

AI in children’s social care: who benefits, and how do we know?

Coram-i

As artificial intelligence accelerates through every part of public service delivery, children’s social care faces both immense possibility and profound uncertainty. At Coram-i’s November *AI in Children’s Social Care* event, Dr Aoife O’Higgins, Director of Evidence at **Foundations**, the **National What Works Centre for Children and Families**, closed the day with three provocations. Each was designed to bring the conversation back to what matters most: **children’s experiences, outcomes, and voices**.

Her message was clear: if AI is to have a meaningful, positive impact in children’s social care, the sector must be far more intentional about *who* benefits and *how we will know*.

1. Start with the question - who benefits?

Aoife began by noting a striking gap in current discourse: despite rapid experimentation with AI tools, **we do not yet know who is actually benefiting from this technology**.

While enthusiasm for efficiency gains is understandable, especially in a financially pressured sector, she challenged the idea that efficiency is an end in itself. Without a clear, child centred definition of success, AI risks reinforcing existing inequities or creating new unintended harms.

Throughout the event, speakers touched on the fastmoving pace of innovation, yet the conversation often drifted away from children themselves. Aoife urged the sector to “think of the children”, not as a slogan, but as a disciplined practice of **centring voice, experience, impact, and outcomes**.

2. Evolve how we learn: research, evidence and real-time insight

Aoife’s second provocation focused on **how we learn what AI is doing in children’s lives**. Research and evaluation remain fundamental, but the traditional cycle, from bids, to multimonth studies, to lengthy reports, cannot keep pace with AI’s development.

Instead, she called for a refreshed approach to evidence:

- Faster, lighter, iterative learning cycles;
- Greater emphasis on capturing real-time practice insight;
- Evaluation methods that reflect the speed of digital change.

Importantly, she highlighted that meaningful learning cannot sit solely with academics or large institutions. Local authorities and practitioners are often best placed to see how AI is shaping children’s daily experiences. Their observations, structured and captured well, should form part of the sector’s shared evidence base.

3. Bring children and families with us

Aoife’s final provocation was perhaps the most challenging: **children and families must be active participants in shaping AI in social care**, not passive recipients.

Engagement is complex, especially when the systems themselves are in flux and the workforce is adapting to new tools. But without intentional strategies for codesign and involvement, the sector risks building solutions that do not work for the very people they are supposed to serve.

She noted in particular:

- Children in care are often over consulted yet underheard;
- AI could deepen mistrust if systems are experienced as opaque or impersonal;
- Trust relies on practitioners who understand AI’s capabilities and limits;
- Stable, relational practice remains central, even as digital tools shift around it.

Looking ahead: collective ambition, shared responsibility

Aoife closed by inviting the sector to take on these questions together. Determining who benefits from AI, how we learn, and how we involve children is not the responsibility of any one organisation. It is a shared endeavour.

Her call-to-action mirrors Coram-i’s wider ambition: to foster a national conversation that is reflective, evidence informed and deeply grounded in children’s lived experience.

About Foundations

Foundations is funded by the Department for Education to produce **actionable evidence** that supports and improves practice and policy for children and families. Their work spans domestic abuse, kinship care, strengthening family networks, and relationships for children in care, alongside accessible practice guides for local authorities.