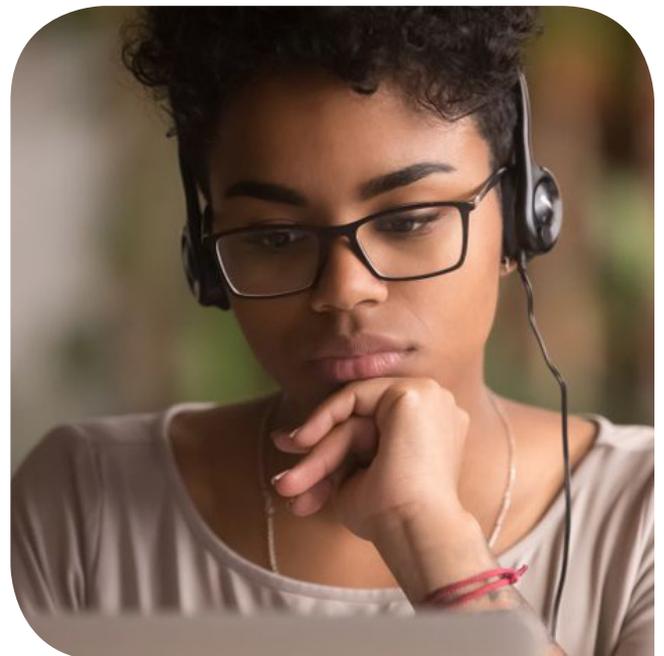
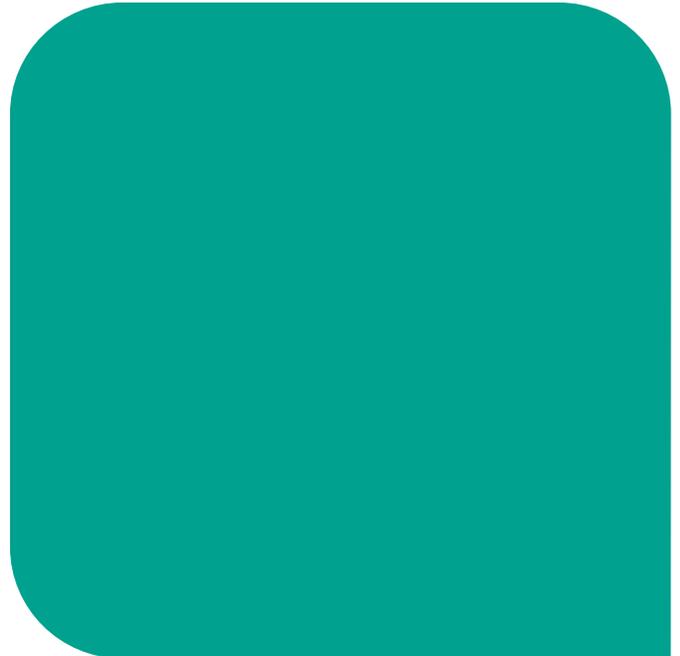
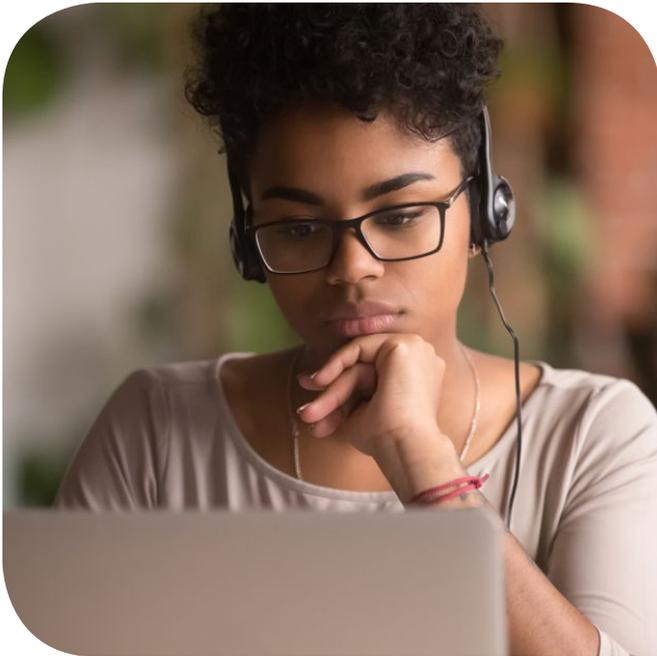




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Digital capabilities for social workers: Stakeholders' report



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First published in Great Britain in October 2019
by the Social Care Institute for Excellence and
the British Association of Social Workers

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Introduction

Social workers require good digital skills and capabilities to support their complex role.

A wide range of stakeholders – from practitioners and people who use services, to tech developers and educators – have a role to play in supporting the development of digital capabilities.

This report outlines the key messages and findings for social workers and all those stakeholders, based on the initial phase of the [Digital capabilities for social workers](#) project delivered by SCIE and BASW. The report aims to share insights with the sector, support debate, and inform the development of the projects' future resources.

The report is based on a rapid literature review, stakeholder Advisory Group meetings, two workshops attended by over 40 social workers in different roles and seniority, a survey completed by 648 respondents, and interviews with 15 key sector leaders.

The [Digital capabilities for social workers](#) project forms part of the [Building a digitally ready workforce programme](#), led by Health Education England.

Definitions

In this project, 'digital technology' is conceptualised as:

- **Electronic systems** (hardware and software) to facilitate day-to-day work of and by social workers (e.g. email, electronic record systems, business software)
- **Online resources** for professionals and people using services (e.g. apps and websites)
- **Assistive technologies** for people using services (e.g. communication aids and robotics)
- **Social media** and social networking interfaces (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, Skype, WhatsApp)
- **Informatics and the use of data** reports and analytics by social workers to monitor and improve services (e.g. performance management software)
- **Hardware** (e.g. mobile devices and web enabled laptops)
- **Online learning** (e.g. professional e-learning, online courses, webinars, online communities of practice).

The term **expert by experience (EbE)** is used to refer to people who use social work services – including adults, children, families and carers.

Context

This section explains the policy context for the Digital capabilities for social workers project.

Policy context

Recent government policies have prioritised digital technology, including 'data revolution' and Artificial Intelligence. (For a historical overview, see [p. 16 -21 of the 2018 House of Lords Report 'AI in the UK: ready, willing and able?'](#))

The Government's 2017 White Paper [Industrial Strategy: building a Britain fit for the future](#) proposed that We will put the UK at the forefront of the artificial intelligence and data revolution and identified the health and care sectors as potential innovators. Within the NHS, the policy framework encompasses "better" use of data to understand need and plan service, quickening the availability of data for care planning and ensuring that the workforce is digitally literate and ready.

The 2018 Department of Health and Social Care policy paper [The future of healthcare: our vision for digital, data and technology in health and care](#) argued that [t]he potential of cutting-edge technologies to support **preventative, predictive and personalised care** is huge. ([NHS Long Term Plan](#))

Allied to these, there is an underpinning assumption that digital technology will lead to the achievement of longstanding policy ambition for better integration within NHS services and between health and social care. ([Kings Fund. 2018. Digital change in health and social care](#))

It is recognised that for these aims to be realised, there is the need to ensure that the workforce is digitally ready. Thus, the NHS [Personalised Health and Care 2020 addressed workforce readiness](#), arguing that In future, all members of the health, care and social care workforce must have the knowledge, skills and characteristics that are necessary to embrace information, data and technology, appropriate to their role.

In the NHS, the workforce implications of the ongoing policy of digitisation has been addressed through the [Building a Digitally Ready Workforce Programme \(BDRW\)](#) which seeks to equip health and care professionals within the NHS with the requisite skills. This is contained in [A Health and Care Digital Capabilities Framework](#) which outlines generic capabilities that support individual motivation and development. Crucially, the framework promotes positive attitudes towards change, technology and innovation.

However, for social workers, digital capability is now a measure of professional capability as this is included in the [Professional Capabilities Framework](#).

Digitisation in social care

In the wider social care sector, the policy framework is fragmented, reflecting the spread of responsibility across different government departments. Developments in adult social care appear driven by the NHS policy agenda. For example [connected social care](#) is about how tech can drive choice and cost efficiencies in adult social care while the technology workforce survey explored workforce digital readiness. Paralleling these,

under the [Local Digital Fund](#), the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government financed skills training and infrastructure for local authorities and the third sector. An example is the [Family context in children's services](#)

This brief policy overview highlights the concerns about fragmentation alongside aspirations for technology to enable integration of services and a quest to ensure workforce readiness. Furthermore because multiple government departments have responsibility for social work, there are many stakeholders in discussions about digital capabilities.

Key messages

This section is about the role of sector constituents in promoting and enabling a digitally ready social work workforce, including an overview, plus detailed messages for individual stakeholders. These messages are based on the initial findings of this project.

Overview of key messages

- Social workers want to engage with digital technology; however, they want it to enable relationship-based practice and improve the experiences of people who use services.
- Social workers can help to shape policy, practice, procurement and technology if they are digitally literate and actively engaged in decision making and planning locally and nationally.
- Managers should address training needs and ensure critical reflection on the ethics of digital technology in supervision.
- Senior managers should ensure that social workers have current and functioning equipment, reliable connectivity, and systems that enable rather than hinder practice and integration.
- Strategic leaders should ensure that social workers and experts by experience (EbE) are involved in the design, development, and procurement of digital technologies. These should be underpinned by principles of co-production.
- Educators should include digital capabilities in social work education programmes using the Health and Care Digital Capabilities Framework and the Professional Capabilities Framework.
- EbE want technology to improve outcomes for them, meet their distinct needs, and increase access to information and services. Use of digital technology should be rights-based – e.g. right to self-determination, consent, privacy and confidentiality.
- Technology developers and suppliers should meaningfully involve social workers and EbE to ensure efficacy, efficiency, and effectiveness.
- The sector should work together to ensure systems work across health, care and related services as social workers and services demand interoperability and integration.
- Policy makers should provide a conducive policy framework that promotes systems integration, coherent regulations on data governance and a digitally ready workforce.
- Sector leaders should ensure transparency around purpose, design and procurement of systems and the increasing use of AI and predictive analytics in social work.

Messages for key stakeholders

Social workers

Digital capability is part of the professional standards of practice for social workers. It is a capability within the [Professional Capabilities Framework](#) and part of the [Social Work England Professional Standards](#) from 2 December 2019. Digital capability also enables social workers to attain and demonstrate the skills and knowledge in the [Post-qualifying: knowledge and skills statement for child and family practitioners](#) and the [Knowledge and Skills Statement for Social Workers in Adult Services](#).

Social workers' roles include accurate recording of their interactions with people using services and other professionals, e.g. using digital systems to record and review assessments and care plans. Digital technology can render these work processes more timely, comprehensive and inclusive when the hardware and software systems – and administrative support for them – are designed around the social workers' practice.

Due to the pace and scale of technological change, social workers should engage professionally with digital and keep learning through Continuing Professional Development (CPD).

CPD can include trainer-led or self-directed online learning, use of apps or written material, reflection based on professional curiosity to raise individual awareness, or through peer-to-peer and group supervision models. The types of CPD offered should be commensurate with social workers' needs and learning styles.

Social workers should embrace and extend their use of digital technology where it can assist with the core business of social work - improving outcomes and experiences for people who use services. For instance:

- Simple digital technology that has become commonplace in daily personal life can (with appropriate protocols) facilitate relationship-based practice by increasing frequency and speed of communication e.g. through appropriate use of email, texting, apps and other online platforms.
- Social workers can improve social inclusion and enable positive peer networks of support through helping service users of all ages to access online resources and communities.
- Where online record systems are integrated, and the right permissions have been applied, decision-making about care and support can be more efficient and more holistic, ensuring faster interventions and supporting preventative practice.
- For people with specific needs – for instance some autistic adults, people with learning disability, dementia service users, and Looked After Children - digital technologies can enable them to express their wishes. This is empowering and rights-based practice and will ensure that they enjoy the same right to self-determination and choice as everyone else.

Social workers need to integrate safeguarding and assessment capability into their digital and online skills. They should understand risks associated with digital technology and how to use digital tools in their safeguarding duties under the Care Act 2014 and Children Act 1989.

Critical reflection, understanding of ethics, and good decision-making skills are required across social work and need to be adapted to digital challenges. Social workers will encounter ethical dilemmas – for instance balancing the right of people using services to online privacy and confidentiality balanced against disclosing information in safeguarding.

Social workers should ensure that use of digital technology and online platforms do not create risks for service users and mitigate them where they occur.

Social workers should understand their duties under the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

Supervisors of social workers, team managers, and practice leaders

Managers and supervisors can support good practice by promoting digital capabilities for social workers. Many digital technologies are already incorporated into routine practice – for instance in using online systems to capture assessments, interventions, and care plan reviews.

An enabling question about whether a particular technology should be adopted is 'how can it enhance relationship-based practice, address people's needs (including safeguarding), and foster rights-based practice?'

Supervisors and managers can encourage role-specific and practice-focused digital capabilities by including them in Personal Development Plans.

Where social workers require foundational digital skills, a combination of face to face training and coaching may be the most effective route.

Trainer-directed CPD can increase initial confidence and problem-solving approaches, which can be increased by self-directed, peer and online learning.

Like all professionals, social workers need to be trained and be confident to make the most of existing and emerging digital technologies to facilitate their work. This means having a suitable digital environment in which to work and the right equipment.

Critical reflection on the ethical implications of digitisation in social work should be addressed in supervision.

Senior managers (e.g. heads of integrated services, principal social workers, assistant directors, heads of IT and system procurement

Social workers and EbE want to use digital technology that is accessible, intuitive, and effective. They must also be interoperable and enable integrated working.

Social workers should not be tied up in computer admin which is outside their 'core business' but as professionals, social workers know data gathering is important for improvement and assurance Senior managers should explain why social workers need to be engaged in data recording and collection– for instance, what data gathered by

social workers is for performance management, training needs analysis, or for meeting wider organisational goals?

Organisations need to collect data but as far as possible, this should not add to the social work task or divert from the core activities and purpose of practice.

The priority for new digital technologies should be relationship-based practice and person-centred care. Performance management should be about meeting these objectives.

Systems should be interoperable (with partner agencies wherever possible), secure, and accessible. They should also enable information sharing between professionals within teams and between agencies.

Local policies can restrict social workers' digital capabilities where they prohibit them from using 'everyday' technologies (e.g. undue restrictions on email, text, WhatsApp, Skype, Facetime).

Most people using services also want to use diverse digital platforms to interact with services and professionals. Local policies should support social workers and people using services to communicate and share information safely, confidently and creatively

It is recommended that organisational leaders review their local data governance policies to ensure proportionality, currency, and efficacy. (See chapter 3 of [Data management and use: Governance in the 21st Century. A joint report by the British Academy and the Royal Society](#))

There should be multi-disciplinary teams with different skills to design, develop, and procure local digital systems. The involvement of social workers and EbE will ensure systems and technologies reflect the realities of practice and are efficacious.

Strategic leaders (e.g. directors, local politicians, commissioners, heads of private, voluntary and independent providers)

Strategic and political leaders should ensure clarity of purpose and objectives in the use of technology in their organisations.

'A mix of technical and non-technical managers and user-led organization should oversee the development of digital and technology programmes. This is because [w]ith the assumption that digital government is all about technology, digital teams are put in the driving seat of reform efforts. Much-needed collaboration with non-technical teams can be missed.'

Copeland, E. 2018. [A brief Introduction to Digital Transformation](#). London. Nesta

There should be procedures for involving EbE, social workers in different services and technical staff, in managing an organisation's digital infrastructure and processes. This should be underpinned by principles of co-production.

Leaders should consider innovative models to address specific challenges in making social workers digitally ready. For instance, principal social workers can be the link between technical and service delivery teams, clinical commissioning groups and local authorities can jointly fund social worker posts aimed at driving the use of digital technology in service.

Educators (e.g. universities and higher education institutes (HEIs))

Majority of respondents to the project survey reported that their social work training did not prepare them for digital readiness in practice. This included 25% (very unhelpful), 27% (unhelpful) and 37% (neither helpful or unhelpful). Thus, while student social workers use digital technologies, this survey finding suggest that the skills and knowledge they gain within education settings are not being transferred to practice.

Qualifying social work programmes should ensure that newly qualified social workers are digitally ready for practice and are able to engage with the risks and opportunities of digital technologies.

HEIs should ensure that student social workers receive training in digital capabilities as stipulated in the Professional Capabilities Framework. The use of [A Health and Care Digital Capabilities Framework](#) can ensure consistency across all social work training courses

HEIs and teaching partnerships should develop CPD programmes in digital capabilities, identifying which specialist skills are required for some distinct social work roles – for instance in criminal justice, youth offending, online safeguarding.

EbE with specific needs should be involved in training students about how particular technologies benefit them - for instance communication aids with people with learning disability and adults diagnosed with dementia, videos and apps with Looked After Children, and assistive technology that empowers blind people.

Modules in social work ethics should address ethical issues in (e.g.) 'datafication' and digitisation of welfare systems, highlighting national guidelines and guidance – e.g. [the British Association of Social Workers Social Media Policy](#).

Experts by experience (EbEs): people who use services, their families and carers

EbE involved in this project were enthusiastic about the benefits of digital technologies. However, some of these technologies (including hardware) cost money. To encourage use of beneficial technologies, developers and service providers need to make them freely available to EbE.

EbE should be supported to self-advocate and demand their right to consent to the uses of their data and protection under GDPR.

EbE should be enabled to co-produce digital technology by outlining the distinct benefits of the inclusion of their lived experience and clarifying their expectations as citizens living in an increasingly digital society

They should be involved in the training of social workers' digital capabilities, including programme design, teaching and assessment of students' digitally readiness.

Technology developers and companies

Developers should involve social workers and EbE at the early stages of design, development and procurement.

To encourage their use, technologies should reflect the 'realities' of practice and the values-driven motivations of practitioners. Therefore, developers should increase their

understanding of social work practice by directly co-producing technology with EbE and practitioners.

Social workers will respond to systems that prioritise peoples' needs over organisational objectives, although they are not mutually exclusive. This requires developers to explain how technologies address these issues.

There is a demand within the social work for transparency and debate about:

- design and procurement
- rationale underpinning systems (re) design
- why they are required to do administrative tasks that divert their attention from practice to data collection and entry

Policy makers (e.g. Government departments, Chief Social Workers, civil servants, think tanks, national politicians)

Digitisation in social work is being driven by policies contextualised within the NHS and healthcare. However, while symbiotic, the NHS and social care have significant differences in aims, structures, and personnel.

Digital technology can support the integration of services, where appropriately supported and implemented to meet the primary tasks and requirements of all stakeholders and digital users.

The NHS has developed a policy framework on digitisation, and this should be replicated in social work. All stakeholders in this project reported fragmentation and inoperability, which is partly explained by the different government departments with social work responsibilities pursuing different objectives on digitisation.

Policy makers should address digital capabilities of social workers across all settings and with different roles and responsibilities

A review of current data governance rules is required to make them consistent. Clarity between the GDPR and safeguarding duties is also required.

National bodies for sector leaders, regulators, and inspectors (e.g. ADADD, ADCS, NHS England, Social Work England, NHSX, CQC, OFSTED, NHS Digital, Care England)

Fragmentation of digital systems at national level impacts negatively on the day-to-day work of social workers and this in turn affects the outcomes experienced by people who use services. Social workers should be at the heart of integrated health and social care services and understand how technology can enhance integration.

Leaders should ensure more integration of systems, technologies and processes that genuinely work for all professionals to facilitate integrated health and social care

In part, inspection of social care services (e.g. by Ofsted and CQC) is also an evaluation of social workers' digital capabilities and whether the digital technology of their employers enable or hinder good practice.

There is a need for sector leadership in developing common policy frameworks and processes to underpin systems design, outputs, and procurement contracts. (See Chapter 6 of [Connected Councils: A Digital Vision of Local Councils in 2015](#))

A common framework for procurement and design will enable standardisation and achieve the policy goal of interoperability, leading to the realisation of the full benefits of integrated services and systems for users of services and social workers.

National bodies should understand and aim to influence the system supplier market to ensure that new system development takes account of the needs of social workers and service users.

Leaders should also develop processes for cross-sector learning and knowledge sharing about the benefits of adopting new digital technologies.

Social workers and sector leaders who participated in interviews and workshops advocated for greater transparency and open debate about the use of predictive analytics in health and social care.

Regulators and sector leaders should work with stakeholders in social work to increase the content and effectiveness of training on digital capabilities at pre and post qualifying levels.

Findings

The findings from the 'discovery phase' of this project are summarised here. This phase included a rapid literature review, stakeholder Advisory Group meetings, two workshops attended by over 40 social workers in different roles and seniority, survey completed by 648 respondents, and interviews with 15 key sector leaders.

Overview of key findings

The literature suggests that social workers' digital capabilities vary, however survey respondents in this project varied and rated their digital skills as 'Good' or 'Very good'.

Social workers engage with digital technologies in their private lives and want this to be replicated in their professional roles. They understand the benefits of technology.

All stakeholders involved in this project reported fragmentation and inoperability. They believe that current technology can assist with better integration of services and workstreams.

There is the need for co-production principles to underpin development and installation of digital technology. Social workers and experts by experience (EbE) should be meaningfully involved.

Social workers believe that new systems in workplaces should prioritise relationship-based practice and person-centred care over performance management. They do not want their role to include data collection for performance management and other organisational objectives.

Organisations need to collect performance management and other data, however this should not all be included in social workers' tasks as this can divert focus from their role.

Social workers appear concerned with different ethical issues from those addressed in the literature. They want EbE to have choice over how they interact with services and for their right to self-determination to be enhanced by technology. Social workers also want data security and the threats that they receive on social media to be addressed.

Key informants suggest that social work is not utilising the full potential of current technologies because of restrictive local data governance protocols.

Social workers believe that university training does not address their digital readiness for practice. Skills, ethics, and policy should be taught in qualifying programmes.

The national policy framework on digitisation in social care is fragmented. The government departments with social care responsibility should develop a unified framework with integration a key priority.

There is a desire within the sector for stakeholders to engage with each other. Technology providers should understand social work and involve social workers in all aspects of their work.

Rapid literature review

The key research questions focused on:

- Digital capability as it applies to the social work professional role and why it is important
- Identifying the benefits of increased use of digital data, technology and social media in social work practice
- What needs to be addressed in pre- and post-qualification work training to enable these benefits to be realised?

Literature review themes

In the broader national context of the importance of digital capability and skills in the wider UK workforce, research which specifically addresses the question of **digital capability** for social workers and the required strategies and frameworks to develop this is thin on the ground.

It is clear that regulators, professional bodies and social work educators in the UK (and elsewhere) have found it hard to keep abreast of the rapid pace of technological innovation and the need for new policies, guidance and training to equip social workers with the critical skills to use data and digital tools effectively.

There is some consensus about the importance of mapping and embedding digital capabilities into existing professional regulations, standards and frameworks to present a coherent professional response. The need to develop what has been termed “digital professionalism” has been highlighted (Taylor, 2017), based on core professional values and a strong vision of the benefits of digital social work practice which resonates with practitioners.

Led by Health Education England (HEE), the **Building a Digital Ready Workforce** programme aims to bring people together in a culture that recognises the need to innovate and the role of digital in that innovation. The mission of the programme is to assist health and care professionals in England to acquire digital skills to transform and deliver the outcomes of their role quicker, easier, safer and at a higher level of quality. This is delivered through a number of workstreams, including ‘digital champions’ which has been successful in health settings (HEE/RCN, 2018) and a new informatics role in social work (Reay, 2019).

A well-established body of social work literature considers the history of technology use by social workers and the potentially transformative impact of digitisation on their role (Ballantyne, 2017).

Information and assistive technologies are transforming the way care services are delivered but it is recognised that technology can only be an enabler if it is delivered and utilised appropriately and in a human-centred way which meets specific individual needs. (ADASS 2019)

Social workers need to understand and shape how digital technology impacts on key practice issues, and the expectations of clients they work with in relation to its use. The development of critical skills and competence as well as technical awareness is needed in order to assess and evaluate ethical issues around confidentiality, data security, online risk and the blurring of private/professional boundaries.

Social workers continue to express frustration with the design, accessibility and implementation of case management systems for recording and sharing of data (NHS Digital, 2018). There is an increasing awareness of the challenges posed by the deployment of artificial intelligence software, predictive analytics and use of “big data” in the planning and delivery of services, particularly services for children and families. (Gillingham & Graham, 2017, BASW, 2019)

The “digital readiness” for practice of social work students and the need to embed digital literacy into the curriculum to prepare students to become ethically competent practitioners is an ongoing theme (Goldingay & Boddy, 2017). Current requirements for learning and development pre- and post-qualification need to be appraised alongside research findings from work on the digital socialisation of students in readiness for practice (Taylor, 2017).

The proliferation of social media, networks and apps, and the development of critical perspectives on its use in practice is a dominant theme in recent professional literature (Westwood, 2019).

Research which systematically reviews and evaluates the use of social media interventions in practice is limited, but the opportunities presented by social media to improve practice, build and strengthen client relationships, support collaboration and integration are recognised (Jackson, 2019, Kirwan, 2019).

Particular issues have been identified for social workers working with children and young people, both in terms of educating them about and managing social media risk but understanding how young people engage with and benefit from social networking is crucial and an increasingly important part of CAMHS social work (Somerville & Brady, 2019)

Practitioners need to learn about digital technology in a real-world context making decisions based on knowledge of what’s available, what is appropriate and what works.

Workshops

The workshops enabled the scoping of the issues from across the sector. Designed to ensure England-wide participation by social workers in different roles and settings, two workshops were held in Birmingham and London. Both were advertised on the BASW website and were oversubscribed, thus enabling the project team to select attendees to ensure representativeness. The wide-ranging interest in the workshops is another evidence of the appetite for digital technology in the sector and the desire of social workers to engage with the project theme.

Attendees included:

- A social worker employed by technology company which supplies local authority systems
- Social workers and non-social work staff currently implementing new digital systems
- Educators
- Students

- Practicing social workers in children and adult services in varying roles – for instance independent reviewing officers, managers, and independent social workers

The format of the workshops was a mixture of presentations and table top discussions. The project team explained the aims of **Digital capabilities for social workers** and presented analysis of the survey data and the literature review. After this, an EbE gave a talk on how they have found digital technology beneficial and outlined other potential benefits for people who use services. Following the presentations, there were table top discussions and group feedback. The workshops were therefore CPD for participants and sources of valuable 'data' for the project.

Workshop findings

- There was a consensus that digital technologies can enhance social work, sometimes in unexpected ways – for instance the use of social media to identify missing looked after children. However, the 'acid test' for new technologies is whether they can augment the work practitioners do **with and alongside** people rather than replacing social workers
- Partnerships between technology companies, IT departments, social workers and people who use services must be encouraged to ensure that new systems reflect practice realities
- Employers are on different points of the digital transformation agenda. While some employers were 'upgrading' to cloud-based systems, some are now implementing 'older' systems. However, participants agreed that systems' transformations profoundly impacted on practice – "it's been a nightmare". There were reports of deleted case records, systems unsuitable for social work processes and lack of training opportunities
- Social workers asked for the development of a coherent CPD framework on digital capabilities and training incentives. Participants also agreed on the need for social workers to reflect on their skills and identify their training needs
- Employers, technology companies (suppliers) and BASW should jointly agree a CPD framework for social workers
- Some social workers reported having 'good kit' but these can be unreliable, "too slow" or "not integrated". This can affect their confidence in systems and lead them to "bypass" them

Workshop participants discussions on ethics concluded that:

- people who use services should be able to choose how they use technology to interact with professionals and services. They should also be able to determine how much of their medical and social care records are accessible to professionals

- Some social workers' rights to privacy have been breached because clients have accessed their social media profiles
- The use of social media can lead to blurring of social workers' private and professional selves
- Some participants receive threats on social media
- While the literature is concerned about ethics, there was little discussion about privacy and confidentiality in the workshops. One explanation may be that social workers in the workshops prioritise efficacy and efficiency over ethics.

Survey

The purpose of the survey was to gather descriptive statistics and information – to provide information about the distribution of a wide range of 'people characteristics', and of relationship between such characteristics. (Robson, C. 2001. Real World Research. Oxford. Blackwell Publishers. (p. 127)).

The aim was to collect data on the digital technologies used by social workers, understand their perception of their capabilities and the role of HEIs in ensuring digital readiness and what will enhance (or hinder) social workers' use of digital technology in practice. For the methodological reasons stated, this section presents the "headline" statistics.

The survey was completed by 647 respondents practicing in children and adult services across the NHS, local authorities, the Private, Voluntary and Independent sector and in social work education. Most respondents were based in England (90%) and were employed predominantly by local authorities and integrated NHS and local authority services.

Over 40 per cent were 15 years or more qualified and demographically, the age group 45–54 were the largest participants (33 per cent), followed by 54–64 (26 per cent) and 35–44 (20 per cent).

Survey findings

Respondents rated their digital skills as 'Good' (47per cent) or 'Very good' (31 per cent), with no one claiming they had 'Very poor' skills.

Even allowing for self-selection, this data indicates some self-confidence within the workforce about its digital readiness.

Most respondents also found their social work training 'Neither helpful nor unhelpful' (37 per cent) or 'Unhelpful' (27 per cent) or 'Very unhelpful' (25 per cent) in preparing them for using digital technologies in practice.

The most used digital technologies were email and mobile phones, but overall, digital technology was used for a variety of tasks such as research, performance management, electronic recording, and communication.

Respondents reported mixed experiences of current information systems - hardware, software and online connectivity - in their work. Some are provided with excellent facilities and information and guidance that optimise digital options in day to day

practice. Others reported inadequate, inappropriate or unreliable tools and a lack of training.

When asked which tasks that they used digital technology most for, on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (always), the most selected 'Always' categories were:

- Assessments, care, planning and/or reviews (63 per cent)
- Safeguarding children or adults (47 per cent)
- Sending and receiving routine communications with people who use service (e.g. through email, texts or apps) (47 per cent)
- Sharing information electronically between agencies (41 per cent).

Employers should therefore prioritise training and CPD provision in these areas.

The survey data suggests that training and CPD in digital technology are rare in social work practice. 55 per cent of respondents reported receiving training only 1-2 times within the past two years and 27 per cent received none in that period. While the survey did not ask about availability of training, it can be concluded that social workers are not attending regular training. Consequently, employers must address availability of training and how they can incentivise professionals to take up CPD opportunities.

To scope training needs further, the survey asked 'What mode of training in digital technologies do you find/expect to be most useful?' The top three 'Very useful' responses were:

- Individual coaching and advice on site (55 per cent)
- Classroom face to face teaching (55 per cent)
- Self-teaching (e.g. with instructions) (17 per cent).

Interviews

15 sector leaders have been interviewed using the key informant methodology:

Key informant interviews are qualitative in-depth interviews with people who know what is going on in the community. The purpose of key informant interviews is to collect information from a wide range of people—including community leaders, professionals, or residents—who have first-hand knowledge about the community [sector].

UCLA Centre for Health Policy Research. Key informant interviews

Through existing contacts and research, sector leaders with unique insights into the use of digital technology were identified and interviewed over the telephone. They comprised strategic leaders of statutory services, app developers for children's services, user-led groups, carers organisations, policy makers, and senior academics.

Interview findings

Digital technologies can enhance social work practice and outcomes for people who use services

- Mobile technology can enable user-involvement in social workers' assessments because they can complete forms in their presence, cross-check information and ask for immediate feedback.
- Online forms can increase accessibility and enable self-assessment of need.
- Digital platforms can increase availability of information, thereby enhancing informed decision-making and choice over services.
- Assistive technology and apps can enable people with communication needs to express their wishes, thereby realising their right to self-determination.
- Videos and apps can improve the lived experience of looked after children (LAC) – for instance preparing them for new placements, facilitating contact with their families and friends, enabling them to state their preferences, giving them access to their records, increasing their involvement in LAC reviews and statutory processes about their care, providing avenues for feedback on their placements – this can reduce placement breakdown.
- They can enable better and speedier understanding of local (or aggregate) need, thus fostering improved commissioning, cost analysis and better targeted and more effective interventions.
- Integration of back-end operations between organisations can lead to integrated care processes.
- Social networking sites can reduce loneliness and social isolation for some people who use services.
- Assistive technology can enhance quality of life and independence.
- User-led groups can create online forums to share information, network and advocate for their needs. This can enhance the collective impact of user-led organisations.
- Efficiency – “One of the things that we hear is how digital technology can support time saving for social workers.”

Barriers to using digital technologies in social work

- Ineffective framework to promote new digital technologies – “putting a link on a website is not enough, digital resources need to be promoted like any other form of support”.
- Lack of a single digital location for approved apps for social work.
- Austerity – services are under financial pressure and therefore do not prioritise digital innovation.

- The use of “legacy systems” in social care organisations means that they do not have available technical capacity to innovate.
- The current policy framework which encourages multiple providers has resulted in the use of different systems, which are not integrated.
- Lack of conducive local authority data governance and procurement framework – this impedes speedy adoption of new technologies. A key interviewee remarked “they [local authorities] tend to draw out the process...seems to be based on suspicion and risk-aversion”.
- Costs to users – “people likely to receive services are those who are unable to afford the technology – so it is not only a cost to services but also to people receiving them.”

How to realise the full benefits of digital technologies

- Technology must be user-centred and reflect what social workers do in practice.
- There must be clarity of purpose for their use – for instance are they for performance management, record-keeping, process management, or are they to facilitate relationship-based practice?
- Senior (operational) managers need technical knowledge – this requires regular training and their involvement in systems design and day-to-day management of their employers' systems.
- There must be a conducive policy environment.
- There must be a strong evidence-base about their benefits – it is not to be assumed that technologies are necessarily beneficial.

Initiatives that interviewees want to take place over the next two to three years

- Changes in local authorities' procurement process.
- Local authorities supporting technology companies to understand the needs of social workers and users of services.
- Increased levels of co-production – “people who use services and social workers working alongside technology developers and not tokenistic gestures such as surveys; you can see the difference when they [developers] have built it from the ground [starting with the needs of people who use services]”.
- More Open Source systems and software.
- Transparency and increased debate about the impact of the use of Artificial Intelligence in social work.
- User-centred design and exercise to produce a proto-type of what a recording and information system would look like if designed by users (social workers and families).
- More sharing of good practice between employers.

References

The following are key references used in the rapid literature review. (Hyperlinks)

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- [HEE/NHS \(2018\) A Health and Care Digital Capability Framework](#)
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- [NHS Digital Information sharing presents major barrier to social workers 25 Jan 2018](#)
- [Reay, Tommy \(2018\) Digital capability within social work \(Blog 10 July 2018\)](#)
- [Somerville, L. & Brady, E, \(2019\) Young People and Social Networking Sites: Exploring the views and training opportunities of CAMHS social workers in Ireland. Journal of Social Work Practice, 33\(2\) 2019](#)
- [Taylor, Amanda \(2017\) Professionalism, social work and the connected age](#)
- [Westwood, Joanne \(2019\) Social media in social work practice. London: Sage](#)

Practice examples

These are examples of practice from organisations that are currently using digital technology in social work practice or education, and/or are supporting the development of digital capabilities. These examples are included to encourage reflection and innovation. Inclusion does not mean formal approval by SCIE or BASW.

Action for Children – Mind Of My Own apps

Action for Children is rolling out the use of Mind Of My Own apps across their fostering services in the UK, following a successful pilot in Bolton Children's Rights Services.

The Mind Of My Own apps use child-focused language, design, emojis and text to encourage children and young people to share their thoughts from a tablet or phone screen, with their social worker or lead worker. The apps enable children to share information based on structured scenarios such as 'Prepare for a meeting' or 'About my wellbeing', confidentially, 24 hours a day. Statements are sent to a central administrator who ensures that the allocated social worker reads and follows up on the statement received.

Action for Children has found that the apps enable children and young people to share information when and where they feel ready, including disclosing difficult issues that struggle to share face-to-face, as well as celebrating successes.

Use of the apps has strengthened the voices of children and young people - for example by helping them to prepare for formal meetings and visits or ensuring that their own words and statements are added to their records.

Social workers have found the technology simple to use and it has improved communication, enabled them to respond more rapidly to emerging issues, and helped them to evidence children and young people's views in decision making.

At an organisational level, Action for Children plans to use anonymised data from the apps to track emerging themes and issues across services, which in turn can support improvements.

Use of Mind of My Own apps forms part of Action for Children's overall strategy to expand the use of digital technology.

Links:

[Action for Children](#)
[Mind Of My Own](#)

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East Sussex County Council, Children's Services - Digital social work practice and development

East Sussex Council's Children's Services has developed a range of approaches to improve social workers' confidence, skills and usage of digital technology.

Led by the Principal Social Worker in close collaboration with IT colleagues, the council has developed a digital resource toolkit providing access to advice, guidance and resources for social workers to use. This includes how to guides such as how to set up controls or remove your digital footprint; updates on key digital developments; plus apps and websites for social workers to use in their work with children and young people.

East Sussex has also developed its own digital resources. For example, they have developed an e-booklet called 'How to do a digital assessment (based on work by the South West Grid for Learning Trust) enabling social workers to assess children and families' digital lives and potential risks. One of East Sussex's digital leads used the assessment triangle and mapped out digital needs using the three dimensions of the triangle: child development; family and environment and parenting capacity. East Sussex have called this the digital triangle and it is a key tool in the e-booklet. Social workers now routinely check for online safety concerns as part of their assessment.

Close working with the council's IT Department has proved essential. For example, the teams are working to enable social workers to use more apps on their council-issued smart phones. They are conducting small scale pilots using Facebook messenger and WhatsApp to support communication with young care leavers, including the development of guidance for staff.

The programme is supported by a communications plan including: a single website for sharing tools, resources and research; a single monthly newsletter signposting to the latest research and practice developments; blogs and interviews with social workers about their experience of using digital technology.

Link: [Social Work in East Sussex Blog](#)

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Lincolnshire County Council – Digital transformation of adult social care

The use of digital technology has enabled Lincolnshire County Council to bring about major improvements in adult social care.

Following a Peer Review by ADASS, and a Digital Maturity Assessment (based on Local Government Association model), the Council identified priorities for digital development. It then worked with customers, families and carers to test out their perceptions and attitudes to digital working, and also with staff, community groups and cross-party members to develop a Digital Roadmap which is their guide for allocating resources and prioritising investment in technology.

The Roadmap sets out a vision for: digital citizens – with a focus on self-care; the digital workforce with easy access to advice and records; and the digital community where information is safely shared with health and care partners.

Some of the digital developments they introduced, and the initial benefits are outlined below.

- **Connect to Support Lincolnshire** consists of an online directory of services and information, and live chat support for those not confident online. It guides people to access the most appropriate care and support for their needs. This self-service system helped the council to manage demand. Last year 47 per cent (16,400) of all requests for support to the council were met by the provision of information and advice.
- **Online financial assessment tool is currently being implemented** which will allow people to get an upfront indication of the cost of care. The tool indicates that once fully implemented the Council can: reduce average wait for assessment from 50 to 15 days; reduce failed care packages from 19 per cent to 5 per cent; increase unclaimed benefits take-up to an estimated £20,000 per month.
- **Pre-payment cards** which enable people to manage their care budget more easily, eliminating the need for them to provide paper statements and receipts. The cards are now used in over half of new cases.
- **New technology for staff** including 4G laptops and a mobile version of case management system MOSAIC which enables social workers and occupational therapists to assess needs and source care more quickly – sometimes within a single visit. The Council has also enabled a number of their partners to appropriately access the case management system. For example, District Councils use the system to manage referrals for adaptations – speeding up the process and eliminating paperwork and backlogs.
- Flexible working is supported by a **new online procedures hub** with workers accessing this on average 700 times per month. There is also an **online self-service helpdesk** portal which now takes 88 per cent of all service requests, reducing staffing resource by over 50 per cent. Early signs show use of the equipment and online resources saves staff at least 30 minutes for every assessment and review. The more efficient use of staff time across the county has led to a 35 per cent rise in the number of people having their needs reviewed.
- **Management information dashboards** to enable managers to access real-time data on caseloads and activity.

Link: [Lincolnshire Connect to Support](#)

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London Metropolitan University – Starting your social work journey app

London Metropolitan University has created a mobile app to help people considering social work as a career to understand more about the profession. The app was co-created with student social workers and is currently a prototype. When developed further, it will be made available on app stores.

Starting your social work journey is aimed at the first 'point of entry' Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF). It uses audio, video, text, and personal checklists to increase understanding of what it is like to be a social worker. It then assists with understanding the interview process and the first year of study and provides aims and checklists which are personal to the user and can be saved to their device.

The PCF section of the app contains 'quick guides' to each PCF domain, as well as the option to read the full PCF. It is supported by video clips of students talking about their experiences on placement and during training.

The app is deliberately simple for those unfamiliar with using mobile digital tools. As well as providing comprehensive information for point of entry, use of the app also embeds digital capabilities from this point and applicants and students are being trained in digital competence as a by-product of using the resource.

Link: [London Metropolitan University](#)

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Nottingham Trent University – NTU digital framework

Nottingham Trent University has developed a framework to develop the digital capabilities of their BA and MA social work students.

The framework includes a self-assessment of first year students' digital skills, who are asked to retain and reflect on their current level of competency.

The University has deliberately included a range of learning experiences across the programme that develop IT skills. They re-assess in the final year when looking at digital identity and again reflect on the growth and range of skills that have been developed. By focusing on growth, the framework aims to demonstrate impact.

The course covers basic office tasks (such as spreadsheets, word processing, email, polling, and presentations), as well as making and editing video, statistical processing, information searching, virtual reality, and using handheld electronic devices to create novel material, such as personalised assessments.

The framework is mapped to several elements of the [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education' Subject Benchmark Statement for Social Work](#).

The University found that this approach helps both student and tutor, as it opens up discussions. It also allows for both organic and targeted development. They also discovered that age did not necessarily relate to IT skill. Many of the younger students

knew how to use apps, but not how to use more professional skills. Equally, many of older students are very IT savvy.

Link: [Nottingham Trent University](#)

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Sheffield City Council – Personal listening device to improve communication during Best Interest Assessments

Social workers at Sheffield City Council use personal listening devices to improve communication during Best Interest Assessments with people who have significant hearing difficulties.

The personal listening device is a portable device which has a microphone attachment and volume control and is used with headphones or earphones. It supports one-to-one conversations with people with hearing difficulties as it amplifies the sound and reduces background noise.

Social workers who act as Best Interests Assessors for Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DoLS) are required to carry out formal mental capacity assessments and establish the wishes and feelings of the person.

One of the underlying principles of the Mental Capacity Act is to support the individual to participate in the decision-making process and to maximise their ability to make decisions for themselves wherever possible. Effective two-way communication is therefore key and often challenging when people have hearing difficulties.

The personal listening device can support effective communication and engage and focus the persons attention. It is also supporting confidentiality, as it reduces the need for the practitioner to raise their voice in order to be heard.

The equipment can enable workers to have a meaningful, two-way conversation. One social worker reported that if she had not used the device during an assessment with a lady who found hearing aids problematic to use, her hearing difficulties would probably have made the assessment a challenging and frustrating process, and the practitioner may have captured a very different impression of her capacity and understanding. As a result, the lady was deemed to have capacity to make decisions – and the Sensory Impairment Team provided her with her own personal listening device to support day-to-day communication.

Link: [Pocketalker Ultra via Action on Hearing Loss](#)

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University of Birmingham – Facebook and child protection, and Social work, Social Media

The University of Birmingham has produced resources to develop social workers and students understanding of social media in social work practice, and the related ethical issues.

[Facebook: an unethical practice or effective tool in child protection](#) is a freely available YouTube video based on an ethnographic study of child protection social work practice in England.

Social workers have been using social media as a way to 'collapse borders' between social workers and service users to gain another view of service-users lives through monitoring their Facebook pages. This video reports how social workers provided researchers with a rationale for their use of Facebook and analyses the ethics of such practice. The aim of the video is to trigger discussions about the ethical uses of social media in social work practice.

The University also produced an app to explore ethical issues of using social media in social work.

'Social work, social media' features a fictional team manager called Adrian who is facing ethical dilemmas around social media use. The app user tries to help Adrian make the right decisions to ensure his team's practices are consistent with social work ethics and values. They are encouraged to reflect on those decisions and consider the potential impact these may have on day-to-day practice.

The app explores themes such as:

- Is social media skills development important for social workers?
- What are the ethical implications of exploring open social media profiles?
- Does social media present new personal/professional boundary issues?
- Can skills, knowledge and confidence in social media use lead to greater service user, community, inter-professional engagement?

Links:

[Facebook: an unethical practice or effective tool in child protection](#) – YouTube video

[Social Work, Social Media on the Apple App Store](#)

[Social Work, Social Media on the Google Play Store](#)

[Article on how the app was developed](#)

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Digital capabilities for social workers: Stakeholders' report

Social workers require good digital skills and capabilities to support their complex role.

A wide range of stakeholders – from practitioners and people who use services, to tech developers and educators – have a role to play in supporting the development of digital capabilities.

This report outlines the key messages and findings for social workers and all those stakeholders, based on the initial phase of the [Digital capabilities for social workers](#) project delivered by SCIE and BASW. The report aims to share insights with the sector, support debate, and inform the development of the projects' future resources.

The report is based on a rapid literature review, stakeholder Advisory Group meetings, two workshops attended by over 40 social workers in different roles and seniority, a survey completed by 648 respondents, and interviews with 15 key sector leaders.

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