

Evaluating AI in children’s social care: beyond the shallows

Coram-i

Artificial intelligence is already reshaping children’s social care, but according to Professor Donald Forrester, Deputy Director of **The Centre for Social Care and Artificial Intelligence Learning (SCALE)**, we are “paddling in the shallows,” with much more on the horizon: enormous opportunities and equally significant risks. Presenting at Coram-i’s November *AI in Children’s Social Care* event, Donald offered a thoughtful and often provocative exploration of how the sector can responsibly evaluate AI, even as its development outpaces traditional research cycles.

A field changing faster than the sector can keep up

Donald began by situating AI as a transformative force far beyond children’s social care. Citing **Sundar Pichai’s** (CEO of Google) assertion that AI may be “more profound than fire or electricity,” he emphasised the **scale of global investment**, around \$1.5 trillion annually, and the inevitability of profound social change. Children’s social care will not be exempt.

Yet within the sector, current activity is highly uneven and often bottom up. Local authorities are experimenting in pockets, often influenced by private and voluntary sector partners. Many are adopting tools, but without a shared evidence base or robust understanding of their impact. It is, as Donald put it, “an incredibly exciting time,” but one that calls for both optimism and caution.

He spoke from the vantage point of **SCALE**, a first of its kind research centre combining computing, data science, trials research and social care expertise. SCALE’s aim is to evaluate how AI is used across children’s and adults’ services, and to help the sector understand not only *what* tools can do, but *how* they function and *what difference* they make.

What AI actually is and why it matters for evaluation

While Donald was quick to clarify that he is not a technical expert, he offered a clear explanation of the technologies currently bundled under the term AI: machine learning, large language models, expert systems, robotics, and even emerging forms such as genetic AI. These tools mimic or surpass human cognitive processes, processing vast amounts of data in ways that resemble human perception and reasoning.

He illustrated this with a personal example: asking ChatGPT to draft an opening to a sermon, which he and his father-in-law found startlingly strong. For Donald, the point is not novelty: it is evidence of how convincing and wide-ranging these tools already are, and therefore how urgently the sector must understand both their strengths and their limits.

Opportunities: from boring jobs to better decision-making

Donald set out a wide range of potential applications currently being explored or developed through SCALE and other organisations:

- **Administrative support** (e.g., automated summary tools);
- **Interagency data sharing**;
- **Practice improvement** through automated feedback on skills such as motivational interviewing;
- **Supporting research use**, making evidence more accessible to practitioners;
- **AI assisted risk assessment**, shown in early research to outperform human judgement on some tasks;
- **Direct help for families**, such as translation services or interactive “My Social Worker” applications;
- **Advanced organisational analytics**, enabling deeper understanding of need and risk.

“Most of these developments will mature significantly within the next two to four years. The question is not whether they will arrive, but how they should be tested, governed and integrated.”

Why obvious benefits still require rigorous evaluation

One of Donald’s most striking concerns came from a comment he heard during an attempt to evaluate Magic Notes: “*The benefits are so obvious... Why evaluate?*”

This, he argued, is precisely the mindset that puts children, families and practitioners at risk. Even when AI offers clear value, such as reducing notetaking burden, its side effects can be complex and unintended.

Using Magic Notes as a case study, he posed questions across three domains:

1. The AI system itself

Do we know how accurate it is? Have we tested for hallucinations? Is it truly the best way to achieve the task? Could a publicly funded alternative offer similar benefits without commercial constraints?



2. The human user

Will practitioners still check outputs, or will busy workers gradually outsource more of their thinking? How might reliance on summaries affect their understanding of families?

3. The organisational context

If AI saves time, how will underfunded authorities use that time? To reduce stress? Improve practice? Or reduce staffing?

For Donald, these questions are not arguments against AI. They are arguments for **evaluating AI in its full context**, not only in terms of direct function.

Evaluation must become interdisciplinary and rapid

Donald argued that children’s social care already has strong methodologies for evaluating complex interventions, particularly through theory-driven and collaborative approaches like those outlined in **Medical Research Council and National Institute of Health and Care guidance**. These methods emphasise working with practitioners, children and families to understand how an intervention works, for whom, and under what conditions.

But AI demands something more:

- **Interdisciplinary evaluation**, including deep technical understanding of how models function “under the hood”;
- **Attention to interaction effects**: the combined system of human, AI and organisational context;
- **Recognition of significant side effects**, not just headline benefits.

The biggest barrier, however, is **time**. Good research is slow, methodical and collaborative. AI development is fast, commercial and accelerating.

Authorities face real operational pressures and will not wait years for evaluative findings. Implementation is already happening. Donald raised the urgent question: *How can evaluation adapt to keep pace?*

What the sector must prioritise next

Donald concluded that evaluation is only one part of what the sector needs. To make AI work for children and families, we must develop:

- Workforce readiness;
- Organisational readiness;
- Robust governance and trusted guidance;
- Faster, more flexible research funding.

He emphasised the essential role organisations like **SCALE** and **Foundations** play in combining social care expertise and technological understanding, something the sector urgently needs more of.

Conclusion: a transformative moment, if we choose it

Donald ended with both enthusiasm and realism. AI represents extraordinary potential, from reducing administrative burden to improving decision quality and expanding access to help. But without thoughtful evaluation, rooted in ethics, technical insight and social care values, AI risks amplifying inequity, reducing practitioner autonomy and reshaping the workforce in ways we do not yet understand.

The challenge ahead is to step beyond the shallows, with curiosity and caution, and to build the evidence, governance and readiness needed to ensure AI serves the fundamental purpose of children’s social care: improving the lives of children and families.

About SCALE

The **Centre for Social Care and Artificial Intelligence Learning (SCALE)** will harness the potential of AI for social care, aiming to kickstart activity and build critical mass in a new, exciting, and fast-moving cross-disciplinary research area. SCALE will deliver real-world impact by placing those with direct experience of services at the centre of our work. We will include service users from adult and children’s social care, as well as practitioners and policymakers, to build sustainable long-term collaborations and to secure external funding.