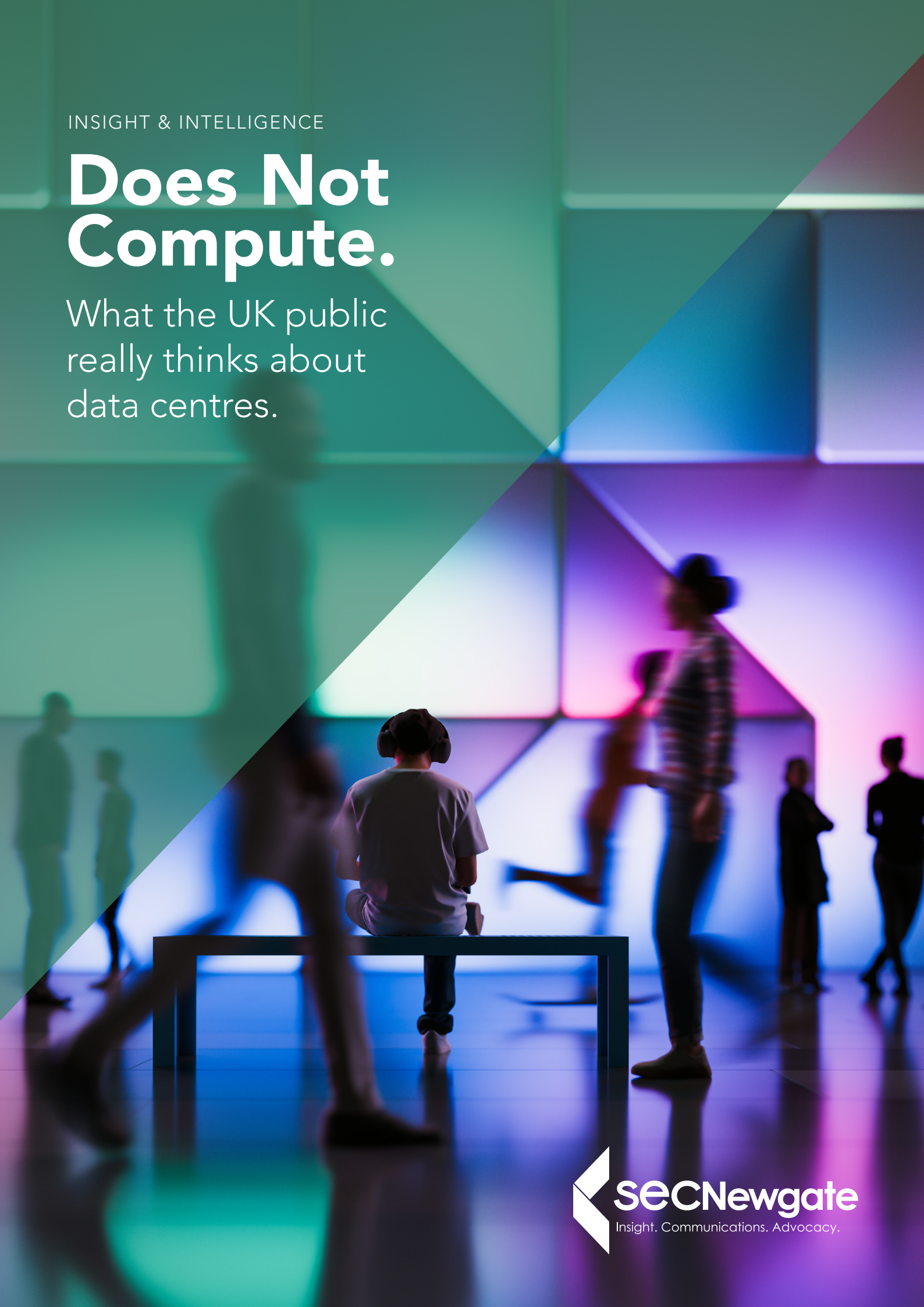

INSIGHT & INTELLIGENCE

Does Not Compute.

What the UK public really thinks about data centres.

SECNewgate
Insight. Communications. Advocacy.

Foreword

The UK's economy and public services are becoming ever more digital. From banking and healthcare to communications, entertainment and artificial intelligence, data centres have powered our modern life for years, operating out of sight and largely out of mind, barely distinguishable from warehouses or office spaces.

That era is now ending. Growing demand for digital capacity is driving a new generation of data centre development at far greater scale, reshaping their form, resource demands and geography. As this infrastructure becomes more visible and moves into new places and communities, the gap between national importance and public understanding creates not only planning and delivery challenges, but a growing reputational risk for the sector.

SEC Newgate UK's *Does Not Compute* research sits within this moment – and comes amid calls from MPs for a 'national conversation' on data centres. While data centres are now widely recognised as nationally important, public understanding of what they are, how they operate and why they are needed remains limited. As with other forms of large-scale infrastructure, people are often encountering the concept for the first time through media coverage, local proposals or political debate, before a shared baseline of knowledge has been established.

> Growing demand for digital capacity is driving a new generation of data centre development at far greater scale, reshaping their form, resource demands and geography.

Our findings show a public that is far from disengaged, but whose views are still taking shape. There is broad recognition of the role data centres play in supporting the digital economy and data security, alongside concerns about power, water, artificial intelligence and local impact. These perspectives are not fixed, but they are forming quickly, influenced by how information is framed, who provides it and when.

As data centres are increasingly treated as critical national infrastructure, and as decisions about their development attract greater attention, the way the sector explains itself will matter. Not only in planning terms, but to build broader public confidence that the data centre sector can deliver growth – and support the UK's digital ambitions - responsibly and transparently.

Executive Summary

Data centres are an emotionally charged issue for the UK public, despite low knowledge.

There is strong appetite for more information about how data centres support our digital lives. When this is provided, perceptions shift, with the majority of the public recognising their importance and feeling more positive towards them.

Substantial knowledge gaps underpin public attitudes towards data centres.

Despite low knowledge, **the public recognise the importance of building more data centres** in the UK – but sentiment is **not fully formed**.

There is **strong appetite for more information** about data centres. When knowledge building information is provided, **opinions solidify**.

The public **cannot decouple data centres from their feelings towards AI,** indicating that when communicating about data centres, a cautious approach is needed when linking development to AI. In addition, it may be advisable to highlight the other digital services that data centres support to **provide much-needed assurance on data centre necessity**.

The UK public are grappling with conflicting perceptions of data centres. They recognise the critical role data centres play in national growth and data security, but are weighing this up with concerns about **AI, energy usage and security risks**.

4 in 10 would not find it acceptable for **more data centres to be built in their local area** even if they are essential for the UK's future growth. This split highlights a consistent tension between **recognising national need and weighing local impact**.

Within local authorities, planning committee councillors are **more accepting of data centre applications - when they are more familiar**. However, low familiarity is currently widespread, indicating that knowledge building focussed on the need for data centres, employment capability and resource usage is necessary when engaging councillors on planning committees to alleviate potential concerns.

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UK public perceptions on data centres

Methodology

An online survey with **1507** UK respondents.

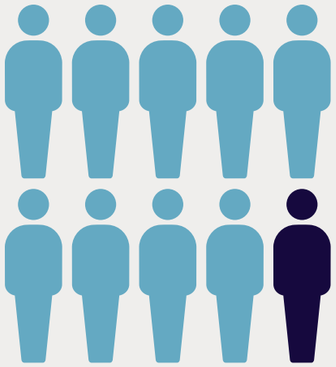
Fieldwork took place between 11th and 18th March 2026.

The dataset is nationally representative across age, gender, region, social grade, ethnicity, tenure, and working status.

Substantial knowledge gaps underpin public attitudes towards data centres

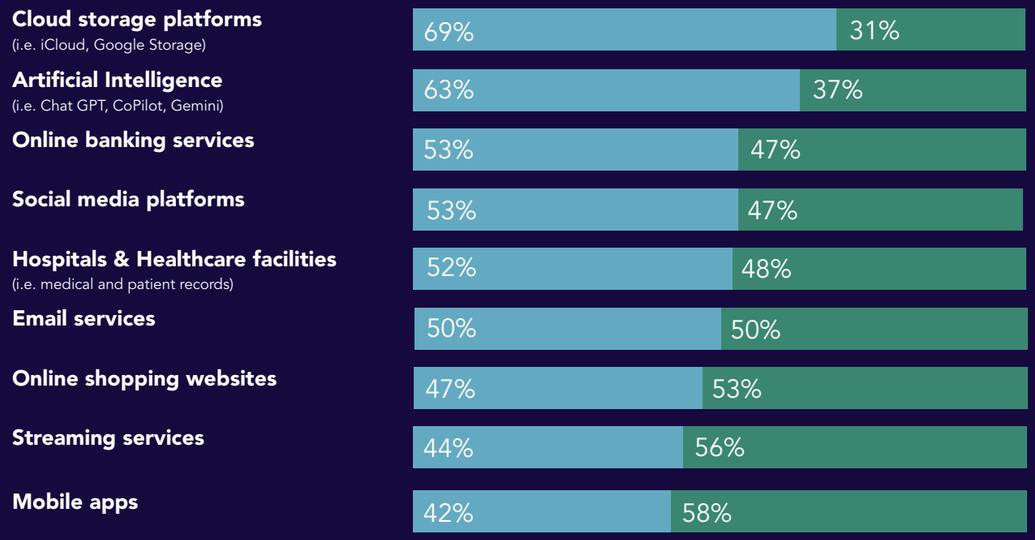
In the UK, public understanding of data centres is limited, despite heavy reliance on the digital services they support.

Almost 9 in 10 (89%) of UK adults say they know little or nothing about them. This is inclusive of a sizeable minority (14%) who have never heard of them at all. This lack of familiarity persists despite the fact that data centres underpin much of everyday digital life.



9 in 10 (89%) of the UK public claim to have **little to no knowledge** about data centres.

Knowledge of information stored and processed by data centres



Source: Data Centres Research 2026. Q1. How much do you know about data centres? Base: n=1,507 Q3. Based on what you currently know, which of the following store information in data centres? Base: Total excluding those who have not heard ofdata centres n=1,292.

Despite their strong reliance on digital services, people lack knowledge about the breadth of services which data centres support

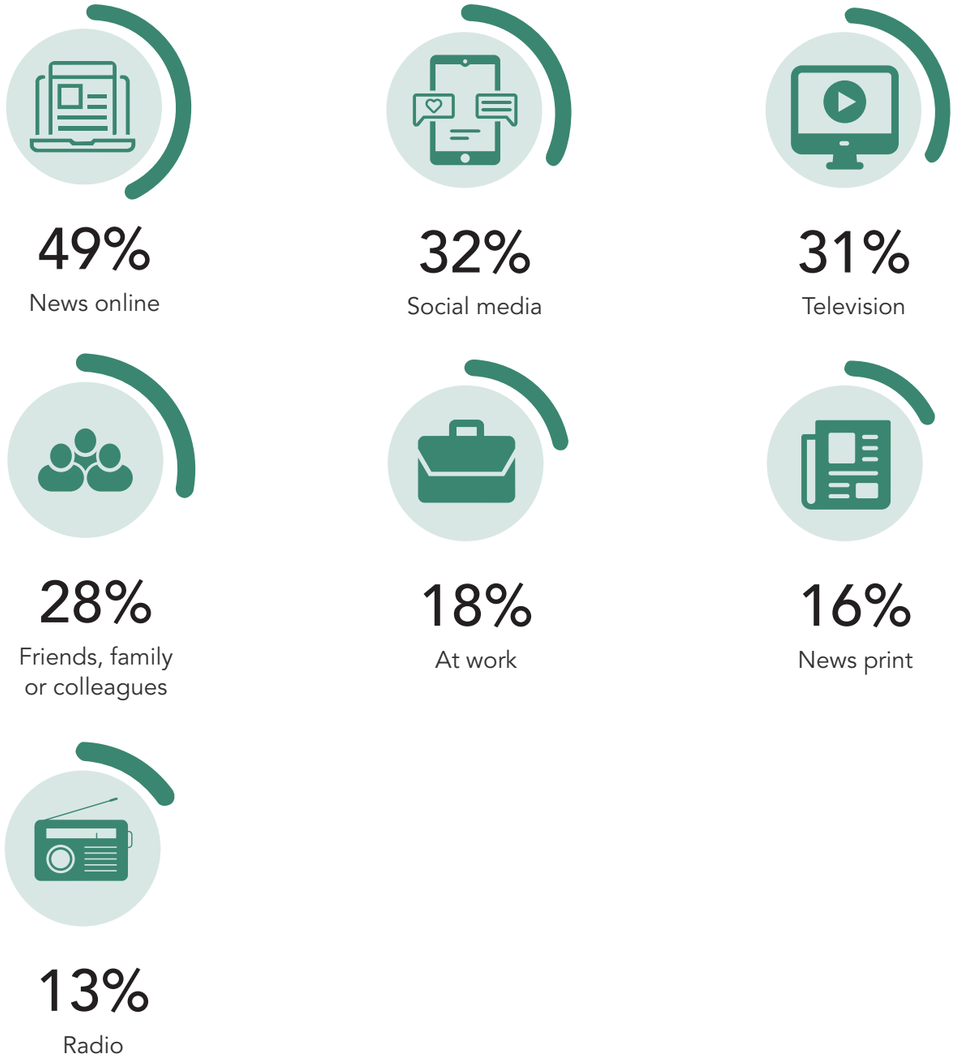
The public are routinely using digital services that rely on data centres. Online banking, email services, social media platforms, cloud storage, streaming services and online healthcare systems all depend on continuous data centre operation. Yet, as is apparent in mixed knowledge of the information stored and processed by data centres, these digital services are not universally associated with data centres.

When people do have some understanding, it is uneven. The strongest associations are with data centres, and **cloud storage** (69%) or **artificial intelligence** (63%), but awareness drops for other services. Only around half recognise that data centres support **online banking services** (53%), **social media platforms** (53%), **hospitals** (52%), **email services** (50%), **online shopping websites** (47%). Awareness is even less for **streaming services** (44%) and **mobile apps** (42%).

In addition to low awareness of the services data centres support, information about data centres is dispersed across many sources.

The UK public are encountering the topic of data centres through online news, television, social media, and conversations with friends or colleagues. This fragmented exposure helps explain why awareness is generally low.

Source information about data centres



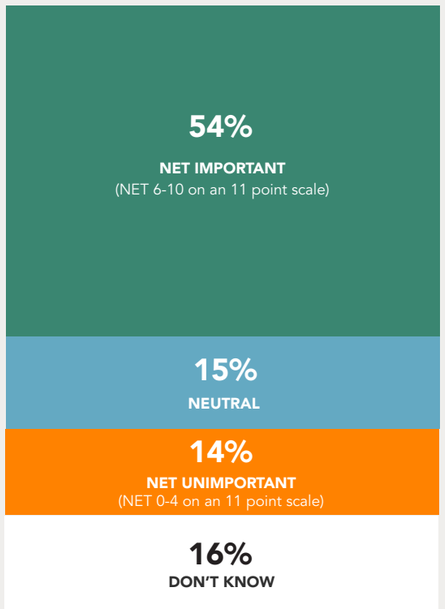
Source: Data Centres Research 2026. Q2. Where have you heard or read about data centres? Q3. Based on what you currently know, which of the following store information in data centres? Base: Total excluding those who have not heard of data centres n=1,292. Other and None are not shown.

Despite low knowledge, the public recognise the importance of building more data centres in the UK – but the picture of sentiment is not fully formed

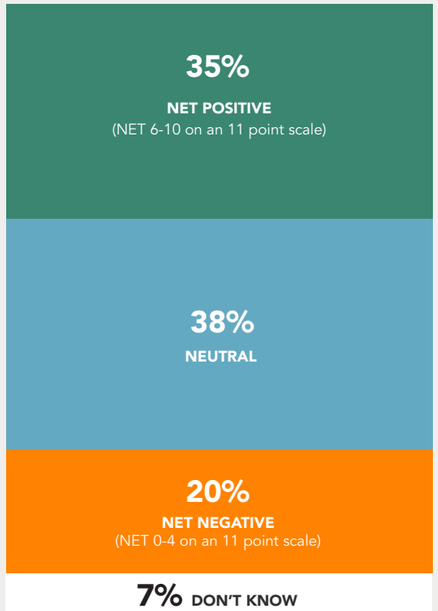
Data centres already convey a sense of national importance for over half of the UK public

Amongst those who have heard of data centres before, just over half (54%) say it is important for the UK to focus on building more data centres. This recognition could be driven by the current media environment: data centres are increasingly presented as underpinning AI growth, digital services and the UK's economic competitiveness. From SEC Newgate's experience conducting public research on infrastructure, this level of activity and energy in public discourse is relatively unique to data centres. In previous work we have conducted into renewable energy infrastructure, debate is less nationally prominent, and public engagement more limited than is currently seen for data centres.

Importance of the UK focusing on building more data centres



Sentiment towards data centres



But, despite their perceived importance, this is not filtering through to positive sentiment

Whilst the recognition of the importance of data centres exists, sentiment towards them is mixed. Around 1 in 3 (35%) of the UK public feel positively, 1 in 5 (20%) feel negatively, and the largest group say they feel neutral (38%). This suggests that attitudes towards data centres are not yet fixed. Whilst a small majority recognise that data centres play an important role in the UK, mixed sentiment indicates that the public feel uncertain about what the role of data centres really is, and what it means in practice.

In this context, neutrality does not signal indifference, but it does demonstrate the importance of how knowledge is built with the public to ensure sentiment is driven in the right direction.

Examples of recent headlines on data centres

> There might be good reasons for Britain to build data centres. Job creation isn't one of them.

FT FINANCIAL TIMES

> UK's first major AI data centre on collision course with net zero.

THE TIMES

> Prioritising AI data centres could block new homes, builders warn.

BBC

> UK is running out of water – but data centres refuse to say how much they use.

THE i PAPER

> Miliband warned that UK data centre boom risks guzzling gas.

The Telegraph

> Data centre pause 'reflects national challenges'.

BBC

> OpenAI pauses UK data centre deal over energy costs and regulation.

BBC

> Invisible data centres and capricious chips: is UK's AI bubble about to burst?

The Guardian

Source: Data Centres Research 2026. Q4. How positive or negative do you feel towards data centres? Q5. In your opinion, how important is it for the UK to focus on building more data centres? Base: Total excluding those who have not heard of data centres n=1,292.

The public have strong appetite for more information about data centres. And when knowledge-building information is provided, opinions solidify.

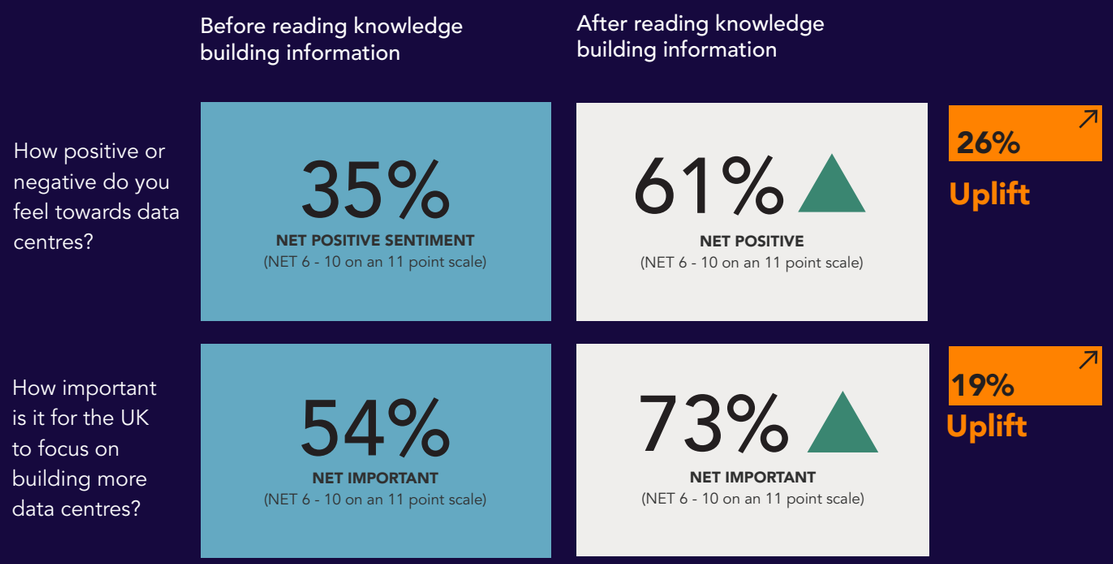
When the knowledge gap is addressed, sentiment towards data centres improves

Drawing upon our experience working in the sector, SEC Newgate created stimulus to show survey respondents. This stimulus was purposefully neutral and focused on explaining what data centres are used for, how they operate, and their positioning in the UK.

After reading this information, the proportion who feel positively towards data centres increases substantially (from 35% to 61%), and perceived importance of building more data centres also rises (from 54% to 73%). After being shown stimulus, there is also widespread support for the government's decision to classify data centres as 'Critical National Infrastructure', with 8 in 10 (79%) of the public saying they agree with this classification.

However, these shifts are not seen for everyone. Information primarily moves those who were neutral or positive before they saw the information. Those who already hold negative views are much more resistant to change. SEC Newgate's experience in public perception research surrounding infrastructure tells us that this is likely what we would call our 'Detractor' group whose opposition is so entrenched that knowledge building has little impact.

The findings suggest that providing educational information can help shape emerging views for the majority of the UK public, demonstrating that knowledge building will be a powerful asset as data centre development grows in the UK.



Source: Data Centres Research 2026.Q6. How much do you agree or disagree with the UK Government's decision to give data centres Critical National Infrastructure status? Q9. How positive or negative do you feel towards data centres after reading the information shown? Q10. How important do you think it is for the UK to focus on building more data centres after reading the information shown? Base: Total n=1,507.

Survey respondents were shown the following written stimulus about data centres

Data centres are buildings with servers that **store, process and manage our digital activity**.

Although we may not know it, most of us interact with data centres hundreds of times a day. For example, all of the following every day activities are all powered by data centres:

- **Making a bank transaction**
- **Sending an email**
- **Using social media**
- **Searching for something online**
- **Watching television on a streaming service**
- **Saving a document to the cloud**

In 2024, the government designated data centres as **'Critical National Infrastructure'**, giving them the same national security status as wind farms, nuclear power stations and airports. This decision was made by the government because data centres support essential services, including the NHS, financial systems, and, significantly, AI development, making their failure a severe risk to national security, the economy, and public safety.

As our world becomes more digital, it is expected that **more data centres will be needed in the future.** This means that the amount of resources needed to operate data centres will also increase.

Data centres **need to be in operation 24 hours a day**, meaning they **require constant power, cooling and management**. Data centres currently consume around **2.5% of the UK's electricity** and demand is **expected to increase by 5 times the amount** by 2030.

Access to power and cooling, as well as **internet connectivity**, are important considerations for where a data centre can be located. They also need to be located **close to areas of high demand**. That is why most data centres in the UK are located in or near cities like London or Manchester.

Newer **AI-enabled data centres can be more flexible**. The government has recently designated AI Growth Zones across the UK where it would like to see these types of data centres built, including in more rural areas.

While data centres **are modest employers** compared to the size of the building they occupy, they are seen as **key enablers of growth** for the digital economy and the sectors they support, like financial services, healthcare, technology and others.

The public cannot decouple perceptions of data centres from their attitudes on AI

The public's views on data centres map to wider attitudes towards Artificial Intelligence

Members of the public who feel positively about data centres are significantly more likely to say that AI should be cautiously embraced, rather than feared. Conversely, those who feel negatively about data centres are more likely to express deep concern about the growth of AI.

This alignment suggests that concerns about AI may intensify or reinforce concerns about data centres, particularly where expansion is seen to be driven by AI related demand. This serves as an important consideration for those organisations engaging the public or navigating public debate on data centres, where attitudes towards artificial intelligence are likely to influence how data centre development is received.

Attitudes towards artificial intelligence by data centre sentiment
(% shown is NET agree – 6 - 10 on an 11 point scale)

89%

of those who feel **NEGATIVE about data centres** are **deeply concerned about the growth of AI**

(vs. 67% of those who feel **POSITIVE** about data centres)

74%

of those who feel **POSITIVE about data centres** agree that AI should be **cautiously embraced rather than feared**

(vs. 39% of those who feel **NEGATIVE** about data centres)

Source: Data Centres Research 2026. Q9. How positive or negative do you feel towards data centres after reading the information shown? Q16. Below are some attitudes towards technology, data and AI. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Base: n=1,507.

The UK public are grappling with conflicting perceptions of data centres

They recognise the critical role data centres play in national growth and data security

Over 8 in 10 (83%) of the UK public agree that it is *critical that the UK has capacity to store and process data as the demand for data storage grows.* This is the strongest positive perception of data centres in this research, highlighting broad recognition of their role as essential national infrastructure.

This view is reinforced by wider perceptions of economic and technological importance. 7 in 10 agree that data centres *contribute positively to national economic growth,* and that data centres *support the essential growth of AI in the UK.*

“I think data centres are critical now as tech is increasing at a phenomenal rate especially with AI advancement.

“I believe that data centres are crucial for the development and growth of companies, especially AI now that it’s becoming so prominent in today’s society.

Source: Data Centres Research 2026. Q12. Below are some benefits of data centres. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Base: Total n=1,507.

Positive perceptions of data centres are shaped by political voting intention

Views on data centres differ sharply by political outlook, with Conservative and Labour voters* consistently more likely to accept their benefits. Across a range of measures, these groups demonstrate strong alignment in seeing data centres as critical national infrastructure and in recognising their contribution to the UK’s economic growth and digital capacity.

Beyond national factors, they are also more inclined to recognise practical benefits such as lower traffic generation compared with other types of large developments, opportunities for waste heat reuse, and the role data centres play in attracting high-value businesses.

Green Party voters hold significantly less positive perceptions about data centres, and are in less agreement about how essential they are, and their contribution to national growth. Only 56% agree that data centres support the essential growth of AI in the UK, and under half (45%) agree that data centres can positively contribute to local economic growth.

	TOTAL	CONSERVATIVES	LABOUR	LIBERAL DEMOCRATS	GREEN PARTY	REFORM
	n=1,507	n=177	n=231	n=133	n=223	n=259
As the demand for data storage grows, it is critical that we have capacity to store and process data here in the UK	83	90 ▲	88 ▲	90 ▲	74 ▼	86
Data centres can positively contribute to national economic growth	72	80 ▲	78 ▲	83 ▲	64 ▼	71
Data centres support the essential growth of Artificial Intelligence in the UK	70	78 ▲	77 ▲	79 ▲	56 ▼	74
Once up and running, data centres do not generate a lot of traffic compared to other buildings like warehouses	67	75 ▲	71	68	63	69
Waste heat from data centres can be used to power local homes and community buildings	64	75 ▲	65	71	63	64
Data centres offer highly skilled jobs	63	71 ▲	68	68	44 ▼	71 ▲
Data centres can positively contribute to local economic growth	60	69 ▲	68	67	45 ▼	62
Data centres attract other high value businesses and organisations to an area	56	67 ▲	66 ▲	59	45 ▼	59
A well-designed data centre is an attractive addition to the surrounding area	39	50 ▲	48 ▲	37	25 ▼	44

▲▼ Denotes significantly **higher** / **lower** than NET (TOTAL)

“Data centres are important and necessary for the nation’s development. It takes a lot of effort to build and maintain data centres.

“I believe data centres are essential since our lives become more and more digital. There are certain services you cannot access unless you use a smartphone and access to the internet.

Source: Data Centres Research 2026. Q12. Below are some benefits of data centres. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? *Q17. If there was a general election held tomorrow, which party would you vote for? Base: Total n=1,507, Conservative n=177, Labour n=231, Liberal Democrats n=133, Green Party n=223, Reform UK n=259.

The public are also weighing up the positives versus strong concerns about AI, energy usage and security risks

The most prominent concern relates to demand driven by AI. 3 in 4 (76%) feel that *data centres are expanding because of excessive demand from artificial intelligence in the UK*. This is in contradiction with a majority who feel that *data centres support the essential growth of Artificial Intelligence in the UK*. This contradiction points to a nuanced public response, indicating uncertainty about the impact of AI growth despite acknowledgement of its importance.

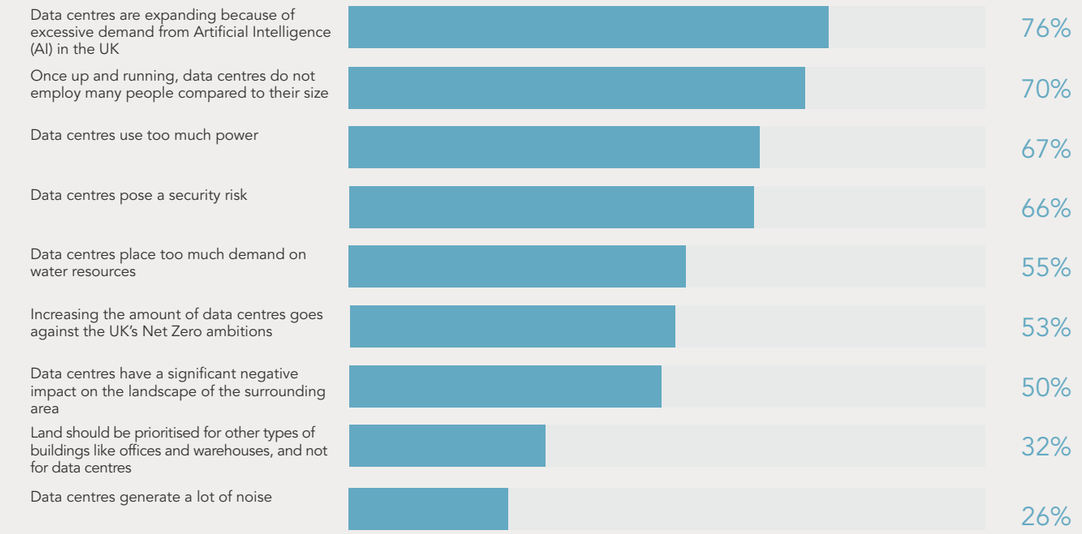
Economic perceptions are also more cautious at a local level. 7 in 10 (70%) feel that once operational, *data centres do not employ many people relative to their size*. Concerns about resources reinforce this unease, with 2 in 3 (67%) agreeing that data centres use too much power. The research highlights how energy use becomes a proxy for a wider debate about limits and priorities in a resource constrained system. Alongside these practical concerns sit issues of trust and security. Another 2 in 3 (66%) believe that *data centres pose a security risk*, demonstrating anxiety about data protection and cyber security.

These perceptions reflect a public that are conflicted about the reasons for data centre expansion and the trade-offs involved. Data centres are widely seen as essential to national growth and data security, yet their role as enablers of AI driven demand places them at the centre of a broader debate about their necessity.

Negative perceptions of data centres

How much do you agree that…

(NET 6 – 10 On an 11 point scale)



"[Data centres] themselves are not a bad thing, the increase in services that rely on them is. AI reliance is not a good future, the ecological cost is not worth the current convenience.

"They are necessary but unfortunately do not have the benefit of creating many job roles.

"The amount of power used is excessive and I think data centres should only be used for essential things like banking and not for expanding social media and AI.

"I'm not very happy as all data centres can leak data information to unscrupulous hackers.

Source: Data Centres Research 2026. Q11. Below are some perceived drawbacks of data centres. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Base: Total n=1,507

Negative perceptions are more prevalent among younger adults

Revealing an interesting disconnect amongst a digital native audience who tend to be higher users of the services data centres support, younger adults, particularly those aged 25 to 34, are more sceptical. Their concerns focus strongly on *water use* (63%), *environmental credibility* (59%) and *visual impact* (57%).

Green Party voters' environmental stance fuels their opposition to data centres

When exploring negative perceptions associated with data centres, the research demonstrates that *Green Party voters'** environmental stance fuels their opposition. 67% feel that i*ncreasing the amount of data centres goes against the UK's Net Zero ambitions, and 83% agree that they use too much power.* Contrastingly, Reform voters are significantly less concerned by environmental impacts of data centres.

The need for nuanced messaging

The differences identified across voting intention and age difference indicate that there is no single public view of data centres, and potentially no single narrative that will resonate across all audiences.

As data centres sit at the intersection of a range of issues including economic growth, environmental impact, and artificial intelligence, communication that acknowledges difference in opinion will be essential to navigating public debate and building acceptance.

	TOTAL	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+
	n=1,507	n=162	n=264	n=248	n=254	n=236	n=177	n=166
Data centres are expanding because of excessive demand from Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the UK	76	72	79	76	78	75	78	**69 ▼**
Once up and running, data centres do not employ many people compared to their size	70	**54 ▼**	67	71	68	**81 ▲**	76	75
Data centres use too much power	67	65	70	71	69	65	64	**60 ▼**
Data centres pose a security risk	66	**54 ▼**	**59 ▼**	60	**72 ▲**	67	**77 ▲**	70
Data centres place too much demand on water resources	55	62	**63 ▲**	54	58	**47 ▼**	54	49
Increasing the amount of data centres goes against the UK's Net Zero ambitions	53	58	**59 ▲**	54	54	51	49	**44 ▼**
Data centres have a significant negative impact on the landscape of the surrounding area	50	**59 ▲**	**57 ▲**	52	46	45	47	**39 ▼**
Land should be prioritised for other types of buildings like offices and warehouses, and not for data centres	32	**44 ▲**	**44 ▲**	33	31	**22 ▼**	**23 ▼**	**23 ▼**
Data centres generate a lot of noise	26	**41 ▲**	**37 ▲**	31	22	**21 ▼**	**14 ▼**	**14 ▼**

▲▼ Denotes significantly **higher** / **lower** than NET (TOTAL)

Source: Data Centres Research 2026. Q11. Below are some perceived drawbacks of data centres. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? *Q17.If there was a general election held tomorrow, which party would you vote for? Base: Total n=1,507, 18-24 n=162, 25-34 n=264, 35-44 n=248, 45-54 n=236, 65-74 n=177, 75+ n=166.

Tensions arise around local vs. national benefit – and strong division emerges when it comes to security risk, data usage, energy usage and net zero

6 in 10 of the UK public say they would find it *acceptable for more data centres to be built in their local area because they are essential to the UK's future growth*. However, this support is far from universal. 4 in 10 say they would *not find this acceptable*, even if the national benefits were clear. This split highlights a consistent tension between recognising national need and local impact.

The national benefit of data centres is not enough for all local communities

When asked to choose between competing priorities, over 6 in 10 place greater importance on local impacts and job creation than on national benefits of data centre development alone.

This indicates that while data centres are widely understood to support the broader economy, their limited role in local employment makes them harder to justify at a community level, particularly where developments are large-scale.

Acceptance of Development

6 in 10 (60%) would find it **acceptable** for more data centres to be built in their local area because they are essential for the UK's future growth.

4 in 10 (40%) would **not find it acceptable** for more data centres to be built in their local area even if they are essential for the UK's future growth.

Local impact

Local impacts should take priority when deciding whether to build data centres

National benefits should take priority when deciding whether to build data centres

Available land should be reserved for **employment uses** (i.e. manufacturing, warehouses etc.) **that create large numbers of local jobs**

Available land should be used for data centres **even if they create fewer local jobs** once operational

Source: Data Centres Research 2026. Q14. Below are some statements about data centres. For each pair, please select the statement that most represents your personal view. Base: n=1,507.

The UK public are deeply conflicted about whether data centres should or should not be prioritised in the UK

Opinion is split on whether data centre expansion should be limited because of energy demand or net zero commitments, reflecting uncertainty about how digital infrastructure fits within a constrained energy system. Views are similarly divided on whether the solution should lie in expanding infrastructure to meet growing demand, or in individuals reducing their own data usage to limit the need for further development.

These findings demonstrate that where support exists, it is often conditional, shaped by how convincingly national benefit is balanced against perceived impacts. This helps explain why data centres can be broadly accepted in principle as essential to growth, yet contested in practice when specific developments are proposed.

Security Risk

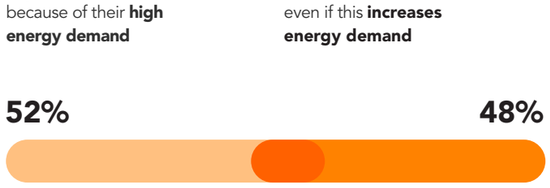
The **potential security risks** associated with data centres mean **development should be restricted** in the UK

The importance of having secure and reliable data storage based in the UK means data centre **development should not be restricted**

Energy Usage

The UK should **limit the expansion of data centres** because of their **high energy demand**

The UK should **expand the development of data centres**, even if this **increases energy demand**



Data Usage

Individuals should reduce their data usage so that less data centres need to be built in the UK

Individuals should not have to reduce their data usage even if this means building more data centres in the UK

The UK should prioritise reducing overall data usage to reduce the need for more data centres

The UK should prioritise building more data centres to support increasing levels of data usage

Net Zero

Achieving the **UK's Net Zero targets is more important** than increasing the number of data centres

Increasing the number of data centres is important, even if it means us not achieving our Net Zero targets

The view from local councillors

In this year's National Planning Barometer – SEC Newgate's annual national research with councillors on planning committees – the topic of data centres was explored with key planning decision makers for the first time.

Methodology

A bespoke section dedicated to data centres was answered by 483 planning committee councillors.

This data centres section was a part of a wider piece of research with 532 planning committee councillors. Fieldwork took place between 19th January and 11th February 2026, and data was weighted to be proportionate to the number of councillors in England by region.

Scan the QR code to download the National Planning Barometer 2026

The findings in summary…

Councillors' views on data centres reflect a careful balancing act rather than outright support or opposition

While a strong majority recognise the national importance of data centres, concerns remain prominent around employment capability, power usage and water demand, particularly in areas where local infrastructure is already under strain.

Concerns about data centres are most pronounced among Green Party councillors, mirroring patterns seen in the public research

For Green Party councillors, alignment with net zero ambitions and pressure on local resources play a particularly central role in shaping perceptions of data centres.

As demand for data centre capacity grows, planning outcomes will be influenced by how clearly the national need is articulated – balanced with credible, locally grounded explanations of the impact and benefits of data centres

The National Planning Barometer research reveals that the same public knowledge gap is observed among those responsible for assessing and determining data centre planning applications.

In this context, familiarity and clarity are likely to be influential factors in how future data centre proposals are received and ultimately determined.

Mirroring the general public, councillors who sit on planning committees lack familiarity with data centres

A nascent application type: familiarity of data centres as a non-office employment application type is low amongst councillors, mirroring the UK public's low knowledge

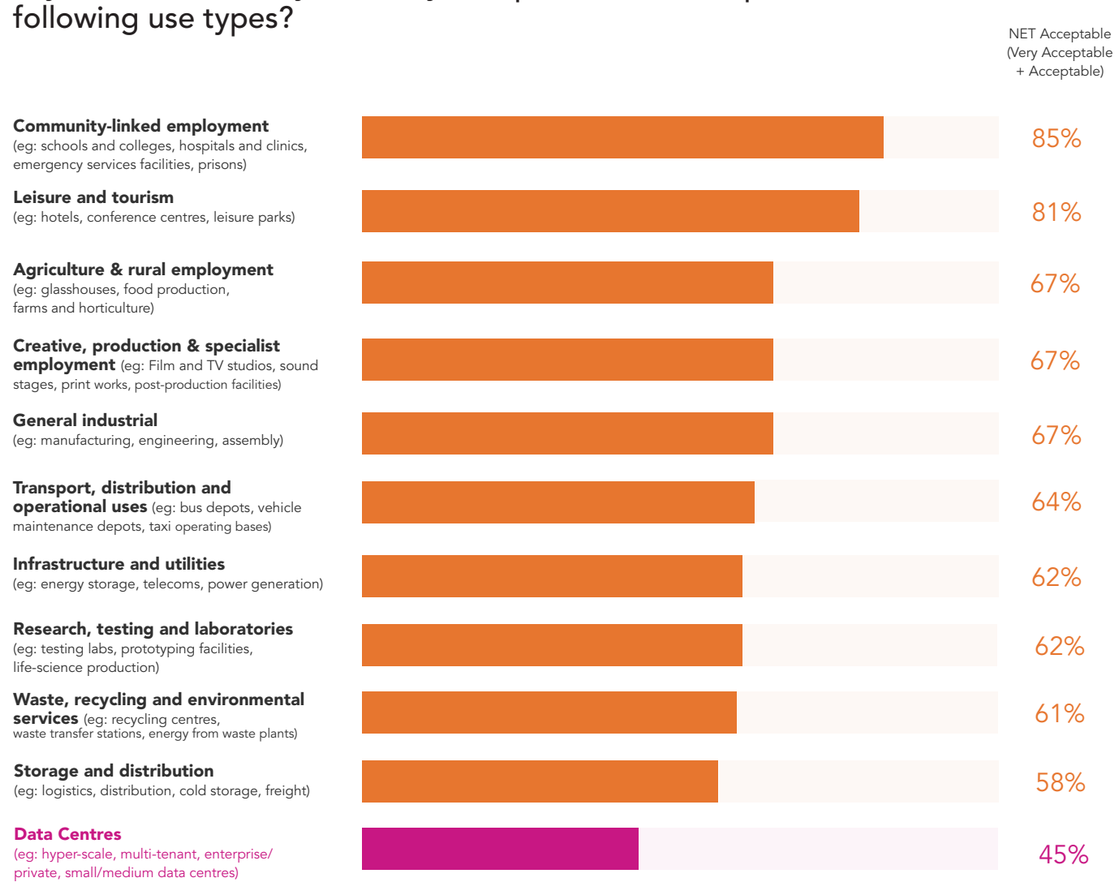
Amongst planning committee councillors, familiarity with data centre planning applications is low. Only around 1 in 5 say they are familiar with them. This mirrors the broader picture seen among the UK public, where low awareness and limited understanding coexist with high reliance on data centre enabled services. In both cases, data centres are recognised as significant, but remain poorly understood in practice.

Mirroring their lower familiarity, when considering *land designated for non-office employment use*, acceptance of use types is lowest for data centres with under half of councillors saying they would find it acceptable. Where councillors feel more familiar with data centre applications, acceptance increases markedly, for example, higher acceptance is seen for *community linked employment*, closely followed by *leisure centres*. This indicates that knowledge plays an important role at the point of decision making, even if it does not remove all concern.

Only 22%

of planning committee councillors are familiar with data centres as an application type on non-office employment use land

When considering land designated for 'non-office employment use' in your local authority area, in your opinion, how acceptable are the following use types?



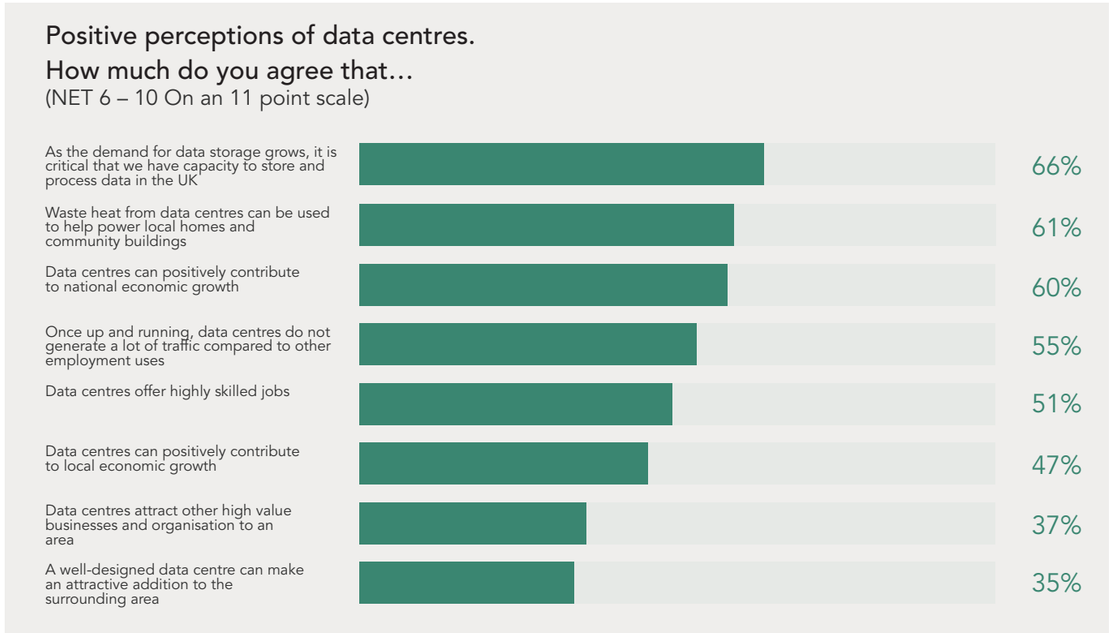
Source National Planning Barometer. Q19. When considering land designated for 'non-office employment use' in your local authority area, in your opinion, how acceptable are the following use types? Base: 2026 n=532.

Compared to the broader public, councillors take a slightly more pragmatic view of the benefits of data centres

Councillors' positive perceptions are slightly more muted than the public's, suggesting that data centres are less of an emotive issue for this stakeholder group. This may be grounded in their experience of assessing development proposals, approaching the evaluation of data centres through a more practical, planning lens.

However, many councillors recognise the national benefits associated with data centres, with 2 in 3 agreeing *as the demand for data storage grows, it is critical that we have capacity in the UK*.

Certain benefits resonate particularly strongly with planning committee councillors. 6 in 10 agree that *waste heat from data centres can be used to help power local homes and community buildings*, highlighting the appeal of benefits that link national infrastructure to tangible local benefit. A similar proportion also agree *that data centres can contribute positively to national economic growth*, reinforcing the public viewpoint.

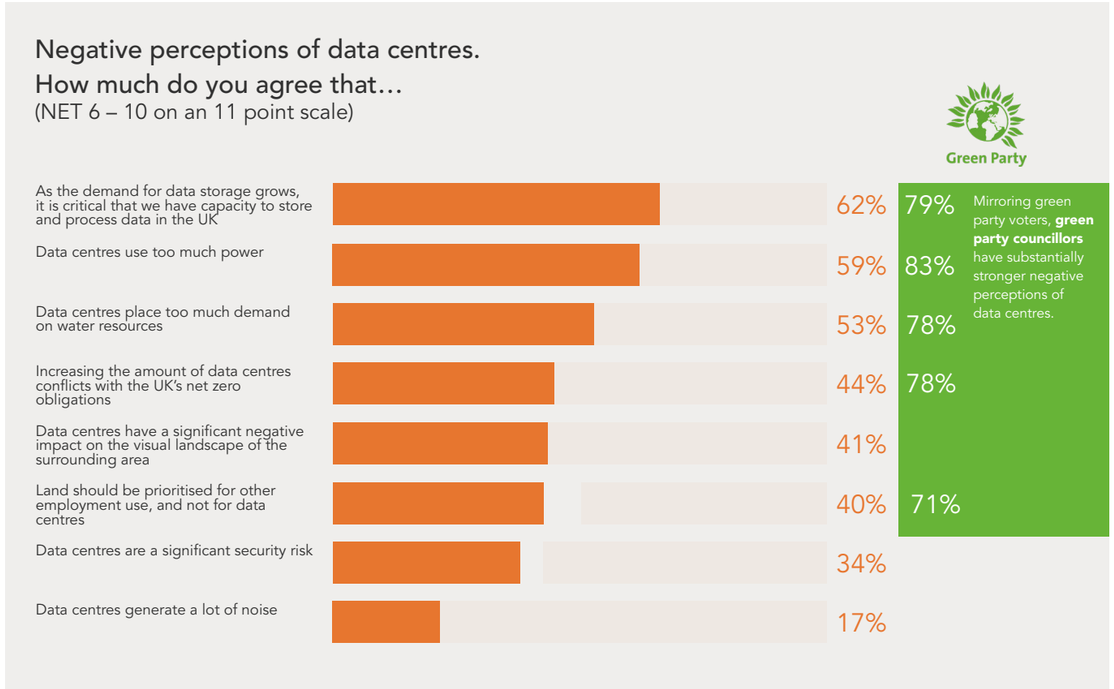


Perceptions indicate that councillors tend to view data centres through a functional and practical lens. While concerns on resources and local infrastructure remain important, arguments for national growth and clearly articulated local benefits appear to play a meaningful role in shaping how data centre proposals may be assessed at the decision-making stage.

Source National Planning Barometer. Q20. The following list details some perceived benefits of data centre development. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about data centres? Base: 2026 respondents who answered all Data Centres questions (Q18, Q19, Q20 AND Q21) n=483.

However, negative perceptions exist around employment, power usage and water demand

Equally for councillors, data centre concerns remain prominent, with top issues being their limited employment capability, as well as excessive power and water usage. Green Party councillors are particularly sceptical about alignment with Net Zero ambitions, but we see that across parties there is consistent unease about the pressure data centres may place on local infrastructure, energy and water resources, especially in areas where capacity is already constrained.



Source National Planning Barometer. Q20. The following list details some perceived drawbacks of data centre development. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about data centres? Base: 2026 respondents who answered all Data Centres questions (Q18, Q19, Q20 AND Q21) n=483.

Powering progress: Building understanding, reputation and consent for data centres

Data centres are hot property. Sitting at the heart of the government's digital growth agenda, data centres have been designated Critical National Infrastructure and, from early 2026, brought within the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) regime.

The expansion of data centre capacity is essential to the UK's ambition to drive economic growth through digital transformation, artificial intelligence and technological leadership. Yet delivery is constrained by a range of barriers, including a limited supply of suitable sites, grid capacity challenges and growing public concern about the impact of data centres on local communities and the environment. These pressures are not only slowing development but also creating a wider reputational risk for the sector.

The good news is that the more the public learn about data centres – what they do, why they are needed and the benefits they bring – the more likely they are to feel positively towards them. As SEC Newgate's 'Does Not Compute' report finds, there is a significant knowledge gap in the UK when it comes to data centres, creating an opportunity for the sector to raise awareness, address misconceptions and make a stronger case for this critical national infrastructure.

SEC Newgate is ideally placed to support data centre developers, operators and end users in bridging this gap and building public understanding. We bring deep experience across the sector, working with leading organisations to raise profile, enhance reputation and deliver positive outcomes.

Together, our specialists have supported some of the UK's largest data centre developments, drawing on integrated expertise across planning, public affairs, research, digital, design, communications and corporate reputation – ensuring projects are set up for success.

Strategy & Corporate Communications

SEC Newgate's Strategy & Corporate Communications team helps clients build, protect and enhance their reputation in a sector facing growing scrutiny.

Public Affairs & Government Relations

Our Public Affairs & Government Relations specialists engage policymakers, regulators and officials as planning and infrastructure policy evolves to support the rapid growth of digital infrastructure.

Planning & Engagement

Our Planning & Engagement team supports clients through an increasingly complex consenting landscape, helping projects secure approval, manage risk and build trust at both national and local levels.

With data centre projects having entered the NSIP regime, our team brings deep expertise in nationally and internationally significant infrastructure. We help shape a clear and credible narrative around the role data centres play in national resilience, economic competitiveness and future-proofing the UK's infrastructure.

While consenting routes may increasingly be determined nationally, scrutiny remains firmly local. We support data centre developments at every stage of planning and delivery, helping clients understand local sentiment, engage early and communicate clearly about how data centres operate and the benefits they deliver, including investment and economic value. Our insight-led consultation and engagement programmes strengthen the case for consent, support examination and help maintain community confidence through construction and operation.

The opportunity in the UK is clear: more data centres are needed, and quickly. But as individual projects come forward the challenge is one that is not new - how to make building critical infrastructure in communities acceptable.

SEC Newgate can help smooth that process and build and enhance reputations in the sector at a local, national and international level.

BEST PLACES TO WORK
2023/2024/2025/2026
THE SUNDAY TIMES

CONSULTANCY CAMPAIGN OF THE YEAR
PRCA PUBLIC AFFAIRS AWARDS 2026

BEST ADVOCACY CAMPAIGN
PUBLIC SECTOR
PURPOSE AWARDS 2026

CONSULTANCY OF THE YEAR
EDIE NET-ZERO AWARDS 2026
SHORTLISTED

BEST PRO-ACTIVE LOBBYING CAMPAIGN ON AN ISSUE OR CAUSE
INCOMMS' CORPORATE AFFAIRS AWARDS 2026
SHORTLISTED

ADVISOR OF THE YEAR
THE VARIETY PROPS AWARDS 2025

RESEARCH INSTITUTE OF THE YEAR
EDIE NET-ZERO AWARDS 2025
SHORTLISTED

GLOBAL AGENCY OF THE YEAR
PROVOKE MEDIA GLOBAL SABRE AWARDS 2023 & 2025

PUBLIC AFFAIRS CONSULTANCY OF THE YEAR
PROVOKE MEDIA EMEA AWARDS 2024

AGENCY OF THE YEAR EMEA
(CORPORATE/FINANCIAL)
PROVOKE MEDIA AWARDS 2023

COMMUNICATIONS AGENCY OF THE YEAR
EDIE NET-ZERO AWARDS 2023

PLANNING CAMPAIGN OF THE YEAR
PRCA PUBLIC AFFAIRS AWARDS 2020

Contact us

If you have any questions about our research, or how it might impact your business, please contact:

Leyla Hart-Svensson – MD, Insight & Intelligence
leyla.hartsvensson@secnewgate.co.uk

Phil Briscoe – Senior Counsel
phil.briscoe@secnewgate.co.uk

Allister Hayman – Director
allister.hayman@secnewgate.co.uk

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