



# The state of AI in charities 2025



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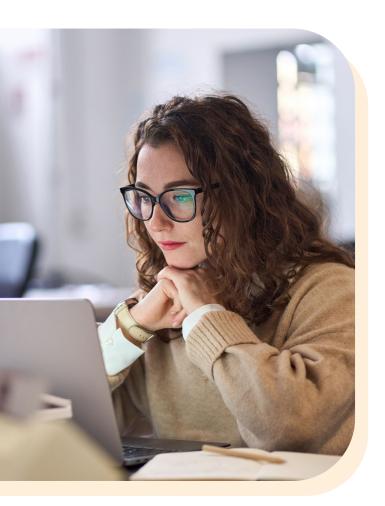
Artificial intelligence is transforming every walk of life. In fact, a 2024 report states that 79% of adults in the UK have used generative AI at work. But what does the charity sector have to consider?

Al is revolutionising organisations, but is yours making the most out of it? We know the appetite for Al in charity organisations is there, but big questions are yet to be answered:

- How do we implement AI with limited resources and knowledge?
- How do we ensure AI is safe and ethical?
- How do we educate users to get the most out of AI?

We understand that many charity organisations are at the beginning of their Al journey. Most are asking the above questions, with no real clear answers. In this report, we explore how charity organisations feel about Al and their current preparedness. Then we tackle the challenges you're facing.





To gain a greater understanding around artificial intelligence (AI) in the charity sector, Phoenix Software and NCVO conducted a detailed survey of charity organisations, spanning a diverse range of organisation sizes and geographic regions, in early 2025. The aim of the survey was to understand how charity organisations are engaging with AI, their level of digital maturity, and the opportunities and challenges they face when implementing AI solutions.

The survey saw engagement from 39 charity organisations spanning a mix of sizes and regions. These findings provide a valuable snapshot of how some charities are beginning to explore AI, the opportunities they see, and the challenges they face

This report also delves into the key barriers to adoption, from data quality and digital skills gaps to concerns about governance, ethics, and return on investment.

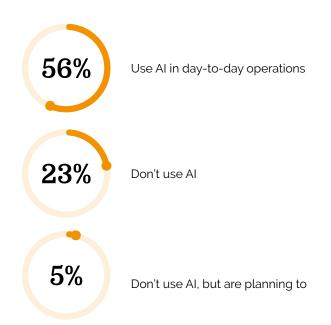
Let's take a closer look at some of these areas in more detail.

## Current use of AI in charities

#### How often are organisations using AI?

We asked participants of the survey how often they used AI and how they use it. We found that more than half of the participants are currently using it, with some planning to and others unsure.





#### The current use of Al

Participants were asked to characterise their organisation's current AI use based on several statements and they checked which ones applied to them. Through this, we found:



of respondents stated that they are 'exploring or researching how AI could support us as an organisation'



of respondents are 'exploring this area but there are challenges around resources and skills'



of respondents are 'building an AI policy and/or strategy'



of respondents stated that they are 'using AI capabilities for specific tasks in the organisation'



of respondents stated that they are 'evaluating some AI capabilities in our organisation'



I'm using AI daily via my own ChatGPT account, but we aren't using it across the organisation yet, though there is a desire to."



We are considering exploring AI capabilities but are very much at the start of a journey, if at all, and have very limited resource, and the skills within the organisation vary massively."

It's clear that AI is on the radar for many charity organisations, with a growing number exploring or preparing to implement it.

The challenges facing the sector, particularly among smaller organisations, revolve around skills, resources, and risk management. As interest builds, the next step will be to close the capability gap, by investing in the right people and training to move from intention to action.





We are in the process of developing our AI policy as we have concerns in relation to a number of topics. However, we're also currently using AI in several different contexts, such as writing minutes for online meetings, helping with the development of text for our website, exploring the possibility of using an AI-powered chat bot."

# Positive or negative: how do charities view AI?

Al for charities can be a double-edged sword. When done right, Al transforms organisations and beneficiary outcomes. But if managed incorrectly, Al could lead to a lack of security and ethical concerns. As charities seek to modernise systems and improve services, the adoption of artificial intelligence is increasingly seen as a key enabler. But it's important to remember the complexities and challenges that come with it.

The results from our survey highlight exactly how real charity organisations feel about the perceived benefits and concerns relating to AI.



There isn't
anyone who feels
confident they
have the skills
to roll this out to
ensure we're doing
it effectively
and safely."



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We have limited budget and time to devote to developing AI skills and knowledge within the team but are keen to understand how to create efficiencies with AI."

#### The challenges organisations are facing

When we asked individuals about the challenges they encounter when trying to implement or make use of AI technologies, we received a wide range of responses. Despite the diversity in answers, they all consistently pointed back to a few core themes:



Skills, resources, and time



Privacy, data protection, security

At the heart of the issue is a lack of skills and expertise (reported by 80% of respondents), which impacts every other aspect of implementation, from designing AI solutions to managing them securely and effectively. This skills gap often increases security and privacy concerns, with 77% of respondents worrying about their ability to handle sensitive data and prevent privacy risks.

Even when solutions are implemented, user adoption can be slow, a problem reported by 44% of respondents. This makes it harder to achieve the cultural shift needed for AI to deliver value. And when adoption is patchy or inconsistent, it becomes challenging to demonstrate a clear return on investment, further fuelling hesitation at leadership level.

Without the right skills, it's difficult to manage risk. Without time and resources, it's hard to invest in training or overcome regulatory hurdles. And without buy-in, it's difficult to prove impact.

#### Overcoming the challenges

While the challenges around AI adoption in charities are clear, they are not insurmountable. Your organisation can take practical steps to build confidence and capability in your AI journey.

### Start small, prove value, and scale

 $\checkmark$ 

Rather than overhauling entire systems, begin with low-risk pilot projects to demonstrate value and encourage wider adoption

### Prioritise data governance and responsible AI use



Clear policies around data privacy, security, and AI ethics are essential. Develop internal frameworks to ensure GDPR compliance and responsible data use

### Secure leadership buy-in with real-world examples



Decision makers often need to see evidence before committing, so encourage conversations around AI at board-level

### Lean on curated support and sector-wide guidance



With limited time to explore the AI market, many charity teams benefit from curated, trusted insights into what's working elsewhere. Explore practical guidance from experienced specialists before your AI implementation

### Build skills through partnerships and shared learning



Collaborating with sector bodies like NCVO or experienced technology providers offers access to the skills needed for effective AI use

## 66

It is proving very difficult to get anyone at a high level to engage and take forward any kind of plan for responsible AI adoption and use."

#### **Overall findings**

While there's a clear desire to get the most out of AI, charities face complexities when it comes to adoption.

A significant technical skills deficit within charities is not only slowing the implementation of AI but also showing concerns about data privacy, security, and compliance.

Adding to these challenges are cost, time, and resource constraints. This is especially true for smaller organisations with existing legacy systems.

It's evident that many charities are feeling the weight of these challenges. However, with the right guidance and support, the charity sector will thrive with AI.

## The benefits organisations are seeing

In our survey, we asked charities to select what opportunities they feel AI presents to their organisation. They selected each option that they agreed with, and the results are fascinating.



These results highlight a clear focus within the charity sector on efficiency (82%) and productivity (77%) as primary opportunities. This suggests charities are looking to AI to streamline their operations, maximise impact with limited resources, and do more for their beneficiaries.



I feel like using AI on a regular basis for us all could make us more efficient and productive due to the time if could save us in the usual processes we complete."

While data-driven decision-making and innovation were also significant at 51% each, indicating a desire to leverage insights and explore new approaches, the lower interest in areas like cost reduction (31%) and scalability (23%) might suggest that for many, the immediate priorities are internal operational improvements rather than large-scale expansion or financial savings.



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All of the above. Funding being cut drives the necessity for improvements and efficiencies. Also as the amount of data grown, it can be challenging to draw meaningful insights."

#### If done right, AI will give you...

While many already see AI in a positive light, we know that the true benefits will only be seen through careful planning, ethical deployment, and ongoing management. When implemented with the right governance and aligned with organisational goals, AI can go far beyond automation and efficiency.

- **Problem solving:** effectively managed AI can help predict and prevent issues within charities. For instance, it can identify potential challenges in service delivery or flag risks related to beneficiary well-being early on, allowing for intervention and resource allocation
- Scalability: for charities assisting individuals with complex needs, AI enables scalable personalisation of support. With the right approach, automated systems can maintain a human-centric feel
- **Enhancing services:** All empowers charity staff with intelligent tools, enabling them to respond with greater confidence, insight, and agility to the needs of those they serve

Al doesn't make everything more efficient, more productive, more scalable from day one. You'll see the true benefits of the technology when it's properly introduced, governed, and tailored to you and your needs.

#### **Overall findings**

These results show optimism across the charity sector about Al's potential to bring tangible, practical benefits. A standout theme was the opportunity to free up staff from repetitive and administrative tasks, allowing them to focus on more meaningful work. This was seen not only as a way to boost internal productivity but also as a chance to enhance donation and important work delivered to the beneficiaries of charities.

The connection between efficiency, customer focus, and staff empowerment was clear, with many participants identifying these benefits collectively, suggesting an appetite for people-first transformation enabled by AI.



## How prepared is the charity sector?

We asked participants a series of questions surrounding AI preparedness and current abilities.

The overall results showed that there are gaps in the charities sector, but also a clear understanding of the importance of responsible AI adoption and a willingness to progress.

#### Al policies and governance

Effective AI policies and governance are critical to the responsible use of technology in the charities sector.

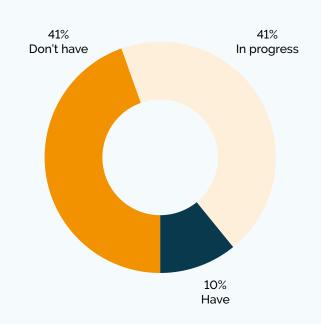
Without clear oversight, there's a risk of unintended bias, data misuse, or loss of trust, particularly when handling beneficiary data and confidential information. Well-defined policies not only support compliance and data protection but also help charities utilise AI to deliver smarter, more inclusive services. When asked what current strategies they have in place, responses showed a clear trend.

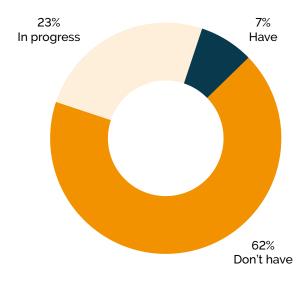
#### **AI Policy**

An AI policy is a formal set of guidelines that defines how an organisation uses, manages, and governs artificial intelligence responsibly and ethically.

Only 10% of respondents currently have an AI policy in place, with 41% saying that one was in progress. 41% of participants confirmed they had no policy.

Alongside our evidence that AI implementation is in the beginning stages for charities, so is AI governance. We hope that, as more organisations utilise AI, we see the development of AI policies also increase.





#### Al Acceptable Use Policy (AUP)

An AI Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) is a document that outlines the approved ways employees and stakeholders are permitted to use AI tools and technologies within an organisation.

A very small 7% of respondents stated that they have an AI AUP in place, but 23% said they were in the progress of building one. A huge 62% do not have one.

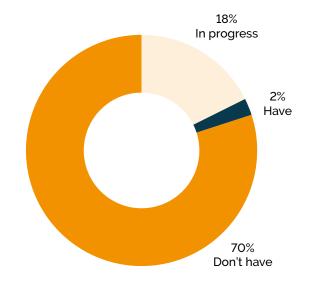
We see a clear commonality here between AUP's and AI policies, likely because they go hand in hand.

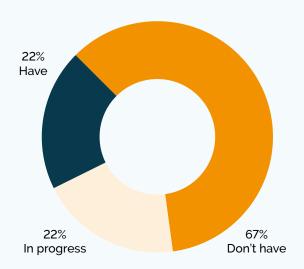
#### Al literacy training

Al literacy training is designed to help individuals understand the fundamentals of artificial intelligence, its applications, risks, and ethical considerations, so they can use Al tools effectively and responsibly in their roles.

We found that only 2% of charities currently have AI literacy training in place, with 18% being in progress. This means that 70% of charities are not prepared when it comes to AI literacy training.

The low uptake suggests that as AI tools become more accessible, many staff may not fully understand how to use them, what risks to look out for, or how to align their use with organisational goals and ethical standards. Without targeted training, there's a risk of misuse, underuse, or resistance to adoption, making AI literacy a critical area for investment as the sector moves forward.





#### Security awareness training

Security awareness training is designed to help employees recognise, understand, and respond appropriately to cyber security threats.

Our survey found 22% of organisations either already have security awareness training or are building it out. A significant proportion (67%) have no specific security awareness training that addresses AI risks.

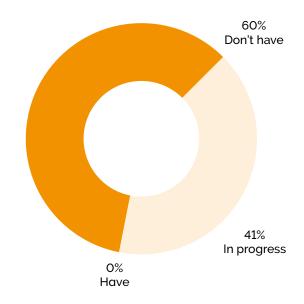
Further to the above, this highlights a need for more awareness around the security implications of AI, especially for charity organisations handling extremely sensitive data.

#### **Al Strategy**

An AI strategy is a high-level plan that outlines how an organisation will adopt, implement, and scale artificial intelligence to achieve its goals while managing risks and ensuring responsible use.

Surprisingly, 0% of respondents stated that they have an AI strategy in place, though almost half (41%) said that one was in progress.

These results indicate that strategic planning for AI is very largely undeveloped for charities, and there's work to be done. With almost 60% having no strategy or plans to have one, most organisations are likely exploring AI in an ad hoc or experimental way rather than through a coordinated, long-term approach.



#### Al understanding

According to our research:



This is a huge knowledge gap, and shows that many organisations are missing out on the powerful ways AI could transform how they manage properties, support beneficiaries, and streamline operations.

But here's the exciting part: this knowledge gap isn't just a challenge, it's a huge opportunity. With the right training and resources, your organisation can utilise AI to transform.



**66** It's a fast-moving train that's very hard to get on due to lack of skills, time, and understanding."



Very few employees or volunteers know how (or even why) to use AI systems. and whether it might benefit them or their beneficiaries, and although our trustees are aware of the benefits and risks, there are vastly moreimportant issues in the short and medium term."

#### AI and the Civil Society Almanac 2025

This year marks the first time NCVO is using artificial intelligence to support its research work, and the Almanac is the first NCVO product to pilot AI in its methodology.

We are piloting AI tools to extract and analyse tens of thousands of charity financial accounts, enabling faster insight generation and improved data consistency at scale. This represents a bold step forward in our ambition to lead with innovation and evidence.

"This year's Almanac represents a major shift in how we collect and analyse charity data. For the first time, we're using AI tools to process large volumes of financial accounts efficiently and ethically - allowing us to extract insights faster, with more consistency and scope. It's an exciting step in our commitment to innovation and dataled leadership in the voluntary sector."

Dr. Nayyara Tabassum, Research and Insight Manager, NCVO

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#### Lawful, ethical, responsible AI use

When asked how confident charities are that they understand how to use AI lawfully, ethically, and responsibly, 82% of respondents stated that they have low confidence.

Al platforms are generally safe. But in industries like charity and not-for-profit when sensitive or financial data is being exchanged, responsible Al use is extremely important. Preventing bias is also essential when comparing data sets.

Many respondents having a lack of faith in their organisation's responsible use of AI highlights a necessity for action.

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We are very attentive to the legal, ethical and responsibility implications, but we still don't know enough."

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I don't think
we've adequately
considered the
implications, let
alone ethical or
environmentalimpact use,
sufficiently
as yet."

We believe that lack of understanding and the complex nature of these technologies is likely what's holding organisations back from adapting ethical and lawful approaches to AI.

However, we did find some evidence of forward thinking, with some organisations reporting awareness in higher-level/board-level employees.

#### **Risk understanding**

We asked how confident respondents were that their organisation knows the potential risks around AI:



had low confidence



had medium confidence



had high confidence

These responses highlight a clear concern: many charities aren't yet confident in their ability to identify and manage the risks associated with AI. This suggests that awareness and understanding of potential pitfalls are still developing, leaving room for significant improvement.

It reinforces the need for stronger governance, better training, and cross-sector collaboration to build the confidence and capability needed to adopt AI responsibly.



We have good cyber and data security policy and process, however more would need to be done to adopt AI more widely across the organisation."



We understand the risks for the organisation but need to ensure all staff understand it."



#### **Human control**

Our research shows:



of charities don't feel confident they have the right meaningful human control in place when it comes to AI.

This continues the trend we're seeing in terms of lack of oversight when it comes to Al. As previously mentioned, many organisations haven't started or are only just beginning their Al journey, so the right controls are not yet in place.

No matter where your organisation is on its Al journey, Al governance is a high priority. These findings show that charity organisations need more support and guidance with Al adoption.



#### **Resources and expertise**

Having internal AI experts is rare in the charities sector, but valuable. When asked about their confidence in their organisation's expertise in AI solutions, the responses followed the trend we're seeing throughout.



Having internal AI experts (or help from external specialists) who can provide strategic direction, ensure responsible adoption, and help bridge the skills gap is essential. Without this, you may struggle to take full advantage of AI's potential.

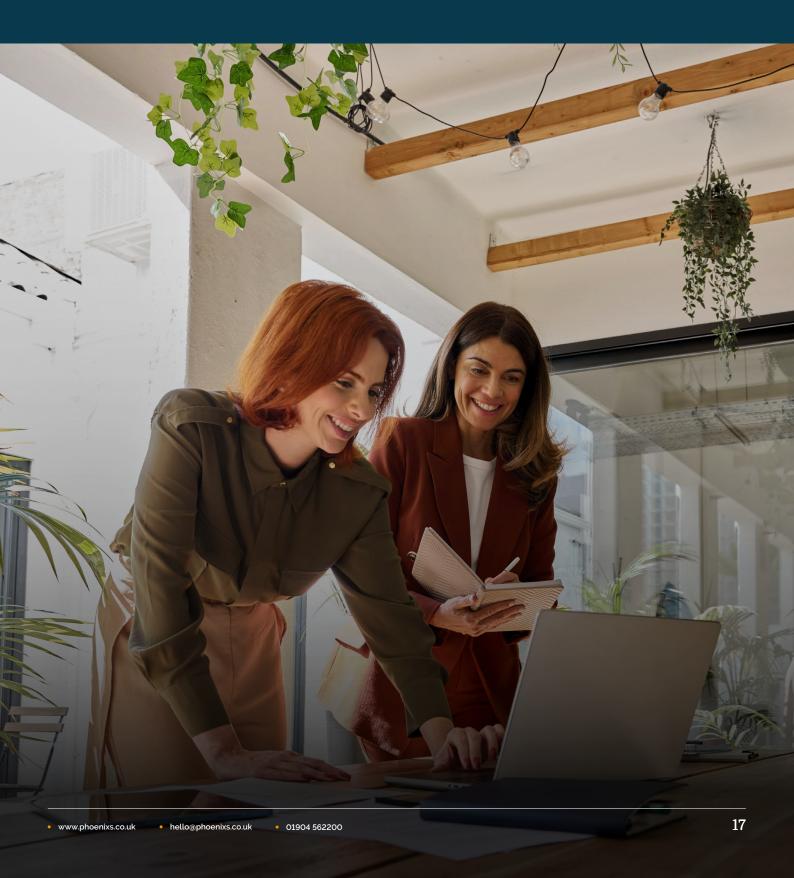


We have in-house knowledge of building complex agents using many low-code platforms, but bespoke, Azure AI driven design and development or in-app implementation is lacking."

#### **Overall findings**

The results of this research clearly highlight that many charities are in the very early stages of Al adoption and governance. While there is a growing awareness of the importance of Al policies, strategies, and ethical considerations, actual implementation remains limited.

But there's also a big opportunity here. A lot of respondents are keen to get started with AI – some already are – and there's real momentum building across the sector. The main things holding them back? Time, resources, and know-how.



# What should a comprehensive AI strategy look like?

Al is complex, and our survey shows that this is a blocker for charity organisations. Once fully implemented, secured, and weaved into strategies, Al is transformative (and well worth it).

We've broken down the key elements of an AI strategy, helping to break down those barriers and help charity organisations get started on their AI journey.





#### Vision



A successful AI strategy starts with a clear vision aligned to your organisation's goals. In charities, this typically means improving services for beneficiaries, optimising asset management, reducing costs, and ensuring compliance with regulatory requirements.

Objectives may include:

- Increasing responsiveness to beneficiary needs and inquiries
- Automating repetitive administrative and fundraising processes
- Proactively identifying individuals or communities in need of specific support
- Predicting trends in demand for services or potential challenges
- Using real-time data to guide service delivery and resource allocation

This vision should act as the foundation for all AI-related decisions and investments. It should outline why and how you plan to use AI and keep you on track once AI is rolled-out.

#### Organisational readiness



Before implementing AI, you must understand the maturity of your data, infrastructure, and internal capabilities.

- Is beneficiary, donor, and service delivery data clean, complete, and easily accessible?
- Are existing IT systems capable of integrating with AI platforms?
- Are robust data protection and cyber security measures in place to safeguard sensitive information?
- Does your organisational culture support digital transformation and innovation?

A readiness assessment helps identify any foundational gaps that must be addressed before scaling AI solutions.

#### Skills and culture

Adopting AI demands the right skills and a culture open to change. You must invest in upskilling and change management to support staff across all levels.

- Conduct a digital and AI skills gap analysis
- Develop AI literacy training tailored to different roles
- Identify and support internal AI champions
- Embed AI into wider digital transformation programmes

#### **Priority use cases**



Identifying high-value use cases is critical to ensure AI is solving real problems and delivering measurable benefits. In the charities sector, common AI use cases include beneficiary services, asset and maintenance management, and operational efficiency.



#### Governance



In the charity sector, where decisions can significantly affect people's lives, ethical use of AI is essential. Governance frameworks should be established to ensure AI is used responsibly and transparently.

- Clear oversight of AI initiatives through a governance board or working group
- Policies addressing fairness, bias, data ethics, and accountability
- Regular audits of AI models to assess for unintended outcomes or bias
- Transparent communication with beneficiaries about how AI is being used in services



#### **Key partnerships**



A successful AI strategy includes identifying the right platforms, tools, and implementation partners. Most charities will adopt AI through third-party solutions rather than building systems in-house.

#### **Outcomes**



Measuring the impact of AI is essential to track progress and inform future investments. Clear KPIs should be defined at the outset of any AI initiative.

Evaluation should be embedded into project cycles to inform scaling and continuous improvement.

## How can Phoenix and NCVO help you?

Phoenix brings deep knowledge of charity challenges, like digital inclusion, rising demand, and budget constraints, to shape practical AI strategies. From advisory workshops to full-service delivery, we support digital transformation with tools that deliver measurable impact for beneficiaries and teams alike.

Phoenix is a proud partner of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), working collaboratively to support the digital transformation of charity and not-for-profit organisations across the UK. With this, NCVO is convening development opportunities and the sharing of member practice to support the sector's adoption of Al. Through this partnership, we contribute to sector-wide innovation by sharing expertise in areas such as Al adoption, cloud technologies, and cyber security. By aligning with NCVO's mission, Phoenix helps member organisations harness technology to transform.

As we continue to work with NCVO, we will provide you with tailored webinars, toolkits, blogs, resources, and more. If you'd like to hear about this report directly from specialists from NCVO and Phoenix, we have an upcoming webinar that you can register for <a href="here">here</a>.

NCVO is also innovating internally through its research infrastructure. This year, for the first time, they are piloting AI directly into the methodology of their flagship, Civil Society Almanac, a major milestone in their efforts to harness emerging technologies responsibly and strategically. This not only strengthens NCVO's insights but also models real-world AI use for the sector.



#### Al readiness assessment

Al has the power to transform charities from automating repetitive tasks to improving beneficiary services and enabling smarter, data-driven decisions. But with 87% of charity organisations reporting low Al knowledge and 76% lacking confidence in understanding Al risks, where do you begin?

Phoenix's AI Readiness Assessment is your first step to confidently navigating the AI landscape. The assessment helps you:

## Understand your current AI maturity



From strategy and governance to skills and infrastructure

## Define practical next steps



With tailored recommendations to help you move from interest to impact

## Identify capability gaps



Including policy development, ethical safeguards, and data readiness

Whether you're just starting to explore AI or looking to build responsible, strategic use across your organisation, our AI Readiness Assessment provides the clarity and direction you need.

## AI governance: an essential for charities





With the growing use of AI, Phoenix guides charity organisations on how to implement AI ethically and transparently. Our AI Governance Workshop supports you to make effective decisions on how AI can be used safely and securely in your organisation.

#### The workshop covers:

- Introduction: understanding how your organisation is currently using Al.
- 2 Understanding the landscape: analysing existing policies, guardrails, documentation, and training on use of AI
- **Strategy**: exploring your aspirations and desired use and outcomes of implementing AI.
- 4 Al best practice: identifying standards, frameworks, and principles your organisation can align to
- Next steps: receive a Phoenix output report detailing a bespoke, suggested list of recommendations on how you can improve your AI governance posture, as well as detailing how Phoenix will support you moving forwards.



#### **Bespoke Al Governance Support**

For those charity organisations further along their AI journey, our team of experienced consultants can help you with a range of tailored support including but not limited to:

- Review of existing AI policies, processes, and documentation
- Creation of AI policies, processes and documentation
- Creation of an Al strategy
- Al training
- Guidance and support on using Al ethically and responsibly
- Gap analysis/assessment against ICO's Data Protection Toolkit, the NIST AI Risk Management Framework, ISO42001:2023 and the UK Government's AI Playbook

## Other AI solutions and services

#### **Copilot for Microsoft 365**

We enable charity teams to boost everyday productivity through Microsoft 365 Copilot. By embedding Al directly into familiar tools like Word, Excel, and Outlook, Copilot helps automate document writing, data insights, and email drafting, saving time and reducing manual admin across charity operations.

#### Microsoft 365 Copilot workshop

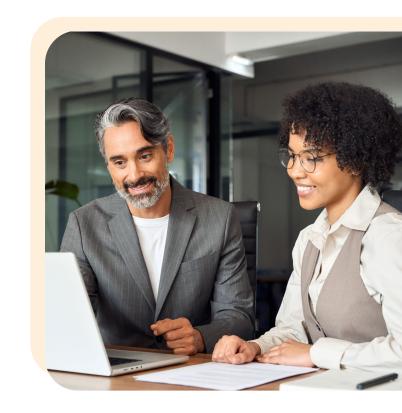
Through the Microsoft Copilot 365 workshop, you'll embark on a journey, diving into numerous demonstrations showcasing Copilot in action. Together, we'll explore real-world user examples, tackle challenges, and address pain points to pinpoint the most crucial scenarios for your team's success.

#### Copilot Studio vision and value

A three-phase engagement that provides an overview of the Art of the Possible, an overview of key concepts, and building next-Generation AI capabilities using Microsoft Copilot Studio.

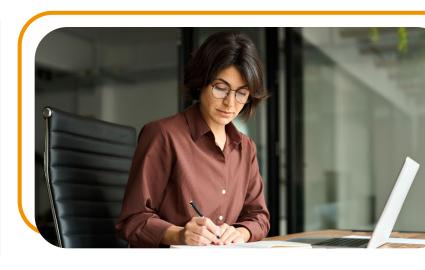
#### **Azure AI and OpenAI Integration**

Phoenix helps charity providers create smart, scalable AI applications using Microsoft Azure and OpenAI technologies. Whether it's powering intelligent search, summarising beneficiary information/feedback, or creating automated workflows, these services can be tailored to an organisation's unique charity datasets and objectives.



#### **Machine Learning and predictive insights**

Phoenix uses machine learning to help charity organisations make better decisions from their data. This includes identifying trends, predicting arrears risk, and optimising resource allocation, supporting proactive service delivery and data-informed planning.



#### Al chatbots and virtual agents

Designed with public sector services in mind, Phoenix offers intelligent chatbot solutions that provide 24/7 support across web, email, and social platforms. Pre-trained on charity-specific scenarios, these bots can answer common beneficiary questions, schedule appointments, and triage service requests, reducing pressure on call centres.

#### Intelligent process automation

Manual charity processes can be time-consuming. Phoenix delivers Al-driven automation to streamline these repetitive tasks, reducing staff workload while maintaining service quality and accuracy.



## Other AI resources

#### **Accelerating AI in the workplace**

In our whitepaper 'Accelerating AI at work', we explore the challenges of AI and how to prevent ethical and bias issues

- Understanding AI in the workplace
- Challenges and apprehensions
- Positive impact of Al
- Ethical AI
- ✓ Al for all
- Copilot for Microsoft 365: a new way to work





#### The value of AI

To ready leaders and businesses for the age of AI, we've created a document outlining the true value of AI, including where AI is going, the types of AI, use cases, and the different AI solutions from Microsoft.



## Get in touch today

For more information on AI strategies, implementation, and governance, get in touch with our dedicated specialists.

Alternatively, you can contact us at hello@phoenixs.co.uk or call us on 01904 562200

