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AI - Glossary

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

A broad term for computer systems that can perform tasks that normally require human intelligence, such as recognising patterns, analysing information, or generating text.

Key idea: AI does not "think" or "understand" in a human way. It follows rules and patterns learned from data.

Machine learning (ML)

A type of AI where systems learn patterns from data rather than being explicitly programmed.

In practice: A system might learn which applications are usually approved by analysing past decisions.

Data

Information used by AI systems to learn or make decisions. This can include text, numbers, images, or records.

Ethical relevance: If data reflects past bias or inequality, AI systems can repeat or amplify those problems.

Algorithm

A set of instructions a computer follows to complete a task or make a decision.

In practice: An algorithm might decide which cases are flagged as "high risk" based on certain factors.

Data protection

Rules and laws that govern how personal data is collected, stored, and used.

UK context: GDPR and the Data Protection Act are especially relevant when using AI in social services.

Ethical AI

An approach to designing and using AI that prioritises fairness, accountability, transparency, and respect for human rights.

Safeguards

Policies, checks, and limits put in place to reduce harm when using AI.

Examples: Data protection, bias audits, human review, clear accountability.

Human-in-the-loop

A system where humans remain actively involved in reviewing or approving AI-assisted decisions.

Best practice: AI supports, humans decide.

Explainability

The ability to understand and explain why an AI system produced a particular output.

Why it matters: Professionals may need to justify decisions to service users or courts.

Transparency

How clear it is how an AI system works and how it reaches decisions.

Ethical concern: Some AI systems are "black boxes," making scrutiny difficult.

Hallucination

When an AI system generates information that sounds plausible but is false or made up.

Implication: AI outputs should always be checked, especially in professional settings.

Large language model (LLM)

A type of AI trained on vast amounts of text to generate human-like responses.

Examples: ChatGPT, Copilot, Gemini.

Limitation: These systems can sound confident while being wrong.

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Predictive System

An AI system that estimates what might happen in the future based on past data.

Example: Predicting likelihood of service need or risk escalation.

Decision-support tool

An AI system designed to assist humans in making decisions, not replace them.

Important distinction: The human professional remains responsible for the final decision.

Automation

Using technology to carry out tasks with minimal human involvement.

In social work: Automation might support administrative tasks, but should not replace professional

Bias (in AI)

When an AI system produces unfair outcomes, often because of biased data or assumptions built into its design.

Example: A system that consistently underestimates risk for some groups and overestimates it for others.

Training data

The data used to teach an AI system how to behave or make predictions.

Key risk: If training data is incomplete or biased, the AI's outputs will be too.

Guardrails

Policies, rules, and technical limits put in place to ensure AI systems are used safely and appropriately.

Purpose: Guardrails help prevent harmful or incorrect outputs and make sure AI is used responsibly.

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Prompts

The instructions or questions given to an AI system to guide what it produces.

In practice: A clear, well-worded prompt helps the AI generate more accurate and relevant responses.

Stack (AI Stack)

The different layers of technology that work together to make an AI system function.

Includes: Data, models, tools, software, and the infrastructure that supports them

Virtual Assistant

A digital tool that helps users complete tasks by answering questions, providing information, or automating routine actions.

In practice: A virtual assistant might help a professional find policies quickly or draft routine documents.

Generative AI

A type of AI that creates new content—such as text, images, audio, or summaries—based on patterns learned from data.

Key point: Generative AI produces “new” material, but it is based on what it has previously learned.