

BETTER TOGETHER VCSE FORUM

23rd October 2025



Better for everyone

Welcome & Introductions

Kate Burrows
Executive Director, Durham Community Action
Chair of the Better Together Forum

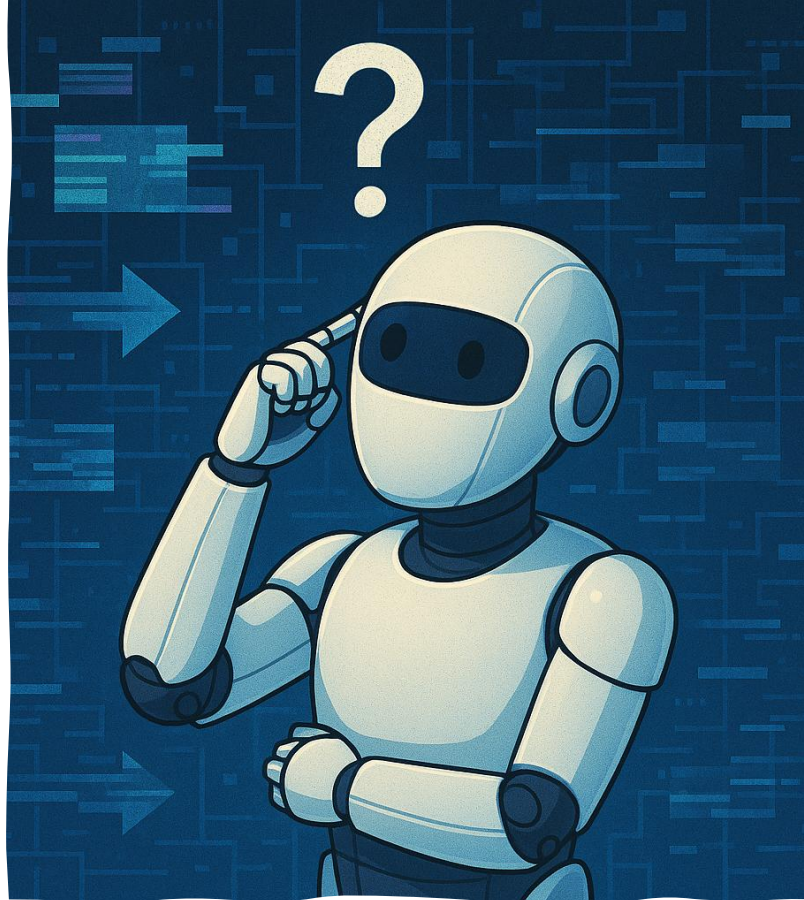
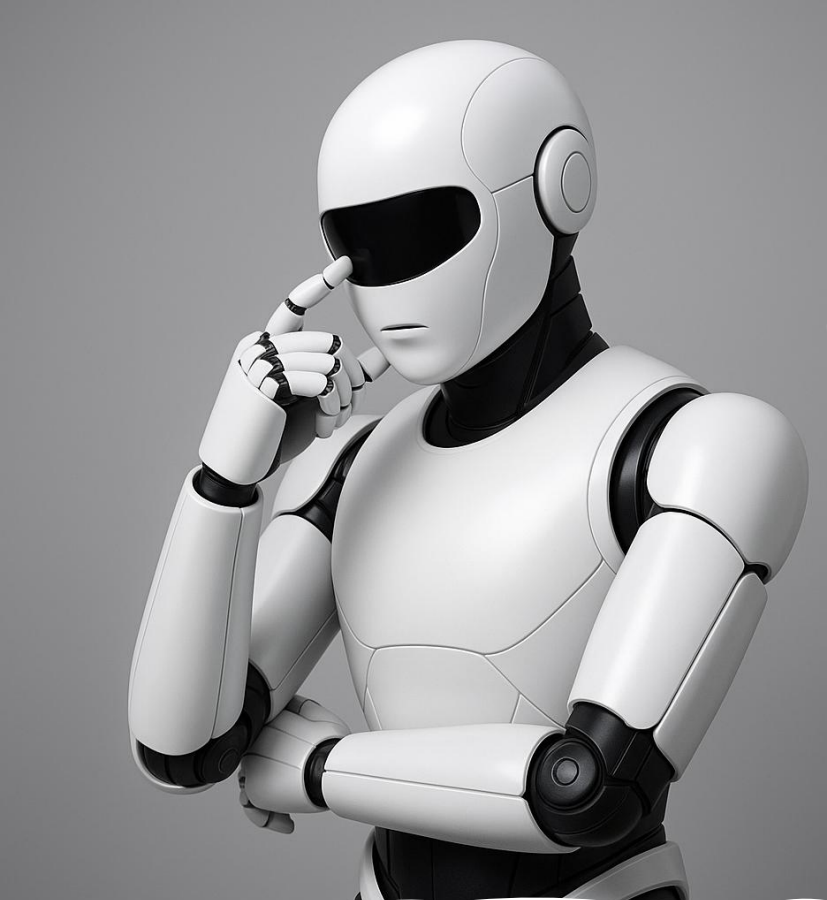


Better for everyone

Presentations



Better for everyone



AI for social good?

What is AI and what are the challenges & opportunities for the VCSE sector

Outline

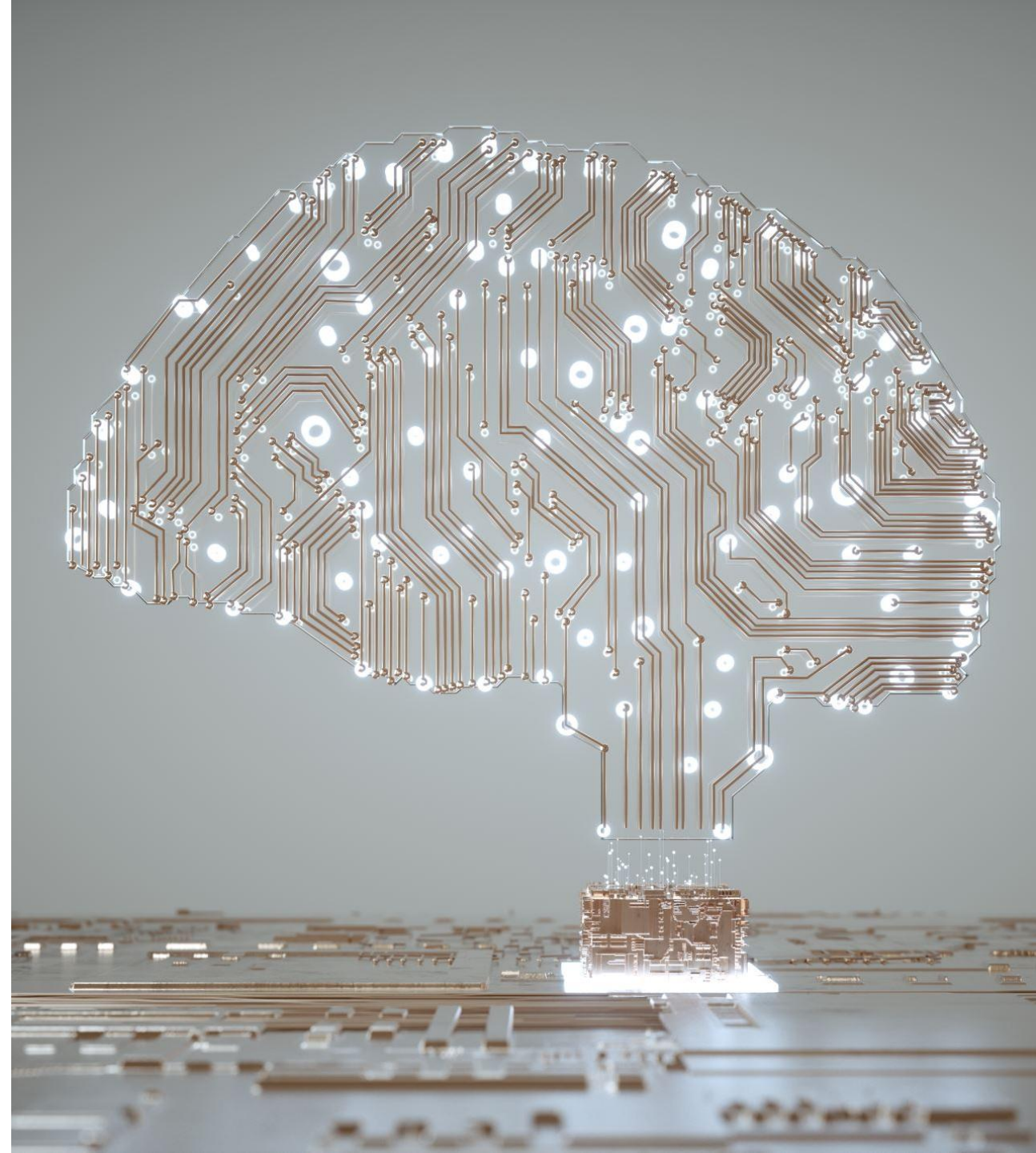
What is AI?

How can you spot AI?

Prompt Engineering

Ethical challenges

AI & the VCSE sector



What is AI?

Artificial Intelligence refers to software systems designed to mimic human cognitive functions such as learning, problem-solving, and pattern recognition.



Large Language Models (LLMs) & Generative AI

What are LLMs?

Advanced AI systems 'trained' on HUGE datasets

Can understand and generate content, answer questions, create images, etc.

Examples include: ChatGPT, Claude, Google Gemini

What is Generative AI?

Became widely accessible in late 2022

Has rapidly been adopted across industries

Increasingly powerful with continual development

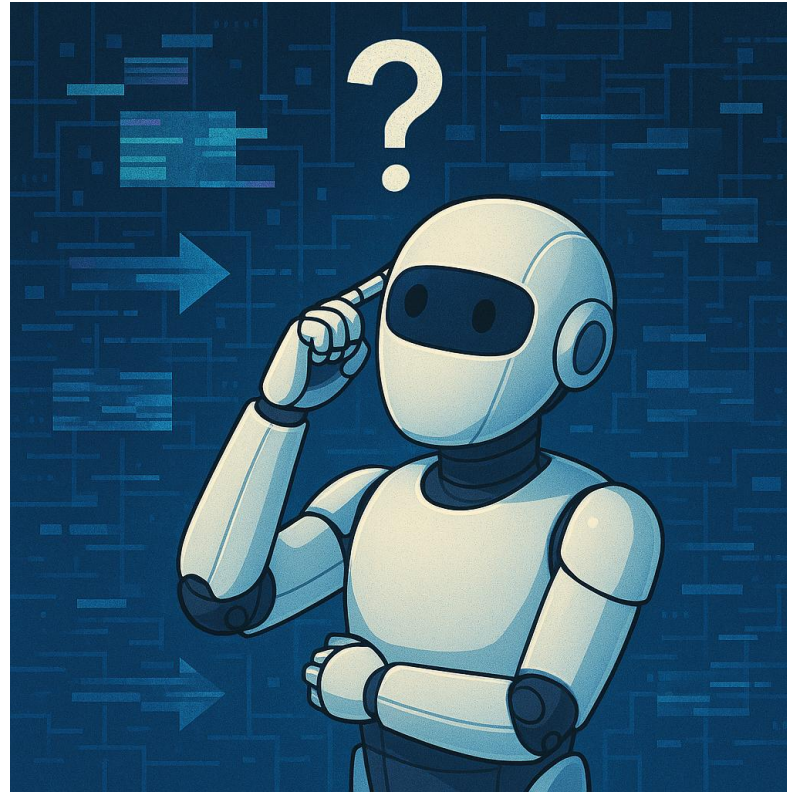
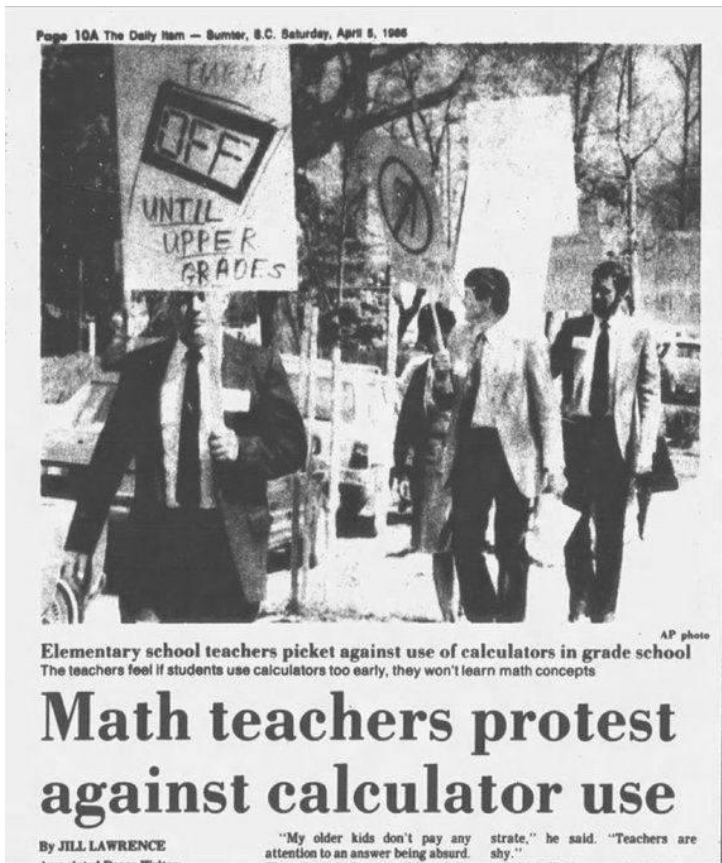
Sparked debates about ethics, proper use, copyright infringement, etc.

Emily Blunt and Sag-Aftra join film industry condemnation of 'AI actor' Tilly Norwood

US actors' union joins stars in opposition to Norwood, which it says was created 'using stolen performances'



<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/sep/30/emily-blunt-sag-aftra-film-industry-condemnation-ai-actor-tilly-norwood>



Microsoft boss troubled by rise in reports of 'AI psychosis'



GETTY IMAGES
Zoe Kleinman
Technology editor

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/article/s/c24zdel5j18o>

Generative AI Problems?

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Can you spot AI? What are the 'tells'?

Overly formal - Uses fancy words when simple ones would sound more natural

Perfectly correct - No little mistakes or shortcuts that normal people make

Odd tone - Doesn't change between formal and casual like humans do

Very exact numbers - Uses precise figures instead of rough estimates

Sounds generic - Missing the unique way real people express themselves

Stiff connections - Joins ideas together in slightly awkward ways

Too many descriptive words - Uses unnecessary adjectives

Robot-like terms - Chooses technical words over everyday language

The Em- dash – Current models favour the so-called Em- dash (two dashes after a word)

Hallucinations – AI will fill in the gaps in its knowledge: making things up

Hallucinations

One example is fake academic references
But it will just get things wrong AND with confidence!



Prompt Engineering

What are prompts?

Prompts are the inputs or instructions you give to an AI model (like ChatGPT) to get a specific output

Why does writing better prompts matter?

Better prompts = better outputs = less editing time

More efficient prompts use fewer computational resources

Fewer, better prompts = smaller environmental impact

Good prompting is the key skill for effective AI use

Writing Better Prompts – PREP EDIT

First we PREP

Prompt: “Please create a quiz about 19th century art”

Role: “You are an art historian specializing in the 19th century”

Explicit: “Include questions on artistic movements and techniques”

Parameters: “Write 10 multiple choice questions for college students”

Then we EDIT

Evaluate: Evaluate the content for language, facts, and structure

Determine: Determine accuracy and check with source

Identify: Identify Bias and Misinformation

Transform: Transform content reflect adjustments and findings

Prompt Builder Template

I am: [your role]

Working on: [project/task]

I need: [specific output]

Format: [length, style, structure]

Audience: [who will read/use this]

Tone: [how it should feel]

Constraints: [what to include/avoid]

Context: [relevant background information]



Ethical Concerns

Data Privacy and Consent

Information can be stored and/or used for future AI training

Be mindful of the data you're sharing when using AI tools

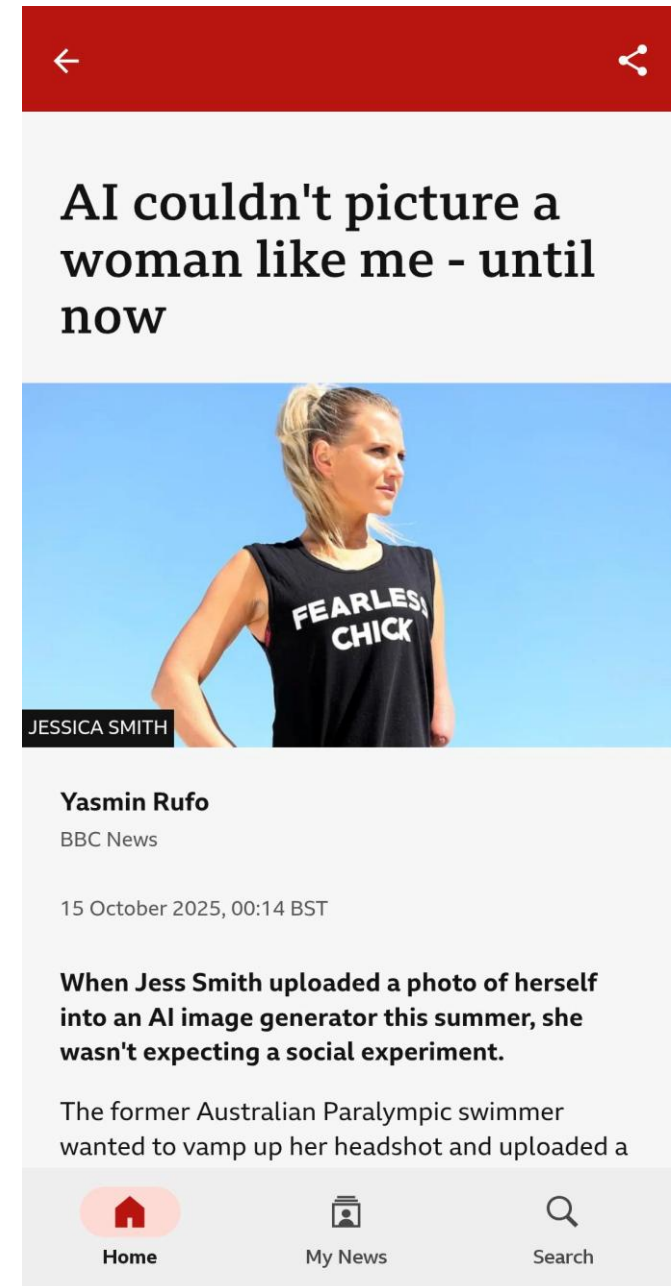
Bias and Discrimination

AI systems learn from historical data, which often reflects existing inequalities

Transparency and Explainability

Black box decision-making

Training data is 'stolen'



<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cj07ley3jnpo>

Challenges for the VCSE Sector

The Governance Gap

AI is developing faster than the regulatory frameworks, ethical guidelines, and organisational policies needed to govern its use

Digital Literacy

Many charities lack in-house digital and/or AI expertise

Staff already stretched thin - who has time to learn these tools properly?

Resource Issues

AI tools cost money - "Free" tools may harvest your data

How do you assess AI vendors?

Environmental Impact

Each AI query has a carbon footprint (plus model training is intensive)

Data centers powering AI consume enormous amounts of water and energy

Opportunities for the VCSE Sector

Do More with Less

- AI can handle routine tasks freeing up staff time
- Grant application assistance

Enhanced service delivery

- 24/7 availability (e.g. bespoke chatbots)
- Tailoring services and materials to individuals

Improved Engagement

- AI tools can produce high quality copy quickly
- Generate content for social media

Accessibility and Inclusion

- Summarise information (pos. into Easy Read formats)
- Lowers the barrier to technology use



Final Thought

“The question isn't whether AI will come to the charity sector - it's already here. The question is whether we shape it around our values and the people we serve, or let it shape us.”

 Claude, Sonnet 4.5 (Anthropic)

Between Promise and Practice: *How the UK VCSE Sector Adopts Generative AI*

David Clark, Marta Cecchinato, Andy Dow – Northumbria University, Newcastle

VCSE organisations in economically disadvantaged regions, particularly in NE England, are adopting generative AI to manage growing demands amidst limited resources.



Rethinking the Organisational Unit in AI Adoption:

Adoption in VCSEs often occurs independently of formal strategy, highlighting the need to rethink organisational units and account for informal, distributed experimentation.



Ethical Uncertainty and the Moral Politics of AI Use:

Disclosure is influenced by fears of judgement and reputational harm, with participants navigating policy vacuums, moral labour, and trust shaped by peer reactions and alignment with organisational norms, beyond technical transparency.



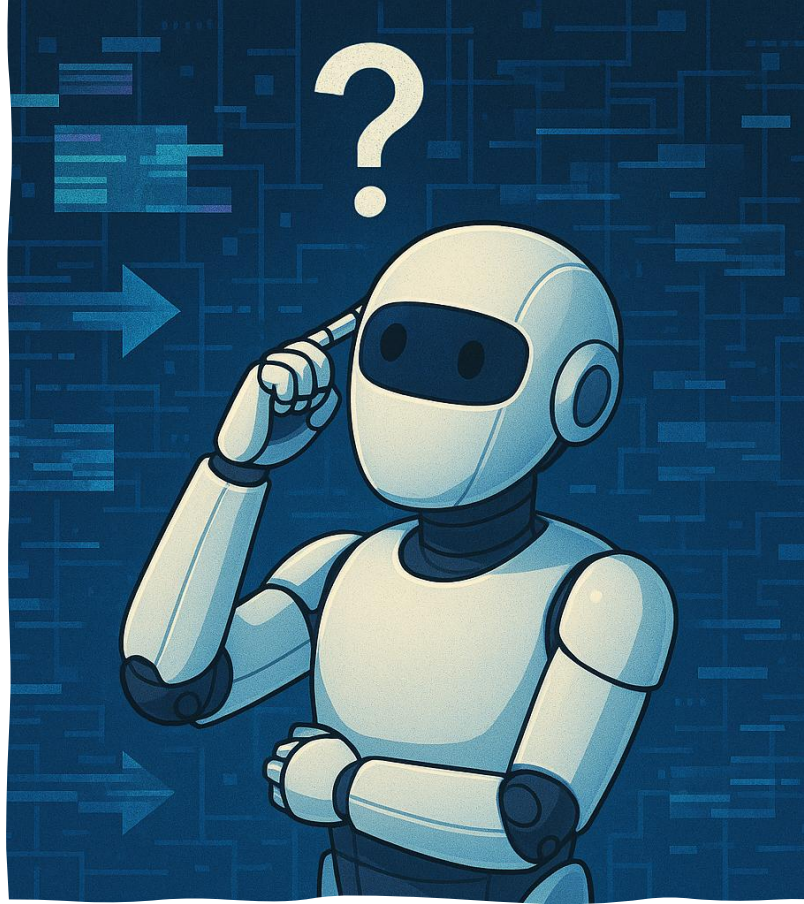
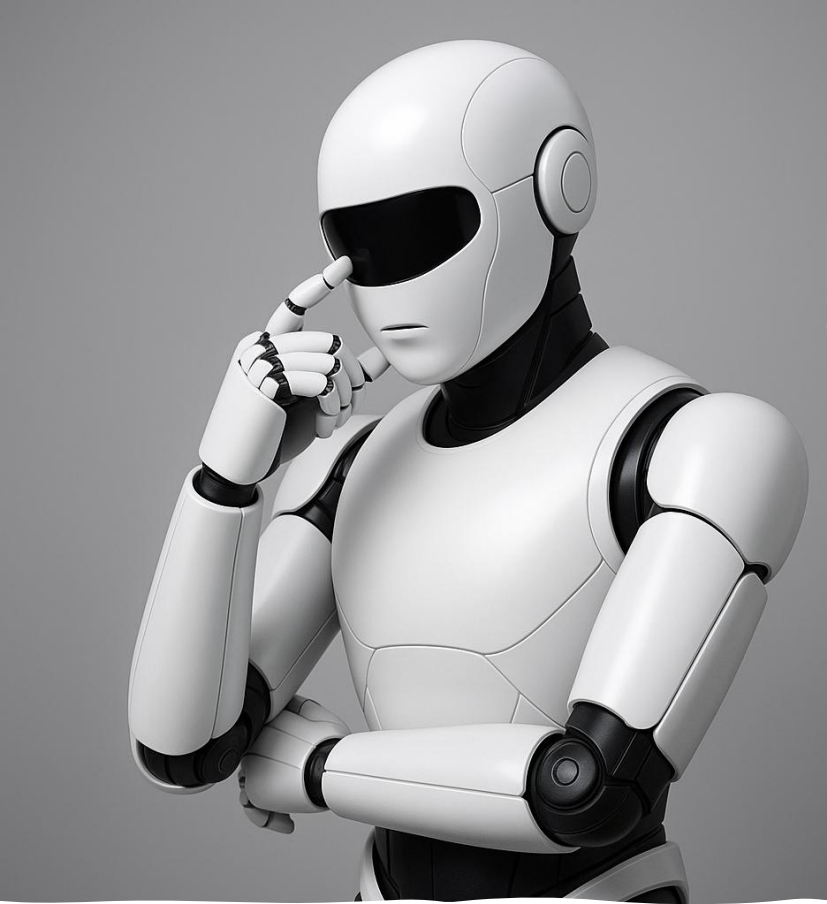
Designing Support as Infrastructure:

VCSEs require legitimisation structures like policies and sector-specific guidance, with support reframed from upskilling to infrastructure legitimacy tailored to their unique social contexts and governance needs.



“Smaller charities in local communities across the North-East, often those with the least resources, are plugging the gap caused by the cost of living crisis that millions of people in this region [North-East] are grappling with”

- NVCO Chief Executive Sarah Elliot



Thanks

Let's stay in touch!

Much more work to be done exploring AI in VCSEs

andrew.dow@northumbria.ac.uk

Agenda

01 Introductions

02 What AI can help with

03 How to use AI to get the most out of it

04 Common Pitfalls + Funder update

An AI end-to-end platform connecting commissioners, funders, delivery organisations and individuals.

- Enables the voluntary sector to expand their capacity.
- Helps to understand the changing demand that is on the VCS.
- Provides the tools to reach and support marginalised residents.

plinth.org.uk

Grants wastes time and money

To connect all these different systems and data sources, each group has to invest administrative time and money into joining them up.

This can affect the value-for-money of the entire project, but the full cost can often be hidden, as the admin burden usually falls to people least able to afford it.

Individuals

Can't manage their own care or support, and so have to rely on professionals to manage for them.

Delivery Organisations

Need to spend hours collecting details and compiling progress reports for their funders or commissioners. This is multiplied across all the different projects a single organisation will run, and across all organisations involved.

Commissioners/Funders

Need to painstakingly join together data exports in Excel or other tools, to get a sense of what's going on across the whole programme.

46%

Of grants cost more than they're worth

15.8m

Hours are spent on monitoring and reporting just for grants each year.

Temperature check:

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- 2 How many of you have actually used an AI tool—like ChatGPT or Grammarly—to help with writing?
- 3 What's your biggest barrier when it comes to writing grant applications?
- 4 If AI could take just one thing off your grant-writing plate, what would you want it to be?

Quick Safety Check!

AI can help at every stage of the process

1 Idea
Generation

2 Project
Planning

3 Fund
Matching

4 Feedback

1 Idea Generation

✓ Suggest innovative project ideas that address [specific issue, e.g., youth mental health] for a community-based charity. Focus on low-cost, high-impact solutions.

2 Project Planning

✓ Outline a risk management strategy for a community project aimed at [goal]. Include potential risks, mitigation strategies, and contingency plans.

3 Fund Matching

✓ "Please review the attached eligibility criteria and our current impact report and let me know if my charity (charity number) is eligible for the grant listed

4 Feedback

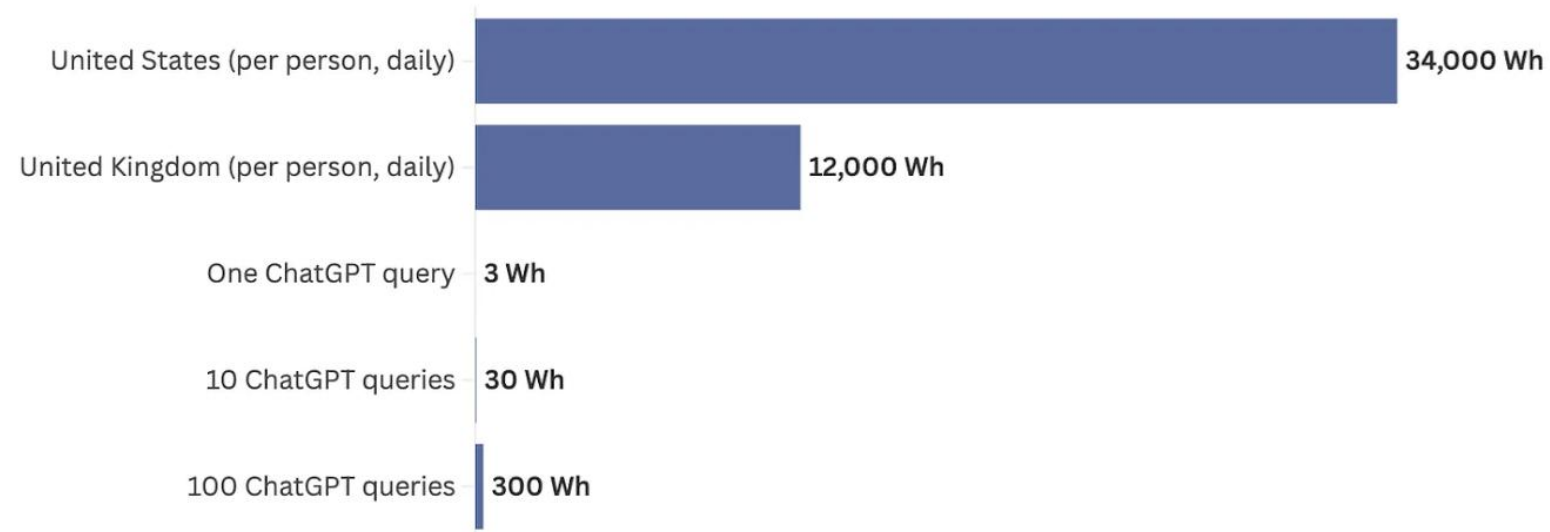
✓ Review this draft grant application for clarity, tone, and impact. Suggest improvements to make it more compelling to funders.

Common Pitfalls

1. **Relying Too Heavily on AI-Generated Text**
2. **Lack of Clear Instructions**
3. **Ignoring Tone and Style**
4. **Skipping the Review Process**

How does the electricity use of ChatGPT compare to the daily average footprint in the UK and the US?

Measured in watt-hours. Electricity consumption for the US and UK includes household use plus services and industry within the economy.



Source: Ember Energy, Alex de Vries, and Andy Massley • This assumes that one ChatGPT query uses 3 watt-hours of electricity. More recent data suggests this could now be as low as 0.3 Wh.

Funder views

Cautious Optimism: Many UK funders see the potential of AI to improve efficiency, especially in grant assessment and reporting, but are proceeding carefully due to concerns about bias, transparency, and impact on trust.

Interest in Experimentation: Some progressive funders (e.g., the National Lottery Community Fund, Paul Hamlyn Foundation) are piloting AI tools for internal processes or funding research into AI ethics and applications for civil society.

Equity and Inclusion Concerns: There is a shared anxiety about how AI might exacerbate existing inequalities in funding access, particularly for smaller or grassroots organisations without tech capacity.

Lack of Policy Clarity: Few funders have developed formal strategies or ethical guidelines for AI, leading to ad hoc use and a desire for more sector-wide frameworks and shared learning.

National Lottery Example

AI as a force for good: The Fund promotes AI as a powerful tool that—if used ethically and inclusively—can benefit people and communities.

Guidance and encouragement for applicants: They published guidance allowing applicants to use tools like ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot, and Claude to draft funding applications—stating applications won't be penalised for AI use

10 ethical AI principles: The Fund has defined ten core principles—such as keeping humans in the loop, ensuring transparency, inclusivity, privacy by design, accountability, environmental awareness, and continuous monitoring

Pilot projects supporting vulnerable communities: Their support includes AI-powered initiatives like “Cecil from WECIL,” a chatbot built for and by disabled people to improve accessibility

Questions?



Don't hesitate to get in touch.

Contact us

jess@plinth.org.uk



MAPS Debt Modernisation in County Durham


Citizens Advice County Durham and East Durham Trust

Edward Pickering – CEO – Citizens Advice County Durham



What's it all about...?

- **The Money and Pensions Service (MAPS)** recently asked for suggestions for projects to develop and streamline debt advice
- **Citizens Advice County Durham** (who provide MAPS funded Debt Advice across County Durham) and **East Durham Trust** (who provide local debt advice) decided to collaborate to try out some innovative ideas using **Artificial Intelligence (AI)**
- We are in the process of trialing and developing our ideas, but would also like some feedback...
- The project ends in **March 2026**



**AI is scary,
right?**



1: Use AI to make giving Debt Advice easier

- Both organisations debt advisers are using **Microsoft CoPilot AI**
- This integrates with their existing Microsoft Office applications and can do things like:
 - ***Draft Documents*** in Word
 - ***Analyse Data*** in Excel
 - ***Draft quick replies*** in Outlook
 - ***Design layouts*** in PowerPoint
 - ***Summarise a long video*** and produce bullet points
- Other AI tools are available (e.g. Google Gemini) but both organisations use Microsoft Office and we needed **a closed AI infrastructure** – so not ChatGPT (public)





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File **Home** Insert Layout References Review View Help



Aptos (Body) ▾

11 ▾



Create content with Copilot



draft a proposal from yesterday's  meeting notes|



Welcome Letter

A Warm Introduction to Our Organisation

Dear [Recipient's Name],

On behalf of everyone at [Organisation's Name], I would like to extend a very warm welcome to you. We are delighted to have you join our community and look forward to embarking on an exciting journey together.

At [Organisation's Name], we pride ourselves on fostering a culture of collaboration, respect, and innovation. Whether you are joining us as a new team member, partner, or valued client, we are committed to supporting you every step of the way.

You will find that our team is friendly, approachable, and always willing to help. If you have any questions or require assistance as you settle in, please do not hesitate to reach out to your colleagues or your point of contact.

We are confident that your time with us will be both enjoyable and rewarding, and we look forward to achieving great success together.

Once again, welcome to [Organisation's Name].

Kind regards,

[Your Name]

[Your Position]

[Organisation's Name]

1: The story so far...

- It takes a while (2-3 months) for CoPilot to get to know how you work and what you like and don't like...
- It can draw on all the data in your organisation (if you let it) so can often find things you knew about but didn't know where to find
- Great at doing basic tasks like drafting letters/emails
- No one feels it is taking over their job!



- ***The crunch test:*** If it saves someone 30 mins of time a week, it will in effect pay for itself!

2: “Automated Debt Advice Module” ADAM

- We are building an **online 24/7** available debt assistant
- Initially it will be available for anyone who lives in **County Durham**
- It will use a **Private Instance of ChatGPT** (so the data is not publicly available)
- We will train it using questions and answers generated by **real life Debt Advisers**
- **It will learn!**



Citizens Advice County Durham
Online Debt Advisor

Ask your question:

Submit question

Or you can choose an example question:

"My mortgage lender has sent a letter saying they want to repossess my house. I'm 3 months behind on payments. What are my options?"

"I can't afford to pay my council tax and my energy bills this month. Which should I pay first?"

"I have £8,000 in credit card debt across three cards and can only afford to pay £200 a month total. What should I do?"

2: Things we need to lookout for...

- **AI Hallucinations** (unexpected responses)
- **Out of Scope questions** – signpost to other sources
- **Emergencies / Urgent situations** – contact with a debt adviser ASAP
- **Running Costs** – you effectively pay per transaction with Chat GPT (tiny, but it all adds up)
- **Liability / Insurance** – who pays up if it goes wrong?
- **Environmental Impact** – how big actually is this?

2: So what questions should ADAM ask?

- Have a chat on your table about the questions that ADAM should ask people
- Write them down on the sheet provided
- Other comments or ideas welcome!

If you have any questions about the project or AI in general, please get in touch:

Edward.pickering@citizensadvicecd.org.uk



Roundtable Discussions

What does AI mean to/for the VCSE in County Durham?

What actions can we take 'better together'...?



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Information Sharing



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Close

Kate Burrows
Executive Director, Durham Community Action
Chair – Better Together VCS Forum



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