

Building Scotland's Digital Capacity: A Local Government Roundtable on Data Centre Planning

With techUK, Scottish Government and kindly
hosted by Shoosmiths

Paul Gilhooey



Agenda

Arrival	1030
Welcome & Housekeeping	1100
Scottish Government – Paul Gilhooley	
techUK – Matt Robinson & Luisa Cardani	
Presentations from partners:	1110
Shoosmiths, Steven Stewart & Jas Sahotay	(c15mins per presentation, 5mins Q&A)
Pulsant – Mike Hoy & Helen Munro	
GMCA (virtual) – John Duncan	
The Data Lab – Heather Thomson	
Lunch and Networking	1230
Roundtable	1300
Close and Networking	1400

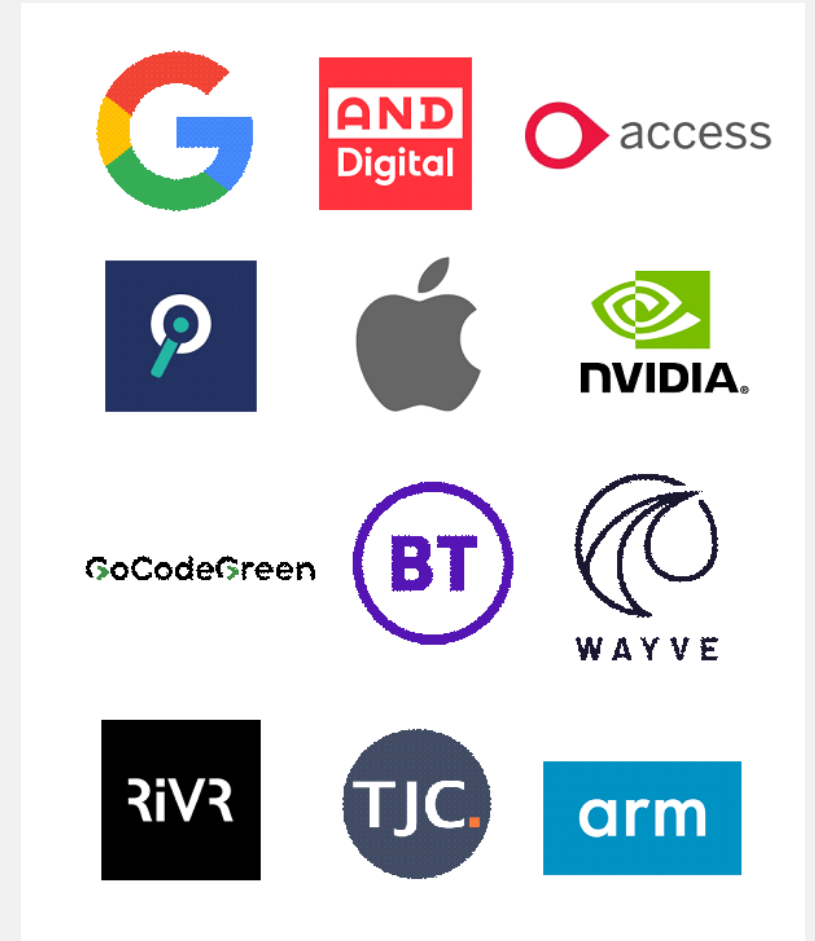
Luisa Cardani Matt Robinson

techUK
FOR WHAT COMES NEXT

techUK, who we are & what we do

techUK is the trade association for the tech sector and we are pleased to represent over **1,100** members, from household names to 'ones-to-watch'.

- The techUK membership includes SMEs and multinationals from every **nation and region** in the UK.
- Our members are the driving force behind our work. They participate in networks and events relevant to their business, they lead our committees, boards and working groups, and **they set the agenda for our work**.
- Members join our community to **build strong relationships** with customers, partners, regulators, Government, and peers across the UK.
- They have access to **timely insights**, events, breaking news, thought leadership, and policy updates.
- We work with them to define **policy positions** that will benefit the industry, and to champion tech as a driver of the UK economy.



A selection of our members.

Data Centres & techUK

techUK Data Centre Council

- <https://www.techuk.org/resource/announcing-the-new-techuk-data-centres-council-2026-2028.html>
- Steer the Data Centres Programme, agree on priorities for action, engage with the resulting Working Groups;
- Define the policy responses required for a given issue – wider programme member views will also be sought;
- Bring focus to our data centres policy work and act as the first port of call for engagement with high-profile stakeholders; and
- Represent the interests of the broader membership

Demystifying Data Centre Planning Webinar Series

- <https://www.techuk.org/resource/demystifying-data-centres-planning-call-for-contributions.html>
- How the UK Planning System Treats Data Centres?
- Grid Connections, Energy Constraints and Planning Risk
- Water, Energy Efficiency and Environmental Regulation
- Data Centres and Local Communities: Growth, Jobs and Trust
- Planning Reform and the Future of Data Centre Development

Data Centre Reports

- By 2035, data centres have the potential to contribute an additional £44 billion in GVA to the UK economy between 2025-35
- (English DCs) 51% of surveyed sites use waterless cooling systems.
- 64% use less than 10,000 m³ of water per year – less than a typical leisure centre.
- 89% of sites either measure water use or deploy systems that do not require water for cooling.
- <https://www.techuk.org/resource/techuk-report-understanding-data-centre-water-use-in-england.html>

Steven Stewart
Jas Sahotay

SHCOSMITHS

Planning for Data Centres

Steven Stewart – Planning Partner, Shoosmiths

ENERGY & INFRASTRUCTURE

Challenges?

Lack of established policy and practice

Limited experience with the technology and large-scale projects.

Tension between National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) drive for digital infrastructure and net-zero energy goals, while trying to balance community concerns and their large energy use.

Two-tiered consenting regime.

EIA approach can vary.

Public perception.



Are these being addressed?

NPF4

Policy support for developments that contribute to decarbonisation, digital resilience and regional economic development.

Identifies energy and digital infrastructure as priorities, giving planners stronger grounds to support applications aligning with national net-zero objectives.

SG Consultation on consenting threshold

The Scottish Government is consulting (ending 27 March 2026) on raising the 50MW threshold for Section 36 (S36) electricity generation consents to 100-150MW.





The Future?

Clear Policy

Clear leadership on national policy will eradicate inconsistencies in decision-making and give clarity at local authority level.

Joined up approach among local authorities, Scottish Government and statutory consultees.

Streamlined Consenting

Not just applicable to net zero aligned projects, but the infrastructure work to facilitate these projects also.



DISCLAIMER

This information is for general information purposes only and does not constitute legal advice. It is recommended that specific professional advice is sought before acting on any of the information given. Please contact us for specific advice on your circumstances.

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**FOR
WHAT
MATTERS**

Mike Hoy
Helen Munro



John Duncan

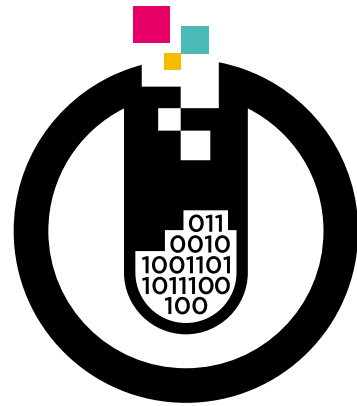
GMCA GREATER
MANCHESTER
COMBINED
AUTHORITY

Heather Thomson



**THE
DATA LAB**

value from data and AI



THE DATA LAB

value from data

THE
DATA LAB



Scottish Funding Council
Comhairle Maoineachaidh na h-Alba

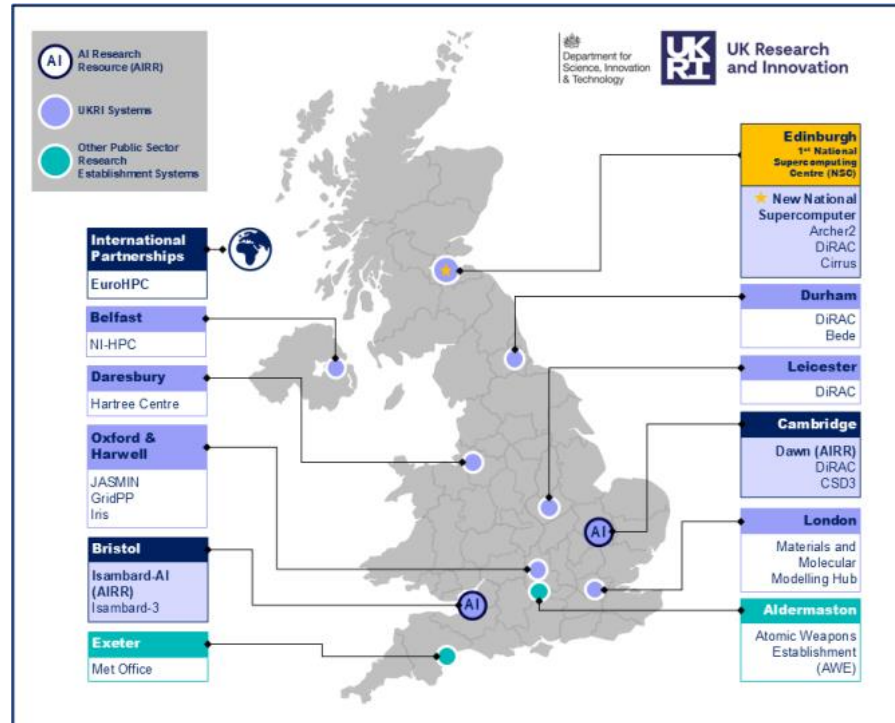
BE—ST

Built
Environment
—
Smarter
Transformation



Innovation Centres connect Scotland's academic expertise with industry and with public and third sector organisations to create economic and societal benefits. They also support skills and training to develop the next generation of researchers and knowledge exchange practitioners through masters and post-doctoral level provision.

Strategic alignment



AI Opportunities Action Plan. Ramping up AI adoption across the UK to boost economic growth, provide jobs for the future and improve people's everyday lives.



Programme for
Government



THE
DATA LAB

OUR MISSION

To transform the use of data and AI by enabling innovation, fostering connection and collaboration, and developing skills to change lives and drive economic growth, creating a more productive and sustainable society in Scotland and beyond.



INNOVATION SUPPORT



SKILLS AND TALENT



COMMUNITY AND PARTNERSHIPS

**THE
DATA LAB**



IMPACT

- £212M additional revenue
- 1500+ jobs created or safeguarded
- £122M R&D funding secured
- 200+ collaborative R&D and data science project
- 1000+ MSc and PhD scholarships, 500 industry placements
- 1300+ learners upskilled in data through Data Skills for Work
- 80K learners professional learning including 2500 leaders
- 8000+ members of The Data Lab Community in over 100 countries



LANARKSHIRE ANNOUNCED AS NEXT AI GROWTH ZONE

THE
DATA LAB



THE SCOTTISH CLUSTER SCHEME

WHY CLUSTERS?

- Clusters accelerate innovation, competitiveness and growth
- They bring together industry, academia, government and investors around shared priorities
- Help ecosystems reach critical mass, attract investment, and build international visibility
- A core element of Scotland's Innovation Strategy and Programme for Government

Scotland's National Innovation Strategy

F27

6. Innovation Clusters

The Strategy's first programme of activity is focused on Innovation Clusters and is designed to support our priority areas to grow, scale and deliver world-class economic performance.

In this chapter we will define what we mean by clusters, set out the opportunities that exist to catalyse their rapid growth and propose a new vision for a more systematic approach to achieving that goal.

Industry-led clusters have demonstrated they are a powerful enabling vehicle for delivering economic growth, high-value jobs and entrepreneurial start-up and scaling enterprises through impactful innovation and collaboration. I have valued the opportunity to share our cluster experience and expertise with a range of stakeholders and to now see the role of clusters form an integral part of the Innovation Strategy.

Stephen Ingledew,
Executive Chair
FinTech Scotland

Economic Clusters consist of dense concentrations of interconnected businesses, supply chains, skilled labour pools, economic and education institutions, public sector organisations and related infrastructure all operating in a particular field. Together, these actors create an ecosystem of collaboration, healthy competition, knowledge exchange and often close working partnerships.

There are numerous benefits to the formation and growth of economic clusters. They have been shown to drive the pace and quality of innovation; increase productivity and boost wage growth. Clusters are also strongly correlated with the formation of new high growth businesses, expanding and reinforcing the strength, competitive edge and innovation of the cluster. A good example is Scotland's emerging fintech sector, which has risen from a thriving financial services sector, to compete with existing businesses, driving innovation and ultimately reinforcing the scale and performance of

Scotland's National Innovation Strategy

F29

A new approach to cluster building

At a minimum, a new approach to cluster building approach must:

- provide focus on the scale of opportunity and global potential within our national innovation priorities.
- be capable of identifying weaknesses or growth opportunities in key clusters and provide a systematic plan for addressing them.
- provide context on Scotland's international standing and competitiveness in global markets.
- provide alignment of policy and investment support across the public, private and academic sectors.
- clearly and visibly promote our world-leading capability to international audiences.

Scotland can learn from international examples of best practice from countries of a similar size and outlook, where rigorous cluster-building approaches are the norm; underpinning national economic growth and signalling world-leading capability. Countries that have successful and highly productive and collaborative innovation ecosystems such as Norway and Denmark maintain tiered cluster development programmes that visibly define their national strengths and innovation capabilities, incorporating different regional strengths and their own business systems.

With a similarly unified national network of high-performing clusters in each of our innovation priority areas, we will visibly demonstrate how Scotland can effectively harness different regional strengths and excellence into a collective national effort to become globally competitive. As with Denmark's Cluster Excellence network, a visible cluster network will unify different regional strengths to indicate a collective national expertise in a few specialisms, and can provide valuable signposting to attract further international investment, collaboration and talent.

Aligning public and private sector support for innovation priority clusters according to their specific needs will help businesses within our innovation priority areas to scale and grow, maximising their productivity and economic impact in accelerating Scotland's economic growth. As with the Norwegian Innovation Clusters, tailored packages of public support that catalyse growth and stimulate further private sector investment will support innovation priority clusters to achieve their world-leading capabilities.

Scotland's National Innovation Strategy

F30

Actions

1. We will work closely with our Enterprise Agencies and other relevant partners across industry, academia and the broader public sector to develop a Scottish Cluster Scheme.

This scheme will define a rigorous and systematic approach to the identification,

Scotland's National Innovation Strategy

F31

2. We will begin our work on Cluster evaluation and facilitation process with a focus on each of the innovation priority areas identified in this Strategy.

The Scottish Government will work with cluster lead partners to undertake an evaluation and facilitation process to identify barriers and opportunities for each innovation priority area. This evaluation will be used to develop

Scotland's National Innovation Strategy

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3. We will support the development of a Scottish Cluster Network aligned to our innovation priority areas.

In recognition of the crucial importance of collaboration, peer learning and productive competition in driving cluster innovation, we will support the development of a new Scottish Cluster Network. The purpose of this network will be to facilitate collaboration

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY CLUSTERS?

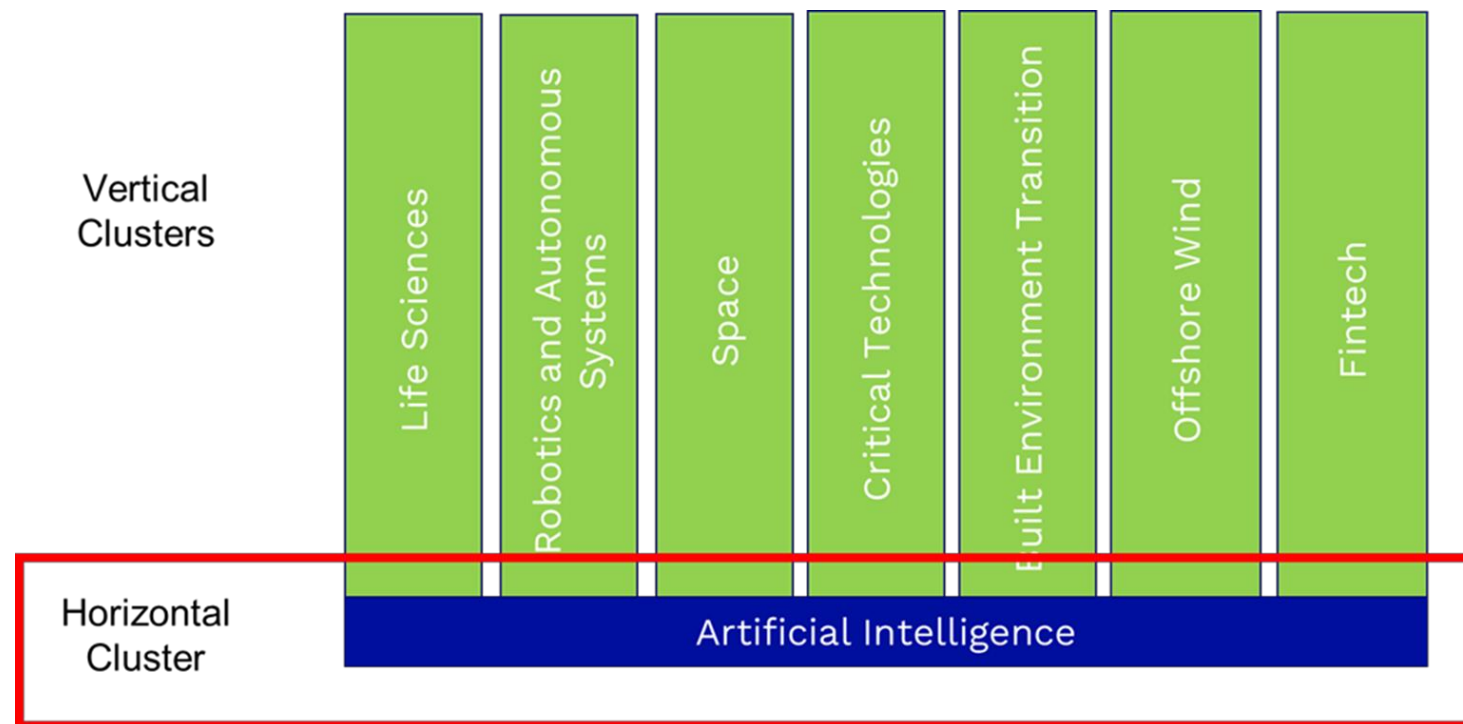
Cluster Definition

The term ‘cluster’ is often applied in the widest sense to networks, places, industries and approaches within economic development. For the purposes of this Blueprint, the European Cluster Collaboration Platform definition has been adopted:

“Clusters should be considered as regional ecosystems of related industries and competences featuring a broad array of inter-industry inter-dependencies.

They are defined as groups of firms, related economic actors, and institutions that are located near each other and have reached a sufficient scale to develop specialised expertise, services, resources, suppliers and skills definition”

WHAT ARE THE CLUSTERS WITHIN THE SCHEME?



THE CLUSTER DEVELOPMENT LADDER

Diagram 1: Cluster Development Ladder



OUR APPROACH

Understanding
the Market &
Policy
Environment

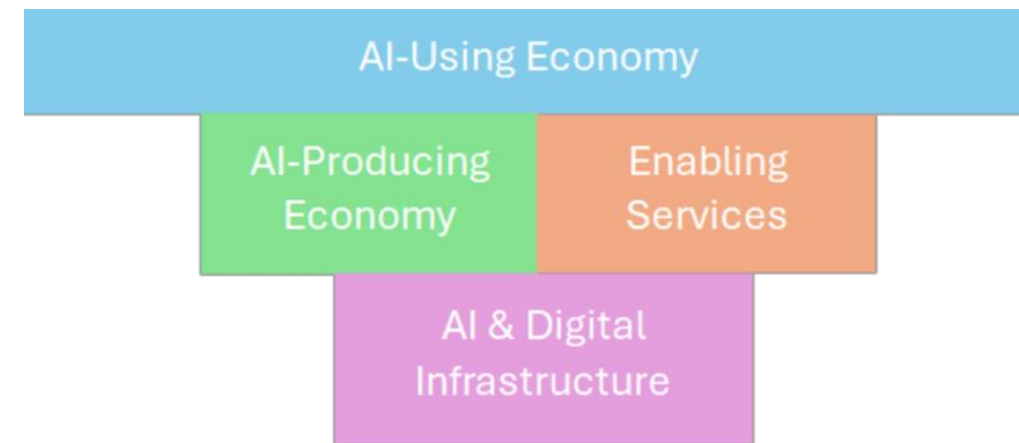
Mapping
Scotland's AI
Ecosystem

Stakeholder
Engagement

Gaps Analysis

Action Plan

FOCUS: 4 BOX MODEL



1.The AI-producing economy - at the core of the AI-producing economy are organisations that actively develop AI models, software, and platforms. These may include startups building generative AI tools, research labs creating new machine learning algorithms, or companies specialising in high-value applications such as diagnostic imaging, autonomous systems, or AI-driven design.

2.The AI-using economy - this includes organisations that integrate existing AI technologies into their operations to enhance productivity, customer service, logistics, or decision-making. These firms may use machine learning to optimise logistics, employ chatbots for customer service, or analyse large datasets for business intelligence. For example, financial services firms deploying AI for fraud detection or retailers using recommendation algorithms fall into this category.

3.Enabling Infrastructure - the infrastructure domain is the physical and digital backbone needed to develop, train, deploy, and operate AI systems. This includes both the hardware necessary to develop and run AI solutions, alongside the compute and telecommunication infrastructure that are required for producing and using AI across the economy. Important examples include datacentres and 5G.

4.Enabling Services - this part of the economy involves organisations developing and offering services to support the development and adoption of AI. For example, firms offering training or developing AI risk assurance tools.

SWOT ANALYSIS

STRENGTHS

- World-class AI research base
- Leadership in ethical & trustworthy AI
- Strong AI-producing economy (61%)
- Cross-sector demand (finance, health, energy)
- Collaborative innovation institutions

WEAKNESSES

- Limited commercial scale-up performance
- No dedicated AI CMO
- Compute & infrastructure gaps
- Shortages in advanced AI talent
- Uneven adoption across sectors & regions

OPPORTUNITIES

- AI as a horizontal enabling cluster
- Inward investment attraction
- Integration with UK compute & AI Growth Zones
- Establishment of a CMO
- Growing demand for responsible AI governance

THREATS

- Intensifying global competition
- Regulatory divergence risks
- Ongoing talent shortages
- Infrastructure constraints
- Risk of ecosystem fragmentation

EMERGING FINDINGS (INFRASTRUCTURE)

- Strong but fragmented AI ecosystem
- AI adoption across sectors presents huge opportunity
- Stronger ecosystem coordination could unlock additional value
- Infrastructure and data access are emerging strategic issues
 - Interest in exploring national AI infrastructure capabilities, including potential shared platforms or national models that could support secure and responsible AI deployment.
 - “There is an opportunity for Scotland to develop sovereign AI capabilities for key sectors.”
 - Consultation highlights that infrastructure access and data availability will become increasingly important considerations for ecosystem development.

Community and Partnership



OUR DIGITAL COMMUNITY ENABLES DATA AND AI PROFESSIONALS, ACADEMICS, STUDENTS AND ENTHUSIASTS TO CONNECT, COLLABORATE, AND LEARN.

JOIN TODAY FOR FREE!



MARCH'S THEME: INFRASTRUCTURE

Monthly theme - March 2026 - Infrastructure

Published on 2 March 2026

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March's theme in The Data Lab Community is **Infrastructure**.

Discussions around data centres and national infrastructure have frequently hit headlines over the past couple of years. Across government, industry and academia, data centres are increasingly framed as critical, economic catalysts, and the backbone of AI and digital transformation.

With plans for 'AI Growth Zones' to accelerate the build-out of AI data centres and increase sovereign capacity, discussions around connections to the grid, power requirements and links with renewable energy, what does an increased focus and development of national infrastructure mean for data and AI professionals, society, and the environment?

Stay tuned as we discuss this and more throughout March!

DATA
FEST
2026

SCOTLAND'S LEADING DATA & AI EVENT

27th & 28th May 2026
The Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh



Lunch

Please fill in your post it's and
attach them to the board

Questions? Problems? Concerns?

Roundtable

Thank you

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FOR WHAT COMES NEXT



marcomms@techuk.org



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