, complex and nuanced decision making is important because it reduces the potential for harm caused by incorrect assessment of risk by algorithms. Humans should also be empowered to trust their own training and expertise and raise concerns about lack of accuracy in AI systems. Research with public sector workers has indicated that they are cautious about the idea of using AI that makes decisions or for tasks that require interpersonal skills, empathy or creativity (Haesvoets, Verschuere and Roets, 2025; Vanson, 2025).

Privacy and consent: Some types of AI used within the public sector could infringe upon children’s right to privacy. For example, there is potential for biometric data gathered for the purpose of remotely invigilating examinations or providing access to school meals to be transferred beyond these settings. These systems are commonly used across the UK and it is unclear whether children using these systems have given clear and free consent for their image, emotions, biometrics and data to be used in these ways (Defend Digital Me, 2022).

1.2 Knowledge, awareness and uses of AI

1.2.1 Who is aware of AI?

Studies consistently find that self-reported awareness and understanding of AI has increased across society, including among older people, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, those with lower digital literacy, and children. A high proportion of children and adults are aware of the existence of AI, and generative AI in particular (Cloud Nine, 2024; Picton and Clark, 2024; UK Government, 2024). For adults who use the internet, awareness of apps and sites' use of content recommendation algorithms to tailor what users see online increased from 81% in 2023 to 85% in 2025 (Ofcom, 2025a; 2025b). Ofcom's 2025 annual media use survey found that 63% of 8-17 year olds who use the internet said they were aware of directing algorithms, compared to 59% in 2023.

This increased awareness does not, however, tell the whole story. Qualitative studies with children have found that although they often have some awareness of the existence of algorithms, they are often unaware of the specific ways in which their social media feeds are curated by AI. This could lead to children having biased experiences, having a limited understanding of how algorithms work, struggling to know what is real and what is not online, and having limited understanding of how and where their data is stored and used (McLoughlin and McMullen, 2024; Stoilova, Livingstone, and Nandagiri, 2019; Ofcom, 2025a; Szczuka et al., 2022; United Nations, 2022). This lack of depth of understanding is reflected in surveys that ask more detailed questions about the specifics of children's knowledge and experiences. In a large 2023 survey of Scottish children aged 8-14, the majority (56%) said that they felt it was important for children to know about AI, but only 13% said they had learnt about AI at school, and only 22% said they 'knew lots' about AI (Children's Parliament, Scottish AI Alliance and Alan Turing Institute, 2023c). Just over a third of children (37%) said that an adult in their lives had explained AI technology to them (Alan Turing Institute, 2025). Some studies found that children's main learning about AI was from YouTube and social media (Szczuka et al., 2022). In line with the digital divide more widely, awareness and knowledge of AI appears to be mediated by social class; children who go to private school or children with parents employed in professional/semi-professional roles are far likelier than others to report having heard of AI and to have had an adult explain it to them (Hashem et al., 2025).

Research with adults also indicates that although general awareness of AI is high, in-depth knowledge is not as high, and has not increased over time (Liehner et al., 2023; Ofcom, 2025b; Scantamburlo et al, 2024; Szczuka et al., 2022). When asked about specific ways in which companies collect and use data to direct algorithms, the proportion of online adults who had heard of the use of cookies (between 68-71%) or knew about companies collecting information from social media accounts (between 58-60%) did not increase between 2018 and 2025 (Ofcom, 2025c). Similarly, although there is good awareness of some uses of AI that have had a high media profile, such as driverless cars or facial recognition, people are often unaware of uses of AI that are commonly used and impact large numbers of people. A 2025 Ada Lovelace survey found that just 18% of people were aware that AI was used to assess eligibility for welfare benefits (e.g. Universal Credit), and 24% were aware of other risk and eligibility technologies, such as using AI to assess how likely a person is to repay a loan (Modhvadia et al., 2025). Perhaps reflecting this lack of in-depth knowledge, qualitative studies have found that parents often said their children did not use AI while also saying that their children were using things like Siri, apps that recommend activities or content, social media, YouTube, and messaging services. This indicates a lack of knowledge of parents with regards to AIs presence within commonly used technology (Madden et al., 2024; Szczuka et al., 2022). Similarly, studies have noted that there is often a gap between what people think AI can do and what it is actually capable of; for example, Liehner et al. found that half (50%) of their participants thought AI was science fiction robots, and almost a third (31%) believed AI was a threat to humanity (Liehner et al., 2023).

Although awareness of AI is high and growing, several studies have highlighted that adults struggle to support children and young people around AI. A 2024 survey of 500 teachers across Scotland found that 71% of teachers had no confidence or low levels of confidence in teaching children about AI, while 63% either didn't understand AI at all or had only a little bit of knowledge about AI. More than 90% of teachers surveyed had not looked for or been provided with resources to support facilitating learning with AI, and 79% hadn't received any guidance on the use of AI in teaching and learning (Children's Parliament, Scottish AI Alliance and Alan Turing Institute, 2024). Parents have also described lacking confidence and understanding in how to guide children in their use of AI (Szczuka et al., 2022).

1.2.2 Who is using AI?

It is worth noting that actual AI usage is likely to be higher than surveys suggest, because people are often unaware of everyday uses of AI that are integrated into the background of apps and websites, rather than AI-specific apps such as Chat GPT, and because survey questions often focus on the use of generative AI. Survey data is, however, useful to track change over time.

Self-reported use of AI is increasing (Ofcom, 2025a,b; Picton and Clark, 2024). In Ofcom's survey half (50%) of 8-17 year old children and a third (31%) of adults said they had used AI tools like Chat GPT (Ofcom, 2025a; 2025b). This has risen from 46% of children and 23% of adults in 2023. Among those aged 16 and over, those aged 16 - 24 were most likely to say they had used these tools, with 53% reporting using them. Older children were more likely than younger children to report using AI tools (59% of 13-17s vs 42% of 3-12s). This may suggest either that children and young people are using generative AI more than adults, or that they are more aware that they are doing so.

The National Literacy Trust's 2024 survey found that although three quarters (77%) of those aged 13-18 reported having used Chat GPT, frequent use was uncommon, with 8% of 13-18 year olds using it daily and 12% a couple of times a week (Picton and Clark, 2024).

Generative AI tools may be more commonly used by children with additional support needs. A survey of 780 children in the UK found that nearly a quarter of children aged 8-12 reported using a generative AI tool (22%), but this was significantly higher amongst children with additional learning needs (Alan Turing Institute, 2025).

Studies in Scotland, the UK and the US that ask about social class or income have tended to find that it is associated with AI usage, reflecting the wider digital divide. Children from social grades ABC1 (i.e. children with parents who are employed in professional/semi-professional roles) or whose parents have a degree level education are more likely to use generative AI apps (Madden et al., 2024; Ofcom 2025a). They are also more likely to be more frequent users (Alan Turing Institute, 2025). In contrast, adults on low incomes are less likely to say they have used or are open to the idea of using some types of AI (Modhvadia et al., 2025). One 2024 study found no difference in self-reported awareness or usage between children who did and did not receive free school meals; this could either reflect that these factors had less influence on the children in their sample, or that

this way of defining and measuring income was not accurate enough to highlight the difference (Picton and Clark, 2024).

1.2.3 What are people using AI for?

Across a number of studies, the most common reason cited by children for using AI was for fun or entertainment. AI is also used by children to support their learning and for emotional support and advice (Internet Matters, 2025; Ofcom 2025a; Picton and Clark, 2024; Stoilova, Livingstone and Atabey, 2025; Young Scot, 2024). Ofcom report that although the most common reason cited for using AI among 8-17 year olds was for fun (48%), an increasing proportion of children had also used it to learn (45%, compared to 35% in 2023) and for school (45% compared to 37% in 2023) (Ofcom, 2025a).

The National Literacy Trust found that of 13-18 year olds who used Chat GPT at least once a month, three quarters (74%) said they used it for fun, 57% said that it helped them with ideas, 51% used it to learn new things, 44% said they used it to have a chat, and 34% said they used it for advice or to help with a problem. Relatively few said they used it to generate outputs like stories (19%) or poems/lyrics (13%) (Picton and Clark, 2024).

Ofcom's 2025 survey of those aged 16+ found that the use of AI for work and education purposes had increased since 2023. Around two in ten (22%) of those in the workforce in 2025 said they used AI as part of their job, compared to 12% in 2023. Almost half (45%) of the students surveyed said in 2025 that they used AI for education purposes. This means that of all AI users, about six in ten (62%) do so for work or education purposes (Ofcom 2025c).

1.3 Views on current and potential uses of AI

Research seeking views on current and potential uses of AI has highlighted the nuance involved in this area; with participants usually highlighting both risks and benefits (Alan Turing/ Ada Lovelace Institutes, 2025; UK Government, 2024).

Across studies that looked at views on AI, children and young people consistently cited speed and efficiency as key benefits of using AI (Thai et al., 2023; UNICEF, 2021c). They also highlighted the benefits AI could have within healthcare and for supporting the undertaking of routine administrative tasks (United Nations, 2022; UNICEF, 2021c;

Chaudron and Di Gioia, 2022). Protecting children, improving access to education (particularly for children with additional support needs) and the use of AI for fun and entertainment were also identified as potential benefits (Alan Turing Institute and Queen Mary University of London, 2025; Alan Turing Institute, 2025; Children's Parliament, Scottish AI Alliance and Alan Turing Institute, 2023; Gazulla et al, 2024; McLoughlin and McMullen, 2024; Milosevic et al., 2023; Stoilova, Livingstone and Atabey, 2025). Children were clear that AI should be used for public good and to improve structural issues including poverty, discrimination and environmental and climate issues (Alan Turing Institute, 2025; La Fors, 2023). Adults highlighted similar positives, including efficiency, accessibility, and working for the public good – particularly in relation to the use of AI in healthcare – and entertainment (Ada Lovelace Institute, 2023, 2025a, 2025b; Capstick, 2025; Liehner et al., 2023; Okoidigun & Emagbetere, 2025; ONS, 2023; UK Government, 2024). Alongside these potential benefits, however, research with children and young people and adults cited several concerns, which are discussed in turn below.

1.3.1 Data protection and security, consent and transparency:

Children said they were often not given adequate information about when and how AI was being used, including what was happening to their data, whether they could opt out and what would happen if they opted out. They wanted this information provided in child-friendly language so they could make informed decisions about engaging with technology and sharing data (Defend Digital Me 2022; UNICEF, 2021c; Thai et al., 2023; Together, 2024; Children's Parliament, Scottish AI Alliance and Alan Turing Institute, 2023b; Stoilova, Livingstone, and Nandagiri, 2019).

Adults also raised concerns about data protection and security, consent and transparency, online safety, and insufficient monitoring of AI systems (Ada Lovelace Institute, 2025a, 2025b; Dupont et al., 2024; Modhvadia et al., 2025; Okoidigun & Emagbetere, 2025; ONS, 2023; Scantamburlo, 2024). They often pointed out the need for regulation and were concerned about inadequate regulatory power, especially around the public sector sharing data with private companies who are generally not as trusted as universities and research centres in this area of work (Ada Lovelace Institute, 2025a; Scantamburlo, 2024). Similarly to children and young people, adults highlighted the importance of transparency and knowing how AI was being used, including how it contributed to decision-making. They also highlighted the importance of being able to opt-

out of their data being used and retained by AI systems (Dupont et al., 2024; Modhvadia et al., 2025; Okoidigun & Emagbetere, 2025).

1.3.2 Online safety:

Several large studies found that children recounted bad or age-inappropriate experiences with AI technology such as chatbots, including in technology that should have been age limited (Alan Turing Institute, 2025; Internet Matters, 2025; Ofcom, 2025; Stoilova, Livingstone and Atabey, 2025; Together, 2024). There have been several recent instances of children's mental health being negatively impacted by interactions with AI systems, including some cases involving self-harm and suicide (see, for example, Kuenssberg, 2025). There is also an ongoing investigation into AI-generated sexualised imagery of children (Ofcom, 2026)

Research with adults has also found that they are increasingly concerned about the safety of adults and children online, including through exposure to harmful content and potential use of AI tools in abusive situations (Ada Lovelace Institute, 2025a; Internet Matters, 2025; Liehner et al., 2023; Modhvadia et al., 2025). Participants across a range of studies highlight the potential for AI to affect children's rights, including their rights to safety and privacy. Studies have pointed out the importance of adequately regulating and monitoring AI, including ensuring that it does not negatively affect children's rights (Alan Turing Institute, 2025; Children's Parliament, Scottish AI Alliance and Alan Turing Institute, 2023b; Stoilova, Livingstone and Atabey, 2025; Stoilova, Livingstone, and Nandagiri, 2019; Together, 2024; United Nations, 2022).

1.3.3 Digital literacy:

Strong evidence suggests that relying on children and young people's digital literacy is not sufficient to protect them online. Various studies have found that children were not always aware of the risks presented by AI around safety, misinformation and data protection, and therefore sometimes consented to sharing data that did not need to be shared. This was sometimes because of a sense of resignation that 'nothing online is private anyway' (Milosevic et al., 2023), or because they believed that AI tools would not share their data (Andries and Robertson, 2023; La Fors, 2023; Milosevic et al., 2023; Stoilova, Livingstone and Atabey, 2025; Stoilova, Livingstone, and Nandagiri, 2019; UNICEF, 2021c). Children suggested that adults should talk to children about AI more, and

that guidance and advice should be available for people to know how to use AI safely and appropriately, including through learning in schools, to raise awareness and empower people of all ages. They also underlined that children's views and experiences should be considered when developing and regulating AI (Alan Turing Institute, 2025; Chaudron and Di Gioia, 2022; Children's Parliament, Scottish AI Alliance and Alan Turing Institute, 2023a, 2023b; Internet Matters, 2025; Madden et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2021c)

1.3.4 Inaccuracy and misinformation:

Children highlighted the potential for inaccuracy and misinformation in AI outputs, and could give examples of this happening in their lives (Alan Turing Institute, 2025; McLoughlin and McMullen, 2024; Gazulla et al., 2024; Internet Matters, 2025; Ofcom, 2025a; Together, 2024). However, some studies found that young people appeared to trust AI information. Ofcom's tracker found that 42% of 13-17 year olds said they would trust an AI-generated news story more than or to the same extent as one written by a human, and almost half (44%) of 8-17 year olds who were aware of algorithms were happy for apps to use information they had collected about them to decide what to show them (Ofcom, 2025b). A study by the National Literacy Trust found that although 40% of 13-18 year olds who used AI for homework checked AI outputs in case they were wrong, a fifth (20.6%) did not. Similarly, although almost half (47.4%) added their own thoughts into AI outputs, a fifth (20.9%) copied whatever it said (Picton and Clark, 2024). A large US study garnered very similar findings (Madden et al., 2024).

1.3.5 Decision-making and accountability:

Children and adults said that AI should not be the sole decision maker. Where AI contributed to decision-making, they highlighted that it should be clear how AI had contributed to the decision. It must be possible to appeal decisions that AI has been involved in, and accountability structures must be in place to ensure that AI systems are safe, fair and accurate for all (Ada Lovelace Institute, 2025a; Dupont et al., 2024; Gazulla et al., 2024; La Fors, 2023; Modhvadia et al., 2025; Stoilova, Livingstone and Atabey, 2025; Okoidigun & Emagbetere, 2025; UN, 2022)

1.3.6 Impact on humanity and human relationships:

Research with children and young people has raised questions about the impact of using AI on human intelligence, creativity and relationships (Alan Turing Institute, 2025; Picton

and Clark, 2024; Stoilova, Livingstone and Atabey, 2025). Children and young people across several studies have highlighted the importance of human connection and emotions and decision-making, saying that AI cannot replace these human qualities (La Fors, 2023; UN, 2022). Others, however, have found that children can be confused by, and in some cases drawn to, the human-like qualities of some AI technologies. A large Scottish study found that many 6-12 year olds were confused or unsure about whether smart speakers had feelings or agency, with 37% saying they thought their smart speaker 'maybe' had feelings, 35% saying it did not have feelings, and 28% saying it did have feelings (Andries and Robertson, 2023). A mixed-methods study by Internet Matters found that more than a third (35%) of children used AI chatbots for friendships, rising to 50% for children they defined as 'vulnerable'[1]. They also found that one in eight (12%) children are using AI chatbots as they have no one else to speak to, which rises to nearly one in four (23%) vulnerable children (Internet Matters, 2025). These findings have led researchers to express concerns about the potential consequences for human relationships (Alan Turing Institute, 2025; Andries and Robertson, 2023; Internet Matters, 2025).

1.3.7 Potential job losses and quality of life:

Children and young people across a range of studies were concerned about future job displacement for them and their parents/carers and the impacts of this on their quality of life. They were clear that AI should support, not replace, humans in the workplace. They also said that AI should not be used to replace human interactions within care-focussed work (Alan Turing Institute, 2025; McLoughlin and McMullen, 2024; United Nations, 2022; Visram et al., 2023). Children were also concerned about the environmental impact of AI, although some were excited about the potential for AI to help protect the environment (Alan Turing Institute, 2025; Alan Turing Institute and Queen Mary University of London, 2025).

Research with adults broadly aligned with this (Capell, 2024; ONS, 2023; Okoidigun & Emagbetere, 2025). However, one study found that older generations (Gen X and baby boomers) were less likely than younger generations (Gen Z and millennials) to believe that

[1]For the purposes of their report, Internet Matters defined children as vulnerable if they: 'have an Education, Health and Care Plan, receive SEN support, or… have a physical/mental health condition which required professional help'

AI would change their jobs (Capstick, 2025).

1.3.8 Inequalities and bias:

Some children were aware of the potential for AI to exacerbate existing inequalities. They were concerned that the widespread use of AI could worsen biases such as gender, race and class biases by reflecting societal biases in algorithms. They highlighted that some people do not have consistent internet access or the skills or devices requited to access AI tools, which when AI is widely used may affect their ability to access services and support, thereby worsening the digital divide. However, some children suggested that if used well, AI could potentially help to reduce inequalities, for example by improving the environment, providing information, or improving accessibility(Gazulla et al., 2024; Stoilova, Livingstone and Atabey, 2025; Together, 2024; UNICEF, 2021c; United Nations, 2022, Visram et al., 2023).

Adults, including parents, were also concerned about the risk of exacerbating inequality through built-in bias (Ada Lovelace Institute, 2023; Capell, 2024; Das, 2023; Okoidigun & Emagbetere, 2025; ONS, 2023). Minority ethnic groups, LGBTQI+, and those with disabilities were more concerned about this, because 'People's views on AI reflect their experiences of structural inequalities and distrust of power holders.' (Ada Lovelace Institute, 2025a). As a 2025 Ada Lovelace report concluded:

> *'People found it hard to believe that AI would contribute to a positive or fair society when existing inequalities were so egregious. Any use of AI would simply magnify wealth disparities or increase discrimination by entrenching it within AI tools.'* (Ada Lovelace Institute, 2025b)

1.3.9 AI in the real world:

Although both children and adults said they thought AI should be used for the good of society and could see how it could be used to improve structural issues including poverty, discrimination and environmental and climate issues, they often did not trust that AI would be used in these ways. This was largely because of large corporations using AI in the pursuit of profit, and people were concerned about the potential negative impacts of AI use on these wider structural problems (Ada Lovelace Institute, 2023, 2025a, 2025b; Alan Turing

Institute, 2025; Alan Turing Institute and Queen Mary University of London, 2025; La Fors, 2023; Capstick, 2025; Liehner et al., 2023; Okoidigun & Emagbetere, 2025; ONS, 2023; UK Government, 2024).

Overall, increased awareness of AI does not appear to equate to public trust. Several large surveys have found that perceptions of risk are increasing and trust in AI companies is decreasing. A recent Ada Lovelace survey found that although perceptions of risks had increased over time, perceptions of benefits had stayed largely static (Ada Lovelace Institute, 2025a). A study across 26 nations by Stanford University reported declining levels of trust in AI companies to be unbiased and protect data, as well as declining trust in the fairness of AI (Capstick, 2025).

1.4 What don't we know?

Our literature review has identified that there are gaps in the evidence base. Research with children and young people clearly shows that there are differences in the knowledge and views of those from different social groups, which means that children within the hearings system, who tend to come from more socially deprived backgrounds (SCRA, 2025), may be less likely to have the knowledge to assess whether any systems adopted by SCRA come with risk. It is therefore crucial that SCRA seeks to engage with a range of children and young people to understand their views of the potential risks and benefits of using AI within the Children's Hearings System.

In addition, there is a lack of studies exploring the knowledge, views and experiences of professionals in the justice and social care systems. This is a significant gap, as any use of AI within the Children's Hearings System would need to be explained to children and families by these professionals. This highlights that further research is required to support SCRA's decision making around AI.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the ethical and rights-based issues around AI and reviewed the existing research around children and adults' knowledge, uses and views of AI. Our review has highlighted that although AI is increasingly being used in the public sector, and public awareness of AI has increased in recent years, in-depth understanding of AI is not as

commonplace. In addition, although people can see that there could be benefits to using AI, several concerns arise consistently throughout research with children and adults. Given the ethical issues and public views explored throughout this chapter, it is crucial that any decision to use AI at SCRA is well thought through and based on good evidence, which is why we carried out this research project.

2. Methods

The previous chapter considered the existing research around children and adults' knowledge, uses and views of AI. It highlighted several important ethical issues that need to be explored in order to support decision making at SCRA. It also found that despite increasing AI use, in-depth understanding of AI is not as commonplace. This chapter will outline the methods we used in this study to explore the issues around AI use in the Children's Hearings System.

Chapter Summary

This study aims to support SCRA's decision making around AI by exploring perceptions of the ethical, legal and rights-based issues around the potential uses of artificial intelligence (AI) within the Children's Hearings System.

We used workshop-style focus groups to explore participants' views about the use of AI technology, how AI affects their life, what they think the benefits and risks of using these technologies might be for society, and how AI could be used within the Children's Hearings System. We included educational and interactive elements to support participants to build their knowledge and confidence.

163 people participated, across 29 workshops. Participants included employees of SCRA and Children's Hearings Scotland; Children's Panel Members; advocacy workers, safeguarders and employees of organisations advocating for children, young people and families; social workers; solicitors and legal organisations; children and young people (aged 12+); parents/carers; and other professionals.

We used thematic analysis to analyse the data.

2.1 Aim and research questions

It is crucial that any decision about AI use at SCRA is well thought through and based on good evidence. This study aims to provide this evidence by exploring perceptions of the ethical, legal and rights-based issues around the potential uses of artificial intelligence (AI) within the Children's Hearings System.

To achieve this aim, we identified four research questions:

- What do Scottish Citizens understand about the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) both generally and within the Children's Hearings System?

- How do Scottish Citizens feel about the potential incorporation of AI into the Children's Hearings System?
- What are the ethical, legal and rights-based concerns that Scottish Citizens have around the use of AI within the Children's Hearings System?
- Do the ethical, legal and rights-based concerns Scottish Citizens have around the use of AI differ based upon the task that AI could be used to support within the Children's Hearings System?

2.2 Design

Each participant was invited to attend a workshop-style focus group to explore their views about the use of AI technology, how AI affects their life, what they think the benefits and risks of using these technologies might be for society, and how AI could be used within the Children's Hearings System. Workshops were targeted at the following groups:

- employees of SCRA and Children's Hearings Scotland;
- Children's Panel Members;
- advocacy workers, safeguarders and employees of organisations advocating for children, young people and families;
- social workers;
- solicitors and legal organisations supporting children, young people and families, i.e. SLAB and Clan Childlaw
- children and young people (aged 12+) and parents/carers;
- Other professionals that provide reports to SCRA, such as education, health, and police staff.

These groups were selected as they are the groups most likely to encounter the Children's Hearings System through their personal or professional lives.

Each workshop lasted up to 3 hours, including regular breaks, and consisted of two main sessions. The first session explored views about the use of AI technology, how AI affects day to day life, and what the benefits and risks of using AI might be for society. We wanted to know what participants' baseline understanding of AI was, as well as how they used it already in their day-to-day lives, both at home and at work. The second session used made up examples describing how AI could be used to explore views about whether AI should be used in the

Children's Hearings System. We asked participants to think about the benefits and risks of using AI in the ways described, and how the risks could be addressed.

Workshops were usually online for professionals and in-person for young people and parents/carers, but we were flexible according to participants' preferences. We aimed for 6-12 participants attending each workshop, and where there were more than six participants we split into two smaller groups for the discussions, to enable everyone to participate.

All participants were asked to provide written, informed consent for participation in the study. Copies of the signed consent forms were retained by both parties for their records. Participants were informed that they could opt out at any point or refuse to answer specific questions. They were also reassured that they would not be identified within any outputs.

Permission was sought to audio-record workshops. Recordings were then transcribed, checked and anonymised. Where permission to record was not given, researchers took detailed notes. Young people and parents/carers received a flat-rate consulting fee in the form of a £50 gift voucher for participation in a workshop, and refreshments were provided.

2.3 Piloting and refining workshop materials

One of the challenging aspects of this project was supporting workshop participants to build a suitable level of knowledge so that they could meaningfully contribute to the discussion around AI. This was particularly difficult because AI encompasses a huge field, with many different types of technology and uses, and most people do not have an advanced knowledge of how these systems work, or how they interact with them on a regular basis. This is amplified by the lack of transparency around AI; many services, apps and websites have AI embedded into them, without this being made explicitly clear to the end user. This can make it difficult for people to talk about what exactly AI means to them, and the different ways in which they might engage with it.

These issues became evident when trialling the initial workshop format with young people. We piloted the materials with 11 young people, some of whom had experience of the hearings system. They told us that the materials were too text-heavy, that they didn't understand what AI was, and that it was hard to focus and concentrate using the draft materials.

It was clear from this feedback that we needed to include some educational elements around what AI is, and where it is already used, in order to enable a shared understanding between

participants. In practice, this meant altering the workshop to include a short video explaining what AI is, with some examples of how it is currently being used in society (Royal Society, n.d.). We also included an AI bingo game which challenged participants to 'name their number' from a grid of common AI tools, to ascertain which types they had already used (Payne, 2019). Participants were asked what they knew about AI, and how they used it, both before and after these educational elements. We also developed cartoon strips to replace the text versions of the scenarios in the second half of the workshop to make it less text heavy (see **Appendix II**)

2.4 Recruitment

Previous experience of attending a Children's Hearing was not a requirement for participation in the workshops. Recruitment was, however, targeted towards organisations who worked with or represented individuals who have lived experience of Hearings in order to ensure that these views were captured. Recruitment was also targeted at youth and parent/carer participation groups operating in high Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) areas to ensure that views more accurately reflected the experiences of populations more likely to be affected by hearings.

We asked the project's Research Advisory Group (RAG) members and SCRA's partners to distribute information about the project and put us in touch with potential gatekeepers. Where necessary, we sought approvals from the relevant organisations (for example, local authorities) before recruiting through them. We also advertised the project on SCRA's social media platforms. In addition, to reach as wide a range of parents, carers and young people as possible, we contacted youth centres, third sector organisations, and Champions Boards, parent and carer support groups, and national and local third sector organisations across Scotland.

2.5 Ethical approval

Ethical approval was granted by SCRA's Research Ethics Committee on 10/09/2024.

2.6 Research Advisory Group (RAG)

We set up a Research Advisory Group once ethical approval was granted. The role of the RAG was to support and challenge the team in developing our research and analysis.
The Advisory Group met at key points throughout the course of the research project.

2.7 Analysis

We analysed the data thematically. Our analysis was informed by Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Braun, Clarke & Hayfield, 2022). The coding framework was developed inductively and deductively. First we developed an initial framework using the UNCRC, UNICEF and Scotland's AI strategy as a starting point. We then coded one transcript, adding codes as necessary, and then used the resulting draft framework to code the rest of the transcripts.

Two team members, both of whom had been involved in the project throughout the design and fieldwork stages, coded the data, using NVivo as a tool to help us store and organise the data. We took a collaborative approach to coding, meeting regularly throughout the process to discuss any issues and make decisions about the analysis. We took an iterative approach to coding, adding new codes to the framework as necessary throughout the process and refining the coding framework as required.

Once all the transcripts were coded, we developed initial themes which we then reviewed and refined, leading to the development of four themes. Throughout the process of analysis, we looked for differences between the views of participant groups.

2.8 Participant information

In total, 163 people participated, across 29 workshops. In general, people attended a workshop with participants in the same participant group (for example, legal professionals attended a workshop with other legal professionals),), to allow those with shared knowledge and experiences to feel comfortable to talk openly. We also offered two workshops towards the end of the fieldwork period, which enabled six professionals who had expressed an interest but had been unable to make previous dates to participate. The number of participants in each participant group can be seen in Table 1 below.

In total, 123 professionals participated along with 19 young people and 21 parents. The research was designed to include a wide range of participants, including different professional groups with potentially varied perspectives on the Children's Hearings System. Including enough participants from each group enabled us to analyse differences and similarities between the views of participant groups, including between different professional groups.

Table 1: Participants

Participant group	Number of participants
Advocacy workers/ employees of wider advocacy organisations	25
CHS staff	24
Legal professionals	9
Other professionals	9
Panel members	23
Parents and carers	21
SCRA staff	24
Social workers	9
Young people	19
Total	**163**

We asked participants to complete an optional participant information sheet to give us more demographic details about them. Of the 19 young people who participated, 7 were male and 12 were female, across six local authorities. Eight of the young people had previously attended a children's hearing, seven had never attended, and four left this space blank. The youngest participant in this group was 12, and the oldest was 25.

Twenty-one parents/carers participated, across three local authorities. Three were male and 18 were female. Four had previously attended a children's hearing, three did not want to say whether they had attended or not or left this space blank, and 14 had never attended a hearing. Parents and carers' ages ranged from 21 to 67.

There were 123 professional participants from 20 local authorities. They ranged in age from 23-64. Most had attended a children's hearing.

2.9 How to read the findings chapters

- Each chapter includes a chapter summary in a box at the beginning of the chapter, containing the key points in that chapter.
- We have included 'spotlights on young people' where young people's views differed significantly from the rest of the participant groups.

- Where we identified differences between the views of participant groups we have indicated this.
- Sometimes we have used the terms ‘many’, ‘most’, ‘often’, ‘sometimes’. This is a qualitative report so it’s not about counting the number of times a topic came up, but some people find it helpful to understand what we mean by these terms. In general, when we have said when we have said ‘most’ that means almost all of the people or groups; when we have said ‘many people’, ‘many groups’, or ‘often’, this means more than around half the people or groups; and when we have said ‘sometimes’ or ‘some’ this means more than one person or group but fewer than half the people or groups.

2.10 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methods and materials we used in this study to explore the issues around AI use in the Children’s Hearings System. We used workshop-style focus groups to explore participants’ views, and included educational and interactive elements to support participants to build their knowledge and confidence. The following four chapters will explore the findings.

3. Findings

Below there are four discrete but overlapping findings chapters. These are: 'Knowledge, uses and perception of AI', which considers how people describe their knowledge, use and views of AI in general; 'AI's impact on children and young people', which considers in-depth participants' views on the impact of AI on children and young people; 'Benefits and risks of AI use', which looks at the risks and benefits of using AI within and beyond the Children's Hearings system; and 'Moving forward', which considers whether AI is inevitable or desirable within the Children's Hearings System and the safeguards that would need to be in place for AI use to be safe and acceptable.

3.1 Findings chapter 1: Knowledge, uses and perceptions of AI

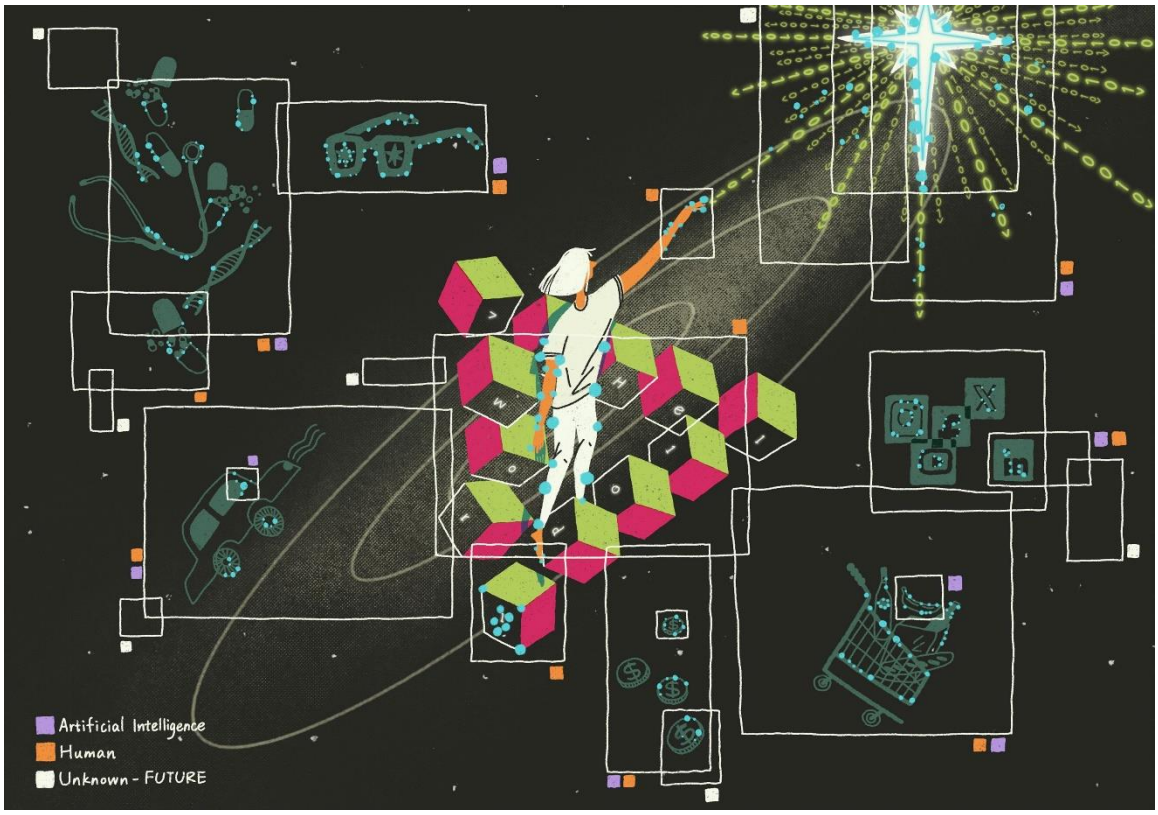


Figure 1: Ariyana Ahmad & The Bigger Picture / https://betterimagesofai.org / https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

This chapter considers participants' knowledge and views of AI. It begins by looking at what participants know and understand about AI, how they already use it in their day to day lives, and how they feel about its prevalence in society. The second part explores perceptions of children's attitudes to and uses of AI. Thirdly, it considers how AI intersects with wider society and humans.

Chapter Summary

Most participants brought some knowledge of AI to the workshops, but few said they were experts or knew nothing. Awareness and understanding of AI tended to increase as the workshop progressed.

Participants generally used AI more than they were initially aware of and were often surprised by the prevalence of AI integrated within the apps and websites they used day-to-day.

There was a common perception among adults that young people liked AI and used it more than adults. Young people's views contrasted with this, with young people explaining that they did use AI but mainly for fun. Young people told us that they would generally not use it for anything they saw as important such as writing essays or applying for jobs, and not for anything that would normally involve direct contact with a human being.

Participants pointed out that AI systems reflect and potentially exacerbate the inequalities, biases and harms that exist in the human worlds they operate within. Many could see that AI could in theory be used for social good, but were sceptical about how likely this was in our current profit-driven society.

Participants were clear that AI systems reflect the human world. They often pointed out aspects of society that were unequal or exploitative, and highlighted that AI systems would likely reflect or exacerbate these. Many participants said that while AI could in theory be used for various purposes, in our current society AI is often used to sell products or further political agendas rather than to support or protect children and young people.

Participants across all participant groups highlighted that there are aspects of being human that cannot be replaced by AI: emotion, values and intuition; human intelligence and development; and relationships and relational practice. Participants, especially young people and parents/carers, very strongly emphasised the importance of human connection and relationships.

3.1.1 Knowledge and understanding

This section looks at general understanding and knowledge around AI in our participant groups, without specific reference to the Children's Hearing System. The idea of prevalence is also covered here, with discussions focused on how AI is already embedded into our society, how people feel about this, and how they navigate technology as a result.

Understanding AI

Understandings of AI were varied. When participants were asked to give examples of what they thought AI was, they generally had a good awareness of AI tools designed to assist humans. The most common responses included popular large language models ([LLMs] i.e. ChatGPT, Co-Pilot, Gemini, and AI personal assistants (i.e. Google, Siri, and Alexa). Participants also highlighted chatbots as common examples of AI that they encountered in their day-to-day life.

Some participants viewed large language models as helpful tools, citing the speed at which they could find information, or the ease at which they could perform a second check on work created by humans:

> *"You can ask them different things and it's an instant type thing. I've used some of the chat things and I've used Gemini but it's to check over, like the things I've written and things like that. I just think it's exciting when the advances that have been made, but it's also quite scary."* **(CHS staff member)**

Others had more negative views of LLMs, believing their use was detrimental to creativity and learning. These issues are discussed in **Human intelligence and brains**

and **Development**

Knowledge and use of AI assistants was more widespread, with many discussing how these had become normalised in homes and on phones, even with very young users:

> *"... a lot of us use Alexa and other things like that and ... I don't think we're consciously looking 'Oh this is AI working here'."* **(Panel member)**

Participants' views of chatbots were generally very negative, with few exceptions. People found them to be very frustrating, noting that they were only useful when they were used within a specific set of parameters:

> *"If I think of AI, always just think of like trying to return stuff in shops and you know you have to go through the AI chat portals and that is not always a very smooth process. But then sometimes it works great, and you know it's a joy, isn't it, that you can just get it done so quickly. But it's like if you deviate off the script, it's a nightmare."* **(CHS staff member)**

Knowledge of AI also included algorithms used to make recommendations online. Although the word algorithm was not always used, participants often talked about how they had been recommended content or products based on previously viewed material. Some found these recommendations to be helpful, while others talked about how the algorithm would sometimes point them in the wrong direction. While many of the participants understood that their online activity informed what products and content they were recommended in adverts, or via services like Spotify, there was less awareness that social media feeds are curated by algorithms:

> *"If you are on TikTok and you look at something so the algorithm then sends you more stuff that is the same, what you like. So that is AI. Right. That makes sense. It is, yes… your shopping. Your online shopping. And you are seeing adverts for stuff that you have bought and then you go onto Instagram whatever and you are…oh, I've got that."*
>
> **(SCRA staff member)**

> *"I suppose the thing that I see most AI in daily life is targeted marketing based on your online behaviours. And I suppose the worrying thing about that almost, is it's not with consent, it happens, and it translates your behaviours without you inputting in any direct way to 'this is what I'm interested in, this is what I want to see', so there are, whilst very clever some of it, is full of assumptions."*
>
> **(Panel member)**

Participants often talked about services, websites or apps which either had AI modes or AI features embedded in them. Some were already aware that AI was involved in these processes, but others did not realise this until after the activities included in the first part of the workshops (i.e. the bingo game or initial group discussion) had been completed. Examples of AI embedded in services that participants were aware of included summary results or reviews on search engines and online marketplaces, AI modes on social media applications like Snapchat, and AI elements within word processing or graphic design software. Many participants also mentioned AI's involvement in the production of content such as images, music, or videos.

There was very little advanced technical understanding of how AI works, with the exception of a very small number of participants who had a background in computing. Equally however, there were very few participants who had no understanding of AI at all prior to the educational section of the workshop and initial group discussions taking place. Awareness and understanding of AI tended to increase as the workshop progressed; those who had previously thought they did not use this type of technology at all often began to understand that they had already used AI extensively, and their knowledge of it was not as limited as they first believed it to be.

Spotlight on Children and Young People

Understandings of AI

Young people often mentioned the same things as adult participants when talking about their understandings of AI, though their knowledge of ChatGPT was often explained in the context of coursework or homework. Their understandings and use of AI did however differ in one key way. Young people were more likely to describe AI as a less serious tool than their adult counterparts. AI was often understood as part of computer games and content creation:

"There's like serious AI, and then there's AI kind of used as just entertainment."

(Young person)

"I'll be honest, I have, I think it's character AI, where it's hilarious, messing with the bot. People make them!" **(Young person)**

Prevalence

The AI Bingo game that we introduced as part of the knowledge-building section of the workshops highlighted the often mundane, everyday uses of AI, including everything from weather prediction to autocorrect and text prediction within word processing tools. Participants often reacted with surprise to these examples, either because they thought AI only included systems that were far more modern or advanced, or because they did not realise how prevalent AI already was in their day to day lives:

"Actually we don't realise, we are kind of reserved when it comes to using AI, but actually it is so widely used that is almost like quite difficult to comprehend." **(Advocacy worker)**

"I was looking for platforms to use AI, not really realising that they were embedded in a lot of the platforms that are already existing, and we use every day." **(Other professional)**

The issue of prevalence provoked a mixed reaction. Some participants saw the positive sides of AI being so prevalent in their lives, thinking of the technology as tools which could help them navigate their lives:

"I just think that I'm using AI much more than I realised and that actually I find a lot of it extremely helpful. Do you know, like I use like Google Maps all the time for directions, but also really appreciate the fact that it will give you real time 'that road is now, y'know, there's an accident,' all of that kind of thing, you know. I mean, that's actually an amazingly great invention for people that."

(CHS staff member)

A far more common viewpoint, however, was concern that AI was infiltrating people's lives without their knowledge. Lack of transparency about how and when AI was being used was a key concern:

"I don't know much about AI. But it really made me think about how insidious it is now in all our day to day lives and it's... slightly scary because you wonder how you find new experiences which are directed towards you by some other mysterious force. I'm not being conspiratorial about this, but it does feel like our lives are being programmed." **(Panel member)**

"The video makes you realise how ubiquitous is. A lot of AI was mentioned in that bingo thing – you know chatbots on the computer, or recommendations that you get, or sponsored ads. And these are kind of so targeted and trying to predict your future behaviour, you realise that you're constantly interacting with it, or it's constantly interacting with you, even if you're not trying to."

(CHS staff member)

One recurring theme was that it felt impossible to turn off, control or escape AI. There was a strong sense that AI was so deeply embedded into the systems that we all already use, that there was little choice about whether or not to use AI. This concern applied as much to seemingly 'benign' AI processes, such as mail filtering and autocorrect, as it did to features such as monitoring of online behaviour and algorithmic filtering that participants were more concerned about:

> *"It really opens my eyes to how much it has affected daily life in small ways. The Gmail filling in, you don't get a choice, it's already there. You can't quite turn things off without everything around it collapsing as it assumes you want to use it all the time."* **(Young person)**

> *"And it's being done to us rather than like a choice to be like, oh, 'I want to achieve, to interact in this way'."* **(Advocacy worker)**

Current uses (professional and personal)

Participants were asked about their use of AI, with answers being as varied as their levels of knowledge. Some were keen users of AI and talked enthusiastically about using it regularly, often showing excitement about what might come next. Others were more cautious, having observed or tried AI tools or services, but did not class themselves as habitual users. Some thought they might be using AI without realising it, while others felt they didn't engage with AI or use it much at all. Others were openly wary or hostile towards AI and chose to actively avoid using it where possible. Sometimes a participant would express more than one of these views as the workshop progressed and their understanding of AI developed. This indicates that people's understanding and use of AI is nuanced and complex, and therefore cannot be simplified into rigid or distinct user categories:

> *"OK, well, see, we'll start off with the first stupid question, because I'm really not sure what you mean by AI. Is it sort of the interactive side of AI or is it sort of automated systems? Which obviously I interact with a lot, find helpful. I've had very little interaction with Interactive AI. And when I get offered it as part of my customer experience or such, then I tend to go, no, I really want to speak to a person and avoid it at all costs. So, I'm not quite sure what you're encompassing within the term AI, but those*

are the things that I think of when you talk about it."

(Advocacy worker)

Those who were keen users of AI talked about how they used AI regularly, both at work and at home. This included those who sought out AI specific tools:

"I actually used it this morning. I was just about to send a really grumpy email this morning, because [something] happened late last night and then I couldn't sleep. And I put it in, and it came [out] absolutely beautiful, and I was like, 'that's the kind of emails that I want to send'. That is what I thought in my head, once I had got over the initial frustration, but I think there is something around, people putting their own words and thoughts into a system and getting it checked. 'Is this what you think?' 'Is this the way that you are feeling?' I might be very naïve because I also know the dark side of it as well."

(Wider advocacy professional)

"I can find it quite gives us a sort of starting point lesson planning, things like that. I can find it quite useful for sort of giving you that that head starter and then you can kind of, it's not perfect but certainly it can kind of get you kind of the idea of how you might want it to look and certainly make it sound smarter than what I am. So yeah, I quite like it for that. So yeah, in ChatGPT and stuff like."

(Other professional)

Other regular users recognised that AI was intrinsically involved in so many of the online apps or services they used in day-to-day life:

"I use it pretty much every day in terms of my phone. Microsoft Outlook it does tasks for me when I am setting up Ticket Tailor, Eventbrite things like that... And then I suppose if you are thinking of things like SPSS software for doing statistics and data, even Microsoft Word you could argue there is elements of that is artificial intelligence."

(Advocacy worker)

Those who were more cautious talked about how they would only use AI to help them in specific contexts. Others talked about using AI sometimes, but frequently caveated their use with potential negatives, or concerns they had around ethics or risk. Those who were wary or disliked

AI talked about a range of issues, including how AI made them feel uncomfortable, concerns about AI replacing humans and how accurate AI was. They also expressed concerns around consent and transparency (see also '**consent, transparency and proportionality**'):

> *"I'm never going to use it to do everything, because otherwise what's the point of me?"* **(Advocacy worker)**

> *"I think it's that for me, it's whether or not you want to engage with that and that seems to be missing at the minute, whether you're actually giving devices or systems that permission to sort of infiltrate in that way."* **(CHS staff member)**

Some participants also talked about not using AI due to a perceived negative impact on their critical thinking skills or the environment (see **AI systems in a human world** and **Being human**), while others were still unsure when they were using AI. Those who suspected that they used AI without realising it often talked about how they understood AI as being in the background of the internet. While they sometimes struggled to articulate what this meant, there was some understanding that they were being monitored or 'listened to,' and that this led to customised content, or them being directed to act in a certain way:

> *"People don't even understand that they are being recorded, and this is being held and that information is being shared... That's why when you sit in a room and talk about beans, you suddenly get adverts for beans because, you know, there are your devices. If you've got Siri activated on your phone, I believe it hears you. So it's so omnipresent."* **(Panel member)**

> *"It's always tracking you, your data, watching what you do online."* **(Young person)**

Spotlight on Children and Young People

Uses of AI

Young people were less enthusiastic than adult participants about using AI in general. While

some did seek out AI tools specifically, they tended to be more wary or critical of its use. Young people were more likely than adults to talk about using AI just for fun. This aligns with their perceptions in section one – Knowledge and Understanding – that AI is not necessarily a serious tool:

"Yes but I have only used them just to mess around. Just to see what it's capable to do."

(Young person)

Some of the older young people we spoke to described using ChatGPT for writing prompts, job applications, or coursework, but most were careful to distinguish that they didn't use it for the entire process:

"So I'm really bad at wording things, and spelling, so I just put it in, like corrected stuff for me. But it can also like write it for you, which I wouldn't do I guess." **(Young person)**

"If I'm trying to kind of write a story, I use an AI thing. AI generated stories....for the prompt."

(Young person)

Like some adults, others were keen to point out that they explicitly avoid using AI where possible:

"I don't use my Snapchat AI. It just sits there. It'll be right at the bottom of my Snapchat list now." **(Young person)**

"I've only done it a few times, I don't really use it anymore. I don't think it's probably the best." **(Young person)**

Young people gave a range of reasons for choosing not to use AI, including its impact on the environment:

So, see ChatGPT? Like the headquarters, it takes a lot of energy to generate even one thing, and that creates a lot of heat, so they have to use gallons and gallons of water to just put it out and that's really bad." **(Young person)**

Similarly to adult participants, young people were concerned about the impact of AI on learning and development. They talked about the use of AI at school and university, and how this could interfere with the development of critical thinking skills (see also**: Development t**):

"I hate the idea of someone being lazy and getting AI to write an essay, then passing it off as their own. The whole point of uni is to research and develop your critical thinking, if you're writing an essay with AI, do you really deserve a degree at this point?"

(Young person)

Young people were more vocal than adults about the potential impact of AI on art and creativity. Participants in three of the young people's workshops shared their concerns about current or future impacts on the creative industries, which sometimes led to conversations about the purpose and meaning of creativity and art in society:

"The whole point of creating and being an entertainer is the creativity of it. [If you use AI for this] you're just making something else do it for you, and still like getting the funds from it."

(Young person)

3.1.2 Perceptions of children and young people's attitudes to and uses of AI

In contrast with the views expressed by young people, there was a common perception among many adult participants that children and young people used and liked AI more than others, or that they were more accepting or trusting of it than adults:

"So in that point is I mean I'm terrified of technology, but children aren't, kids, aren't, they love technology."

(Panel member)

"Especially young folk, 'hink they're right intae it and I cannae agree wae it at aw."

(Parent/carer)

Several participants pointed out that young people they knew helped them with or introduced them to technology, including AI:

> *"I think about AI with my... my son is 13 and all I hear about is him talking about it now where lots of people are using it ..."*
>
> **(CHS staff member)**

> *"I only found out about [AI] a year ago from my goddaughter, who's 21... she explained that the film we were watching was completely generated by AI, and I hadn't got a clue what that was. So she told me. Thirty years younger than me and she had to explain what AI was."*
>
> **(Legal professional)**

In line with these perceptions about young people being more positive or knowledgeable about AI than adults, there was often an assumption among adults that young people would welcome or prefer AI tools such as chatbots. This included the belief that young people would want to use these tools to request information on sensitive or embarrassing topics:

> *"Because kids these days, whether we like it or not, are more tech savvy and maybe more comfortable engaging with a chat bot or something to have a discussion than a person who might you know, who might scare them a bit?"*
>
> **(Panel member)**

> *"I think the younger generation feel safer talkin' to a robot, or somebody online, than going talkin' to an actual adult, or an actual person, because they 'hink this 'hing doesnae judge them, it's no gonnae tell them what to dae. I can understand it from that, but therapists? You can pay a tenner a month for an AI therapist. I think that's mad."*
>
> **(Parent/carer)**

Questions were, however, raised by some about whether children and young people were well enough equipped to understand and navigate the ethical and practical issues that arise from using AI, and whether adults were adequately supporting them to navigate these issues:

> *"I assumed that there would be like an upward trajectory with my generation, into the next, into the next with technology literacy... But I*

taught at [a] University and a lot of the students didn't know how to use like file explorer, or Word properly. It was all very much like tablet based understanding and I think even tech literacy has dropped a lot with young people at the moment, which I was surprised by. But it's, yes very apparent that young people aren't tech savvy.

They are really good at TikTok, really good at Snapchat, really good at Instagram but then actual technology around that and like what a cookie is for example, yes there is no understanding."

(Wider advocacy professional)

A minority of adult participants said that they thought children and young people might be more aware than adults of how technology may impact their rights. This view was more aligned with the views of the children and young people we spoke to, who tended to view the use of AI overall more negatively than adult participants (see Spotlight on Children and Young People for further detail).

3.1.3 AI systems in a human world

Participants were clear that AI systems reflect the human world. They often pointed out aspects of society that were unequal or exploitative, and highlighted that AI systems would likely reflect or exacerbate these. Many participants said that while AI could in theory be used for various purposes, in our current society AI is often used to sell products or further political agendas rather than to support or protect children and young people. There were four main concerns about using AI systems in our current society: the role of commercialism; inadequate regulation; fairness and social justice; and the impact on the environment. These are discussed in turn below.

Commercialism

Across almost all workshops there was a sense that AI was often being used to make money for profit-making businesses or individuals. People sometimes referred directly to specific well-known individuals who had made money through the development and selling of technology including AI. Participants said they knew that big tech companies were making money out of their data (see **Wellbeing**

and **Scale and Scope of Data it Can Use**

) and were sceptical about how far AI was likely to be used for the greater good, including the wellbeing of children, in the context of global capitalism:

> *"...these big tech companies are just about making money, we know that they, we are little fish in their big pond. They are not going to care..."*
>
> **(Wider advocacy professional)**

> *"...we don't live in a world that's like always about producing good outcomes and kindness and you know. We live in a world where it's very much dominated by market place and selling things and producing a particular political way of thinking, and AI could totally be exploited..."*
>
> **(SCRA staff member)**

There was often a sense that AI had been 'pushed' and normalised through its integration into products that most people use daily, as part of a strategy to make more money from it:

> *"I think people pushing it are the people selling AI and the ones who are like forcing it to be integrated into our phones and laptops and software and stuff. When it comes to things like the Children's Hearing system... I think the stakes are too high to just jump straight in with both feet with AI, despite how much it has been pushed on organisations by people like Microsoft and Windows and Facebook and all the rest."*
>
> **(Wider advocacy professional)**

Across all participant groups, people recounted being subject to targeted marketing strategies aimed at selling products. People sometimes said that this was occasionally useful, such as when looking for a particular product. Largely, however, people said it encouraged them to spend more money than they intended to, and that they found it unsettling, particularly because of how accurate some of the recommendations were and how this potentially meant that AI was 'listening' constantly (See **Scale and Scope of Data it Can Use**

and **Consent, transparency, and proportionality**

):

"I'd use the word manipulative, but probably not the best word to use, but it feels like a real marketing strategy. Do you know what it's like using all of this data so that they can market? I don't know. Yeah. There's just something about that I feel was really unsettling."

(CHS staff member)

"...the ones where it tells you what you like buying – it's too good at that, I buy too much." **(Young person)**

Similarly, several participants had experienced marketing and profit-maximising tactics such as dynamic pricing and manufactured scarcity (making it appear that items would soon be out of stock to create a sense of urgency).

They generally found these annoying and unhelpful but often had not previously considered that these were AI or algorithm driven processes. Very few people said they knew about or used strategies to avoid these tactics, such as safe search or incognito mode (see **Wellbeing**

and **Scale and Scope of Data it Can Use**

for more information on data protection).

Regulation

Some participants felt that the development of AI was moving too fast, and that we needed to slow down the process and regulate it properly:

"I think there was, was it last year? A lot of the governments, Western governments, were trying to say, 'OK, let's just stop AI, can we just pause it for six months until we figure out what it is, and we can get laws to catch up?'" **(CHS staff member)**

"It needs to be regulated properly...it needs to be reviewed, monitored. It can be quite dangerous. That's my concern. It is not giving a true picture of what is really happening. People can be exploited by it as well, and that's the negatives." **(SCRA staff member)**

Some worried specifically about the lack of existing oversight, and how to navigate that when it was so difficult to understand how AI produced output or reached decisions:

"And I suppose it does come back to governance, like you say in terms of where is the oversight for that? I think that's quite difficult to do with AI because it doesn't show it's workings... it doesn't show you how it comes up with the working. It doesn't show you how it got to that. There's no clear link that you can see where it's, what information it's used. It's just come and arrived at that information and deciphered it how it, how it likes." **(Other professional)**

Some participants linked this lack of regulation or oversight with the potential for exploitation, particularly for children:

"They operate worldwide, they are operating out of different countries so, it depends who owns that AI essentially, where is it based. How much control. How much regulation does that country have, how much influences does other countries have on that. So how is that protecting children from exploitation and your worry is the more AI there is, the more algorithms there are, the more things children are going to be exploited to." **(SCRA staff member)**

"I know there's a lot being made of online protection for children, but I'm not sure, I don't know if that's necessarily safeguarding their privacy. I don't know the extent to which legal measures are actually covering that aspect of it. I would presume it would. You just feel that they're in such a vulnerable position, that crucial information could be extracted, without their knowledge or consent."

(CHS staff member)

Some people however did not think regulation would be effective. One argument was that corporate greed would take precedence over any effective regulation, while another was that our society was not properly prepared for AI to be unleashed on it. Others talked about how we have failed as a society to regulate the internet and social media, and so we would not be able to regulate AI either:

"My worry is social media is now out there, the horse has bolted, there is no regulation, nobody stopped the bus to think about it, we really can't be making the same mistake with this, as a society this is just not positive. There are lots of positive things about social media and lots of

negative things and nobody controls it. Nobody controls it."

(SCRA Staff 2)

"A 'hink, we as a humanity, as a society, we're too young fur – to get AI so widely available, especially with the government as well."

(Parent/carer)

Participants weren't sure whether any level of regulation or monitoring would ever be enough to make AI viable, and the question of 'who watches the watchers?' came up sometimes:

"Oh, it's like anything, like [a] who's watching the watchers type thing for government. You have that for judiciary, for police, for everything. You have an oversight body that's made you look at that.

But again, if that body is doing a bad job, who's looking at them?... [There] needs to be some oversight body, like you know from government level that looks at it but then, they're accessing that information as well, so that's a double... And then again, who's watching the watchers? And then who do you complain to?"

(Wider advocacy professional)

"I get that a lot of it's about regulation, but if there's a way to make money, people will find a way around regulations."

(Panel member)

Fairness and social justice

Concerns about fairness and social justice were common throughout the workshops. Participants acknowledged that the society in which we live is unfair and unequal, and expressed concern that inequalities could be exacerbated and amplified by the widespread use of AI.

Participants were aware that children and young people did not have equal access to technology and the internet, and were concerned that this digital divide could be made worse if more services required individuals to access them digitally, including through AI chatbots acting as gatekeepers and potentially excluding some from accessing services:

"I can see the benefits. I'm not, you know, I'm not too blind to that. At the same time, I'm just wondering in a society which is already very much a haves and have-nots, whether or not people are really going to be exposed to it in the same way."

(Panel member)

Some people were aware that generative AI used the information of internet users to inform its ongoing development, and that it would therefore reflect the content that was available to it. This intersected with conversations about the digital divide; if some groups in society are over or under-represented or misrepresented online, AI systems will over or under- or misrepresent these groups too:

"I mean poverty, access to technology will inform who's using it and who's populating it and therefore it will have a biased, it could have a biased view unless we teach it to not do that. And I don't know how you teach it to not, or if people are looking at that."

(CHS staff member)

"I mean we know that there are already quieter voices or the harder to reach whatever terminology you want... But in in the world of AI, potentially they're even more excluded, so I think. I yeah, I think that needs to be that needs to be recognised."

(Wider advocacy professional)

People also commonly expressed concerns that the programming of AI systems would reflect the biases of the people and societies programming and developing them. Sometimes these concerns were specifically about the corporations creating and programming the big AI systems. These were considered to lack the diversity needed to represent a wide range of views and experiences, and as such were considered likely to create AI systems that would replicate and reinforce existing inequalities and biases. More often, these concerns were about the systemic inequalities around class, race, sex and gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, and other inequalities, that already exist in wider society. Participants expressed deep concern that AI systems could unintentionally exacerbate existing inequalities by basing its algorithms and outputs on data that arose from an unequal society:

"So, I'm thinking about human biases that go into the creation of AI. You know, obviously we have a lot of those biases at a systemic level, whether that be racial, classist, you know? Disability. Basically protected characteristics, things like that. Our biases are fed into the AI machine... the information that is spit out is reflective of the biases that that we put in." **(Legal professional)**

"Basically you could have like a white supremacist and that means every single person of colour who would go to a children's panels, that AI would recognise it, and be like, you're a person of colour, get oot, am takin' yer weans aff you, you're the worst of the worst, am gonna put you in the jail, because a white supremacist has done it, do y'know what I mean?" **(Parent/carer)**

Worries about ingrained bias were further compounded by the perceived lack of transparency regarding how AI systems had come to its decisions or outputs, meaning that it would be difficult to identify and mitigate against systemic bias. Participants sometimes gave real-life examples of AI bias, usually relating to race, including the use of facial recognition exacerbating racial bias in the UK, and the use of AI to inform decision-making in US probation services. Participants also pointed out that bias is sometimes '...so subtle', making it challenging to 'actually identify consciously' (Panel Member). This raises questions about transparency and accountability, and how these can be achieved.

Participants were also concerned about the wider impacts of AI on job losses, which they pointed out was likely to be unequal, reinforcing existing inequalities, as those with the lowest paid jobs were the most likely to lose their jobs to AI:

"AI is really good for, you know, simplifying kind of those administrative tasks in in jobs like in supermarkets, for example, and in an ideal world of like social equality, that would free up those individuals to go into, you know, a higher paying and more like skilled profession. But we don't live in a society like that. We live in a very kind of capitalist, unequal society where that's going to negatively impact some families and children. So if you think about, you know, potentially parents having their jobs replaced by AI then that's impacting negatively on the child,

in terms of their standard of living, or even the best interests of the child." **(Legal professional)**

Participants also acknowledged the potential positive impacts on fairness and social justice, which were mainly around making information more easily accessible and understandable to a wider audience, including those with additional support needs (see **Inclusion and participation Access to Information**

and

Accessibility

Environmental impact

Some participants brought up the environmental impact of AI, raising concerns about the impact on the planet and how this could affect children and young people. Young people were particularly likely to raise this issue, with the environmental impact of AI discuss in three out of the four young people's workshops:

"I read as well that AI uses loads of energy. And the new AI, the bigger it gets, the more it's used, it's using so much." **(Young person)**

When people talked about AI and the environment, the discussion was often around proportionate usage, with participants saying that humans should not use AI to do things that could be done in other, less energy-intensive ways, or that may not need doing at all. They also highlighted that AI should not be used where the quality of the output was insufficient to justify the energy required to fulfil the task:

"I get concerned about the environmental impact of generative AI, the amount of energy it uses, to create absolutely not nice stuff – creating art and it has 24 fingers on one hand." **(Young person)**

"... the power that AI requires in order to generate quite a small thing. Is that proportional?" **(Social worker)**

It is possible that discussions about the environment may have been informed to some degree by the national news cycle, as articles about AI's environmental impact had been in

the news towards the end of the fieldwork period, when the young people's and social work workshops were running.

3.1.4 Being human

Workshops very often contained discussion about what it meant to be human, and there was general agreement that despite the negative impacts humans have had on the world (see **AI systems in a human world**

), there is something special about humanity that cannot be replaced. Although participants sometimes found it difficult to articulate, three main aspects of the importance of humanity in relation to AI came up.

Firstly, the importance of emotion, values and intuition; secondly, the crucial importance of relationships and relational practice; and finally, the potential impact of AI on human intelligence and brains. Each of these are discussed in turn below.

Emotion, values and intuition

Almost all professional participants, including SCRA staff, pointed out that emotion, values and intuition are a key part of being able to do their jobs, and a key part of the Children's Hearings System more broadly. They talked about the role of emotion in working with children and young people and families, including recognising, interpreting and acting on the emotions and non-verbal cues of others, and feeling and showing empathy. They acknowledged that humans sometimes find this emotions-work difficult because it is complex and challenging, and were therefore clear that AI did not have the emotional intelligence required to do this work:

> *"Human emotions are hard for even humans to recognise, I guess."*
>
> **(Legal professional)**

> *"…during children's hearings or when [children] are expressing their own views people deal with things differently and if AI doesn't have an understanding of that emotional empathy it might interpret it in a totally wrong way."*
>
> **(SCRA staff member)**

They also talked about the role of intuition in decision-making, with many saying that decision-making is not a simple matter of weighing up various factors, but also requires an

element of applying your own intuition. It was pointed out that this 'intuition' reflects the professional and personal skills and experience that are accrued through being human:

> *"I used to think oh, gut [instincts], but it is not, it is your well-honed assessment skills..."* **(SCRA staff member)**

> *"Just because it can take information online from all different sources, that doesn't mean it's the equivalent to someone who has lived an actual human life."* **(Young person)**

Overall, there was a strong sense that values, emotion and intuition were important and helpful when working in the Children's Hearings System, and that AI did not, and probably could never, have these qualities. There was, however, a minority view that the removal of emotion could sometimes be positive as it could help to mitigate against human bias:

> *"Although AI makes unbiased decisions, sometimes that lack of emotion and human judgement can work. You need that as well, somehow, you need to blend them both and I think that's really what [another participant] was saying as well there. I don't know how to explain it. It's great that it's unbiased or there's no unconscious unbiasedness in it, but sometimes you need that human emotion, judgement, empathy as well."*
>
> **(Panel member)**

This connected to the perception of machines being neutral, unlike humans. This perceived neutrality, although sometimes raised as a positive feature of AI, was not considered to outweigh the more negative impacts of biased data and programming. It was acknowledged that emotion could sometimes exacerbate human bias; however, those who thought this believed that rather than removing emotion through the use of AI, we could and should be engaging in reflective practice that enables those working with children, young people and families to examine what impact their biases may have had upon their decision-making.

Relationships and relational practice

Throughout all the workshops there was a strong sense that relationships and relational practice cannot and should not be done by an AI system. Participants very strongly emphasised the importance of human connection and relationships, with some participants expressing concern that increases in the use of AI could result in a decrease in human relationships and connectedness. They gave examples, often including self-service checkouts and customer service chatbots, of where they felt this was already happening, and expressed concern that further integration of AI into the everyday could further diminish opportunities for human connection:

> *"I'm still very much valuing the human aspect. I'm having that as a priority. And you know, if we have AI everywhere, are we losing that connection with humans basically more than anything else? Because we're just getting the answer from our phones anyway."*
>
> **(Other professional)**

Participants also highlighted the need for relationships and relational practice in both the Children's Hearings System and the statutory and third sector services that work alongside it to support children and young people and families. Parents, carers and young people were especially emphatic about this. Participants often said this was because AI cannot recognise emotion, be empathetic or trauma informed, and because 'the human touch' or 'human element' was a crucial foundation of the Children's Hearings System:

> *"... the work that we do is about relationships and it is about people and human contact and that understanding."* **(Advocacy worker)**

> *"Would you leave your child in the hands of a robot? With somethin' that literally has nae feelings, and nae empathy."*
>
> **(Parent/carer)**

Participants also often raised concerns about language and tone, describing AI tools as 'cold' and saying that AI-generated outputs were often easily distinguishable from those created by humans:

> *"... you can tell the difference when something has been put together by a person that has been thinking about it and when something has been automatically written just based on the information that is*

available." **(Advocacy worker)**

"You can tell it's AI when it's written, it's really just like dehumanising language, it's really bland." **(Young person)**

Human intelligence and brains

Almost all participants raised concerns about the impact of AI on human intelligence and development. These included the impact of AI on learning and people's ability to do their jobs, and whether AI could result in skill loss more widely, for example such as loss of map reading, mental arithmetic, and memory skills. They also talked about this in relation to child development, and this is discussed in **Error! Reference source not found.**.

Participants commonly raised the possible negative impact of AI on critical thinking skills. Many described a sense that people were already *'dumbing down'* (SCRA staff member); citing examples of how they or people they know currently use AI to make things quicker or easier and are losing skills such as being able to read and assimilate information from a wide range of different sources. In relation to the Children's Hearings System, some participants expressed concerns that staff could begin to rely on AI tools instead of using their critical thinking skills and professional judgement.

For some, this connected to the idea that AI tools could be perceived as neutral and were therefore trustworthy; possibly more so than humans:

"I guess my concern is if there is a programme or something that is saying 'right this is high risk' that staff switch off to undertaking that assessment themselves." **(SCRA staff member)**

" … you just assume that it has got authority."

(SCRA staff member)

Some professional participants were concerned that over-reliance on AI could change the way that people work, for example writing reports in a particular way or using specific words or phrases that an algorithm was programmed to recognise. They were concerned about

practitioners writing for the AI rather than taking an individual approach to each report or making individualised assessments:

> *"[Would the AI start] training us to write reports in a certain way to get the output from the AI that we want?"* **(Social worker)**

However, others pointed out that how people respond to and engage with AI will reflect their knowledge and understanding, and that with adequate, well-planned training, regulation and oversight, practitioners could learn from AI and vice versa:

> *"...if we use it effectively, we can use it to learn from. So for example, if you were to upload a report onto AI and then it came back with suggestions about what could be better and it changed it for you and made it better, instead of just kind of going 'all right, it's better now' and moving on, it's about being able to reflect and analyse it to learn yourselves, to do it better next time. So I think it's very much about how we engage with it. That's really important... that it doesn't become just... seen as like a quick solution."*
>
> **(CHS staff member)**

3.1.5 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on participants' knowledge and views of AI. It has shown that although almost all participants regularly used AI, they were often surprised by its prevalence. In addition, although adult participants often thought children and young people felt more positive about AI, the children and young people we spoke to said this was not the case. Although participants highlighted that AI brought potential to improve social issues, they were generally sceptical about whether this would happen in the wider context of society's focus on commercialisation. Participants were clear that AI systems reflect and potentially exacerbate the inequalities, biases and harms that exist in the wider world, and should not considered neutral. Participants said that relational practice was crucial and could not be replaced by AI. The next chapter will consider the impacts of AI use on children and young people.

3.2 Findings chapter 2: AI's Impact on children and young people

Figure 3: Reihaneh Golpayegani / https://betterimagesofai.org / https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Participants across all groups discussed the potential impacts that using AI could have upon children and young people. Although these discussions underpin many of the concerns and issues raised in the other chapters of this report, in this chapter we discuss in depth the perceived impacts of AI on children and young people. These impacts largely fall into two categories, namely: impacts on the inclusion and participation of children and young people; and impacts on the safety, development or wellbeing of children and young people.

Chapter Summary

Participants often highlighted the potential for AI to support the inclusion and participation of children and young people in general.

In relation to the Children's Hearings System, participants were unanimously in favour of improving children's participation and inclusion opportunities, but they did not always agree with each other about whether and how AI should be used to do so.

AI could be used to improve participation by supporting the gathering of information, helping young people to share their views, helping to frame information in a more child friendly way, and making information more accessible. However, participants questioned why these types of tasks would be carried out by an AI system rather than a human. They highlighted the importance of human involvement in AI tasks to ensure that children and young people and their families were adequately supported, because people need to be responded to as individuals with different needs.

Participants often highlighted the tension between supporting children's access to information, inclusion and participation, and keeping them safe. Across all groups, participants expressed concerns about the potentially negative impacts of AI on the safety of children and young people, by exposing children and young people to online sexual abuse or otherwise harmful images or videos; creating deepfake photos or videos from children's online images; supporting online grooming; and helping adults identify young people online and then abuse them in 'real life'.

Concerns were also raised about potential impacts on children's brain development and how meaningful AI-supported learning is long-term. Children and young people were clear that they did not see AI as a good tool for supporting meaningful learning or development.

There were also wider wellbeing concerns, including the potential impacts on children's ability to form and maintain human relationships, the 'addictive' nature of algorithm-driven social media feeds, and longer-term impacts on the labour market and subsequent quality of life.

There was a strong message throughout the workshops that any use of AI within society should prioritise children's best interests. Participants highlighted that any AI systems introduced to the Children's Hearings System should have benefits for children and young people and should not solely be introduced as a response to challenging financial circumstances.

Participants sometimes expressed concern that AI outputs would not be adequately trauma informed. They emphasised the importance meaningful human involvement in reviewing any AI-generated outputs.

3.2.1 Inclusion and participation

The potential for AI to support the inclusion and participation of children and young people in and beyond the Children's Hearings System was frequently raised across all participant groups. Many participants gave examples from beyond the Children's Hearings System of ways in which they were already aware that AI was being used to support inclusion and participation. These examples included: improving access to education using specific apps or programmes such as translation or voice to text apps; the ability to join online groups and forums that they may not otherwise be able to access; and support for specific learning needs or disabilities (see also:

3.2.2 Accessibility

):

> *"You know we've got a lot of young people who might struggle to come to school for a variety of reasons or struggle to be in a classroom setting. And AI is giving that opportunity for them to still further their education and learn."* **(Other professional)**

> *"As the resident AI hater, I like it in cases of accessibility – captions in transcripts, really valuable resource for people who need it."* **(Young person)**

Similarly, people highlighted the potential for AI to support listening to and learning from children's views:

> *"AI tools could be used to help children communicate more freely what it is they're thinking. And it wouldn't be the only way of doing it, but it could be another tool in the tool set."* **(Panel Member)**

> *"I think AI gives children maybe an easier way of being able to share their opinions and their thoughts, you know, by using things like emojis or things that is sometimes an easy way for kids who struggle with verbal communication, to be able to communicate with you on how they're feeling."* **(Other professional)**

Participants also expressed concerns about the potentially negative impacts of AI upon the inclusion and participation of young people. These concerns were commonly related to inequalities, with participants worrying about the digital divide being exacerbated by an increased emphasis on using technology to access services (see also: **Fairness and social justice**

):

> *"Equality and access. I think we saw a wee bit of this and, well, a big bit of this during COVID times, of that digital poverty and access, and the more the likes of education... If you've just not got that access to [online resources] or you've not got access to that for as long as you need in a day, or your connection's slow because you're in a kind of remote part of the country, then that that means that you're not getting the same right to education or other opportunities that others are."*
>
> **(CHS staff member)**

> *"I think they need to have the option though, 'cause no everybody's familiar with the computer, no everybody's familiar wae the technology. No everybody gets access tae it."* **(Parent/carer)**

People were also concerned about the potential for misinformation and the impact this could have on young people's access to reliable information (see also: **Access to Information**

which in turn could affect the ways in which they engage with and participate in society. This included some young people, who were aware of the potential for misinformation and talked about the ways in which they screened information to check whether it was reliable:

> *"I think AI has the potential to disseminate untrue and or harmful information to children if they're using, if you think of things like Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok, you know, all those other things where it generates the algorithm depending on what you've seen already, then it just reiterates what you're viewing."* **(Panel member)**

> *"People are obviously like, I have seen inappropriate ones like it has been on the news. People are... doing obviously bad things with AI and they have got in trouble with it. But doing inappropriate things like celebrities it says they have done and they haven't. Because they have*

made like AI program it."

(Young person)

Inclusion and participation in the Children's Hearings System

Participants often said that the inclusion and participation of children and young people in the Children's Hearings System could be improved. They were sometimes surprised that SCRA's knowledge about the additional support needs (ASN) of individual young people was not more consistent and saw this as a barrier to participation. It was identified that existing processes within the Children's Hearings System could be exclusionary. For instance, there was a very strong message from participants across all participant groups that young people were sometimes unable to access their reports because they were too long and not written in a child friendly way:

"There's a lot of data at the moment which suggests that children and young people just don't read the reports. So anything that makes them more accessible would be useful." **(Panel member)**

"... we're talking about a fair tribunal and we're trying to promote accessibility for children and young people, to read reports about them, then having anything in a summary format, which allows them to see what someone else has already written, it adds to the legal fairness of the tribunal system and safeguards their participation"

(CHS staff member)

There was a strong message that in order to support children and young people to meaningfully participate in Hearings, SCRA and partner agencies needed to: ensure that child-friendly reports were created; identify the additional support needs of children and young people and take these into account when planning and managing hearings; provide a range of creative approaches to gather young people's views; and make information available in ways that are more accessible to people with additional support needs:

"Their ADHD's no gonnae be aff the roof because you've accepted and acknowledged that this child has additional support needs. You're still taking that child's needs intae consideration and that'll make that child feel validated." **(Parent/carer)**

"I would be very supportive of that [scenario 1 – scanning case files] because he needs managed differently going into a children's hearing and he needs people to recognise that and be able to give him, whatever he needs. Which his usually fidget space. Time alone, various things… so no I think that I am a big fan of that."

(Legal professional)

The role of AI in inclusion and participation in the Children's Hearings system

Although participants were unanimously in favour of improving the participation and inclusion opportunities of children and young people, they did not always agree with each other about whether and how AI should be used to do so. Often, participants were initially positive about the concept of using AI to improve participation in the Children's Hearings System, by supporting the gathering of information, helping young people to share their views, helping to frame information in a more child friendly way, and making information more accessible to young people with additional support needs:

"…perhaps AI could give a way for them to contribute in a more meaningful way than that kind of very boring form that we send out… I do think there are ways that we could utilise it to make the hearings more child friendly without the children being exposed to some of the more negative parts of a very tense, volatile hearing."

(SCRA staff member)

"Helps people to read a bit better. If people don't know how to read, AI or something could read it for them, an AI could hear what they're saying." **(Young person)**

However, when discussing these issues in more depth, participants often wondered why these types of tasks would be carried out by an AI system rather than a human. They also questioned whether by putting these services in place there could ultimately be less inclusion as the human connection that some children and young people require might be defunded (see also: **Being human**

and **human involvement**):

"I mean absolutely in theory, this [scenario 1] is supposed to increase inclusion, and you know, learn from the fact that X percentage of

people may need additional supports... So in theory, I think it does have merit in terms of that. Is it the best way of doing it? ...on that balance, is the costs benefits and is this the best way of doing it? I'm not 100% sure but I can absolutely see that the theory behind it has absolutely got the inclusion at the heart of it. I'm just questioning whether this is the least invasive and the most appropriate way of doing that."

(Wider advocacy professional)

"It could help read out. Like it's fine to read out stuff I guess, but fine you could get someone to do that. I guess if an area is underfunded but they should just be getting the actual funding for people. And then it's like 'oh they function without a human doing it, all the rest of you can function without a human doing it.'" **(Young person)**

Participants commonly highlighted the importance of human involvement in AI tasks to improve participation and inclusion, often advising of the need for scaffolding or additional supports to be built in to ensure that children and young people and their families were adequately supported to understand the complexity of the decisions that were being made about their lives. Some suggestions of how to do this included: ensuring that the development and delivery of AI generated 'child friendly' reports were seen in the context of the wider reports and information available to inform decision-making; that humans continue to be there to support children and young people and families' understandings of AI-generated materials; and working towards human workers co-developing reports to be submitted to the reporter with young people (see **Relationships and relational practice** for further detail):

"... having independent advocacy involved to help children and young people understand their reports, and what's contained within them, that's absolutely our role... I think [an AI generated report summary] could oversimplify the complexities of what's contained within paperwork and yeah, I think that the potential for missing really critical data there is huge." **(Advocacy worker)**

> *"... the next step for me would be, 'what do you think of this? This is what you've asked for. What do you think of this?' And that would be extra pressure on services, but if we're genuinely doing a child friendly approach then, as well as social work checking their own work, it should actually be, 'whenever I meet you, I'd like to go over what we discussed about making your report more child friendly before I submit it to hearing'. In an ideal world, you understand."*
>
> **(CHS staff member)**

When considering the use of AI to gather information about additional support needs, participants often pointed out that knowing information about a diagnosis or potential diagnosis was not in itself enough, because people need to be responded to as individuals with different needs. It was highlighted that although an AI system can highlight words from a report that indicate additional support needs, it cannot ensure that the actions taken as a result of this information will enable participation. The human action following on from AI information gathering is what could make the difference to young people, and as such it was considered important that additional steps should be taken to understand and respond in a child-centred way to the specific needs of children:

> *"As far as the scenario goes at face value, yeah, you can well get the point of what this is, you're going to get that information, get it out straight away, which would be really, really helpful. But... ADHD in one child and how that presents compared to another. You know we have to... keep the promise and make sure that it's person centred, child centred completely."*
>
> **(Advocacy worker)**

Similarly, participants pointed out that some of the barriers to the meaningful inclusion and participation of young people were indicators of wider issues that could not be solved by technology alone. A key example of this was the quality and appropriateness of written reports, which was often highlighted as a wider issue that required responses such as better training and resourcing for key practitioners across the sector (see **System Saver Vs Sticking Plaster**

).

Occasionally participants went further, suggesting the potential for 'AI agents' that could represent the child, or AI programmes that children could engage in live chats with them (see **Other Potential Uses in the Children's Hearings System**

). When people raised these ideas, others in their group challenged them on it, highlighting the need for caution and to recognise the limits of AI. They also highlighted the importance of retaining human interactions:

> *"I think my head would explode if an AI agent in whatever form started spurting out children's views that they had just decided that they have. I actually think I would have to leave. I couldn't deal with that."*
>
> **(Legal professional)**

> *"A don't 'hink we should be gein' [giving] it that amount of information. That hing, where like a child should be talkin' to AI, a 'hink that's quite isolatin'."*
>
> **(Parent/carer)**

The children and young people we spoke to were clear that they did not want these non-relational types of interaction with AI (see also: **Relationships and relational practice**

).

3.2.3 Safety, development and wellbeing

Across all participant groups, there was a strong sense that children and young people were particularly vulnerable to the risks of AI due to their age, their developing brains and their lack of understanding around online risks. Adult participants expressed concerns that this could increase the risk of their being exploited or entering into online encounters and situations that could place them at risk. As a result, it was felt that children and young people needed to be informed about, and protected from, the risks of using AI, by adults:

> *"I think the bad things is the exploitation and the naivety of young children and young people and thinking that they can share self-generated images of you know, them in sort of nude pictures whatever and they don't have any concept of the risk of that … they don't realise the impact of that being out there for the rest of their life and that's why sometimes adults have to put in boundaries because adolescents*

don't know the risks." **(Wider advocacy professional)**

"The kids, they are not really shaped yet to understand really what is good for them, what is bad for them, and what it can lead to. They don't have these logical connections yet by the nature of their brain that is not developed yet to really understand what those things are going to lead them to, so they cannot like think that if they see this on the internet and if they try it that they cannot think of the consequences and of the long terms... so it has to be probably I would say more monitored, again for safety and monitored by parents, is probably the first responsibility line, on parents." **(Parent/carer)**

The concept of children and young people needing protecting from AI and online spaces also arose in workshops with young people, who tended to talk about their younger siblings or friends, rather than themselves, needing protection:

"Children now are all on phones, they shouldn't be left online without guidance. Like okay if you need to give them YouTube for a bit but they shouldn't be on it all day." **(Young person)**

"My brother's just turned 13 and the idea of, like he doesn't have a phone or nothing, but he's got his Xbox and that, and he goes on my mum's phone, and the idea of having his own phone and just being able to do whatever he wants, is like really scary." **(Young person)**

Although adults often described children and young people as more knowledgeable or experienced than them in terms of technology (see **perceptions of children and young people's attitudes to and uses of AI**), they were still considered to need support and guidance when using AI and technology more generally. This was largely due to children and young people being considered to not have the emotional or cognitive maturity to navigate the practical, ethical and emotional issues that arise from AI use. It was also due to safety concerns around what children and young people could be exposed to:

"... it is that unsupervised access. And how do we modulate and age wise, it's starting earlier and earlier. And children think they know more than us, which they do in terms of technology, but in terms of the wider

ethical and kind of potential harm, I don't think they're quite…"

(Other professional)

Sometimes, conversations arose about adults' limited ability to keep children and young people safe as technology, including AI, evolved. For instance, while it was recognised that AI tools and technology could have built in safety features, there were concerns that these could be circumvented by children and young people. Some participants highlighted how the actions of others could also affect the ability of parents and caregivers to keep children and young people safe. One participant, for example, pointed out that it had become normal for parents to share images of their children online, perhaps unwittingly putting their children at risk. Another highlighted that even if they were able to protect their children and young people at home, they would still be able to access other devices outside the home:

"I think some like stronger controls around, you know the likes of cookies and content that has been shared with young people and children about… Having said that, I suppose you know children; young people are probably like some of the best at finding ways around that. So it's a difficult balancing act." **(CHS staff member)**

"I am worried because I know a lot of kids have access to their phone at school really, so I still kind of worry that my child can get influenced by that at school as well, so (sighs)."

(Parent/carer)

Others pointed out that the vulnerability inherent in young age can intersect with other vulnerabilities experienced by children and young people known to services, who are more likely to have experienced multiple adversities such as abuse, trauma, and poverty and may therefore be at a higher risk of being targeted for criminal or sexual exploitation. This was considered to make the children and young people and families involved with the Children's Hearings system particularly vulnerable to the risks arising from AI (see **Safety**

for more detail). It was also identified as limiting adults' abilities to keep children and young people safe:

"It goes further in relation to protection from abuse, and violence, and trafficking and you know all these things, particularly if you have a child

who is away from home, particularly in residential. And you know we have all seen it in terms of referrals that come through the door. These kids, the reality is that these children are a target you know. They have a vulnerability and they are a target for people who are there to exploit and that I suppose creates an issue as well... I think it can make it easier for those who know how to exploit people. It is an access, way in, isn't it. Without people, for those gangs they can use AI to get in to young people without the protective adults around them knowing."

(SCRA staff member)

Safety

Across all participant groups there was a strong sense that AI could be unsafe for children and young people. Participants commonly raised concerns about how AI could be used to: expose children and young people to online sexual abuse or otherwise harmful images or videos; create deepfake photos or videos from children's online images; support online grooming; and help adults identify young people online and then abuse them in 'real life':

"So definitely seeing an increase in all the catfish[2] and you know the bots, that kind of thing that are online chatting to young people and making them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse."

(Social worker)

"You can make AI do like anything, if you want to see something gruesome you can just get like AI to do it, which is quite harmful..."

(Young person)

Although many of these concerns overlapped with, and were reminiscent of, the concerns participants held about the internet more generally, it was notable that AI aspects such as voice or face changing software, geotagging, and algorithms curating children's experiences of the world were central to participants' worries. These concerns reflected participants' wider concerns about surveillance and being 'listened to' (see also **Scale and Scope of Data it Can Use**

, **Current uses** and **Commercialism**

[2] someone who pretends on social media to be someone different, in order to trick or attract other people

). Parents/carers often shared their concerns about adults using AI to pretend to be children online to gain access to children's lives, through online gaming or chatting. They were often concerned that this could lead to in-person abuse. Professionals also talked about the negative impact of algorithms leading children and young people to see inappropriate images or videos, and the subsequent potential for coercion or radicalisation.

When participants talked about these safety concerns, they often highlighted the tension between keeping children and young people safe, supporting their access to information, and promoting inclusion and participation (see **Inclusion and participation**). Participants often referred to this as a 'double-edged sword', with access to the internet (generally) and AI (specifically) offering greater access to information, but also widening the potential for unsafe situations:

> *"I've got a fear especially with child protection and safeguarding, and how AI can really help distort the truth for children and young people and with what it can do. So yeah, it's a double-edged sword isn't it? It can help, it's a bit like the Internet, and how do we navigate that safely, so it's productive? But at the same time, you know, the safeguarding issue as well."* **(Other professional)**

> *"AI can actually I think can both protect from violence, abuse, sexual exploitation, it can put some guardrails in and equally it can open up opportunities for those very things to happen."* **(Panel member)**

Participants highlighted that the speed of development of technology, and ongoing uncertainty about how this will affect children; the current generation of children and young people have been raised with the presence of AI in ways that older generations were not, and the implications of this are not yet fully understood, making it challenging to know how to protect them:

> *"I think navigating children through being safe virtually is a lot more challenging even than it was sort of 10 years ago. You know, things are constantly changing and as a parent, it is quite frightening. You know, when you're getting to that stage of, like, teaching them to start having their own phones. Just, I don't know. I think children's sense of reality is a bit skewed now."* **(CHS staff member)**

Some participants highlighted the importance of education in keeping children and young people safe online and described actions that they or others had taken to ensure this safety. Although these actions were largely not AI-specific, there was a sense that the prevalence of AI aspects such as voice or face changing software, geotagging, and algorithms increased the risk and therefore the need to support children's safety. These actions included encouraging parents not to post images of their children and young people online, inviting police to come into schools and run internet safety sessions, and, for parents/carers, monitoring children's internet usage, using parental control apps, and taking phones and other devices away from children and young people before bedtime.

Most participant groups highlighted the potential for AI to support children's safety, for example through parental tracking or using algorithms to identify or prevent abuse, but participants were often unsure about the details of how this would work and how successful it would be. Participants also sometimes offered ideas for ways that AI could potentially support children's safety in the future, but were unsure of whether these could be realised. The ideas included using AI to enable children and young people to contact services such as Childline when they felt unsafe, using AI to strengthen data protection/ non-disclosure processes and procedures, and using AI to allow joined-up data sharing between different services that aim to protect children and young people.

> *"... setting up and joining groups, y'know, with the algorithm, you click on one thing, and you get taken down a rabbit hole and before you know it, it could be potentially dangerous groups with dangerous people you're speaking to. On the flip side of that, maybe AI is some way of, I don't know, could it be a way of protecting young people from that? Or like recognising when...I don't know... young people are being taken advantage of."* **(CHS staff member)**

> *"Prevention of sale and trafficking. Use AI to monitor messaging accounts – if the ages of the two people don't match up, one very young, one older, the AI could flag that kind of thing up. I've heard this kind of thing is already happening in WhatsApp, in countries with terrorists or countries at war."* **(Parent/carer)**

"You can use [location tracking] to make sure you don't get kidnapped."

(Young person)

When discussing existing or potential uses of AI aiming to improve children's safety and wellbeing, some participants across a wide range of professional groups pointed out that even with the best of intentions, these systems could lead to unintended consequences such as risking children's safety if their data fell into the wrong hands, or affecting children's algorithms so that they were then faced with unwanted information about abuse and neglect:

"And even simple things like, if we are encouraging, we are increasingly encouraging families online to look out for information, if you are Googling 'Children's Hearings System', if you are Googling 'child protection', does that then, do the algorithms take you down routes about abuse or you know, which might be harmful for a young person who is experiencing something..." **(SCRA staff member)**

"... it comes back to the whole thing about where the data's being stored. You know it, because obviously... if somebody was able to access that information, they're just highlighting who the most vulnerable children might be to exploitation and stuff. I don't know if that's a possibility." **(Social worker)**

When participants raised concerns about the potential harms that could be caused by AI systems intended to promote safety, or when they offered ideas about how AI could be used to support safety, it was often clear that that they were not confident about their own knowledge about AI.

Development

Participants frequently raised concerns about the potential impact of AI on children's brain development, learning and critical thinking. These concerns were broadly in line with their views on the impact of AI on human intelligence and development more broadly – that AI could result in a loss of practical and memory-related skills, affect critical thinking, and possibly impact people's ability to do their jobs (see **Human intelligence and brains**

for more detail).

There was a key difference between discussions about adults' and children's brains. When participants discussed the impact of AI upon adults' brains they were concerned about the loss of skills. In contrast, when discussing children's brains, they were concerned that the use of AI may affect the development of these skills and knowledge in the first place. Participants expressed concern about the impact that this could have both on individual people and on the population in the long term:

> *"But my worry is that artificial intelligence at its basic level [is] reducing brain development for children. And are we now heading into a generation of children who are not able to think for themselves and not able to reason and think wider because their brain pathways and their neurons are being sort of narrowed by the AI?"* **(Panel member)**

> *"It's not giving people the chance to learn, especially this new generation. Their brains aren't developing, it's really challenging."*
>
> **(Parent/carer)**

The impact on brain development and learning was not, however, positioned as straightforwardly negative. Participants often acknowledged that the use of AI could support children and young people's learning and education by enabling them to access a wider range of information and by improving accessibility, which may be particularly useful for those with additional support needs (see **Inclusion and participation**). Questions were raised, though, about how meaningful learning that relied on AI tools was, and whether it always represented true understanding. In terms of brain development, there was a strong sense that the negatives outweighed the positives:

> *"For the kids for learning I think it's between good and bad... good is they are getting to know something new and maybe they can get stuff out, you know, that maybe they need a lot of time to research for and they can just get it out from let's say ChatGPT... Yes and it is quicker for them. And the bad way is that the kids are not doing their actual research to get to the point, or get to the studies you know. Because if you don't actually understand what you are studying about, or what you are reading about, that's a problem because you are not getting all the,*

you are not getting the studies you are just getting all like the end of the book." **(Parent/carer)**

"... in education circles that might allow young people the opportunity to access things but then not fully understand them, so they might have the opportunity to pass a test or use AI to demonstrate some understanding of a topic, but actually that's masking what they don't know and then it doesn't get picked up on and... a teacher doesn't have the opportunity to fully understand that that young person might be struggling or something." **(Other professional)**

Children and young people were clear that although they had often used AI, they did not see it as a good tool for supporting meaningful learning or development. Although some young people had used AI to plan essays, do their homework, or help them apply for jobs, they concurred with adult participants that using AI systems like Chat GPT did not lead to the same learning and development as accessing multiple sources and doing the work themselves:

"I hate the idea of someone being lazy and getting AI to write an essay, then passing it off as their own. The whole point of uni is to research and develop your critical thinking, if you're writing an essay with AI, do you really deserve a degree at this point?" **(Young person)**

"I feel like people would be much more productive [without AI] because as I stated before, I used Chat GPT with my homework and like if stuff like that did not exist I would actually like have to be productive and actually get the brain thinking." **(Young person)**

Wellbeing

As well as direct risks to children's safety and development, participants talked about the potential for more insidious, longer-term risks to children's wellbeing. Participants raised concerns that children and young people may not be as exposed to in-person human interaction as previous generations were, because of spending more time online.

"We're kind of discussing the balance of you know, with things like video games and everything like that probably seems to be more engaging and everything and how that can be great. But the kind of con of that is again, where is the kind of human interactions, is that completely isolated from children or even adults, is that anyone in general? Just kind of get that balance kind of right with that."

(Advocacy worker)

Participants also highlighted potential impacts on young people's perceptions of reality and relationships. Several participants wondered about the wider, longer-term impacts of children and young people engaging with AI systems such as Alexa or Siri as if they were human, but acknowledged that this is still largely unknown:

"I think there's a risk with AI that it's like, it's sort of teaching children as they grow up that who they're talking to in the future might be real or might not be real, you know, like, so kids when they're like, three, they can already say, you know, hey, Alexa, play whatever, you know. So they have the sense that something is a person when it's not a person. So I think I think that's a challenge because it's kind of like... It will make them feel maybe more comfortable sharing things with people they don't know because they don't even know if it's a real person or if it's just a computer." **(CHS staff member)**

Children and young people did not appear to be concerned about the impact of AI in general on their ability and opportunities to form relationships in their everyday lives. They were, however, clear that they valued and wanted human relationships, and said that this was particularly true within the Children's Hearings System, where they described the use of AI instead of humans as disrespectful and hurtful (see **Relational practice**

):

"I would feel so shit if I had got my children's hearing report and it was AI generated." **(Young person)**

Participants were aware of the importance of being trauma informed, and sometimes expressed concern that AI outputs would not reflect this. This belief partly reflected the fact that AI tools would not be able to pick up on the nuances of children and young people's needs. For this reason, participants emphasised how crucially important it would be to have meaningful human involvement in reviewing any AI-generated outputs. They were concerned about the potential impact of using AI within the Children's Hearings System on the wellbeing of children and young people:

> *"I think given it's the level of sensitivity of the information. Someone who has a clear understanding of the whole picture should actually have access to that before the child sees it, or the young person. Just to make sure that there's no terminology that could cause confusion or it's pulled out things and put them in a certain way. And just because again, we just want to keep them safe."* **(Other professional)**

Adult participants expressed concern about the impact of AI on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. Participants often described social media, which is driven by AI algorithms, as 'addictive'. They also raised concerns about the narrowing of children and young people's fields of vision, their access to a wide range of experiences, and what impact this could have upon their wellbeing:

> *"I think that the way that, you know, Google, and social media in particular, can drive people into narrower and narrower fields of what it is they're looking at can be very, very dangerous and I think that it can be very anxiety provoking as well for young people. If the thought that every time they go on to one of these social media sites, it's the algorithm is pointing them in the same direction. So for instance, we are seeing suicide rates, anxiety rates, things like that increasing and a lot of that is being driven by social media. So that is worrying."*
>
> **(Panel member)**
>
> *"... in a way like algorithms on TikTok that are designed solely to keep them engaged infringe on their rights because it is not free association, it is governed by this algorithm designed to keep them hooked."*
>
> **(Wider advocacy professional)**

The impact of algorithms driving young people in particular directions or down particular 'rabbit holes' was particularly important here, marking out these concerns as AI-specific rather than about technology or the internet more broadly. Participants mentioned specific content being targeted at children and young people, including unrealistic content about body image, content focused on radicalisation and misogyny, content about sex and relationships that is not age appropriate, and mental health content that may be more appropriately delivered in a different context and with appropriate in-person support:

> *"... the kind of content you know that there is, that the algorithms pick up and they send to you know teenage girls with you know images of women, who are like size 0 to make them feel that, you know, actually this is how your body should look like. And on the back of that there's, you know promoting health products, slimming products, you know fashion, and you know there's like as I said a consumer approach to it, that you want to make someone feel bad about their body, their looks, the way they are, so that they, the algorithm can pick up, right you know, we'll send them the content to fix that. And I think the potential that has is scary."* **(CHS staff member)**

> *"And it can scan yer face, it can tell ye what yer feelin'. So if ah did that, it can say you're feelin' very excited, and then it can tell you stuff underlying. How does it know ah've got that underlyin'? Ah just feel like it can manipulate weans [children] as well. It's like 'AI told me ah've got depression, 'cause I look sad, so I've got depression'. And there's awready enough 'o that gawn' aroon' [going around].*
>
> **(Parent/carer)**

Adult participants often expressed concerns about children's data being shared online and potentially being profited from by companies. They also worried about how children's data might be used against them later in life. Although concerns about data applied to people of all ages, these concerns were amplified for children and young people based on their young age, their ability to provide informed consent and the ability of children and young people to understand the longer-term consequences of information sharing:

"The impact later on in life. Because you are not really thinking about that when you are 12. There are things you are saying at 12, things I said at 12 I wouldn't want my employer to know it. But once you put it out there, an employer could Google it and find it."

(SCRA staff member)

"So when I clicked on the 'get more information' it was telling you what other apps and websites would be accessing your searches on the weather app. And there was 450 different other organisations. Now what I feel really wary of is that my [teenage] kids they would click 'accept all' to everything that flashes up."

(Wider advocacy professional)

Concerns about the intertwined issues of consent and transparency were often raised in relation to the use of AI in the Children's Hearings System (see also: **Scale and Scope of Data it Can Use**

and **consent, transparency and proportionality**). The idea of using an AI system to support risk profiling, for example, was often cited as an area that required a cautious approach, as participants were unclear whether and how children and young people could give meaningful informed consent for these processes to take place. Participants highlighted that not telling children that their data was being used for risk profiling, and not communicating the outcomes of this profiling, would be unethical because there would be a lack of transparency. However, participants also saw ethical issues with sharing the resulting information, particularly if it had a risk score attached, due to the potentially negative impact that these could have upon the child or young person:

"If I was a child and I was getting referred to the Children's Reporter, how would I feel about a number being next to my name to say how high risk I was? I wouldn't like that as a child. I think you have got to have transparency, but... does it sort of categorise a child too much?"

(SCRA staff member)

"... thinking about it from the child or young person's point of view, in terms of whether or not that got back to them or not, it is another assessment of them that they have no part of, and no opportunity for a say in..."

(SCRA staff member)

Participants sometimes talked about the wider potential impacts of AI on children and young people's wellbeing, including impacts on the labour market, the environment, and daily life. Throughout the workshops, concerns about job losses within the Children's Hearings System were often raised, but sometimes participants also considered the potential impact of labour market changes on parents/carers and therefore children and young people:

> *"So if you think about, you know, potentially parents having their jobs replaced by AI then that's impacting negatively on the child, in terms of their standard of living, or even the best interests of the child."*
>
> **(Legal professional)**

Spotlight on Children and Young People

Impacts on the Labour Market

Young people expressed strong concerns about the impact of AI on the labour market, noting that AI had the potential to reduce jobs. Some young people shared their experiences of struggling to find employment, and explicitly linked this to the increased use of AI and automated processes (i.e. automated supermarket checkouts) in the workplace. They were also concerned about future employment prospects, with several noting that jobs were already scarce in the current labour market:

"It's already rough enough out there getting employment. We don't need it to be doing this and narrowing opportunities even more."

(Young person)

Although some young people had used AI to help them apply for jobs, they largely said they found its utility limited and might use it to plan an application or CV, but not to write it (see also **uses of AI**). The following interaction took place between three young people:

"P1: I use it all the time to apply for jobs.

P2: [shaking head] That's why you're not getting any interviews.

P1: No, I change some of the words, so they don't know.

P2&3 [in unison]: They know."

(Young people)

In addition to their concerns about the impact of AI on the wellbeing of children and young people, participants highlighted some areas in which AI could improve daily life. Access to information was a key aspect of this, with participants highlighting that AI could enable young people to access services, supports and information that could improve their health and wellbeing:

> *"... things like heat, clothing, it can be some information that can be helpful to them, like where they can get food and clothing if their responsible carer is not providing it for them or cannot provide it for some reason."* **(Parent/carer)**

> *"But I found something good... like food recipes... for ingredients so you like put the ingredients it could give you a meal with it."* **(Young person)**

There was a strong message throughout the workshops that any use of AI within society should be there to support the best interests of the child, and that its development and use should always prioritise the child's best interests. However, there were often discussions about the complexities of ensuring this in real life, including in the Children's Hearings System. Several participants pointed out that the benefits and opportunities for AI to improve participation, communication and accessibility for some children and young people should not be ignored, but that these needed to be considered alongside the potential risks to identify whether the potential benefits of AI use outweighed the risks required. Participants highlighted the importance of being clear about the purpose of any AI systems introduced to the Children's Hearings System, including what the intended benefits of these systems were and who would benefit from these. There was a degree of scepticism from staff working in and around the Children's Hearings System, and children and young people who had experience of the system, about whether the use of AI would improve the experiences of children and young people in the Children's Hearings System, or whether it would simply be used as a response to challenging financial circumstances in the sector (see also: **System Saver Vs Sticking Plaster**

).

> *"I think it's a service requirement that we're back filling with AI, that's what it feels like to me. But I think it's what works for the organisation*

and not necessarily what works for the child or young person."

(CHS staff member)

3.2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed in depth the perceived current and potential future impacts of AI on children and young people. Participants often highlighted the potential for improving inclusion and participation through AI but were clear that this also brought risks, including unintentionally worsening the digital divide, and the potential for misinformation. Participants across all groups expressed concerns about the potential negative impacts of AI on the safety, development and wellbeing of children and young people. Although participants also highlighted the potential for AI to support safety, development and wellbeing, the potential negative impacts were usually considered to outweigh them. The next chapter will consider the risks and benefits of using AI within and beyond the Children's Hearings System.

3.3 Findings chapter 3: Benefits and risks of AI use

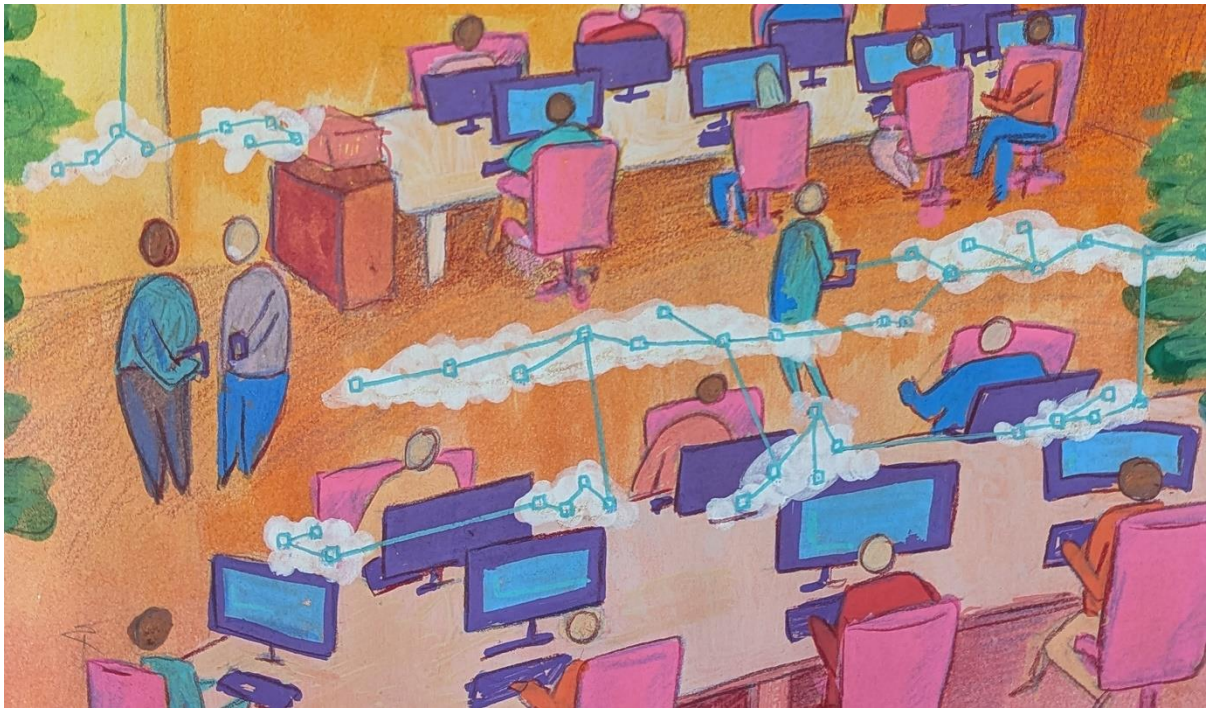


Figure 4: Jamillah Knowles & Digit / https://betterimagesofai.org / https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0

This chapter looks at risks and benefits of using AI, both broadly and within the Children's Hearings System. We highlight the six most mentioned potential positives of AI use, alongside the corresponding concerns. There was a wide range of opinion on how AI could be used positively. Some people gave examples of how AI was already helping them in their personal and professional lives, while others talked about how they felt AI could be used to improve things in the future. Discussions highlighted the nuanced and complex impacts of AI, with participants almost always describing positive and negative impacts for every use of AI that was discussed. It was unusual for anyone to completely dismiss the potential for good that AI could bring, even if they did not seek out AI tools themselves. However, every participant who engaged in the workshops also expressed doubt and concern over what negative impacts might also arise.

Chapter Summary

Participants were given five hypothetical scenarios to help them consider the benefits and risks of AI use in the Children's Hearings System:

1 - Using AI to scan case files to see how many children and young people have ADHD

2 - Using AI to summarise multiple reports to make a child-friendly summary

3 - Using AI profiling to detect risk of Childhood Sexual Exploitation (CSE)

4 - Using AI to redact sensitive information in hearing papers

5 - Using AI to fill in forms automatically from police reports

Discussions highlighted the nuanced and complex impacts of AI, with participants almost always describing positive and negative impacts for every use of AI that was discussed.

Participants raised several potential benefits of using AI in the Children's Hearings System, including: efficiency; access to information; accessibility; the scale and scope of data it can use; the ability to count/ analyse; and consistency.

Alongside these potential benefits, participants raised several concerns and emphasised the potential risks and unintended consequences involved. These risks included: increased workloads and inefficiencies; inaccuracies; AI tools being unable to understand nuance and the potential for exacerbating trauma through AI-generated outputs; concerns around data protection and privacy, and meaningful informed consent; impacts on human decision-making, including decisions being made based upon incomplete or inaccurate data; and a lack of transparency around how decisions are made.

Participants across all participant groups cautioned strongly against the use of AI for anything replacing human interaction or making decisions and highlighted the importance of human checking and accountability. Some participants were more positive about the idea of using AI for administrative tasks.

3.3.1 Efficiency and Timesaving

People often associated AI with timesaving, and participants gave examples of how AI had saved them time at home and at work. This included using AI to develop lesson plans, transcribe meetings and help with managing finances:

"[Next week]] I am going to do the class assembly, so I put as much details in as possible and it came out with 20 things to say for the children, whereas I would have sat for hours trying to do that all on my own. I also on once a week create comprehension questions, which used to take me maybe 1 – 2 hours and now I literally just say to ChatGPT, 'can you please [do it]' and within seconds I have literally got a full lesson plan there." **(Other professional)**

"I use it for numeracy, work plans, expenses. For information, it can be a very good resource, helps you get good information quickly." **(Parent/carer)**

The concept of AI saving both time and money is a common benefit often advertised by AI developers that has been widely discussed in relation to increasing productivity in the public sector (Hashem et al, 2025). Participants were generally aware of this narrative:

"The timing of this is actually really interesting, at that kind of much higher level. If you listen to any conversation about the public sector, whether in the UK or the US, there is this narrative growing around how do we do more, how do we do more with what we've got. There isn't more resource coming, in terms of investment in people, it's about how do we start to look at productivity. Whether you agree with it or don't agree with it, you can't avoid that narrative."

(CHS staff member)

Some spoke positively about the potential for AI to save time for staff working across the public sector, particularly when it comes to replacing tasks that can take a long time for humans to do:

"There's one particular sheriff now... that has written her court judgements in a child friendly way and they've been so well received. But that takes a long, long, long time, especially when you need not just a child friendly one, but, you know, a non-child friendly, one for appeal purposes for onward court appeals, etcetera. And so I think AI would be brilliant from that point of view." **(Legal Professional)**

Others discussed how they thought AI could be used to create efficiencies within public sector organisations by supporting routine tasks such as report writing and the allocation of services:

> *"I suppose I associate it with much faster processing of data, or the ability to process data much faster"* **(Panel Member)**

The use of AI tools was often discussed in terms of freeing up the time of humans to do other more meaningful and less repetitive tasks. This included undertaking more human-centred or relational work. However, some challenged the idea that AI would save any time in reality. This was often due to the belief that the time taken to carry out human checks would be equal to or greater than the time saved if AI was to be used, therefore making processes and workplaces less efficient (see **Safeguards**

for a detailed discussion around human checking). They also questioned whether any potential time savings created by AI would in practice allow people to do more human-centred or relational work:

> *"I suppose for me it's like how or to what extent will any of these promises about time saving and efficiency actually materialise into something that's useful? And how then will that translate into actually freeing up capacity."* **(Social worker)**

> *"I can imagine that being used within the school setting. And if it is being done to save teachers time which will allow them to spend more face-to-face time with children, it's great. But if it is being used to reduce the number of teachers that we have or as a replacement for classroom assistants or as a replacement for certain subjects being taught, then I think it is just not really meeting the needs or the rights of those children."* **(Advocacy worker)**

Participants also raised the issue that AI's expected efficiency could lead to a greater number of issues or concerns being flagged, which would require more human capacity to address, or could lead to delays:

> *"I had noticed a news article recently and it was on computers of some description, identifying as it happens, it was breast cancer, and they*

were able to process something like 1000 reviews of these images, mammogram images, whatever they are, per day with a much higher degree of accuracy than the trained person who was doing, I think it was something like 20 day. So that sounds fantastic. Let's do that. How do you then deal with all those cases that you find when the resources are not there to deal with them?" **(Panel Member)**

While some participants worried about increased workloads, others were concerned that using AI would lead to a reduction in jobs:

"If it's an AI doing it, you don't need to pay it do you? So what is the end goal with that? If it starts being able to do all those things? Where do the people go who used to do those jobs?" **(Young Person)**

"To my mind now it is more it is not there is going to be a machine there, like a robot taking over your job. It is how your job, how you can do your job with machines." **(SCRA staff member)**

In the Children's Hearings System …Value for Money/Efficiency

There were some arguments, as discussed in depth in **Being human**

that saving time on administrative tasks like redacting information and filling in forms automatically (scenarios 4 and 5) could free up time for practitioners to undertake more relational work with children and young people and families within the Children's Hearings System:

"A 'hink that's where it comes to it, a 'hink SCRA, social work, when it comes tae it, need to build a trust wae the child. But how can they build that trust if aw they're dain is paperwork? They're fillin' oot a hundred thousand pieces of paper every day." **(Parent/carer)**

Some SCRA staff thought that using AI tools to do admin work could be useful in some localities where support staff were particularly busy:

"I think it varies on locality. The last locality I was in support staff were so busy, I think something like this could be really good in terms of saving time, less jobs to do, and it would free them up time to get, to

meet deadlines of sending things out in the post."

(SCRA staff member)

There were however concerns that using AI would not in reality save any time for staff at SCRA. Participants felt that checking the output of AI tools could lead to the duplication of work, such as in the scenario suggesting AI create a summary report (scenario 2). While some liked the idea in theory, it was suggested that it would be preferable for a Reporter to either create the report instead, or to be given the job of checking the report or going over it with the child directly. Participants worried that these options, often described as necessary for the tool to be viable, safe and ethically acceptable, would create more work and therefore take more time:

"You know, do you want a full report, or do you want a summary report and then also doing both reports? You know are we creating more work? Are we getting the balance right? Are they going to be more of a benefit than not?" **(SCRA staff member)**

"P3's suggestion of well, you know, once this is produced, the reporter could go through it with a child... I don't think the reporter would have sufficient time to do that, given that their job at the moment and their roles at the moment." **(Legal Professional)**

Similarly, some noted that AI risk profiling tools such as those suggested in scenario 3 could flag up more cases of suspected CSE, and would therefore require more Reporters to carry out investigations to identify whether exploitation was occurring.

"Interestingly I think you may need more reporters, not less, as a result of this. Because once you've got this information, if it's actually useful – and that's why you're gathering it in the first [place] – then you need to act on it. So you might need a lot more trained eyes on looking at this."

(Panel Member)

People often discussed the need for human checks to ensure the accuracy of AI generated content. Participants recognised that the length of time needed to carry out human checks effectively could result in less time savings than expected:

"It would need to be checked for harmful language or by someone who understands that child or young person to see how they might react to certain terminology being used. So I'm not convinced it would help you streamline processes. I think it would create additional checks and requirements of humans to oversee this." **(Advocacy Worker)**

"You'd need to at least do it side by side. You get an AI to make a decision, and a panel to do it, until you get to a point where you accept it. It would take a long time." **(Young person)**

Closely linked to time savings were value for money, with the understanding that higher workloads could lead to a need for further staff, which in turn costs more money. Another perspective discussed was the cost of developing or buying AI tools, and how that might compare to staff costs. Some questioned the value of AI tools, or the cost of training staff to use them, while others talked about whether the money was better spent elsewhere, and whether funds would be diverted from frontline services to fund AI development at SCRA:

"I just wondered about the costs for organisations to use AI in comparison to maybe staff costs. Do you know if you were getting it to do admin tasks, is it more realistic to do that than it is to pay staff wages?" **(CHS staff member)**

"Especially people who work in children's hearings and stuff like that, I'm sure most of them don't know anything about AI, like don't have much knowledge on how it's used or whatever. It's saying saving money but how many people are we going to have to train up, would they, anyway, so people know how to use AI properly, how to keep that safe. How much money is going to go into that realistically and would that be another corner cut?" **(Young person)**

This led to people talking about job losses, or job changes within SCRA and how these would need to be reflected upon in staff's terms and conditions:

"It takes like some of the tasks away from the admin so they can spend more time with the children and young people and families, so they

were taking the admin side away from us then what… if we are going to spend more time with children and young people and families what would our jobs be." **(SCRA staff member)**

"There is that worry about AI like replacing people in in their jobs. But I think that there is kind of another potential for getting rid of that, those kind of like boring repetitive tasks and maybe even increase morale, but I don't know." **(Legal Professional)**

These discussions highlight potential unintended consequences of using AI, including changing the nature of the jobs available, and changing workloads for remaining staff. Any changes could have positive and/or negative implications for staff experiences and morale, as well as affecting who has the skills and experience to do this work, which in turn has potential impacts on equality, diversity and inclusion within the workforce

3.3.2 Access to Information

Another benefit of AI that was commonly raised focused on the ability of AI to improve access to information. This was often linked to the speed at which people, including children, can access information via AI:

"There will be lots and lots of things that I think will be really positive in terms of children's human rights and children's access to information. Children understanding [things], having been able to explore things a bit easier than maybe we could have when we were younger or the generation before us." **(Advocacy worker**)

"The fact of the matter is that AI enables you to get much more information at your fingertips than you would do just speaking to a normal human being. So that is definitely quite a positive for pupils for learning, but also just for general life skills."

(Other professional)

Many of the participants had serious concerns about the quality of information produced by AI, including the potential for results to be incomplete or incorrect. Some worried about people believing this inaccurate information:

> *"I think that's something that's kind of coming through just now that children go down rabbit holes, or adults go down rabbit holes, and the quality of the information can be poor. Some of it can be excellent, but actually some of it can be really poorly sourced and highly opinionated and it's hard. Who's the guardian of that? And I think we're not clear about that."* **(Other Professional)**

> *"There's a term called hallucination. So large language models... they can create answers that don't, that aren't real. So, I'm sure developers of any system that would be trained to do this would be aware of that, but it's, they can present information as if it is true because the answers you get are in very, you know, correct language. So they sound they sound like they know what they're talking about. So you have to treat the answer with some scepticism and drill down into where that answer came from and things like that."*
>
> **(Panel member)**

Others specifically worried about the quality of data being used to train AI, and what results this could produce. This is sometimes referred to in discussions around AI as 'garbage in, garbage out'.. A slightly more Scottish version was coined by a parent/carer:

> *"If you put mince in a computer, it is mince that comes out."* **(Parent/carer)**

Some felt that the results produced by AI systems trained on imperfect or inaccurate data would have the potential to be incorrect and discriminatory. Participants gave real-life examples of existing and potential AI bias, including through facial recognition technology and decision-making tools (see also: **Fairness and social justice**

). These concerns were heightened in discussions around AI systems that could be used to monitor, surveil or make predictions about behaviour(s) and risk:

"It can give wrong results, AI, some that are outdated, ableist, stereotypical. It gives wrong advice."

(CHS staff member)

Others expressed concern that marginalised voices were not fairly represented in the data sets that AI models are being trained on:

"For those children who are in the deepest depths of poverty, they're not interacting online, or engaging with artificial intelligence, if at all, or to the frequency of more well off, children and young people, who have access to technology. So that in itself I would worry would create a data bias and it's not actually taking into consideration the circumstances, opinions, and feelings of those, that group of young people, because they just don't get the opportunity to interact with artificial intelligence algorithms to the level of other children and young people."

(Advocacy worker)

Closely linked to this were concerns around the backgrounds of those creating AI tools and leading AI organisations. These included observations about the lack of diverse voices in the design and production of AI models. Concerns were also expressed about a lack of transparency about who is 'behind' the AI and what their motivations for developing these tools might be:

"And I think, and we've seen, I think recently as well in the political sphere, we get billionaires who have far right views buying social media platforms and then kind of very aggressively using that to, you know, to further their own... political ends. Yeah, it's scary."

(CHS staff member)

Many of the participants, including children and young people, pointed out the role of AI in spreading misinformation online. These discussions, which included references to the use of deepfake technology, highlighted the potential harms that AI could cause:

"And then Apple, the AI thing they have had on recently, they have been doing their news thing and like fake news has been in it...and you are

thinking 'this is quite dangerous because the very young are just seeing that and taking it as, you know, the gospel.'" **(SCRA staff member)**

"... someone could make a message with AI and then use your name and your profile picture, someone could like see that."

(Young person)

Some participants were concerned that the access to information provided by AI could lead to the creation of an online echo chamber due to algorithms filtering the content we see. This was discussed within the context of children's rights, specifically in relation to freedom of thought and freedom from discrimination, and children and young people not being exposed to a wide range of viewpoints and experiences:

"They'll be like ah've got AI, AI can do it. Whereas a feel like people really need to huv their ain opinion, before." **(Parent/carer)**

"That biggest fear of mine is the group thinking, the diminishing of the diversity across our culture, because we're all singing from the same hymn sheet that's potentially being populated or drawn from a specific culture that then we lose our lovely diverse range of cultures and experiences and religions and that then from a minority culture perspective it might have a greater impact also on bias and discrimination point of view and a freedom of thought point of view." **(CHS staff member)**

One young person and one CHS staff member, however, recognised that algorithms could help them to find more of the kind of content they liked, and viewed this positively. One parent also thought having access to wider sources of information would have the opposite effect to an echo chamber:

"I like the idea of how it picks up your interests and things, like the media that you interact with, its automatic, to you. I guess if you're a kid and you're really into like science and stuff, then it's going to give you more science feed and stuff like that." **(Young person)**

"I think it could be quite positive on minority culture and like language and religion because that's learnin' aboot everybody else, ye don't need to know just aboot your race, your culture, your language."

(Parent/carer)

In general, parents and carers were more concerned about the impact of algorithms directing young people to potentially dangerous online spaces and content, including the potential for LLMs to produce harmful output. This was also mentioned by SCRA staff, CHS staff and young people:

"Some places that are even leading kids to kill themselves or... do something bad to their own family, so it can be quite harmful, it can lead them to violence as well." **(Parent/carer)**

"You hear about it a lot at the moment, the kind of suicide awareness stuff and a lot of the stories are like the kid went on to look at depression and within 4 clicks they were on here is how to kill yourself. And you know you think we could be vulnerable to that same you know because... You want some information on domestic abuse, where does that take you online. Yes it might take you to Women's Aid, and some helpful advice for children or young people, but it could take you the other way." **(SCRA staff member)**

Conversely, people sometimes questioned whether AI could be used to reduce the amount of harmful content shown (see **Safety**

).

In the Children's Hearings System ... Access to Information

Some people felt that AI could benefit children and young people by allowing them to have easier access to information in the Children's Hearing System. Some participants framed this in the context of children and young people learning more about their rights:

"... I think there are possibilities there, ways to inform children of their rights and to make sure that they know about what's available to them through UNCRC. That's always the most difficult starting point, to let children know about the rights that they have, so that they can then

exercise them. So there must be some possibilities there."

(Legal Professional)

Others considered how AI could be used to simplify the information provided to children and young people. This usually came up as a potential benefit of scenario 2 (summarising multiple reports to make a child-friendly summary). Professional participants often talked about how AI summaries could be beneficial to young people, and that using them could prevent retraumatising them with out-of-date or harmful details in their reports:

"I think I feel generally quite positive about this example. I suppose we know that young people time and time again come back and say that when they receive this bundle of paperwork, it's potentially really traumatic, and they don't, sometimes they don't even read it because they know it's not them anymore. Or y'know, it's in the past. So I think that potentially giving a summary of the most recent update could be suitable."

(CHS staff member)

There was a lot of support in general for the idea of making reports more child friendly. Some felt that using AI tools to do this could allow children and young people to engage with their hearings in a way they do not currently do (see also: **Inclusion and participation**):

"... you've got a chance of a young person reading that [summary report]. That, to me is a is a big bonus because 90 times out of 100 when you ask them, they got to page 2 and gave up reading the social work or the background report... the shorter it is, the more buy in you're going to get, there's no doubt in my mind about that."

(Panel member)

"Why, how can we no give AI those sheets of paper that the social worker has just sorted, to summarise it and make life easier, for everybody. I think life should be summarised. Everything should just be bullet point and straightforward. Why does it need to be complicated?"

(Parent/carer)

However, there was also widespread concern about the quality of information held in existing reports, and how this could impact on the accuracy of any AI-produced summary. Ensuring that the reports given to children and young people were accurate was considered

to be as important as ensuring that they were easier and less traumatic to read. This mirrors the concerns in chapter one about the quality of information held online which is subsequently used by AI models to produce inaccurate summary results:

> *"I think it comes back to that issue about the quality of the data in the first place, because if all its going on is that social work report then you find that there is a lot of issues with social work reports, there is a lot missing, there is a lot of gaps sometimes you know. There is too much information in it that's just not relevant, and so I don't know about summarising a report that is not the best quality in the first place."*
>
> **(SCRA staff member)**

Additionally, some professionals worried that AI tools simply weren't sophisticated enough to create summary reports that would consider the needs of children and young people. Advocacy workers were particularly concerned about this, arguing that AI tools were not nuanced or accurate enough, and did not have the 'soft' skills required to 'read between the lines' and pull out the correct and relevant information into a summary. Alongside worries about accuracy, they were also concerned about the impact that AI-generated summaries could have on young people, strongly stating that part of the role of advocacy workers is to support children and young people to understand and respond to the content of reports in the context of a trusting relationship. They felt that this relationship was important to young people and that relationships are a key part of being trauma informed, raising questions about whether a summary produced by an AI system could ever be trauma informed (see also: **Relationships and relational practice**

):

> *"Reports themselves aren't balanced, if you use AI, there'd be info picked up that could be harmful. I think the use of AI wouldn't be beneficial for [the young person] and not trauma informed. Reports need to be improved, and it should be done by a person because that's what's important to young people."* **(Advocacy worker)**

SCRA staff in particular were worried about children and young people missing relevant information they were entitled to, and being subsequently surprised in a hearing, if this information was missed out from an AI-generated summary:

"Say for example that is a summary but say there are certain parts of the paper that has been omitted in the summary, well the child has lost the right to know what is in the papers. If the kid does come to the hearing and they are faced with something that is not [in the summary] it is almost a bit of a shock to them as such, it could be detrimental to their conduct in the hearing. And again it is almost like a withholding of information that is a child is entitled to." **(SCRA staff member)**

Another concern raised was the inability to properly check if a summary is accurate. This ties into ideas around accountability, raising questions including: who would be responsible for checking an SCRA produced summary of various reports created by social work, teachers and doctors? How would SCRA staff know if the summary was accurate unless they read the reports themselves? Who would be responsible for any appeals or complaints arising from inaccuracies (see also: **Challenge, ownership and accountability**

)? This is also strongly linked to the points raised in **Efficiency and Timesaving**

, around whether AI would in reality save any time in the children's hearing system:

"How would they know if AI has picked up the right points without somebody from SCRA going and reading all the reports? So when we are saying about duplication isn't that just going to be twice the amount of work and how are they going to know if it is accurate or not without doing it?" **(CHS staff member)**

Spotlight on Children and Young People

Using AI to Summarise Reports

Young people in particular had very strong negative feelings about using an AI tool to produce a summary (scenario 2). While many adults talked about the benefits this would have for young people's rights – specifically access to information – young people themselves were critical of the idea. Like adults, they had specific concerns around the quality of data in existing reports, and indicated that they would prefer for resources to be spent improving the quality of report writing:

"The concern that kind of came up for me there, was if they're using obviously like reports that have already been written, just within my experience I've had reports that maybe weren't the best. They weren't written by people who actually knew me, and they were just kind of there, then that AI would be going off of them. And obviously whoever then gets it from there is being told by the AI, 'Oh but we have a source to back this up' but it's still doesn't mean that it was a very good, kind of, I don't know, report in general. I would be concerned it would just be solidified into the cycle of, 'Oh but it said this' and like 'Oh this has been flagged because of what someone said before'." **(Young person)**

Additionally, young people had strong aversions to the idea of AI writing or summarising reports because of the lack of humanity involved, and because they wanted to be seen as individuals, not numbers:

"It's hard to read it and actually see that this is someone's life and y'know, whatever, what kind of person they actually are. So I think if that was changed, then there's no need for AI to be involved to scan and pick out important bullet points. That was an issue we all had, a lot of reports were very bullet point like, and were not written like it was about someone's life, it was written like it was a number in a file." **(Young person)**

"I feel like we're completely missing the point of it being personalised if we're then handing it to an AI." **(Young person)**

There was strong feedback that reports should reflect and support the young person, and that this should be achieved by a professional talking to that young person, not by a tool which summarises existing reports. In general, young people argued for a person to do this type of work, rather than AI (see also: **Being human**

):

"It's maybe easier to understand but then we are missing the core of the idea that this is based on the young person, to support the young person, so I feel like as much as they say, 'right, we'll get an SCRA staff to check over it', I feel like if you need someone to check it, you may as well make it yourself. At least then it could be from the standpoint of someone that's working with the young person, y'know. I just feel like that would be a bit better for the time

that we have." **(Young person)**

3.3.3 Accessibility

Many thought that AI might be useful for improving accessibility. This often involved using AI-supported tools to make things more child-friendly at schools and to ensure content was accessible for those with additional support or learning needs (see **Inclusion and participation**). These perspectives on accessibility also extended beyond children. Participants talked about how AI could be used to improve things for adults too, including by simplifying language, and enabling non-native English speakers to access information in their native language:

> *"... not even just for children, you know, I think AI might be helpful in, and it's already used in like looking at a report and telling what the reading age of that report was... If you're presenting, you know, some things to some adults the reading age, you know the, you know, the tabloids it's below 12, isn't it?"* **(Panel member)**

> *"Languages, you could use like Google translate and you can speak into it, and it will speak a language like, say if you are in a different country or someone else is in a different country, you can use like Google translate and speak into it and it comes out English or whatever language it is."* **(Young person)**

One participant felt that the combination of AI as a translation tools, and AI algorithms pushing people to their particular interests, could be combined to allow children and young people access to their own language, culture, and religion:

> *"Children have a right to use their own language, culture, and religion, even if these are not shared by most people in the country where they live. I think AI has an almost immediate translation facility within it and in some ways, minority groups can find each other easier. Not always a good thing, but if we're looking at positive things then they could find each other and because of the way algorithms are written... AI would*

drive them towards things that are culturally or religiously suitable for them if we look at it on the positive side." **(Panel Member)**

While views on AI's impact on accessibility were generally positive, there were still concerns raised that it may lead to some services becoming inaccessible for some. This was raised in the context of relying too heavily on technology, and the barriers this might create for those who are less digitally engaged in the general population (see 'inclusion and participation' and 'fairness and social justice'), as well as potential longer-term impacts on access to data:

"... technology is meant to help people and sometimes it's creating barriers due to lots of different aspects, but we're just going headfirst into let's make everything digital. And even down to the point of it becomes with all of our history and archives or digital. What happens if we can no longer get the systems to actually read that, we've kind of lost access to that information... we need to think about the longer term aspects of it." **(CHS staff member)**

Others also questioned whether more 'accessible' AI summaries were a positive thing, noting that they did not always get the context or information right. Summaries on services like Google may make complex information more accessible, but this is only beneficial if the summary uses the correct sources and does not contain incorrect words or meanings:

"The only thing is it doesn't understand local difference sometimes, so for decriminalised parking, that's not a thing... where I live, yet. But if you were to put it in, like it usually just comes up with yeah all areas have done it. Which is like, no. That might be where the police are getting their information from, when they say all areas have, but no, it's like locally that's not a thing. There's a couple of other things where it's not picking up local context." **(Young person)**

While many felt that AI could make education more accessible, others worried that it could be used by some to cheat systems or lead to people becoming lazy (see **Human intelligence and brains**

In the Children's Hearings System ... Accessibility

One of the scenarios in the workshops looked at using AI to identify those with ADHD in our systems (scenario 1). The reasoning behind this is that although SCRA can hold this information, it is currently stored within social work or medical reports rather than within searchable fields within a database. This means that staff do not currently have reliable access to information that could help to prepare hearings more effectively for those with additional support needs. Additionally, if the data was anonymised, it could provide insight into the levels of neurodivergence in children and young people in the hearings system, which could inform policy and practice across the service. This scenario led to participants discussing what accessibility features may be feasibly supported by AI in the children's hearing system.

Some discussed the idea that reports should be accessible to all and pointed out that many adults in the system would not be able to currently understand them due to average reading levels. Suggestions included AI making reports more accessible by creating a 'translated' simpler written report or converting text to speech:

> *"I would think more some of our clients who struggle to read real quite basic information and then if they have to go to the local council and read information or, I mean, I know that AI could probably develop it to speak to them and all that. But then I do think you'd be missing out on human contacts as well with them. So I'd be concerned for vulnerable people, yeah."* **(Legal Professional)**

Others talked about how AI might be used as a participation tool for children, young people, and families. This included AI-based accessibility tools being used to help those with disabilities or language barriers to express their thoughts and become more involved in the hearing process:

> *"I think if they have a disability and I'm thinking along the lines, AI may be able to help support communication, children expressing, you know what their thoughts are etcetera. Also with language barriers too."*
>
> **(Legal professional)**

"With the whole language thing, AI can be quite good for a language barrier. Because you go to hearings and there could be a major language barrier." **(Parent/carer)**

Young people were less enthusiastic about AI's potential to make the children's hearings system more accessible, and expressed concerns about AI getting language and tone wrong, rather than simplifying things (see also: **The role of AI in inclusion and participation in the Children's Hearings system**

) these concerns were often explained in the context of the work already underway within the care and justice system to remove stigmatising language from reports:

"I think the AI would get a bit confused and then maybe use language that isn't actually helpful within the system." **(Young person)**

"Yeah and then obviously all the CHAMPS[3] work in trying to make child report writing way more like personal and friendly and understandable. Part of the problem with current reports is like they're not personal, they're just very cold. AI is just going to carry that on. It just undermines all that work." **(Young person)**

In general, the same issues raised by young people in relation to AI improving **Access to Information**

were raised again when discussing accessibility.

3.3.4 Scale and Scope of Data it Can Use

Technology companies use huge amounts of data, often from open online sources, to train their LLM models. Likewise, both LLMs and machine learning tools can access and scan an enormous amount of data in order to produce an output, whether that is a simple answer to a question, or a report pulling from multiple sources which outlines annual statistics.

Some professionals viewed this element of AI positively. They noted that AI having access to a wide amount of data could help to join up fragmented systems within the public sector, where

[3] CHAMPS refers to Champions Boards, which aim to support young people with care experience to engage, challenge and influence those who make decisions about services which affect their lives

there are lots of different systems and resources being used. This could make it easier to navigate complex data landscapes, and see the 'bigger picture':

> *"But where important information is held across different databases and it isn't being put together. Just because of the volume of documents, because of resource etc., there could be a value in something that is able to scan a large number of documents and sort of pick out those things, but sort of as we have discussed there is huge potential risks there, so it is how that is implemented."*
>
> **(Wider advocacy professional)**

Generally this was a view only discussed by professionals, both in and outwith the Children's Hearings System; however, one parent suggested that AI could be used to improve the communication between official systems to avoid things being missed by humans:

> *"See the likes of the now, just an example, you know the three people who were killed in Nottingham... there was probably 20, 30 social workers involved and there wisnae [wasn't] any communication. So it's now comin' out – there's a [court case], and it's now coming out and sayin', 'well you didnae [didn't] advise this person, and you didnae advise that'. If you could put all that into AI, then that – there would be a red flag coming up and saying that person was – the guy was schizophrenic."* **(Parent/carer)**

Professionals also recognised that AI tools could have the capability to use this massive amount of data to produce statistics or summaries and identify trends, which some could see the positive sides of. This was however always caveated with the potential risks of this approach, including the potential for humans to become over-reliant on it and stop adequately checking it; the potential for data breaches to occur and the subsequent harm this could cause to children and young people and families; and privacy violations:

> *"I'm aware that it can trawl through huge quantities of information very quickly and it could have some very positive uses. But I also think you can't look at AI without thinking about all the negative connotations, and the potential abuses, or*

misuses, of it and the ways in which it could be deployed for unhelpful purposes." **(Legal Professional)**

"I mean I think in terms of reviewing large amounts of information and flagging where particular things come up I think that is probably to me a slightly more logical use of it. As long as you are not relying on that to make your choice and you are not ending up doing less like significantly less human review."

(Advocacy worker)

In addition to the need for human checks, privacy, data protection and consent were recurring concerns identified with AI's use of vast amounts of data. As evidenced in the sections on AI Knowledge and Prevalence, many understood that AI was routinely being used in their lives without explicit consent, and participants felt that their privacy was sometimes violated as a result. These issues were often closely linked to a perceived lack of transparency around what systems or services were using AI. Many of the participants were unaware that they had consented to their data being shared by accepting cookies on a website, or by using a mobile phone connected to the internet. This resulted in participants asking questions about who held their data and where their data was being stored. Although these concerns existed, there was a recognition that this lack of awareness was being driven by privacy notices and website terms and conditions not being read by the majority of internet or mobile phone users. Concerns around AI's access to huge amounts of data were more frequently expressed by adults than by young people:

"And that might get confusing insofar as if the protective factors - privacy notices, consent to data and data sharing, and who has what information about me is that held by a human? Is that held by a computer? In any or if each of those situations who has the right to do what with my information and we know that adults struggle with that, like I said, most adults don't read privacy notices."

(Advocacy worker)

"Usually we just accept the terms, we don't expect breaks in confidentiality. There are pages and pages of terms, no one is reading it." **(Parent/carer)**

Many participants mentioned the privacy of children and young people specifically, and how their rights may be impacted when they spend time online or using phones. This related to children's data being collected and used without their consent or knowledge, in addition to a perception that children and young people might be even more at risk of not understanding what they are consenting to (see also **AI's Impact on children and young people**):

"If you are going to use AI in the background then you know you if you have a child that is very young they wouldn't have the capacity to consent or not. It is going to happen." ***(SCRA staff member)***

"There is an issue about consent as well because although a lot of sites will pop things up saying do you consent a lot of times you just click and go. Young people don't really stop to read all that and understand the implications of consenting to their data being used and spread about. So I think that's definitely an issue."

(SCRA staff member)

Some worried about wider societal implications past their own personal privacy, and questioned whether AI tools could have the ability to violate human rights because of the scale and scope of data it has access to. These issues were particularly highlighted in relation to agencies of the state using AI to monitor, surveil and control citizens:

"And also if Police Scotland are using that you know in surveillances or you know to kind of look at people through cameras or whatever, at what point, where's your freedom lying there in terms of, you know, your right to do things. And if you're a law abiding citizen, how does that impact on that in terms of you being profiled or asked questions about when, when essentially you're not committing any crimes you know. And so I would worry about that." **(Other professional)**

Others highlighted that access to services is often predicated on consent, highlighting that individuals can be 'locked out' of services if you choose not to consent to your data being collected:

> *"You have to accept it, or it doesn't let you go any further."*
>
> **(Parent/carer)**

> *"If they're not buying into those systems which are fundamental systems within a society, are you still able to access those if you don't consent to that? Or are you locked out of that to an extent?"*
>
> **(Other professional)**

A further concern was that AI could take existing problems – such as fraud committed via telephone or online blackmail/sextortion – and amplify it, as a result of the scale and scope of data it has access to:

> *"I think what's different with AI is the scale and reach of it, you know [a human's] gonna reach half a dozen people, AI is gonna reach potentially you know millions, and much faster too... I suppose with it's the speed and the ability to change rapidly, and that's what makes AI different."* **(Panel member)**

> *"... with AI there is that added sort of layer of difficulty in determining who is the person I'm speaking to because it just makes it that much harder to determine because it can be so convincing."*
>
> **(Other professional)**

In the Children's Hearings System ... Scale and Scope of Data

AI's ability to collect huge amounts of data was also discussed within the context of the Children's Hearing System. Participants talked about AI being used to gather data from multiple sources, which could allow staff to see the bigger picture or identify key issues that might otherwise be missed:

> *"I think if you've got multiple reports coming in from multiple different people, it's a good way of being able to sort of pull everything together*

in one setting to maybe -- individually, signs might not point to things but together paints a bigger picture." **(Other professional)**

Some linked this directly with resource, noting that SCRA may not have the staff resources required to collate this amount of data efficiently and that AI could assist with this:

"I don't have a huge issue with using AI in this sense in terms of scanning documents and having it audit. You know, it sounds as though the reason SCRA don't have that information at the moment is because they don't have the manpower to do it. So you know, you could easily do this. You know, it'd be a difficult task to transcribe or have it on a spreadsheet or a database somewhere, but they don't have the manpower to do that with, whereas AI may allow them to have that manpower." **(Other professional)**

A small minority mentioned the potential long-term impacts of allowing AI-corporations to have access to sensitive data, and how that might impact the futures of children and young people currently in the system, with possibility that their information could be used against them in the future:

"And without wanting to sound too dystopian, one of my worries about AI is who owns the data that we are putting through these machines and systems. And what happens in 10 years' time, 15 years' time if that company or the organisation that owns it then sells that data to an organisation who then screens all this information and using them as a big, massive pool of data says [for example] okay anybody who has... had six adverse childhood experiences. We know the correlation between having six adverse childhood experiences and having cancer is significantly higher, so you are not going to get treated, or things of that nature. I just think the right for that child's privacy has gone if we hand this data over to some anonymous conglomerate organisation whose intentions is to get the best results for shareholders, rather than for the best interests of the child. Who then, who might be an adult by the time this comes to fruition." **(Advocacy worker)**

Others had concerns about privacy in relation to data training and storage, and specifically linked this to whether young people would consent to their data being collected by AI and stored outside of the Children's Hearings System:

> *"My concerns would be about the protection of people's data going into... like we talked earlier. Going into the system and to be used to pull information out but have they consented to that, do they know about that, what happens to that, where does it get stored..."* **(Advocacy worker)**

Some debated consent and data storage in a specific legal context, and queried how valuable data collection by AI would be if not everyone consented to it:

> *"Legally, you have to seek permission. I think from a GDPR perspective you have to seek permission to gather this data. So there, it would be OK to do that if people are saying that's OK, but then you've got the management of that. How do you select reports? How do you store and select reports where you identify people have said yes to it and people that have said no, and then at least the question is and how valuable is that data then if you've got 50% of saying no, you can't collect it and 50% you can. Then it's wasted activity."* **(CHS staff member)**

While a small minority of young people felt it may be okay to use AI for admin tasks, most young people felt uncomfortable with the idea of AI tools having access to their data at all and did not want their reports to be scanned. Overall, young people did not want AI having access to their sensitive and personal information:

> *"Like fair enough, tracking statistics like when someone does their weekly shopping. You can see what people buy the most, to see what changes people make, that's a fair thing. But when it's someone's life, where someone's living, people's traumas, people's whole life. That's not something an AI should be scanning through to see what changes have been made."* **(Young person)**

"... it makes me feel a bit icky."

(Young person)

Although almost all participants were clear that children and young people and families should be told if SCRA were to use AI, people were less sure about the legal position on opting out of AI use in a system in which families are compelled to participate (see **Consent, transparency, and proportionality**

).

3.3.5 Ability to Count/Analyse Things

Closely related to its ability to use vast sums of data is AI's ability to count or analyse things. This type of positive is often discussed in terms of machine learning and the ability of AI tools to carry out research or summarise findings. Some participants felt that AI was suited to these tasks, because of its perceived ability to analyse numbers more efficiently than a human. There were minimal concerns about using AI in this way; however, it was made clear that data analysed by AI systems should be reviewed, monitored and interpreted by humans. Participants did not believe that too much reliance could be placed on data collected, counted, or analysed by AI:

"I mean, I can think of applications like that in our own business where it might be useful to have a high level number, even if you know it's not going to be 100% reliable. It will give you an indication of the sorts of numbers involved. So I can see that it would be useful, even if you knew that you couldn't set too much store by it."

(Legal professional)

Concerns were raised that AI would lack the required nuance when analysing textual data. This often referred to data quality – see previous section on **Access to Information**

– but also concerns that AI would not include all of the important or relevant information when creating summaries. It was felt that this could lead to AI getting things wrong, because it didn't understand the context of what it was analysing. This was considered to be particularly relevant when summarising large amounts of information:

"The one thing I would say is I think some of the nuance of the situation could get lost if an AI is used. To go back to my boring Amazon example, I don't like the Amazon AI generated reviews. I like to read what actual

people have said and just I don't know, purely just being older or whatever I think cynically, I'm like, well, no, you're trying to hide something from me or trying to massage the information to make it fit a certain way, or a certain narrative."

(Other professional)

"I can see that they're, especially the summarising documents, there's an element of positivity within that. But then also there's a lot of information and you could just not understand. Or you could misconstrue because the summarizations of it are actually not accurate because there's a wider range of information behind that and there's context behind that. Actually the summarization could be something that's actually completely inaccurate because you've not read the context of it. So it could mean something else."

(Advocacy Worker)

Another concern was AI's lack of ability to deal with complex information in a nuanced way, and how this might impact its recognition of risk.

This refers specifically to risk profiling tools. While some felt AI could collect facts and data, they had more concerns about AI's ability to analyse subjective information:

"I think it's that's where it gets a bit tricky for me is that that ability to, an AI tool's ability to move from collection of facts and data to critical analysis of that data." **(CHS staff member)**

"I just don't, some of these tools, I just don't trust them because different people have different thoughts around what risk is."

(CHS staff member)

AI's perceived lack of ability to detect nuance was felt most strongly when it was discussed in terms of the human ability to apply professional experiences, intuition, and empathy to understand the behaviours and actions of others within specific contexts. This point is explored further in **Being human**

.

In the Children's Hearings System … Ability to Count/Analyse Things

Some participants welcomed the idea of using AI to collect or input information within the Children's Hearing System, with the usual caveats around checks required. This type of use was seen as less problematic if there was no way to identify individuals from the output, if the gathered data could help to improve the system, or if the information gathered was only 'high level', as in scenario 1:

> *"Actually feel totally fine about [scenario 1 - scanning case files to see how many children and young people have ADHD] because it won't be identifiable to an individual so, and I actually think this type of information would be extremely useful for helping us figure out if we're getting the hearings right for children."*
>
> **(CHS staff member)**

Equally, people were generally positive about AI counting things, providing a human checked the results:

> *"This [scenario 1] is a standard way of using AI, I'm surprised you haven't thought about it before actually. It's useful, it needs to be monitored by humans, but it would be… It's a really, really useful way of extracting the data that you want. I think it's a no brainer, personally."*
>
> **(Panel Member)**

Some also pointed out that AI may be able to collate and count data that is currently not available to SCRA:

> *"Do you know in that way I don't think I have got a problem with it because I really do feel that we don't have enough information about this kind of thing on our system… So to know if there is kids or even adults with disabilities coming to a hearing would be really useful. Very useful and for AI to be able to pick that up… because as humans we are not picking it up. So for something to be able to pick that up I can only see a good outcome there."*
>
> **(SCRA staff member)**

Reflecting wider views on AI's ability to counting and analysing, many participants felt that while AI might be capable of collating and counting data, it would not be capable of the nuance needed to analyse it or make decisions, particularly within the complexity of the

children's hearing system. This most often came up in relation to scenarios 2 (summarising reports) and 3 (risk profiling):

> *"And would an AI really, really pick up on the nuance and the ability to read between the lines and reports? And you know, actually understand. It is like quite a lot of nuance of like what might be really going on, if it's just looking for phrases like 'plays football' or 'goes swimming' but not really understand the context in which that is being said or what that might mean to that young person. Would be very worried about, it might completely miss the point. Yeah, really not sure about that one [scenario 2 – summarising reports] at all."*
>
> **(Advocacy worker)**

Context was also important. Several participants talked specifically about efforts to address language changes in the Children's Hearings System.

They were concerned that AI might undermine these efforts because it cannot understand or analyse meaning and therefore may misunderstand or misrepresent the context of the language used in any inputs it uses:

> *"So the prompts that we might be getting for reports or documents and communications might actually be working against what we're trying to use for language in the hearing room, or actually the culture in a particular region in Scotland. You know, it's the nuance of how something is said, you know, can be learned differently depending what region you're in... or it can miss the fact that we're actually trying to create this more trauma-informed or you know, [be] led by a certain language..."*
>
> **(CHS staff member)**

Others talked about the lack of transparency in AI systems, particularly if they come from an external supplier, rather than being developed internally, and how this could result in a lack of clarity around analysis and decision making:

> *"I think just one other point is that something that kind of mentioned is sometimes one of the bad things is there is a lack of clarity in how it's come to a decision. So back to that, I think I mentioned before the black box. So you know you can put the data in, and it'll come out with a decision or a number or something. But it's, there's no, there's not*

always a clarity or understanding on how that decision has come to has been come to." **(Panel Member)**

With reference to risk assessments specifically, participants were generally wary of relying primarily on AI to carry out this kind of work. Some participants felt it would be okay to use risk profiling tools to analyse data alongside humans' analysis:

"It's such a high stakes conversation that it feels initially wrong to trust a computer to it. However, identifying and analysing things like this is something computers tend to be quite good at, and giving an output. So there's sort of lifestyle risks will lead you to an increased risk of heart disease or something like that. Computers are used to doing this and we trust to some extent then, their ability to do that, so I would probably feel comfortable with this [scenario 3 – risk assessment] if it was an 'as well as' scenario." **(Advocacy worker)**

Some worried however about how risk profiling might bias human judgement, while others were concerned about accountability. All participants who discussed the idea of risk profiling (scenario 3) stressed the important of the human professional being the final arbiter of any interpretation of the 'scores' produced:

"Because if you would be judged on that decision and it was being questioned, you could not fall back and say it wasn't a professional decision, it was an AI decision. So that's where the professionals' knowledge and skills need to be at the forefront in terms of interpreting that data and that's got to be clear." **(Other Professional)**

"Maybe it provided a double, triple check if it is flagging that and social work haven't said anything, and it enables us to ask the question of social work around that maybe. To again, you know probe and tease the information, further information and identify the source of evidence should there be some, to be able to present that possibly. But again, as a standalone as you guys have sort of said, I would never think that we would be able to be like oh okay great that's [that] ground, done."

(SCRA staff member)

For further discussion of the importance of human involvement in decision making, see **Human involvement**

.

3.3.6 Consistency

While most participants worried about AI's ability to detect nuance, a small minority felt that AI might be more consistent than humans when carrying out some specific tasks. This was talked about in the context of humans carrying out routine administration work. Some argued that AI could not feel boredom or complacency, so the tasks would be carried out more consistently:

> *"The type of role I'm in now, it's quite heavy in terms of admin, my brain has not really worked in a world like that, coming into this team... it's easy to get caught up in the humdrum of it and not really pay particular attention, when there's not real risk of anything. I'm thinking of like a policy document or... whatever it is, it's really easy to just go into neutral. Where, having AI to make sure that the important bits aren't missed. Again, just as a prompt for you as the human, a tool for you that you're not going to miss something just because it's a mundane routine thing. You won't get that with AI, it's not going to think 'Oh man, I'm going to have to do this 100 times'."*
>
> **(Other Professional)**

One participant expanded on this idea, explaining how humans are not designed to consistently perform certain tasks; resulting in variability in the quality of work that is produced. It was identified that AI could be used to provide more consistent outputs:

> *"So for me this is the type of area I think we should be exploring for AI because this is something that I said earlier, the human brain is not well adapted to. So we tend to read what we think it should say a lot of the time, rather than necessarily what it does [say], and when we are scanning large documents it is difficult to retain attention and to pull things out. I think it is a really, really difficult job to ask people to do. It is actually almost like, yes you are asking maybe to do a task very, very*

different from what they normally would, and we know that people are not particularly good at this." **(SCRA staff member)**

In the Children's Hearings System ... Consistency

Some participants felt that AI could be more consistent than humans when dealing with subjective issues, such as the potential risks for a child:

"I'm also thinking could [scenario 3 – risk assessment] be helpful in terms of like identifying kind of where the risks are for multiple young people as well so that you're not... reducing the risks through one person's perspective for one child, but then it could be the exact same risks for our child but another person's seen that as higher... So it could then allow for, you know, risks that are the same for two different children and young people, and two different people are looking at that, that they could then ensure that they're being treated the same and that the risks are as high as they should be, and nobody's kind of filtering them slightly and reducing them."

(Advocacy worker)

Others thought AI could bring more consistency to the services we provide to young people, either through standardising report writing or assisting with processes:

"And it [scenario 2 – summary report] makes everything consistent as well. It makes it all the same format for kids to look at and understand. And then yeah, someone like beefs it out then it means that everyone's falling the same format, and it can be easy to understand."

(CHS staff member)

"So if everybody just sings off the same sheet, then hopefully we would be making better choices for these children."

(Legal Professional)

Redaction was a task that many participants thought AI might be better at than humans, again because it was felt that AI tools would be better at consistently picking out data to be redacted. People discussed how difficult a task redaction was for humans, and generally

reacted quite positively to the idea of AI being used to undertake this task, with human checks in place:

> *"My general sense was that it is a very stressful process. And I see a lot of responsibility placed on people to, you know, like we all we all can proofread something and still miss something over and over and over again because we what we're reading what we want to believe we're reading or what we want to read rather than what's actually written down. So it's it is something that is so easily done so."*
>
> **(Social worker)**

People who had experience of redacting reports often highlighted that it could be a stressful process because of the potential consequences – harm to children and young people and their families – if they made mistakes. The use of AI with strong human oversight was seen as a potential way of reducing staff stress.

3.3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the nuanced and complex impacts of AI. When participants discussed potential uses of AI, they almost always raised both positive and negative impacts. Participants raised several potential benefits of using AI in the Children's Hearings System, including: efficiency; access to information; accessibility; the scale and scope of data it can use; the ability to count/ analyse; and consistency. They also raised several potential risks and unintended consequences, including: increased workloads and inefficiencies; inaccuracies, lack of nuance and potential for exacerbating trauma through AI-generated outputs; concerns around data protection, privacy, and meaningful informed consent; impacts on human decision-making, including because of incomplete or inaccurate data; and a lack of transparency around how decisions are made.

3.4 Findings chapter 4: Moving forward

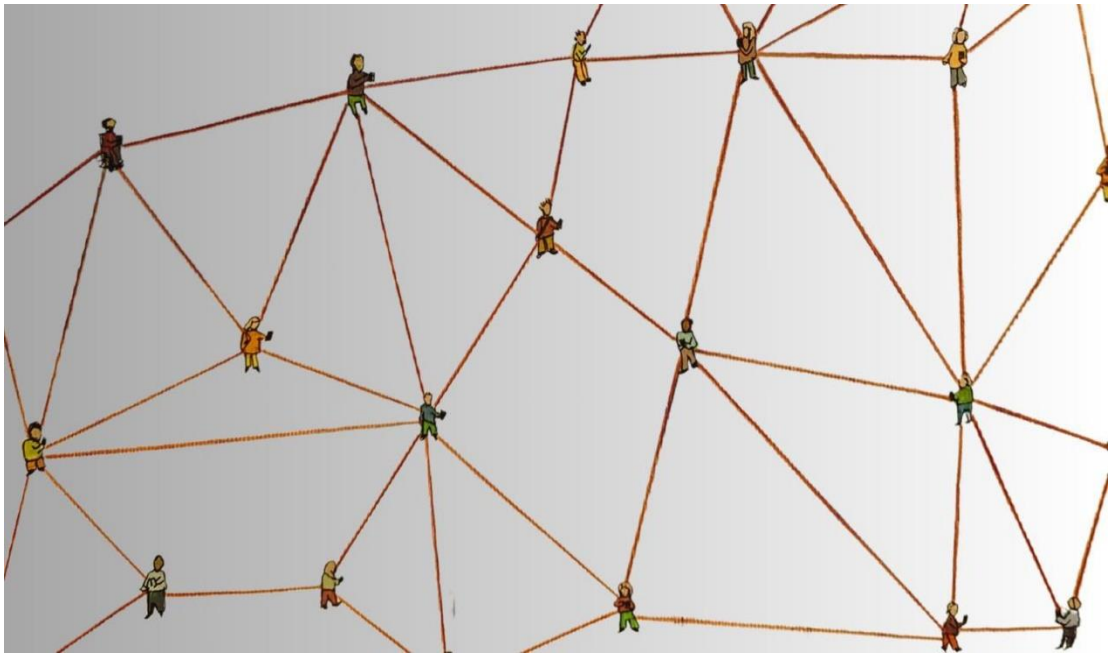


Figure 5: Jamillah Knowles & Reset.Tech Australia / https://betterimagesofai.org / © https://au.reset.tech/ / https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

The previous chapter explored the benefits and risks of AI use within and beyond the Children's Hearings System. This chapter first focuses on participants' views on whether and how AI should be used within the Children's Hearings System. It then considers the safeguards that would need to be in place to make AI safe and acceptable to use in this context. These safeguards focus on human involvement in AI processes and outputs, and regulation, implementation and governance.

Chapter Summary

Although there was a general sense of inevitability about AI use within the Children's Hearings System, participants were not wholly positive about it and they often appeared resigned to the idea rather than excited about it.

A minority were positive about the idea of using AI within the Children's Hearings System and were optimistic and excited about the opportunities the technology could bring, but these participants still emphasised that safeguards would need to be in place for AI use to be safe and acceptable.

Participants often said that AI technology was a 'sticking plaster' for much wider, systemic issues resulting from over-worked and underfunded public sector departments. This led some to question whether AI was really the solution, or whether these problems should instead be addressed at source.

There was a strong consensus that any work carried out by AI within the Children's Hearings System should always include built-in elements of human intervention. Human checking and oversight were described as necessary across all the potential functions of AI discussed, including in administrative tasks. Crucially, participants were clear that any decision-making affecting children and young people and their families should always be the responsibility of humans and should not be left to AI.

Participants consistently pointed out that any AI use in the Children's Hearings System would need to be implemented with safeguards. The strongest of these was the need for humans to be involved throughout the entire process, including through decision-making, checking, relational work, and accountability.

The strongest of these was the need for humans to be involved throughout the entire process, including through decision-making, checking, relational work, and accountability. This was not only about avoiding inaccuracies and misunderstandings, but also about ensuring that children and young people and their families understood what was happening, being trauma informed, and improving participation.

Other safeguards related to regulation, implementation and governance. Participants stressed the importance of careful planning, training and testing before AI systems were implemented. They also highlighted that issues around: consent, transparency and proportionality; data protection and privacy; and challenge, ownership and accountability should be carefully considered at this stage.

3.4.1 Is AI within the Children's Hearings System inevitable?

Throughout the workshops there was a strong sense from participants that AI use was inevitable; AI tools are already so deeply embedded into our society that it can feel impossible to turn off, resist or ignore their use. Many participants expressed a view that AI is already here, and that it is here to stay:

> *"I think AI is here. It's definitely here and it's not going to go anywhere."*
>
> **(Legal professional)**

This sense of inevitability was also expressed within the context of using AI in the Children's Hearing System. Most professional participants said that SCRA should continue to explore the use of AI. Some even worried about SCRA being 'left behind' if they chose not to explore AI:

> *"So I think SCRA should definitely continue exploring it because I think the only way they're going to understand it and understand how to effectively use it is by continuing to explore it. So I think that that's an important thing. I think it's important for any organisation because if you don't, you'll get left behind."*
>
> **(Legal professional)**

> *"I don't know that there's a choice in AI generally. I mean, to me, it feels like we need to be on it because it's going to happen in whatever form... it is going to be part of our lives. You know, so if we don't get up to speed with it and understand it and start using it then, then others will and we will, we will be left behind."*
>
> **(Social worker)**

Despite this, none of the participants had a wholly positive outlook on the idea that AI use was inevitable at SCRA. A small minority were optimistic and excited about the opportunities the technology could bring, but these participants still had mixed views. They were keen to highlight the potential risks involved, and often reiterated that real-world applications of AI were likely to reflect existing problems in the human world (see **AI systems in a human world**

):

"It is going to happen, it's going to revolutionise the world, the way the Internet did. We need to get up, get with the picture and make sure it happens in the best, most ethical way we can in, you know, it's going to happen so. Yeah, I don't know. I have worries about it. I have hopes for it. Feel quite mixed about it. Don't really trust society to do it very well. But it is going to happen, so we need to grapple with the problem of it."

(Advocacy worker)

Many participants accepted that AI implementation was inevitable within the Children's Hearings System, but they were very cautious and stressed how important it was to proceed carefully, with safeguarding and regulation in place. They often noted how important it was to be proactive and prepared for AI implementation:

"It's something that I don't think you could ignore, and it would be better to be prepared and researched, than have its use elsewhere and find that it was impacting on the role of SCRA without preparation, so yeah, I think you should keep going."

(Panel member)

Some participants viewed the inevitable use of AI in the sector with a feeling of resignation. They talked about it being too late to change things and felt that their voices and opinions on AI did not matter. Others noted that they were simply being realistic in accepting that it was going to happen whether they were supportive of it or not. This view was more prevalent amongst parents, carers and advocacy workers:

"I don't mean to be like dystopian doom-monger, but it doesn't really matter how I feel, it's coming."

(Advocacy worker)

"Ah don't 'hink there's any way to avoid it noo [now], ah don't 'hink that like, ah know it sounds bad but see like this [research workshop], that isnae [isn't] gonna change this world, and how it evolves, so."

(Parent/carer)

A small number of participants challenged the idea that the adoption of AI was inevitable in the Children's Hearing System. Some argued that just because we can do something with AI, does not mean we should; sometimes the potential risks or costs outweigh the benefits. Participants were keen to avoid the Children's Hearings System using AI just because it was possible, when it may be simpler, less risky, or more efficient to do things another way:

> *"Just because something, in this case AI, can do something doesn't necessarily mean you should go down that route. There may be other, easier, less complicated, less risky ways of doing something."*
>
> **(Panel member)**

> *"It can be useful, but also on the same hand, you can get people to do it [instead]. Like translators and sort of, someone to explain the jargon, you can hire people for that."*
>
> **(Young person)**

One wider advocacy worker noted that there was an alternative pathway to accepting AI's inevitability; SCRA could use this opportunity to learn from mistakes made with other technologies, like the internet and social media:

> *"... I worry we are doing a bit like what we did with the internet overall which is just running ahead and then we end up in a place we don't want to be in terms of how it is regulated, and how those who profit from it adopt the system. I am all a bit doom and gloom about some aspects of it but just because if I think the way we have ended up with the internet and social media I think it would be nice if this was an opportunity to learn how not to approach it that way and end up where we are. But I am not sure if that will happen."*
>
> **(Wider advocacy professionals)**

Spotlight on Children and Young People
Inevitability

Young people's views differed significantly from the views of adult participants on the inevitability of AI being used in public services. They did not view AI use in SCRA as a foregone conclusion at all and often had very strong negative reactions to the theoretical scenarios of AI use presented:

"I don't think there's any benefit to the child [of using AI in the Children's Hearings System]. They might ask ChatGPT 'what's my verdict?' and expect the AI to be the same, but you get different answers all the time." **(Young person)**

"I think it's just a way of creating shortcuts, when it's something you shouldn't really be making shortcuts for." **(Young person)**

"It's fine in banking apps, and like Nintendo Switch and sometimes algorithms on social media, sometimes, if it's showing you good stuff that you like... it's got limited uses and I think a) we're close to finding all the ones that are good and can function beside us, or b) we've already found them, so let's stop here." **(Young person)**

They also worried about AI use snowballing in the sector, with the technology taking on more of a role, and staff becoming over reliant on it as time goes on:

"What if they use it for one thing, and then think 'Oh this is working', so they use it for another thing, and another thing, and another thing." **(Young person)**

Some argued that the money and time spent on AI development would be better used elsewhere at SCRA, including working towards keeping the Promise by 2030, recovering from the impact of Covid, and direct support work with young people:

"I think there's other things they should be looking at putting time and money into."

(Young person)

"Then you're using money for [training staff in how to use new AI systems] … there's then no money to support young people." **(Young person)**

A small minority felt that it would be okay to use AI at SCRA for basic admin tasks. Like their adult counterparts, the two young people who showed less reluctance to the further exploration of AI both stressed the need to take the time to develop a safe system:

"If it's looked at now, like obviously not trying to finish this, take the time that's needed to develop it properly and ensure that it's safe, it means that you can build a safer system and make sure it goes well. So personally, I'm okay with it as long as it is heavily monitored."

(Young person)

"Yes but just keep a close eye on it. So there is nothing wrong with it."

(Young person)

3.4.2 Other Potential Uses in the Children's Hearings System

Throughout the workshops, participants came up with a range of ways they felt AI could be used in the children's hearing system. Sometimes participants brought these ideas to the workshops, sometimes they offered them as alternatives to the hypothetical scenarios we were discussing, and sometimes they arose at the end of the workshops when participants were reflecting on whether SCRA should keep looking into AI. Most of these ideas focused on administration, participation and accessibility tools, or the potential for an interactive database or Standard Operating Manual (SOM). Often, when people raised ideas, they were challenged by others in the workshop, highlighting the need for caution. The resulting discussions about the pros and cons of AI use have been analysed alongside the rest of the data throughout this report. A full list of potential uses raised by participants is listed in **Appendix I**.

3.4.3 System Saver Vs Sticking Plaster

While some participants said that AI could be used to improve the Children's Hearing System, others questioned whether it was simply a "sticking plaster" for much wider, systemic issues. One way in which this surfaced repeatedly across all groups was in relation to data; specifically, participants talked about missing data and poor data quality:

> *"You know, it opens more questions to it's kind of like, but why are these questions not being asked in the first place? Why is the data not being gathered manually? Is there something about the system itself that isn't necessarily paying attention to these details and therefore does it fix it to look at it in retrospect?"* **(Advocacy worker)**

> *"This for me, highlights inadequacies within services. If you're missing this type of information then I feel that AI would be sort of like a sticky plaster over the top of that, like we can just turn [our] brains off because AI is going to pick it up when really, we should be understanding the needs of the children and young people. Surely that's exactly what it's about? Surely, we shouldn't have a system that's set up to support children and young people, and we don't even know their individual needs. I just feel like if we are missing this, there's a much bigger problem."* **(SCRA staff member)**

Report writing was seen to be another widespread issue in the system. Participants discussed why SCRA were considering using AI to create summaries from existing reports rather than addressing the underlying issue of reports that are too long, cold, and not child-friendly (see also: **Access to Information**

):

> *"If we are going to have to put all that effort and energy into making the report so excellent that you can generate something sensible with AI why not put the effort and energy into just making the report better and maybe doing this with a human."* **(SCRA staff member)**

"We've not even made children's reports good yet, written by humans. Are we not literally doing all this work right now to not make children's reports not be evil to the children who have to read them."

(Young person)

Others talked about AI and risk profiling, noting that the problem was a lack of staff understanding or training around risk factors. They noted that more understanding, awareness and training was required, not an AI tool:

"I would hope that the people involved with the child would have spotted this particular thing already. I'm not sure that an AI taking it out of reports is going to suddenly highlight something that you would hope would already be there, but perhaps I'm wrong."

(Panel member)

"The way, fundamentally, I believe that the way to address adults being unable to recognise risk, is to train them better at recognising risk and that needs to be, in my view, what would address the situation. If childhood sexual exploitation is often not recognised even by professionals, the professionals need to be sent on training... It needs to be monitored as a gap in their knowledge or risk factor around their practice and it needs to be addressed."

(Advocacy worker)

There was widespread recognition that the issues in the system were the result of over-worked and underfunded public sector departments. Some linked this explicitly to a push for AI as a solution but questioned whether this was the right route to take, as it would not necessarily solve the root problems. There were also concerns that investment in AI would reduce funding for frontline services:

"And I worry that there's an AI drive at the moment because people are so bare to the bone in public services and they don't have the resources required and this is just seen as another efficiency measure to help manage that, when actually the companies that are developing it are people like Amazon and Google, where it is about business and being as kind of efficient as possible... they have huge budgets behind them, whereas public services don't, and you may just be shifting the

problem as opposed to dealing with the root cause, which is actually poor funding." **(Other professional)**

3.4.4 Safeguards

Participants consistently pointed out that any AI use in the Children's Hearings System would need to be implemented with safeguards. The strongest of these was the need for a human to always be involved throughout the entire process, including through decision-making, checking, relational work explaining outputs to children and young people and families, and accountability afterwards. Other safeguards highlighted were focused on regulation, implementation and governance. These included the importance of regulation, training and testing; consent, transparency and proportionality; data protection and privacy; and challenge, ownership and accountability. These are discussed in turn below.

Human involvement

Decision-making

Human decision making was described as crucial by participants across all the groups. Even those who were extremely positive about the potential uses of AI in the children's hearings system emphasised that final decisions should always be made by a trained human. This was related to humans' ability to understand context and complexity – or 'read between the lines', emotional intelligence, and professional training and experience. A very strong message across all the groups was that AI could be useful as a tool but should never be used as a replacement for human decision making:

"I think it needs to be like a safeguard to double check it all, that you just don't look at a score and say, 'oh, that's high'. As P1 said, you just can't march in and say, well, your score's high, you're doing something. It's maybe an indication, but it's how it's handled after you get the indication, the double checks that you've got to do."

(Panel member)

Over the course of conversations about AI's potential role in decision making, participants often acknowledged that decision making was a complex area and raised questions about how the use of AI by SCRA could affect reporter decision making. These questions included

whether and how humans may be influenced by inaccurate or overly simplistic AI inputs; whether the perceived neutrality of AI would lead to it being given too much importance; whether humans would come to rely on AI decision-making and lose these skills themselves; and how to ensure reporters remained free to disagree with AI systems without taking professional risks. They didn't always reach a conclusion about how to ensure decision making was positively supported by AI, more often highlighting that this would require extreme caution and careful consideration before introducing AI to support decision making. Participants also highlighted the need for guidance and regulation to support people to feel confident about using AI appropriately. They also wanted assurance that using AI would not reinforce or exacerbate pre-existing inequalities or bias in decision-making:

> *"... often people might have made up their mind and then they are looking for information that just supports their view and I wonder whether what the AI is saying, if this supports their view, it will be 'there you go, it is obvious, it is fact'. And if it doesn't it is like, 'well it is a computer it doesn't really understand'."* **(Social worker)**

> *"[Scenario 3 – risk assessment] would need to come with health warnings, that you can't totally rely on that. You need to still go and do the investigation and the assessment and decision making for yourself. It is highlighting a concern to you, it is highlighting factors that play into that concern, but you still need to do the work yourself."*
>
> **(SCRA staff member)**

Participants were reflective about the human potential for inconsistent decision making, but highlighted that humans could mitigate against this by being reflective and transparent about how they had made decisions:

> *"I have sat in hearings and you know one very strong character or one very upset parent at the right moment, it can just shift sort of the direction of a hearing and... we bring our own stuff, we bring our own emotions, we bring whether we slept last night or not, we bring all these different things that affect decision making when we are at the point of making really important decisions about children's lives. It is tough.*

But yes, that is just how, yes people's ability to be really clear that 'this is my decision, it is influenced in this way, this is what I have taken, this is how I have balanced all these mitigating factors against the risk to the sort of future welfare of this child…'" **(Social worker)**

Some participants expressed concern about the potential lack of transparency in how AI assessed risk (scenario 3). They pointed out that assessing risk was not a straightforward process that could be carried out by an algorithm, because each child and each situation is unique and should be assessed on an individual basis:

"My fear is that a computer decides. Not every child is the same – there might be certain flags for a child, but they may not be being exploited, while another child might not have all the flags, but they may be more vulnerable in a certain sense. So that's why it's important that a reporter is making those decisions, reviewing those files. I think as a tool, used by humans, but yeah…I do have my concerns about it being relied upon to do a specialist job."

(Other professional)

Participants were keenly aware that risk assessment in the Children's Hearings System was very high stakes, with vulnerable children's safety and wellbeing relying on accurate assessments and informed decisions. For some, the stakes were simply too high to rely on 'a formula' that could be used by an AI system to identify risk:

"…calculating risk is not an exact science. So I don't think there is a way to create a formula that will always correctly identify where the riskier situations are, and because of potentially catastrophic implications of us not identifying risk, that concerns me."

(SCRA staff member)

Participants were not always opposed to the idea of using AI as a tool to help identify risk. Many participants could see the utility of using AI to read through all the reports about a particular child, search for particular words or phrases that correlated with identified risks, and come up with a risk score for the reporter to use to support their decision making, particularly in the context of CSE (scenario 3), which is under-recognised (Kelly & Karsna, 2018; Henderson et al., 2020). Some participants felt that using AI input to support decision making could potentially help to mitigate against human bias:

"I think if this is an 'as well as' and adjunct to professionals being well trained and being aware, I wonder if it might actually be one of those situations where this could be an example of AI helping to remove or undermine human biases... For example, in like a small community you might know the family really well and you might not think about the possibility of CSE because of that, whereas a computer wouldn't be suffering from that bias."

(Advocacy worker)

"The only thing I would say that if there is a children's panel, they can make wrong decisions as well... they could come out wae somethin', so. I think it might be a better option to use both, and it might be better to make a decision on [both], rather than just say we've just based it on your knowledge and stuff like that, because it's no always right."

(Parent/carer)

Others were concerned that human decision making could be too influenced by AI suggestions because it would be seen as neutral and therefore trusted too much and given too much weight:

"We're not conscious of what's influencing our decisions at times. So, it's very easy to be exploited and pushed in certain directions because you have this apparently neutral source of information prompting you to act in certain ways. So, I think within a hearing system, as in any other context, that could be detrimental."

(Panel member)

Similarly, some were concerned that it may be difficult for people to overrule AI recommendations, or make decisions that conflicted with AI risk analysis, knowing that these decisions will have implications and may be held against them in future:

"My main issue though with it is to what extent does this then push everybody into being very risk averse and very scared about the consequences of bringing in their own decision making... there will always be mistakes, there'll always be things that are overlooked. So if I'm a reporter and I get a report that says this is a 26 or whatever, CSE risk. Even if I then speak to everyone and conclude that actually the AI

is going wrong, there always be a bit of me that thinks 'well, you know what, what if it was right' and a year or two years down the line, I then get pulled up at a disciplinary about overruling what the computer said. So I think there's, when you're bringing in, you know, AI and human decision making and it's high stakes, I think there has to be safeguards there for the humans..."

(Social worker)

Many, including some young people, pointed out that decision making in the Children's Hearings System is, like all decision making, made in the context of people's real lives, and is therefore affected by the workload, knowledge and experience, and skills of the person using it. In a sector where people are under pressure and have high workloads, it was felt that professionals may be tempted to use AI as a decision maker rather than a tool to support meaningful, complex human decision making:

"... it gives me the heebie jeebies. I just hate the thought of it... just in general. Just with it being used within the hearings system, especially around big decisions and how that could sway, y'know the professionals around it. I know it would be so easy with how stressed and how obviously, it's really hard to get social workers these days, and I understand the stress that must come from the professionals that are supporting the child. And then I think it would be too easy to be like, 'Oh the AI said this, that's it done, I can now focus on something else'. I feel that really we just have to cling to humanity in this situation and use that as our forefront."

(Young person)

Similarly, participants from various professional groups and panel members suggested that a potential longer-term consequence of using AI tools to support decision making might be that people might start writing reports in a different way so that the AI systems would pick up on the words or cues in the reports. This in turn could affect the type of evidence that is presented to reporters, and therefore affect the decisions being made. For instance, it was highlighted that reports which were written in a particular way could be more likely to be picked up by an AI system and then possibly given higher priority by the reporter who is then looking at the risk scores:

"And also do the people writing those reports know the trigger words... that are going to get families that you're working with bumped up the list, or lower down the list? Do you know what's going to happen? And again, what is also a worry is if services like social work or teachers start using AI to produce reports then you then get AI informing AI and I think that's... a problem, I think."

(Other Professionals)

All participants pointed out that the way in which tools to support decision making were used by the people using them would be crucial to whether their use was acceptable or appropriate. The most common view was that AI tools should support, not lead, decision making:

"But I think it is the combination of the AI and the human. I think AI can be used to enhance our decision making and assessment skills, it shouldn't just be used to replace [them]."

(SCRA staff member)

"... that's you sayin' AI is there to help you make a decision, that's fine. As long as it's not AI makin' that decision, not the robot tellin' us that wean [child] is gonna stay, or that robot has decided. I say the robot, I mean the artificial intelligence. See if it can give its opinions, it should be the humans discussing whether it's right or not. And then comin' to an agreement. It's just how it's all used."

(Parent/carer)

Some participants suggested that to avoid being unduly influenced by AI, the tools could be used to provide a secondary check after the reporter had already made an initial decision, rather than as a tool to flag issues before an investigation:

"[It could be] beneficial for the reporter to have a decision, then maybe see the results of these tools. So then it doesn't create a bias before the reporter has even looked at the, through their own decision making."

(SCRA staff member)

"... if it was used as an aside, so you do your own investigation first and then you use this to see if there's anything you may have missed, that would be better than having it from the onset. Because if you get this

and then you go researching, you go with, you already go with the bias of it's negative. So you'll go looking for excuses to back up this point, do you know what I mean?" **(Young person)**

Overall, young people were not in favour of involving AI in decision-making processes that affected the lives of children and young people and their families (see 'spotlight on children and young people – the importance of human involvement).

Human checking

Many participants said that successfully using AI is about interacting with it, rather than expecting it to complete tasks by itself. People gave examples of this from their daily lives; for example, an advocacy worker said that when using Chat GPT they still check its fitness for purpose and change it as required before use, while a young person said that they would consider using AI to help them to structure a CV but not to write it. This need to interact with and check AI outputs extended to participants' views on using AI in the Children's Hearings System, with participants across all groups emphasising the importance of human checking and monitoring. The key reasons for wanting human oversight was partly about maximising accuracy and minimising bias, and partly because the nature of the work carried out in the Children's Hearings System means there is potential for life-changing implications if mistakes are made:

"[not including a human check] would be lazy and like unethical."

(Young person)

"...having those checks and balances and not automatically thinking because of a computer system has said this, that that's the reality."

(Advocacy worker)

Human checking was seen as important because humans were described as being able to do things that AI could not do. This included being able to look at the 'bigger picture' to identify what information might be missing or unknown, as well as 'reading between the lines', to identify where further investigation is required. It also included having an understanding of how written information can be informed by both verbal and non-verbal communication:

"...if a human or an experienced person was reading the report there might not be any trigger words like alcohol etc. but they would be able to identify that that might flag up an issue that you would only

recognise by noticing something actually being missing from the report. Whereas AI wouldn't be able to identify that... reading that as an experienced professional you would be able to notice something that you would want to bring up, that might become important."

(CHS staff member)

AI systems were largely considered to be incapable of understanding context, lacking emotional intelligence, and unable to provide meaningful critical analysis. The need for humans to provide critical analysis was cited as an additional reason human oversight was important:

"... I think in terms of the emotional intelligence and reading the room, I still feel that... there has to be element of human, which will be almost, looking at this analysis and putting this into context or in terms of children and young people and children's hearings."

(Advocacy worker)

Participants across all groups pointed out or alluded to the risk of humans developing an over-reliance on AI, or assuming that the outputs it provided were correct and therefore not checking them properly. They highlighted that this risk would be heightened if staff workloads were too high. Participants were also concerned that any time saved by using AI would be used to give people more work rather than being used to improve relational practice or improve the work-life balance of staff (see **System Saver Vs Sticking Plaster**

for more details):

"It can go really, really wrong and if there was an AI kind of helping to write that, and then there's meant to be a human checking it, are they actually going to be given the time to thoroughly sit down and do that, or will there be more of an assumption that, 'Oh well. You know... I'm going to glance at it, but I actually do not have the time to properly think about it."

(Advocacy worker)

Human checks following an AI carrying out administrative tasks such as automated redaction or form-populating were considered by some to be relatively straightforward, as any checks required would be related to the AI accurately identifying information it had been asked to find. However, several participants, including social workers and

parents/carers, pointed out that even simple redaction tasks requiring critical thinking skills to ensure that things are not missed. An example given of this was an AI not knowing that it is important to remove the names of teachers, school class names, or slang terms for places or people in the local area when redacting documents as these pieces of information can, when combined with a basic online search or knowledge of the local area, identify a child even once their address has been removed:

> *"I assume the responsibility again would still lie with the report writers to make sure that, you know, they're trying to reduce... those identifiable issues such as class teachers, names, schools like you say swimming pools or youth worker names... But yeah, I think overall that would be a really helpful. But with the element of the human side still reading through that to check for those nuanced kind of aspects of the redactions for non-disclosure, so yeah."*
>
> **(Social worker)**

> *"... [redaction is] an art, not a science... every time I redact something, it's on the balance, you know, do I redact that on the balance of this?... and you have to sort of then justify why did that happen? Why did you redact that bit and not that bit? It's a really, really difficult job to do effectively... There are some basic rules, but it's the way that the rules are interpreted for each different circumstance, for each different individual. That is why it's so stressful and so time consuming because it's not just a tick box exercise. I think it would need to be really, really sophisticated to actually, you know, navigate this."*
>
> **(Wider advocacy professional)**

Those who pointed out the nuance and complexity involved in these types of tasks often had experience of carrying them out, so understood the level of human checking that would be required. This highlights the crucial importance of involving those with direct knowledge and experience of particular tasks in the design, testing and implementation of any AI uses.

For tasks involving summarising information, participants were overwhelmingly positive about the idea of summary reports being made available to young people (as outlined in scenario 2). However, they commonly raised concerns about how summary reports produced by AI could be adequately checked, as well as the moral and ethical problems with an AI system doing this work (see **Emotion, values and intuition**

). Concerns about how AI-produced summaries would be checked centred on the need for any human checker needing to compare the AI output with the original source data, thereby replicating the work that the AI had carried out and making it less efficient. This raised questions about whether it would be worth the cost of using AI in this context (see **Efficiency and Timesaving**

)

> *"... in order to check that what is being produced is accurate, ideally you would have somebody who is familiar with the report, in all of its detail, to be able to say 'yes, what AI has generated is a true reflection of what we are trying to summarise'. And I think that's the tricky bit isn't it."*
>
> **(Advocacy worker)**

> *"... in reality, if you're doing any checks, it's going to take, that check is going to take that long, in fact, probably longer, because you'd have to pull out your report and then you'd have to compare that against it."*
>
> ***(CHS staff member)***

Ensuring that the person checking the summary report knew the child well and would therefore be able to notice if something key had been missed or misrepresented was considered the way to overcome this. Participants also emphasised that these reports should be generated and checked by the authors of the reports being submitted to SCRA (i.e. social workers, teachers, safeguarders etc.) rather than by SCRA staff:

> *"Generally speaking, to address the concerns that have been made, it would have to be specifically tailored to the child or young person... It would need to be checked for harmful language or by someone who understands that child or young person to see how they might react to certain terminology being used. So I'm not convinced it would help you streamline processes. I think it would create additional checks and requirements of humans to oversee this."*
>
> **(Advocacy worker)**

> *"I am not a teacher, I am not a health visitor, I am not a paediatrician. So they are not our reports essentially, so how would we know to pull...*

That their assessment, that we are reflecting their assessment and recommendations accurately." **(SCRA staff member)**

Participants across many groups, including young people, highlighted the importance of language and were clear that any written output produced using AI should be checked by a human before it was seen by the child to ensure that the language used was trauma informed and not inappropriately positive or negative:

"I think it would be important for SCRA to have the final overview of that report, to make sure that the language is appropriate, and not skewed too negatively." **(CHS Staff)**

Although most of the discussion around checking was about humans checking AI work, there was also some discussion about AI checking – or at least supporting – human work. Participants acknowledged that human error exists – this usually came up in relation to redaction work and administrative tasks like data entry – and sometimes suggested that AI might be able to help minimise it:

"So it is about AI saying 'you have input this name and this date of birth, but actually we have found all of these, their date of birth is maybe out by a couple of days... like Connor, [is that spelled] ER [or] OR. So it is about picking up on similarities to allow you not to have too many duplicates." **(SCRA staff member)**

Relational practice

Professionals, parents, carers and young people were all clear that if AI was used for any tasks, a human would still be required to interpret and explain its outputs to young people. This human presence was described as essential; even if the AI outputs were considered to be easily understandable, all the participants were clear that there should always be a human available. This person should have knowledge of the situation, would (ideally) be

known to the family, and could help to check young people's understanding and answer any questions they may have.

Participants also pointed out that a human that knows the child would still need to be available to help to explain and interpret the report to the child, whether it was produced by AI or not. The issues around supporting children and young people to understand what was in their reports, the quality of written reports, and the importance of language, were considered to be long-standing and caused by resourcing issues in the wider sector and were not specific to AI. Participants acknowledged this but highlighted that these issues could potentially be exacerbated by using AI systems to summarise reports, as they would be based on information and reports that were considered to be problematic (see **System Saver Vs Sticking Plaster**

). As such it was felt that it might be more appropriate to focus on improving report writing than using AI to summarise reports.

Many pointed out that tasks such as generating reports and gathering views could and should be done by a human working alongside young people and their families, rather than by an AI. This was considered to be important by professionals, parents and carers, who pointed out the possibility to build and strengthen relationships by doing this work in a relational way rather than taking a non-relational approach:

> *"Honestly the ideal would be for the person who is working with the child, that might be the social worker, it might be the advocacy worker, to actually write that brief summary with the child before the hearing, and I think that honestly there isn't anything that will beat that. AI can't beat that at all."* **(Panel member)**

Sometimes participants explicitly or implicitly referred to the importance of upholding the promise[4] to support the safety and wellbeing of children and young people and their families. They were clear that relationships and relational practice were key to this work and strongly highlighted the importance of retaining and strengthening these human connections.

[4] The promise that "all Scotland's children and young people will grow up loved, safe and respected so they can realise their full potential" arose from Scotland's Independent Care Review.

Spotlight on Children and Young People

The Importance of Human Involvement

Some adult participants raised the possibility that the use of AI could increase young people's trust in the Children's Hearings System and surrounding systems if they had previously had negative experiences with humans in the system. Young people did not share this view, except for one young person who did not have experience of the Children's Hearings System. This appears to be an example of adults incorrectly perceiving that young people are positive about AI and will be keen to use it (see also: **Perceptions of children and young people's attitudes to and uses of AI**).

Young people who had experience of the Children's Hearings System were clear that reports should categorically not be written by AI, even if they were then explained by humans. They explained that their experience of the Children's Hearings System and surrounding systems had already been negative, and were concerned that using AI would make it worse:

"Yeah. Just no. It's people's lives, it's people's whole life stories in a file, I don't think that should be left to a robot to do." **(Young person)**

Young people across all four young people's workshops shared very strong views on the need to retain humanity and not use AI in the Children's Hearings System for relational work or any work that involved the creation of reports:

"...if you can't be bothered to write it, why should I read it? It's such a human thing to create, and then to pass that to AI, it's almost like a loss of life. It's just so important to how humans live." **(Young person)**

"... knowing that someone took the time to actually sit down and write about me? It would make me feel better." **(Young person)**

They were also unequivocal in their view that AI tools should not be involved in making decisions about the lives of children and young people and families. This included using AI tools to assess potential risks.

Regulation, implementation and governance

Regulation, training and testing

Participants were generally cautious about the idea of implementing AI within the Children's Hearings System, stressing the importance of careful regulation. They often noted how important it was to be proactive and prepared for AI implementation, and continually monitoring for unintended consequences:

> *"I think it's unavoidable, it's part of our life frame now, so yeah it's probably, it's, we cannot like, it's already there, we cannot just erase it. So if it's already there, let it be doing some good. So why not, it can be good, as long as its reviewed and made sure that it's doing good things for people."* **(Parent/carer)**

> *"... I think you need to be in control of it. So to be ahead of it, and understand what you want it to [do], and not let it happen round about you. So I would, I think the proactive stance on it is the correct one, and I do also think inevitably that will impact on jobs."*
>
> **(SCRA staff member)**

Participants noted how important it was that AI use was regulated. Their views on who might be responsible for this, and how it might be carried out in practice, varied. They recognised that there would be complications with any regulatory approach:

> *"If we're using a US based company and their processes and their kind of systems are located in the US and you know, moving of data outside of the EU carries additional risks from a GDPR perspective, and there's additional safeguards to be put in place, I think."*
>
> ***(CHS staff member)***

A minority felt that that the appropriate regulatory framework already existed via data protection law and argued that this could be applied to data being processed via AI tools:

> *"I feel like a lot of those [safeguards] technically already exist... it would just be a case of making sure that you are applying all the existing safeguards around data protection, to any of the data that you are using the AI on."* **(Wider advocacy professional)**

Several participants brought up training and testing as safeguards. This included training and testing AI systems before putting them into use:

> **"***I guess it would take a lot of, you know, like testing of the system and making sure that, you know, running tests to see if you… having a kind of mock police record and seeing does it pick out the right information [scenario 5]. Is it doing what you want it to. And I guess that would take a long time and quite a lot of like trial and error."*
>
> **(CHS staff member)**

> *"This [risk assessment – scenario 3] is a very, very vital part of the hearings system so it would require a lot of oversight, a lot of trial, and I feel like before it even gets trialled with any young person, it needs to be, they need to make sure it is as viable as possible."*
>
> **(Young person)**

Participants also talked about training and educating staff. This included broadening staff understanding on how AI works, as well as providing training on how to prompt and critically assess AI systems effectively to enable them to use AI as a tool rather than being led by it:

> *"I suppose for us all to feel comfortable personally with the introduction of that [scenario 1], it would be helpful for us all to have better understanding of it… an understanding of how particular aspects or particular tools, AI tools that have been identified to be used with SCRA to be explained to us so that we felt okay yes, I know how that works, and I am comfortable with that."*
>
> **(SCRA staff member)**

> *"… the danger is that untrained users would just ask a simple question and get a simple answer and believe it rather than you know, doing that extra bit of well, where does that data really come from?"*
>
> **(Panel member)**

Consent, transparency, and proportionality

Conversations about consent came up consistently throughout the workshops. These concerns linked closely with transparency; participants were generally clear that children,

young people and families should be told when and how AI is being used, but pointed out the complexities of enabling and supporting meaningful informed consent to the use of AI, when children, young people and families are compelled to be in the Children's Hearings System (see **Scale and Scope of Data it Can Use**

). Specifically, some professionals questioned whether consent to use AI tools could ever really be freely given by young people or their families when they are compelled to be in the system:

> *"You would definitely need consent from parties and individuals that their information is going to be used for that purpose [scenario 2 – report summarising]. But I suppose by virtue of children being in this system, they don't really have that opportunity to consent to what's happening with their data."*
>
> **(Legal professional)**

> *"And I mean, would children be able to opt out of this [scenario 1 – scanning case files]... or is this going to be mandatory? So for me there's something about that. Is this going to be freely informed? Because what's the basis of capturing this data if we're going back to sort of legislation? Is it going to be for the legitimate interest of doing that, in which case the young person has absolutely no say in the fact that all of these really sensitive pieces of information about them and their lives are in a fully searchable database or a fully searchable system, and then so that yeah, I think that needs a wee bit of consideration as well."*
>
> **(Wider advocacy professional)**

Participants stressed the need for transparency when using AI, so that people could meaningfully consent to or opt out of its use. Most were clear that those involved would need to be informed if their data was put through an AI tool. Some recognised that children, young people and families may need support to understand the meaning and implications of AI use, along with any disclosures of AI being used. It was acknowledged that this could be a 'hard sell':

> *"Also that ethical part about ensuring that those who are involved are know exactly what's happening and that actually we are using AI, you know we can't do this without telling these people that are involved and*

what would their reaction be to that? So there's a bit of a kind of a hard sell on that one and people need to understand the benefits because I don't think you could do that without making people aware of it."

(Other Professional)

Others talked about the need for transparency around who would be using the AI tools, and how long for. This linked closely to proportionate use:

"I would want to know what professionals are also looking at that, what team are looking at that and what over what time periods. Like it's for me it's just about the transparency of the information."

(Advocacy worker)

Participants called for clear parameters around where AI use begins and ends. They talked about how AI should be proportionate, and use-specific, rather than a way in which to cast a wide net over all of the data we hold to 'trawl' for risk:

"But I also think we need to think about where things start and where things stop. Because if we think okay, we can look at sexual exploitation, we can look at criminal exploitation, we can look at vulnerabilities, and we are just talking about vulnerabilities say to violence, or terrorism... Or to a whole range of things and the wider we put that net the more likely we are to find something that... might not be accurate or might not be the point and that's the thing that if we are looking for something, we want a sort of holistic assessment of a child's needs and the family, and parenting capacity and so on and so forth. What we are not doing is just trawling for possible risks..."

(Social worker)

People also talked about humans being in control of the AI, and for its use to be limited to the specific tasks set by the staff:

"It should be kept, built in a way, it does one 'hing and one 'hing only. Just admin I 'hink." **(Parent/carer)**

"I don't think it would be an issue to have it, I just think we need to know what context we would be using it within and exactly as you say, we

control it, and we set parameters not vice versa."

(SCRA staff member)

Data Protection and privacy

The need to protect the data of those using our services came up frequently as a required safeguard. This was suggested in terms of ensuring the data is kept safe from the wider internet or attacks, from the companies who create and train AI tools, and from professionals within the system who do not require access to that data:

> *"One other safeguard that I think applies to all the AI that we've talked about this afternoon, is if when you're using an online AI tool, I think that's where the data essentially goes into the big bucket of that company, wherever they're based. So any AI tool being used to analyse children's data needs to... be sort of standalone and not something that then goes into all the data that can be scraped by other AI tools and other companies... if you're using AI to process it, it needs to be ring fenced from the Internet, if that makes sense."*
>
> **(CHS staff)**

> *"And what professionals would have access to that [scenario 1] in particular, whatever is gathered, it's focused on... knowing who's handling that. And making sure that it's not just open to anyone and everyone..."* **(Advocacy worker)**

This is not a straightforward issue, and participants sometimes pointed out the potential longer-term risks involved in outsourcing AI development to external companies beyond the public sector. These negative unintended consequences need to be considered and planned for as part of the decision-making process about whether and how to develop and use AI:

> *"I suppose it makes me quite uneasy when you have got really, really sensitive data. And if... and I don't know the ins and outs of this either but if you had like a tool or you had like a system an AI system built by a different company and you are using it in your public sector job, you know, I would be worried about who controls that data. And you know if*

that AI company then folded what would happen to that data. So I think that would concern me a little bit." **(CHS staff member)**

Challenge, ownership and accountability

Issues around accountability in the Children's Hearings System echoed broader concerns about the regulation and accountability of AI systems in the wider world. Participants pointed out that accountability in the Children's Hearings System is crucial to enable people to challenge or appeal decisions and to uphold the rights of children and young people and families. The challenges of ensuring accountability while using AI came up in workshops across all participant groups, with a wide range of participants highlighting the importance of human accountability:

> *"Who's responsible if action is taken off the back of something that AI generates, where does the accountability for that decision sit? Especially if you don't understand how it's been generated?"*
>
> **(Panel member)**

> *"Where does accountability then fall with these things, because if there is an issue, are we blaming the Reporter or are we blaming the AI? Because obviously I think even if it's been confirmed by a reporter, if then there was to be an issue, how are we fixing it?"*
>
> **(Young person)**

Most of those who mentioned accountability said that AI systems, or computers, could not be held accountable because they were not human. Among participants there was a sense that only humans could be fully accountable, and that as a result the organisation using the AI would have to be held accountable for any errors in decision making and the consequences of these:

> *'…it's the organisation's computer, the accountability still exists.'*
>
> **(SCRA staff member)**

Some said that if AI was used, there would need to be a clear process to preserve accountability, with everyone understanding who was accountable for what, and consistently following the process. Examples of this included: the reporter signing or ticking a box to confirm that they had checked the work of the AI; reporters keeping accurate

records of their decision making, including instances where they had disagreed with or amended AI-based decisions; and the Children's Hearings System ensuring that decision-making at every stage was adequately transparent and traceable:

> *"...if there's a wee checkbox there, then there's some kind of accountability, some traceability of you as an individual, it kind of makes you check it one more time, to make absolutely sure."*
>
> **(Other professional)**

Participants sometimes questioned how possible it would be to ensure that this happened, particularly in relation to more complex tasks such as writing reports or generating risk scores. While considering accountability participants often raised questions about transparency, asking whether children, families and others in the Children's Hearings System would be able to see the workings of the AI system and how this would be facilitated.

Participants very often raised questions about the ownership of AI outputs, saying that it would not be appropriate for SCRA to create summaries incorporating reports that had been written by other people or organisations. This was because they were not the authors of the original reports so could not vouch for the summaries being an accurate representation of the report content and could therefore not be held accountable for the content (see also: **Human checking**

). The issue of ownership and its impact on accountability was particularly heightened for scenarios that involved synthesising reports from various authors to create one summary or score (see also: **In the Children's Hearings System ... Access to Information**

):

> *"Because the author of the original report would be the only person that would know whether or not that [summary report – scenario 2] was a true reflection of what they intended to come across within their original report."*
>
> **(Advocacy worker)**

> *"I don't think AI would work from that point of view if it was the reporter using AI, because then that could change the whole tenor of the report that the original report writer didn't want to achieve, or didn't want that outcome. So, I think it could only be used by the actual report writer, if that makes sense."*
>
> **(Legal professional)**

This led many participants to suggest that while the use of AI to summarise reports or provide a risk score may be something that SCRA's referring partners wish to explore further, it may not be within SCRA's remit to enact.

3.4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented participants' views on the ways forward for using AI within the Children's Hearings System, including whether or not AI should be used at all, and if so, the safeguards that would be required to do so safely. Some participants were relatively positive about the idea of using AI for administrative tasks, but even in these cases were clear that a variety of safeguards would need to be in place for these uses to feel safe and acceptable. Participants were very clear that human involvement in decision-making and checking, and a focus on relational practice, were key to minimising risk and harm. Appropriate regulation, training and testing, and attention to consent, transparency, data protection and privacy, and accountability, were also highlighted as crucial aspects of safeguarding.

The next chapter will consider the implications of these findings for the use of AI in the Children's Hearings System.

4. Discussion

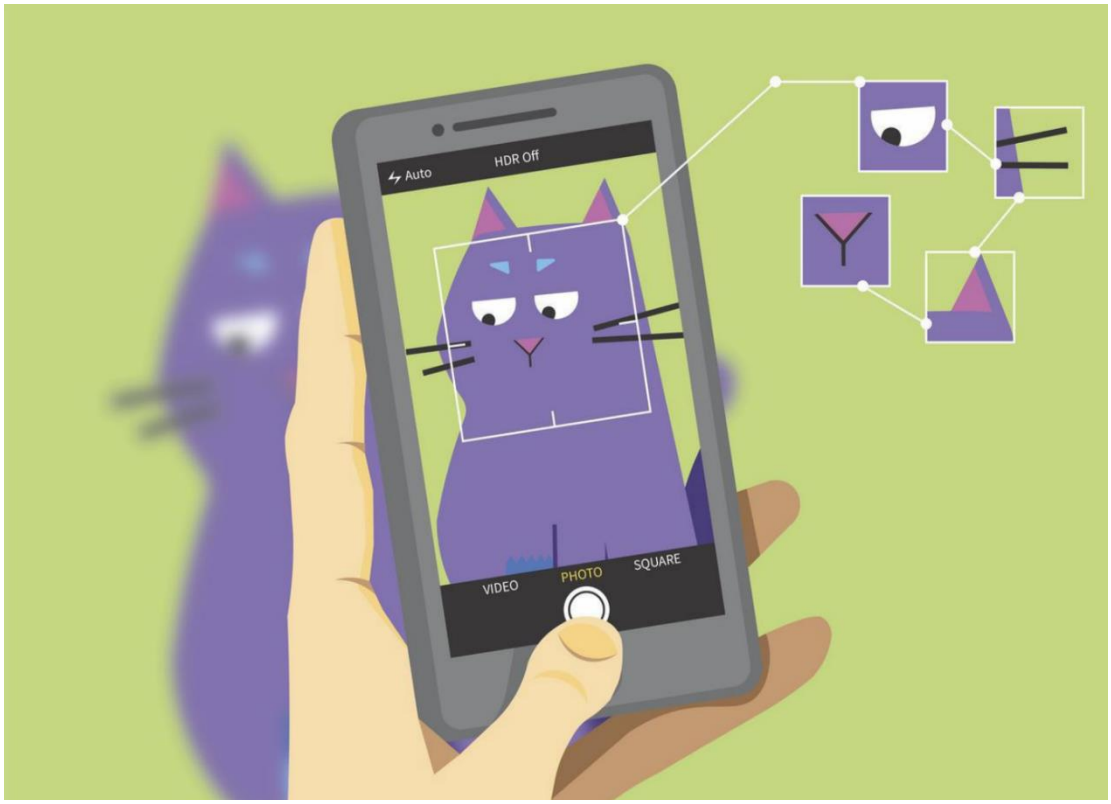


Figure 6: Oleksandra Mukhachova & The Bigger Picture / https://betterimagesofai.org / https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

This final chapter will reflect on how our findings connect with and further previous research about the ethical and rights-based implications of using AI. It will consider the implications of our findings for the use of AI in the Children's Hearings System and make recommendations about how SCRA could proceed in the light of these findings. The need to monitor children's safety and rights is particularly strong in the Children's Hearings System, where children, young people and families may already be experiencing multiple adversities. We recommend that if AI tools are used at SCRA, they should not be used to replace human interaction or make decisions, should only be used where necessary, and should not be used to fix structural problems whose root causes require addressing. Any introduction of an AI tool should involve a thorough cost/benefit analysis; strict privacy protocols; meaningful collaboration with those who will be using or affected by the tool; transparency around how and why the tool will be used and managed; and ongoing planning, regulation and monitoring.

Chapter Summary

The findings of this research project align with a wide range of previous evidence which has highlighted that although people can see the potential benefits of AI, they are often concerned about data protection, online safety, inaccuracy and misinformation, decision-making, human relationships, wider quality of life, inequalities, and real-world uses.

The need to monitor children's safety and rights is particularly strong in the Children's Hearings System, where children, young people and families may already be experiencing multiple adversities.

Participants often expressed discomfort about AI being involved in the complex, high-stakes decision making undertaken by those working in the Children's Hearings System at all, even with human intervention.

Based on the findings of this study, we recommend that if AI tools are used in the Children's Hearings System, they should not be used for anything replacing human interaction or making decisions, should only be used where necessary, and should not be used to fix structural problems whose root causes require addressing.

If AI tools are used to support administrative tasks, there should be a thorough cost/benefit analysis; strict privacy protocols; meaningful collaboration with those who will be using or affected by the tool; transparency around how and why the tool will be used and managed; and ongoing planning, regulation and monitoring; for each tool.

When thinking about AI in general, participants emphasised that transparency, bias, accuracy, human oversight, and privacy and consent were key ethical and practical considerations. They were concerned about the potential impacts of AI on children and young people and were unanimously clear that human connection and relationships are crucial and should not be replaced by AI. These findings align with Scotland's AI strategy's call for AI to be ethical, transparent and responsible (Scottish Government, 2022).

4.1 Human connection and relational practice

Throughout all the workshops participants very strongly emphasised the importance of human connection and relationships, with some participants expressing concern that increases in the use of AI could diminish opportunities for human connection. This supports previous research in which children and adults have highlighted the importance of human connection for relationships and wellbeing (Alan Turing Institute, 2025; La Fors, 2023; Picton and Clark, 2024; Stoilova, Livingstone and Atabey, 2025; UN, 2022).

This emphasis on human connection was also underlined by participants when talking specifically about the Children's Hearings System and surrounding systems. This was not only about avoiding inaccuracies and misunderstandings, but also about ensuring that services were trauma informed and that children and their families understood what was happening and were able to participate. Parents, carers and young people were especially emphatic about the need for human relationships and relational practice. Sometimes they explicitly highlighted that in order to keep The Promise, relational practice should continue to be foregrounded. Young people were clear that they did not want to use AI for anything that would normally involve direct contact with a human being.

Previous research has found that some children, particularly those considered 'vulnerable', use AI chatbots for friendships, and that some are unsure whether smart speakers have feelings (Alan Turing Institute, 2025; Andries and Robertson, 2023; Internet Matters, 2025). This has raised concerns among researchers about the potential impacts on human relationships, and these concerns were echoed by participants in our study. The unequal use and understanding of tools like chatbots among children may translate into an impact on equalities if they are used within a system like the Children's Hearings System. This is because children, young people and families who access the Children's Hearings System are more likely than others to have experienced multiple adversities such as abuse, trauma, and poverty and may therefore be more vulnerable (SCRA, 2025). This could result in them being more likely to seek out information or trying to confide in these systems than adults, which in turn would require additional monitoring and oversight to ensure that rights to information are not being adversely affected and that any communication of distress is identified and addressed.

Young people in our study expressed particularly strong negative views about the idea of professionals using an AI tool to produce a summary report about them. They wanted to be seen and treated as individuals, to be supported and written about by professionals

who knew them, and for any problems with the quality and accessibility of report writing to be addressed at source rather than by creating AI summaries.

Overall, participants, especially young people and parents/carers, very strongly emphasised the importance of human connection and relationships. This prioritisation of relational practice and human connection should be at the heart of any consideration of potential AI tools.

4.2 Safety and the need for regulation

There is strong evidence from previous research that children and adults are concerned about the actual and potential serious safety impact of AI technology on children and young people, including through exposure to harmful content and potential use of AI tools in abusive situations (Ada Lovelace Institute, 2025a; Alan Turing Institute, 2025; Children's Parliament, Scottish AI Alliance and Alan Turing Institute, 2023b Internet Matters, 2025; Kuenssberg, 2025; Liehner et al., 2023; Modhvadia et al., 2025; Ofcom, 2025, 2026; Stoilova, Livingstone and Atabey, 2025; Stoilova, Livingstone, and Nandagiri, 2019; Together, 2024; United Nations, 2022). The safety impacts of AI technology have also been highlighted in several high-profile instances of harm to children, including self-harm, suicide, and sexualised imagery, following interactions with AI systems (see, for example, Kuenssberg, 2025; Ofcom, 2026). Our study aligned with this; across all participant groups, participants expressed strong concerns about the potential for AI to be unsafe for children. There was a general sense of the internet as an unsafe place, with AI exacerbating this due to aspects such as voice or face changing software, geotagging, and algorithms to target children.

Alongside this awareness of the safety risks, there was a common perception among our adult participants that young people liked AI and used it more than adults, and that young people are generally more interested in, and better at using, technology - including AI - than older generations. Evidence from the young people in our study, and from previous research, suggests that this is inaccurate (Audit Scotland, 2024; McCluskey et al., 2023). Children and young people do not all have equal access to and experience of technology, are not necessarily 'digital natives' who are skilled at using technology, and should not be assumed to be adept at navigating risks around safety, misinformation and data protection (Andries and Robertson, 2023; La Fors, 2023; Milosevic et al., 2023; Stoilova, Livingstone and Atabey, 2025; Stoilova, Livingstone, and Nandagiri, 2019; UNICEF, 2021c).

Despite children and young people's need to be supported and protected around new technologies, previous research has found that adults at home and at school struggle to support children and young people around AI (Children's Parliament, Scottish AI Alliance and Alan Turing Institute, 2024; Szczuka et al., 2022). In line with this, although some adult participants in our study described the internet safety approaches they used to help keep young people safe online, these were not AI-specific, and participants were not confident about their effectiveness. Throughout the workshops there was a strong sense that technology in general, and AI specifically, was moving at a fast pace and that it was difficult – maybe impossible – for individuals to keep up with in terms of safety. This underlines that it is not sufficient to rely on the digital literacy of adults or children; organisations need to take responsibility for ensuring the safety of the online/AI-curated spaces they make available to children, young people and families. In line with previous research (Ada Lovelace Institute, 2025a; Scantamburlo, 2024), there was a strong message throughout the workshops that any use of AI within society should prioritise children's best interests, but participants were not confident that AI was currently, or would in the future be, appropriately or adequately regulated or monitored to ensure that this happened.

Children, young people and families who access the Children's Hearings System may be at a higher risk of being targeted online and in-person because of previous experiences of multiple adversities including abuse, trauma, and poverty (SCRA, 2025). Participants in our study generally said that this made the children, young people and families involved with the Children's Hearings system particularly vulnerable to the risks arising from AI. Previous research has pointed out the importance of adequately regulating and monitoring AI, including ensuring that it does not negatively affect children's rights (Alan Turing Institute, 2025; Children's Parliament, Scottish AI Alliance and Alan Turing Institute, 2023b; Stoilova, Livingstone and Atabey, 2025; Stoilova, Livingstone, and Nandagiri, 2019; Together, 2024; United Nations, 2022). In addition to this ethical imperative to further children's rights, SCRA has a statutory duty to uphold children's legally enshrined rights under the UNCRC Incorporation (Scotland) Act. Any use of AI within the children's hearings system must not infringe upon these rights. Our study underlines that this need to monitor children's safety and rights is particularly strong in the Children's Hearings System, where children, young people and families are particularly vulnerable.

Participants highlighted several areas in which children's rights could, without adequate safeguards, be negatively impacted, which could contravene the UNCRC. These potential rights violations include rights to non-discrimination; safety and freedom from exploitation; privacy; access to information; and freedom of expression, among others. Although SCRA engages with these rights daily, the introduction of AI tools presents new risks, and it is vital that potential rights impacts are considered whenever a new tool is being considered. Ensuring that children's rights and wellbeing impact assessments are embedded within any equality and human rights impacts assessments to be undertaken is one way of doing this. Another would be for SCRA to specifically consider developing policies around the use of AI with children.

Regardless of their baseline knowledge about AI, participants in our study were very clear that the information they were directed to by algorithms was affected by their previous online, and sometimes offline, behaviour. Some participants were concerned about the potential impacts of encouraging children to access online information about the Children's Hearings System and surrounding sensitive topics such as abuse, as they felt this could affect children's algorithms and make them vulnerable to misinformation or abuse. Should SCRA look to develop child and family facing AI tools, it is imperative that these are robustly tested to ensure that they do not interact with other applications and tools that regularly analyse and parse data from devices.

4.3 Bias, inequality, fairness, social justice

AI, like all technology, is not neutral and must be considered in the context of the wider inequalities in which it exists (Allhutter et al., 2020; Benjamin, 2019; Broussard, 2018,2023; Noble, 2018; Søraa, 2023; Ulnicane & Aden, 2023). AI can be affected by 'structural bias', whereby existing disadvantages and discrimination including around gender, race, ethnicity, and age is built into and reflected by AI systems. It can also be affected by 'data driven bias', in which unequal access to online spaces affects the data that AI systems can draw on for training, learning and data gathering.

Participants in our study were keenly aware of existing inequalities and although they generally did not use the terms 'data-driven bias' and 'structural bias', they discussed both of these types of bias.

They were concerned about the potential for AI to further exacerbate inequalities because of the ongoing existence of the digital divide; the potential for access to services being restricted to online platforms; and structural inequalities persisting in society. Data justice academics have pointed out that when designed and implemented intentionally, technology can be used as a tool to build more just societies (Munn, 2022; Lauer, 2020; Leslie et al., 2022). Participants in our study also highlighted the potential for AI to be used for social good, but were sceptical about how likely this was in our current profit-driven society. Overall, there was a strong sense that any AI use within the Children's Hearings System should be judicious and reflect the need to solve a problem that will either have direct benefit for children and families or allow costs to be recycled to create that benefit.

Our findings support previous research with children and adults which concluded that AI should not be the sole decision maker, that it should be clear how AI contributes to decisions, and it must be possible to appeal decisions that AI has been involved in (Ada Lovelace Institute, 2025a; Dupont et al., 2024; Gazulla et al., 2024; La Fors, 2023; Modhvadia et al., 2025; Stoilova, Livingstone and Atabey, 2025; Okoidigun & Emagbetere, 2025; UN, 2022).

Often, however, when participants reflected on the complex, high-stakes decision making undertaken by those working in the Children's Hearings System, they expressed discomfort about AI being involved in decision making at all, even with human intervention. Participants were concerned about the potential for bias, the risk of further ingraining current issues with data quality, and concerns about what real-world use and checking might entail in the context of an overburdened social care system. Young people, as well as some other participants across participant groups, were not in favour of involving AI in decision-making processes that affected the lives of children and young people and their families. These concerns reflect previous research with public sector workers (Haesvoets, Verschuere and Roaets, 2025; Vanson, 2025). They also speak to the complex challenges of creating fair and just AI systems, as evidenced by some previous public sector tools such as the Metropolitan Police's 'gangs matrix' which was discontinued in 2024 after disproportionately representing young Black men as potential gang members; and an AI-based child benefit claiming system that pushed a significant number of Dutch families into poverty after welfare claims were incorrectly rejected (Metropolitan Police, 2026; Politico, 2022; Public Law Project, 2023; What Works for Children's Social Care, 2020). In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, SCRA is

required to consider how our functions and decision-making will affect people with protected characteristics, and it will be necessary to take these duties into account when deciding whether and how to use AI tools. This will require ensuring that monitoring systems are built into any AI system to assess which, if any, groups are disproportionately affected by their use.

4.4 Data protection, transparency and consent

Adults and children in previous research have raised concerns about data protection and security, consent and transparency (Ada Lovelace Institute, 2025a, 2025b; Dupont et al., 2024; Modhvadia et al., 2025; Okoidigun & Emagbetere, 2025; ONS, 2023; Scantamburlo, 2024). These concerns were echoed in our findings, with participants worried about where data would be stored, who it would be shared with – including third-party companies who could potentially be sold in years to come – and what it would be used for.

Transparency has been cited as crucial, in policy, previous research and in our study. Adults and children want to know – but often currently do not know – how AI is being used, including how it contributes to decision-making, and whether and how to opt-out of their data being used and retained by AI systems (Dupont et al., 2024; Modhvadia et al., 2025; Okoidigun & Emagbetere, 2025). Perhaps because AI encompasses a huge field, with many different types of technology and uses, most people do not have an advanced knowledge of how these systems work, or how they interact with them on a regular basis. This is amplified by the lack of transparency around AI; many services, apps and websites have AI embedded into them, without this being made explicitly clear to the end user. This can make it difficult for people to talk about what exactly AI means to them, and the different ways in which they might engage with it. Ensuring that people understand and have given informed consent to the use of AI to process their data is particularly challenging in this context and when they are often doing so at a stressful and difficult time in their lives. In addition, previous research with children and young people clearly shows that there are differences in the knowledge and views of those from different social groups (Alan Turing Institute, 2025; Madden et al., 2024; Ofcom 2025a), which means that children within the hearings system are less likely to have the knowledge to assess whether any systems adopted by SCRA come with risk.

The difficulties of building knowledge in order to ensure transparency and meaningful consent are not unique to the Children's Hearings System. These issues are, however, heightened in a system in which consent and transparency are already complex and difficult to navigate because families are compelled to participate. Several participants in our study pointed out that the legal situation around consent to use AI was unclear to them, raising questions around legal compliance. Much of the personal data held and processed by SCRA and its partners is done so without explicit consent under the GDPR exemption of 'legitimate interest' (Information Commissioner's Office, 2025). Participants were unclear, and often uncomfortable, about whether this exemption would or should legally or morally extend to using AI to process people's data without their consent. This is a complex area and if SCRA is committed to the principles of transparency and consent then issues around consent need to be considered in depth for every individual AI tool before its introduction and explained clearly to everyone encountering the Children's Hearings System. Whether this is realistically achievable, and the implications if not, is a question that needs serious consideration.

Participants sometimes raised concerns about sharing children's data with third party companies in order for them to build and maintain AI tools. These concerns included the longer-term potential for companies to sell data or to be bought by other companies that may not share the same ethical principles. This aligns with previous research, which has found that trust in the ability of AI companies to be unbiased and protect data is declining, and that private sector AI companies are seen as less trustworthy than the public sector (Ada Lovelace Institute, 2025a; Scantamburlo, 2024; Stanford University, 2025).

In order to protect the data of children, young people and families, any system used should be a closed system, with data remaining unavailable for commercial use and the training of AI tools. This is likely to affect the quality of any outputs, as experienced already when exploring the use of Magic Notes to record, transcribe and summarise witness statements at SCRA. In this case, the Data Protection Impact Assessment prevented the use of audio recordings for improving AI knowledge of accents, which affected the tool's accuracy in transcribing various accents. This has the potential to lead to equalities concerns – during internal testing of multiple AI transcription tools we identified higher rates of inaccuracies for working class or Glaswegian voices. With any use of AI tools at SCRA, close attention will need to be paid not only to the data protection measures

necessary, but also to the interaction between these measures and the efficacy of any tools used. The retention of audio clips to allow the checking and verification of transcripts, and not making the use of these tools compulsory would be one way of achieving this.

4.5 Impacts on staff, work and efficiency

Many participants raised concerns about potential impacts on decision making and over-reliance on technology. They also suggested that, in the context of financially constrained public sector services, the focus on AI may be a way of trying to do more work with less resources. They did not always agree that AI would solve these problems, and said that in some cases, for example if using inadequate or inaccurate input data, it could exacerbate them. Participants sometimes questioned whether the use of AI tools would necessarily save time or money, due to the time taken for human checking; the cost of developing or buying AI tools; and the cost of training staff to use them. There has been some previous modelling of the potential time-saving impact of AI in the public sector (Hashem et al., 2025), but this hypothetical modelling is at an early stage, involves a high degree of simplification, and has not yet involved real-time research looking at the impacts or efficiencies of using AI in real life situations. The focus of this modelling was on the potential for saving time, rather than assessing the quality of outputs. Efficiency is not only about saving time, but the balance between resources (including time) and the quality of outputs. There have been some recent situations in which public sector workers have used AI to complete work that has been poor quality and ultimately been inefficient, wasting time and costing money to fix, for example the use of AI to draft intelligence reports in an English police force (BBC, 2026). At present it is unclear how or whether AI tools being used within the Children's Hearings System would result in any time or economic savings. It is therefore important that the introduction of any new tools include time-in-motion studies that compare the time of completing tasks without AI and the time it takes to complete and verify the accuracy of those tasks with AI.

Participants were clear that any savings arising from the use of AI tools should be recycled into relational practice, thereby foregrounding it. For vulnerable children AI tools should not be used to reduce the workforce but to make best use of the limited resources available to focus on the tasks that matter to children and young people.

However, participants often questioned whether any potential time savings created by AI would in practice allow people to do more human-centred or relational work, or whether it would simply lead to a reduction in jobs or people being given more work to do in a shorter space of time. Some pointed out that if AI use transpired in this way, it could lead to a worse experience or delays for families. Some were concerned that funds might be diverted from frontline services to fund AI development, leading to unintended reductions in quality of service or causing delays. Others pointed out that AI could potentially improve staff experiences and morale, for example by reducing the need for staff to undertake repetitive tasks. Still others wondered whether in some cases, for example by carefully using a well-tested and well-designed redaction tool as part of redaction processes, AI tools could help to reduce staff stress, trauma and burnout. These are questions that would need to be carefully considered before and during the introduction of AI tools, with input from staff across SCRA, and a high degree of monitoring and transparency to maintain the trust and wellbeing of staff, and the impact on children, young people and families.

Some concerns were also raised about potential impacts of job losses or changes on inequalities, due to the likely changing nature of the remaining jobs, and the skills and experience required to do this work, which in turn has potential impacts on equality, diversity and inclusion within the workforce. These concerns echo previous research that has raised concerns about job displacement (Alan Turing Institute, 2025; Barnardo's, 2024; Capell, 2024; Capstick, 2025; Okoidigun & Emagbetere, 2025; ONS, 2023; United Nations, 2022; Visram et al., 2023).

That such a wide range of potential impacts on staff and services were raised highlights the uncertainty around the organisational consequences of introducing AI tools. There is a need for a thorough, ongoing cost/benefit analysis, and staff and union involvement at every step of AI planning, implementation and regulation (UNISON, 2026).

4.6 Wider unintended consequences

Throughout the course of this research project, the visibility of AI has continued to increase; news articles discussing the impact of AI are published several times each week, and some of the wider societal impacts have become more widely and explicitly discussed. These wider issues were also represented in our research data, but it may be

that if the study were repeated now, or in 12 months, these issues would feature more centrally in the data.

Recently published academic research articles have brought to the forefront the catastrophic environmental impact of some generative AI use, including large language models (LLMs) (de Vries-Gao, 2025; Hlabisa, 2025). They have also pointed to the potential for AI to displace humans from their jobs and thereby negatively affect people's quality of life (Bankins and Formosa, 2023; Mncube, 2026; Renault, 2026) and impacts on attention spans and critical thinking (Kosmyna et al., 2025). All these issues were raised in our study as wider impacts of AI use. SCRA will have to engage with these wider issues as part of its decision making around whether and how to use AI.

4.7 Strengths and limitations

Like all research, this study has some limitations. The workshop style of the focus groups, necessary for knowledge-building, made each focus group around three hours long. This may have been part of the reason why relatively few Social Workers and Other Professionals took part. An alternative approach could have been to undertake longer term knowledge building work to enable a fuller understanding, but we decided against this due to the challenges of requiring ongoing involvement from participants and the burden this would place on them. Instead, we prioritised the inclusion of a wide range of participants, including children and young people who had experience of the Children's Hearings System. Although a wide geographical range of professionals took part, decisions about travel costs and prioritising in-person groups with children, young people and families meant that most of the young people and all of the parents/carers who took part were from the central belt of Scotland. This will have resulted in the under-representation of voices from rural communities where access to the high-speed and reliable internet required to use child- and family-facing AI may be more limited. In addition, more professionals participated than young people and parents/carers. This is because the research was designed to include a wide range of participants, including different professional groups. Including enough participants from each groups enabled us to analyse differences and similarities between the views of participant groups, including between different professional groups.

This study also has several strengths. It is a large qualitative study, and its size enabled us to consider differences between participant groups when analysing the data. . We did not experience recruitment difficulties in this project, which may highlight that participants are keen to shape how AI is used and regulated within the public sector. Although experience of the Children's Hearings System was not a requirement for participation, most of the children and young people and almost all the professionals had experience of the system meaning that SCRA can confidently place the voice of lived experience at the heart of AI decision-making. The workshop style enabled participants to build knowledge and confidence and provided time and space for participants to disagree with each other in a supportive environment, both of which improved the quality of the research data.

5. Recommendations

5.1 Limited use

If AI tools are used in the Children's Hearings System, they should not be used for anything replacing human interaction or making decisions, should only be used where necessary, and should not be used to fix structural problems whose root causes require addressing. If AI tools are used to support administrative tasks, appropriate safeguards, as outlined below, should be in place.

5.2 Thorough cost/benefit analysis

A thorough cost benefit analysis should be completed around each potential use of AI that arises.

The concept of efficiency came up repeatedly in workshops. Participants wondered whether the level of checking, oversight and explanation required to make the use of AI tools safe and acceptable, and therefore viable, would ultimately render AI tools inefficient. In addition, some costs or benefits may affect other agencies or wider society, rather than SCRA directly. Due to the ethical and practical complexities surrounding AI use, these wider impacts should be considered as part of any cost/benefit analysis. The environmental impact of AI tools should be considered as part of this wider cost/benefit analysis, reflecting Scottish Government's commitment to net zero. The level of work that would be required to do this wide and deep cost/benefit analysis should in itself be considered when deciding whether the use of an AI tool is likely to be efficient.

5.3 Co-production

Any AI tools that are introduced should be designed, planned and implemented in consultation with those who will be using them, those who will be affected by them, and those who have expertise in the types of jobs the tools will be undertaking. This will increase the chances of the tools being able to complete the desired function, as it will ensure that potential problems are well understood before the testing phase.

5.4 Transparency

Any use of AI in the Children's Hearings System should be as transparent as possible.

Maintaining trust in the Children's Hearings System and in the public sector more broadly will be an important consideration if AI tools are introduced. One way of maximising trust is through ensuring transparency. This is not only about making clear what tools are being used, when and why, but also publishing any cost/benefit analyses and the results of monitoring and assessment of impacts, so the public can understand public-sector decision making.

Similarly, when decisions are made about whether it is necessary for SCRA to seek explicit individual consent for the use of AI tools to process personal data, these decisions should be publicly available. This should be the case even if explicit consent will not be sought, so that those using SCRA's services can find out whether AI may be used. Whenever information is being shared about how AI is being used, it should be available in a child-friendly and accessible format.

5.5 Planning, regulation and monitoring

Testing, piloting and ongoing monitoring, including penetration testing, are crucial throughout the lifespan of AI tools.

Participants in our study were generally cautious about the idea of implementing AI within the Children's Hearings System, stressing the importance of careful regulation, planning and monitoring. In particular, there is a need to monitor and measure effectiveness and unintended consequences. Our study has highlighted several concerns, risks and potential unintended consequences, but by the nature of being unintended, not all potential consequences will become clear until a system is implemented. For this reason, testing, piloting and ongoing monitoring should be continuous and not seen as one-off procedures but ongoing processes. This means slow and incremental embedding, with

revisionist testing. Testing technology on artificial data should enable SCRA to be satisfied that the tool is adequately capable, before beginning multi-stage testing with safeguards. When SCRA is satisfied that the tool is working safeguards can be dropped in favour of monitoring, but as each new phase of testing begins all safeguards should be readopted until SCRA are satisfied that the change does not adversely affect outcomes.

There is a need for penetration testing to understand the impact of AI applications and how they interact with other apps on various devices, particularly phones, to affect algorithms that influence the promotion of online content. This will ensure that children, young people and families are not unintentionally rendered more vulnerable by using any AI-based apps or services provided by SCRA.

5.6 Privacy protocols

If AI is used within the Children's Hearings System then strong privacy protocols will be required in order to protect the privacy and data of children, young people and families. It will be essential that any system used should be a closed system, with data remaining unavailable for commercial use and the training of AI tools. This is likely to bring its own challenges in terms of the quality of any outputs, as machine learning will only be possible within the closed system, which will likely mean that a high level of human oversight and checking will be required for as long as an AI tool remains in use.

6. Conclusion and next steps

The findings of this research project align with previous evidence which has found that although people can see the potential benefits of AI, they have a range of ethical and practical concerns. This chapter has considered the implications of our findings and made recommendations about how to proceed. Our research has underlined the heightened need to monitor children's safety and rights in the Children's Hearings System, where children, young people and families may be particularly vulnerable. In light of our research findings, we recommend that if AI tools are used at SCRA, they should not replace human interaction or make decisions, should only be used where necessary, and should not be used as an attempt to fix structural problems that require addressing otherwise. Any introduction of an AI tool should involve a thorough cost/benefit analysis; strict privacy protocols; meaningful collaboration with those who will be using or affected by the tool; transparency around how and why the tool will be used and managed; and ongoing planning, regulation and monitoring.

Following the completion of this research, SCRA will continue exploring the use of AI tools to support its work. It will also work with Saidot, an ethical AI company, to develop an AI policy framework and risk management tools for ethical practice, which will be applied to any AI tools being considered for use in the future.

7. Appendix I: full list of potential uses raised by participants

Potential Use	Category	Frequency Suggested	Suggested By
Scheduling hearings according to need, i.e. a child with ADHD could require a longer hearing	Accessibility	1	Mixed Professionals
Capturing voices of non-verbal children	Accessibility	1	Wider Advocacy Groups
Accessibility tools such as voice recognition; immersive reader; text to speech technology and automated dyslexia friendly translations; read to write; note taking; dictation.	Accessibility	4	Mixed Professionals Wider Advocacy Groups Young People
To diagnose neurodivergence in children and young people within social work, and then inform panel members if they have problems with certain things, like paying attention.	Accessibility	1	Mixed Professionals
Assessing reading ages and rewriting reports appropriately to meet this	Accessibility	2	Panel Members
Automated printing	Administration	1	SCRA Staff
Automated letter/papers sending	Administration	1	SCRA Staff
Automated notifications, such as those used by NHS	Administration	2	SCRA Staff

Scheduling panel member rotas	Administration	3	CHS Staff Panel Members
Finding child friendly venues	Administration	1	Wider Advocacy Groups
Diary management to ensure chair or panel member consistency	Administration	1	Wider Advocacy Groups
Scheduling hearings	Administration	3	Panel Members SCRA Staff
Better spell checking	Administration	1	Panel Members
To triage referrals	Administration	1	SCRA Staff
Automated case notes: voice to text, adding to the system	Administration	1	Social Workers
To analyse reporter decision making	Analysis	1	SCRA Staff
To pull out themes in observation reports	Analysis	1	Mixed Professionals
Highlight different help children and young people might need based on their report.	Analysis	1	Parents and Carers
An internal SCRA chatbot trained on our policy and practice	Chatbot	1	SCRA Staff
A website chatbot which talks you through what a hearing might be like and can answer questions	Chatbot	1	Social Workers
Finding out statistics	Data gathering and organising	2	Parents and Carers Social Workers
Streamlining data	Data gathering and organising	1	Wider Advocacy Groups

To link systems and people up to each other across the sector	Data linking	4	Legal Professionals Parents and Carers SCRA Staff Wider Advocacy Groups
A LLM which allows children and young people to have a free flow conversation about what they think should happen.	LLM	1	SCRA Staff
To monitor how panel members are dealing with things in a hearing	Monitoring	1	SCRA Staff
To track outcomes of hearing decisions and to plot children's progress over time.	Monitoring	2	Mixed Professionals Panel Members
An AI avatar a child could use at a hearing	Participation/Access to Knowledge	3	Panel Members
An AI agent which acts as a 'voice' for a child that isn't at the hearing, that could act as a virtual advocate for the child, potentially 'trained' on the child themselves.	Participation/Access to Knowledge	2	CHS Staff Mixed Group
Helping children and young people to communicate and participate in the system, both in the hearings and throughout the process.	Participation/Access to Knowledge	3	Legal Professionals
An app which would help to avoid children and young people having to repeat their stories over and over again.	Participation/Access to Knowledge	1	Legal Professionals

Giving children and young people access to more knowledge, in order to understand the system better, using different formats and channels, such as an AI model which talks them through their rights.	Participation/Access to Knowledge	3	Legal Professionals SCRA Staff Wider Advocacy Groups
An interactive AI agent or chatbot which children and young people could verbally interrogate to get answers to their questions about their papers.	Participation/Access to Knowledge	3	Panel Members
A tool which reads out their reports in a voice of their choosing.	Participation/Access to Knowledge	1	Panel Members
To personalise children's casefiles and information	Participation/Access to Knowledge	1	Wider Advocacy Groups
Child friendly, interactive versions of court documents	Participation/Access to Knowledge	1	Wider Advocacy Groups
Redaction for sensitive documents	Redaction	5	Legal Professionals Mixed Professionals SCRA Staff
Replace one panel member with a 'wee robot'	Replacement	1	CHS Staff
A tool to help identify risk, used alongside their own professional judgement (used in a different way than in the scenario).	Risk profiling	7	CHS Legal Professionals SCRA Staff Social Workers Wider Advocacy Groups

A risk profiling tool to generate discussion around concerns such as CSE	Risk profiling	2	Mixed Professionals
To predict likely outcomes and chances of success based on existing data/case reviews	Risk profiling	1	Social Workers
Something that children and young people could speak to voice their concerns if they feel unsafe within their placements.	Safeguarding	1	Mixed Professionals
To pull information from social work reports into a standardised format or to move it into CSAS format automatically	Standardising	2	Panel Members SCRA Staff
To do social work chronologies, in order to make them uniform across different local authorities.	Standardising	1	Mixed Professionals
To produce social work reports to improve quality	Standardising	1	Panel Members
Improve layout/style of papers given to panel members, allowing for better search functions.	Standardising	2	Panel Members
Offer suggestions to panel members to help them make better decisions	Suggesting solutions	1	Panel Members
Suggesting accommodations for those with additional support needs after a human talks to the child	Suggesting solutions	1	Parents and Carers

To signpost relevant services for professionals to recommend	Suggesting solutions	1	Wider Advocacy Groups
Prompts or reminders during note taking	Suggesting solutions	1	Wider Advocacy Groups
To remove bias	Suggesting solutions	2	Legal Professionals
Helping panel members to write up recommendations or proceedings.	Summarising	2	CHS Staff Panel Members
Summarise and condense reports from professionals for panel members.	Summarising	1	CHS Staff
Summarising reports for children, but going through it with them first, allowing them to challenge or make changes.	Summarising	3	Legal Professionals Mixed Professionals Panel Members
To pull out points in reports then have a human write a summary	Summarising	2	Young People
Tailored summary of potential outcomes of a hearing	Summarising	1	Panel Members
Transcription of decisions and reasons given by panel members during a hearing to improve quality and accuracy.	Transcription	1	CHS Staff
Transcripts of hearings themselves for young people's files or to be kept on record.	Transcription	4	CHS Staff
Language interpretation during hearings	Translation	4	Panel Members Parents and Carers SCRA Staff

As an internally built 'Siri for panel members'. For use before the hearing to prepare, and within the hearing itself: to assist panel members by answering questions on practice and policy; to flag when something has been missed.	Virtual Assistant	4	CHS Staff Panel Members
A virtual welcome assistant for online hearings	Virtual Assistant	1	SCRA Staff
A virtual assistant who does the admin of a virtual hearing in the background, i.e. lets someone into the hearing	Virtual Assistant	1	SCRA Staff

8. Appendix II: Workshop Materials

8.1 Scenario 1

Chris, age 14 lives with his foster carers Dawn and Mike. Chris really likes computing, new technologies, and playing computer games.

Although Chris is really clever, he has a hard time at school. He finds it hard to concentrate and fidgets and moves around a lot.

Chris has been on a compulsory supervision order since he was 12. He recently went to a Children's Hearing. The panel members agreed that Chris would continue to live with Dawn and Mike. Chris wants to stay with Dawn and Mike, but he left the hearing feeling angry. There were too many things being discussed. Chris found it hard to understand.

He decided to write a letter to SCRA. Dawn and Mike helped him. Chris told SCRA what it felt like to attend a hearing with ADHD. In the letter he asked if SCRA knew how many young people coming to Hearings had ADHD. This was information he thought it was important to know as it would help SCRA understand how many young people might need additional support in Hearings.

Chris is surprised when SCRA say they don't know the answer to his question. They explain that this information is held in written reports. This makes it difficult to find and analyse it.

Chris writes back to SCRA to ask them if they have considered using AI. He tells them that some types of AI can be trained to read written documents. Chris tells SCRA that if they used this technology, they would be able to use it to report on lots of different issues that might affect how young people experience their Hearings.

What do you think?

8.2 Scenario 2

Chloe is 15. She has been attending Children's Hearings for three years. Before her Hearings, Aisha receives reports written by her teachers and social worker. She thinks the reports are very confusing. They have a lot of information in them.

Chloe tells her keyworker that she has an idea. SCRA should create a short summary to summarise all the report information. This would give young people an update on what has changed in the last year when they come to their hearing.

Chloe thinks that the short summary could be based on different parts of young people's lives, including whether they are safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible and included. Chloe's key worker helps her to write to SCRA about her idea. SCRA really like Chloe's idea and set up a team to try to work out how to make the summary reports. One month later the team show their plan to Chloe. They want to use an AI to find examples of changes in the hearing reports. AI could search the reports for phrases like 'plays football' or 'goes swimming'. These could be used as examples of being active. All of this could then be used by AI to create a draft summary report. SCRA would check the summary report before sending it to young people.

What do you think?

	This year	***Last year***
Safe	*Chloe feels safe living with her foster carers. Chloe is making safe and healthy choices at school and in the community.*	*Chloe often feels scared and unsafe at home. When she is out with friends Chloe sometimes joins in behaviours that could result in her or other people getting hurt.*
Healthy	*Chloe is usually a happy, outgoing girl; although she understandably feels sad about not seeing her mum and sister more regularly. Chloe has been learning about making safe and healthy choices.*	*Chloe often feels sad because of things that are happening at home. Chloe tries hard to make healthy and safe choices, but is not always successful.*
Achieving	*Chloe is doing really well in school.*	*Chloe has been finding it difficult to concentrate on her school work.*
Nurtured	*Chloe is well cared for by her foster carers and has a safe and trusting relationship with her grandparents. She feels able to get help and support from both her foster carers and grandparents when needed.*	*Chloe has a safe and trusting relationship with her grandparents. She feels able to get help and support from her grandparents when needed.*
Active	*Chloe regularly takes part in sports.*	*Although Chloe likes taking part in sport she has recently stopped going to her activities.*
Respected	*Chloe feels that she is listened to when decisions are made about her care and welfare.*	*Chloe feels that nobody listens to what she wants.*
Responsible	*Chloe regularly helps her foster carers with younger children in their care. At school she has joined the pupil council. Chloe shares her views easily with panel members and social workers.*	*Chloe finds it difficult to share her views with panel members and social workers.*
Included	*Chloe has lots of friends and is a well-respected member of her class. She attends several out of school activities.*	*Chloe has been closing herself off from her friends and has stopped going to activities.*

8.3 Scenario 3

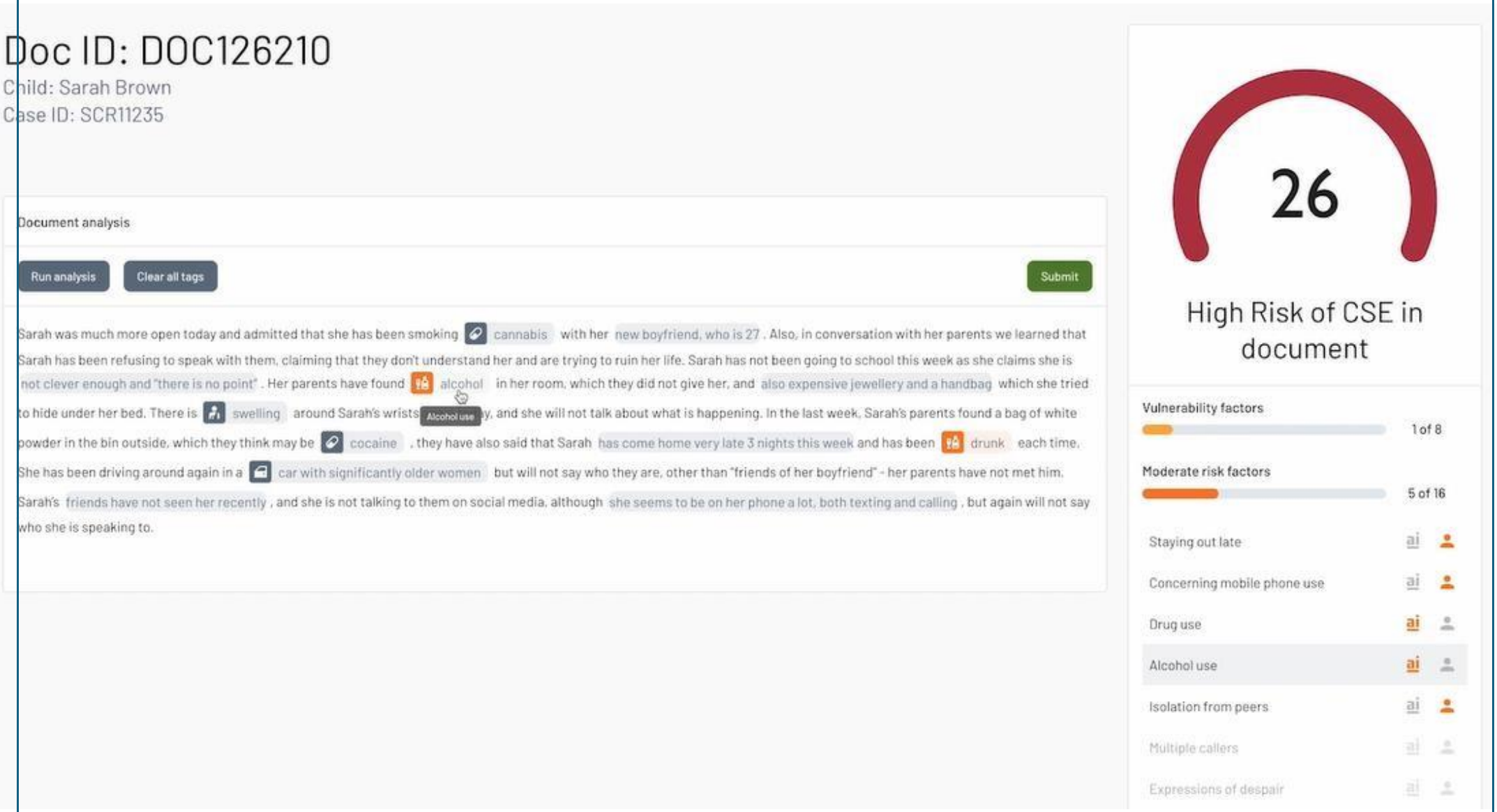
Childhood sexual exploitation (CSE) is a type of sexual abuse that occurs when a young person is given things in exchange for performing sexual activities. This can include things like gifts, drugs, money, or affection.

Jennifer works for a charity that supports victims of childhood sexual exploitation. She recently read that childhood sexual exploitation is often not recognised, even by professionals. The report Jennifer read included tools that could help identify young people at risk of experiencing childhood sexual exploitation. Jennifer has heard that SCRA want to train an AI programme to use these tools. Young people would be screened by the AI when referred to the children's hearings system. The programme would be trained to search SCRA files for words and phrases that show risks of childhood sexual exploitation.

All of the information gathered would be given to Children's Reporters to look at. This would include links to where the AI had found each piece of information. A risk score would be given to each young person. Reporters would be able to change the risk score.

What do you think?

Vulnerability factors	Score
Abuse/ neglect by parent/carer/family member	1
Family history of domestic abuse	1
Family history of substance abuse	1
Family history of mental health difficulties	1
Breakdown of family relationships	1
Child is in residential care	1
Child has low self esteem	1
Child has a disability and/or learning difficulties	1
Vulnerability factors possible total = 8	
Moderate risk factors (child)	
Staying out late	1
Multiple callers (unknown adults/ older children)	1
Use of mobile phone that causes concern	1
Expressions of despair (self-harm, overdose, eating disorder, challenging behaviour, aggression)	1
Drug use	1
Alcohol use	1
Use of internet that causes concern	1
Isolated from peers/ social networks	1
Lack of positive relationships with a protective/nurturing adult	1
Unexplained absences or exclusion from school, or not engaged in education or training	1
Sexually active	1
Criminal activity	1
Family not engaging with services	1
Child under the influence of and/or intimidated by adult criminals	1
Child visiting locations/premises of concern	1
Concerns re. child's peer associations/influence	1
Moderate risk factors possible total = 16	
Significant risk factors (child)	
Going missing overnight or longer	5
Significantly older boy/girlfriend relationship	5
Physical/emotional abuse by that older boy/girlfriend	5
Entering/leaving vehicles alone driven by unknown adult(s)	5
Unexplained amounts of money or expensive items	5
Frequenting areas/premises known for prostitution or sexual exploitation	5
Physical injury without plausible explanation	5
Disclosure of physical or sexual assault; or disclosure of physical or sexual assault and withdrawal of allegation	5
Sexually risky behaviour (e.g. multiple partners; strangers)	5
Recurrent sexually transmitted diseases	5
Abducted/ forced imprisonment	5
Significant risk factors possible total = 55	
Overall possible total score = 79	


Doc ID: DOC126210
Child: Sarah Brown
Case ID: SCR11235
Document analysis
Run analysis
Clear all tags
Submit
Sarah was much more open today and admitted that she has been smoking cannabis with her new boyfriend, who is 27 . Also, in conversation with her parents we learned that Sarah has been refusing to speak with them, claiming that they don't understand her and are trying to ruin her life. Sarah has not been going to school this week as she claims she is not clever enough and "there is no point" . Her parents have found alcohol in her room, which they did not give her, and also expensive jewellery and a handbag which she tried to hide under her bed. There is swelling around Sarah's wrists
Alcohol use
y, and she will not talk about what is happening. In the last week, Sarah's parents found a bag of white powder in the bin outside, which they think may be cocaine , they have also said that Sarah has come home very late 3 nights this week and has been drunk each time. She has been driving around again in a car with significantly older women but will not say who they are, other than "friends of her boyfriend" - her parents have not met him. Sarah's friends have not seen her recently , and she is not talking to them on social media, although she seems to be on her phone a lot, both texting and calling , but again will not say who she is speaking to.
26
High Risk of CSE in document
Vulnerability factors
1 of 8
Moderate risk factors
5 of 16
Staying out late
Concerning mobile phone use
Drug use
Alcohol use
Isolation from peers
Multiple callers
Expressions of despair

8.4 Scenario 4

Sharlene is 14 and has been having a hard time recently at home. She has been arrested for trespassing, causing criminal damage, and assault. Sharlene has been referred to the Children's Hearings System.

Mary works at SCRA and processes Sharlene's referral. Processing a referral takes a long time, and includes lots of steps: check for record of young person, create or update the record, enter police report details, enter referral reason, enter each offence, add investigation forms, send referral to the reporter.

Mary has been hearing a lot about using AI to help with jobs like this. She wonders if AI could be used at SCRA. AI can complete simple tasks more quickly than a human. It could be trained to process referrals to SCRA.

What do you think?

8.5 Scenario 5

The SCRA are responsible for the redaction of documents. Redaction means to remove information. Redaction is used to make sure that a child's address is not given out to those who are not allowed to know where they live. This is done to protect children.

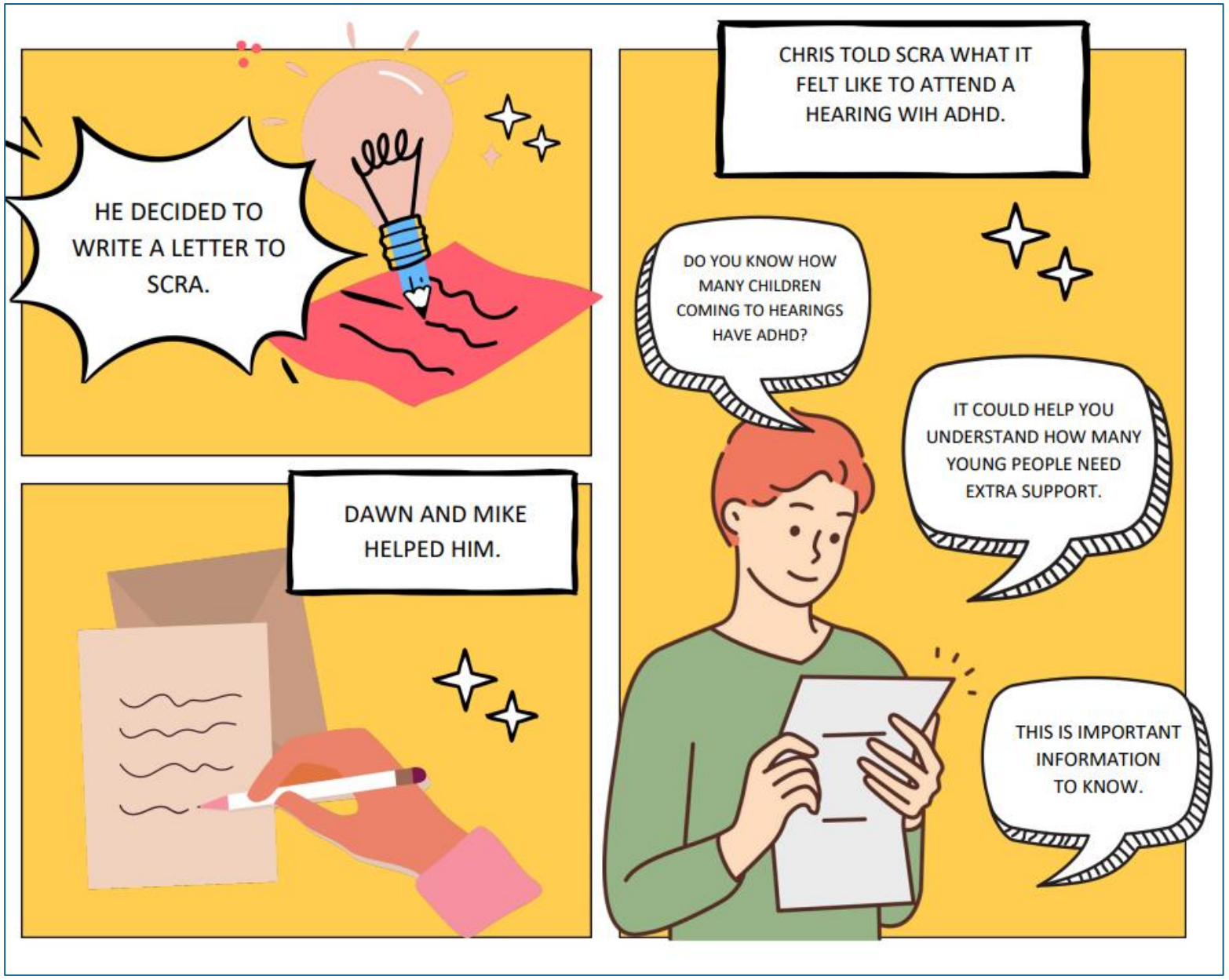
Redaction is currently done by SCRA staff. They read documents and find information to remove. This takes a lot of time. It can be stressful too. SCRA staff know that a child could be harmed if information is missed and accidentally sent out. SCRA are exploring whether AI could help to redact documents. AI could be trained to automatically find specific information in a document.

AI would highlight text it thinks should be redacted. The suggestions would be checked and confirmed by a reporter. AI could then remove that information in every document to be sent out to children and families.

What do you think?

8.6 Scenario 1: Child-Friendly Version


CHRIS HAS BEEN ON A COMPULSORY SUPERVISION ORDER SINCE HE WAS 12.
HE RECENTLY WENT TO A CHILDREN'S HEARING.
THE PANEL MEMBERS AGREED THAT CHRIS WOULD CONTINUE TO LIVE WITH DAWN AND MIKE.
CHRIS WANTS TO STAY WITH DAWN AND MIKE BUT HE LEFT THE HEARING FEELING ANGRY.
THERE WERE TOO MANY THINGS BEING DISCUSSED !
CHRIS FOUND IT HARD TO UNDERSTAND.


HE DECIDED TO WRITE A LETTER TO SCRA.
DAWN AND MIKE HELPED HIM.
CHRIS TOLD SCRA WHAT IT FELT LIKE TO ATTEND A HEARING WIH ADHD.
DO YOU KNOW HOW MANY CHILDREN COMING TO HEARINGS HAVE ADHD?
IT COULD HELP YOU UNDERSTAND HOW MANY YOUNG PEOPLE NEED EXTRA SUPPORT.
THIS IS IMPORTANT INFORMATION TO KNOW.


CHRIS IS SURPRISED WHEN SCRA SAY THEY DONT KNOW THE ANSWER TO HIS QUESTION.
?
THEY EXPLAIN THAT THIS INFORMATION IS HELD IN WRITTEN REPORTS.
THIS MAKES IT DIFFICULT TO FIND AND ANALYSE IT.
HAVE YOU CONSIDERED USING AI?
SOME TYPES OF AI CAN BE TRAINED TO READ WRITTEN DOCUMENTS.

CHRIS TELLS SCRA THAT IF THEY USED THIS TECHNOLOGY THEY WOULD BE ABLE TO REPORT ON LOTS OF DIFFERENT ISSUES THAT MIGHT AFFECT HOW YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCE THEIR HEARINGS.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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