DIGITAL POLICY ALLIANCE®

THE STATE OF AI PRACTICE IN THE UK 2025

A Digital Policy Alliance Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The **Digital Leaders AIWeek** event, held from 13–24 October 2025, can be seen as the UK's most significant annual indicator of AI professional engagement and maturity, generating 93,300 bookings across 197 talks. When combined with the **Digital Leaders AI100 Awards**, receiving over 8,300 votes across 415 nominations, an important perspective of AI adoption in the UK professional community in 2025 is presented.

The data from these activities highlights the UK AI community's strategic focus on several areas of AI adoption, headed by productivity & efficiency, user experience, and workforce & skills. The data also reveals intensive participation in upskilling in AI across both the public and private sectors.

Augmented by comparative analysis from recent AI surveys from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Local Government Association (LGA), and several global industry reports (State of AI Report 2025, McKinsey State of AI in 2025, Microsoft Work Trends Index), the UK's state of practice is revealed to be in a crucial transition phase. While UK professionals report high digital confidence and global users confirm productivity gains, the key obstacle is the AI implementation gap. This gap is defined by a critical need for practical, actionable guidance and the urgent establishment of enterprise-wide governance, especially given that global enterprises often lack visibility and control over up to 80% of AI applications in use, leading to widespread concerns over ungoverned AI use, often referred to as "Shadow AI".

The UK's strategic direction has been clearly set out by the UK government based on an industrial push, aiming for a substantial GDP boost through accelerated investment and development. The indication from this data and addition feedback received from Digital Leaders AIWeek participants is that achieving this ambition requires building additional robust, compliant, and focused operational structures to guide effective AI adoption. Their expectations for 2026 centre on delivering continuous, community-led engagement, providing practical tools to execute implementation strategies, and establishing centralized governance to mitigate escalating risks.

INTRODUCTION

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a fundamental technology shaping the future of global economic activity and public service delivery. Adoption of AI across public and private sector organizations presents a pivotal challenge and opportunity for the United Kingdom. Increasing the rate of growth of economic productivity is one of the greatest policy challenges facing the UK today, and AI holds the promise of raising labour productivity and enabling the UK to cope with population ageing and rising public spending.

For the UK specifically, AI is framed by the UK government and business leaders as central to national economic revival, with the government committing to an "industrial push" through the AI Opportunities Action Plan, originally released in January 2025 and updated in November 2025. This outlines the potential, if AI is fully embraced, to boost productivity by as much as 1.5 percentage points a year, worth up to an average £47 billion to the UK each year over a decade.

Despite such ambitious goals and strong support, truly effective AI deployment demands moving past hype and politics to face the real complexities of implementation. A realistic assessment of the state of AI adoption and use in 2025 is essential to establish levels of confidence and support for these aims, and to determine the most significant hurdles to be addressed in delivering on these aspirations.

To meet this need, this report utilizes the rich, data-driven insights from the 10-day Digital Leaders AIWeek event in October 2025 to establish a grounded, realistic perspective on state of AI in the UK in 2025. With its substantial participation from across the UK, Digital Leaders AIWeek highlighted the interests and concerns of senior leaders, and reflected the current focus of thousands of UK professionals.

What is revealed is that the UK finds itself in a crucial transition phase defined by intensive focus on delivering value and engaging in strategic learning (evidenced by highest interest in the “Productivity & Efficiency”, “User Experience”, and “Workforce & AI Skills” themes) and a concern for ensuring essential governance and ethical compliance (high attendance for topics in “Regulation & Compliance”).

A successful path to operational maturity in 2026 depends on addressing these practical obstacles: Bridging the value deliver and knowledge gap with actionable, contextualized guidance; and establishing the robust governance frameworks necessary to transform high national aspirations into secure, scalable, and value-generating AI integration across the UK economy.

AI WEEK 2025 – THE UK'S LEARNING BLUEPRINT

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The Digital Leaders AIWeek event, the 8th edition of the UK's biggest online exchange of digital leadership experiences, took place over ten days in October 2025 and provides a high-fidelity snapshot of the UK's professional engagement with AI. The scale of the event (drawing 93,300 bookings across 197 talks) underscores the national appetite for comprehensive AI knowledge exchange, learning, and practical insight.

1.1 Scale, Reach, and Seniority

The audience at Digital Leaders AIWeek demonstrated remarkable seniority, with over a third of attendees occupying senior positions consisting of C-Suite executives and Senior Management Team members who are directly shaping their organisations' AI strategies. The remaining participants comprised middle management and professional or technical staff, ensuring a broad cross-section of perspectives from those implementing AI on the ground.

The event also achieved balanced representation across the UK. Participation was roughly evenly split by gender, and all UK regions were well represented, from the South East through to Scotland and Wales. This geographic spread confirms that AI engagement is not confined to London or traditional technology hubs but reflects a genuinely national conversation. Full demographic breakdowns are provided in Appendix A.

1.2 Sectoral Priorities: Public Sector Leads the Learning Curve

Across the event, nearly 2,000 organisations were represented, spanning public, private, charity, and academic sectors. The Public Sector constituted the largest audience segment, with attendees evenly distributed across central government, local government, and other public institutions. This high level of engagement signals that national departments and local councils are positioning themselves as key drivers of AI learning, with strong interest in talks addressing themes such as agentic AI's impact in the public sector and learning from UK public sector teams already using AI.

Private sector participation was also substantial, with nearly half of private sector attendees coming from Small-Medium Enterprises (SMEs). This suggests that AI adoption is not solely the domain of large corporations. Smaller organisations are equally invested in understanding how to leverage AI technologies.

1.3 Contrasting Learning with Innovation

A comparison between Digital Leaders AIWeek attendance and the Digital Leaders AI100 Award nominations reveals an important pattern in the UK's current state of AI practice. While the public sector dominated Digital Leaders AIWeek registrations (focused on learning and knowledge sharing), the AI100 awards saw a clear majority of nominations from within the private sector.

This disparity suggests a key observation: Private sector individuals are more commonly recognised for driving leadership in the creation and adoption of AI in the UK, while the public sector is currently focused on knowledge acquisition and building the foundations for responsible AI delivery.

Given this pattern, significant efforts will be required during this critical phase of UK AI adoption to align the private and public sectors by building appropriate bridges between these communities, establishing policies and governance frameworks that balance innovation with necessary safeguards, and creating networks which support knowledge transfer amongst leaders, practitioners, and decision makers.

1.4 Key UK Professional Priorities

The topics that attracted the highest registration numbers reveal the functional priorities of UK AI professionals. These centre squarely on tangible, immediate operational benefits and responsible deployment:

1. **Productivity & Efficiency** emerged as the dominant concern, with nearly four in five attendees selecting at least one talk on this theme. The most popular individual talk of the week focused on applying agentic AI in the public sector.

2. **User Experience** attracted similarly high interest, indicating concern for ensuring AI systems are accessible and deliver positive outcomes. The talk on AI for accessibility and usability was among the best attended.

3. **Workforce & AI Skills** reflected recognition of the necessary investment in upskilling and training. Popular sessions covered both redefining existing roles and establishing new AI-specific positions.

4. **Regulation & Compliance** underscored the strategic importance of understanding risks and navigating complex legal and ethical considerations. These talks drew strong attendance from both public and private sector participants.

Notably, topics related to broader responsible AI adoption themes such as "AI for Good", "Digital Inclusion", and "Net Zero" attracted relatively lower registrations. This may reflect the current UK urgency to convert AI aspirations into delivery reality, though it raises important questions about whether the UK is achieving an appropriate balance to ensure AI is adopted responsibly and for the benefit of all. Full topic registration data is provided in Appendix A.

GLOBAL CONTEXT AND THE GREAT PRODUCTIVITY ENGINE

The emphasis at Digital Leaders AIWeek on the UK's focus to understand how to use AI to drive productivity is not isolated; it is mirrored and validated by high-quality UK and international surveys, positioning the UK as one of the leaders in understanding how to adopt AI at scale and part of the vanguard leveraging generative AI for efficiency gains.

2.1 Productivity Gains and Commercial Scaling

The Digital Leaders AIWeek registrations indicate that the UK's top priority, Productivity & Efficiency, aligns with global findings. For example, in Summer 2025, stateof.ai ran a substantial survey of AI usage habits with 1,183 participants, over 90% of whom were highly educated adult professionals at startup companies split equally between the US, the UK and Europe. It highlighted 3 areas:

- **Measured Impact:** 92% of respondents reported increased productivity gains from using generative AI services. Furthermore, 47% felt a significantly increased productivity gain.
- **Cost Correlation:** The stateof.ai survey revealed that users on paid AI plans reported significantly higher gains (85% reporting a significant boost) than those on free plans (15%). This underscores the commercial maturation of AI services globally (including the UK), where professionals must invest in professional plans to realize meaningful, reliable gains.
- **High Paid Adoption:** Amongst those with paid AI services, 56% of respondents paid more than $21 per month for AI services, suggesting high usage of team or professional plans for increased rate limits and greater intelligence.

The stateof.ai survey found that widespread AI adoption is driven by a handful of key use cases, including content generation, software development, information research, and data analysis, reinforcing the core areas of interest articulated by the Digital Leaders AIWeek audience.

2.2 Technology and Procurement Patterns

Additional surveys of AI use in 2025 also show a preference for established AI service providers. This data underscores the dominant market reality facing UK adopters today. In these surveys, ChatGPT is the undisputed leader in enterprise use, outpacing competitors by significant margins. Other major tools include Cursor, Google Gemini, Perplexity, and Claude.

- **Procurement Method:** Globally, AI is primarily procured through APIs (followed by fine-tuning and building from scratch), highlighting that most UK organizations rely on third-party cloud-hosted models (such as OpenAI and Anthropic), rather than complex, in-house infrastructure. This reliance indicates potential issues regarding data governance and model sovereignty.

- **Agentic AI Trend:** Strong interest in Agentic AI was seen at Digital Leaders AIWeek with the leading talk addressing the UK public sector's opportunity with agentic AI. This observation is aligned with a global AI focus on operational efficiency for automating common business processes. Researchers have commented that most frequently the agent workflows targeted by AI are narrow and repetitive, increasing the interest in Small Language Models (SLMs) as being sufficient for many of these situations. Although they can bring important security and privacy concerns, SLMs can be significantly cheaper (10–30x less cost), and faster to run than large models in such scenarios. This technical insight offers a pathway for UK organizations (particularly resource-constrained local councils, charity organizations, and SMEs) to deploy effective, specialized agents using an SLM-first, heterogeneous architecture.

THE GOVERNANCE GAP AND IMPLEMENTATION MATURITY

Overall, we find that the state of AI practice in the UK is defined by a dichotomy: High strategic awareness juxtaposed with persistent organizational and technical barriers to safe scaling. The core challenge for UK organizations is addressing this implementation gap to move from strategic understanding to secure, scalable deployment. This gap is compounded by severe organizational, governance, and data readiness issues, both locally and globally.

3.1 The Enterprise Governance Crisis

Following on from the popularity of talks on how to gain value from AI adoption, the high interest in Regulation & Compliance (69%) and Bias & Ethics (67%) at Digital Leaders AIWeek reflects a necessary focus on responsible AI adoption. Publication of guidelines in the UK (such as the "AI Cyber Security Code of Practice") and global survey data contextualizes and adds depth to this concern:

- **Shadow AI:** Enterprise analysis shows that IT and security teams often have visibility and control over less than 20% of the AI applications in use. This unchecked adoption of unauthorized tools by employees ("Shadow AI") brings procurement concerns and exposes organizations to compliance risks and unauthorized data exposure. It amplifies the challenges organizations face governing AI when failing to keep pace with rapid employee AI tool adoption.
- **Governance Prioritization:** More broadly, AI governance is rapidly becoming a C-Suite priority, as seen in the McKinsey 2025 survey. Here, the largest share of respondents anticipate AI affecting the whole workforce, but especially in risk, legal, and compliance functions. Furthermore, that survey revealed that AI compliance specialists are among the most in-demand new roles with over a third of large organizations seeking to recruit them).

3.2 Implementation Barriers in the UK Public Sector

One of the most engaged sectors in applying AI is local government. A survey of English councils from February 2025 revealed that they are quickly moving through experimentation and early AI adoption phases but still face several structural barriers to scale AI use. According to the Local Government Association's AI survey, the proportion of councils not using or exploring AI decreased significantly (from 15% to 5%), and most (83%) have adopted or are exploring generative AI. However, the survey particularly highlighted AI procurement as a significant challenge:

- **Procurement Hurdles:** Two-thirds of respondents (66%) identified "project scoping" (understanding where AI can add value) as a moderate or significant barrier to procurement. Other major barriers included "evaluation" (understanding how to evaluate solutions, 58%) and "market intelligence" (understanding who is a trusted partner, 57%).

- **Investment Focus:** Almost half of the UK's local councils are increasing spending on AI applications, and up to a third on frameworks, guidance and governance. Similarly, a third are spending more to improve data foundations in preparation for scaling AI adoption. This investment strategy indicates a recognition of the need for foundational readiness and policy oversight as essential first steps to scaling AI adoption.

3.3 Data Maturity and the Need for Public Support

Lack of underlying data quality and maturity was a key topic that surfaced in several of the Digital Leaders AIWeek talks. It is a concern that is also highlighted in broader studies. The OECD Survey of AI-Adopting Enterprises (conducted in 2022-23 across G7 countries, including the UK) provides valuable long-term insights into the challenges faced by active AI users in the key domains of manufacturing and ICT sectors. These active AI users reported significant needs for public support.

- **Data Quality:** Interviewees consistently reported problems with publicly sourced data, citing discrepancies, conflicting information, missing data, and lacking comprehensive documentation. Some noted that public data was of lower quality than private sources.
- **Demand for Information Services:** Despite being advanced users, more than three quarters of G7 enterprises judged that having more information on current or forthcoming regulations around data or AI or on expected ROI in AI would be either “helpful” or “very helpful”. This strong demand confirms that practical, reliable information (especially on economic impact and legal compliance) is highly sought after, even by those deep into the adoption cycle. This confirms the Digital Leaders AIWeek audience’s requests for more practical applications and real-world case studies.

Furthermore, the OECD survey found that the perceived helpfulness of public support services was generally high. Intriguingly, there was an inverse correlation: enterprises that used AI more intensively (i.e., adopted a greater number of applications) were more likely to rate public support services as "helpful" (indicated by statistically significant negative coefficients on the ‘Number of AI uses’ vs. perceived helpfulness scores). This suggests that as organizations advance, they encounter a wider variety of implementation challenges, driving them back to seeking external, public support. Such data offers important insights for the UK as it seeks to further align public and private sectors.

THE TECHNICAL FRONTIER AND UK STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

The UK's long-term economic ambition is intertwined with its ability to leverage frontier AI technologies. The technical discussions at Digital Leaders AIWeek reflect an awareness of global competitive dynamics, particularly in reasoning and advanced automation. The enthusiasm for advanced automation (Agentic AI) at Digital Leaders AIWeek aligns with rapid global technical progress, placing the UK firmly in the global technology race, backed by its acknowledge research excellence and explicit industrial strategy.

4.1 Reasoning and Advanced Models

Throughout 2025, progress in AI technology have been rapid and profound. While many key AI advances have been made, the technical frontier in 2025 was dominated by "reasoning" models and the emergence of practically useful agentic systems:

- **Global Benchmarks:** The core of the 2025 research race centred on "reasoning" models. Labs such as OpenAI and DeepSeek traded leads by implementing "think-then-answer" methods. A series of product releases from DeepSeek and OpenAI pushed AI benchmarks forward and highlighted the intense political pressure for leadership in frontier AI models.
- **API Dominance vs. Open Source:** Despite China setting the pace in the open-weight community with models like Qwen, OpenAI models still remain at the frontier of intelligence across independent performance benchmarks. The strong reliance on APIs for procurement means UK enterprise productivity is currently tightly linked to the performance and cost-effectiveness of these closed frontier models (GPT-5, Claude, Gemini). UK leaders will require continued investigations to enhance understanding and track developments in this space.

The intensifying race for AI dominance has generated significant concern across UK government, industry, and civil society. The concentration of cutting-edge AI capabilities outside of the UK raises fundamental questions about national security and strategic autonomy. In many cases, UK organisations find themselves dependent on AI infrastructure they neither control nor fully understand, with critical decisions about data handling and service continuity resting with overseas entities. UK policymakers are grappling with an uncomfortable balance between driving innovation and growth in the UK economy while recognising that core elements of many AI systems are developed and governed beyond its jurisdiction, potentially compromising the UK's ability to maintain an independent strategic position.

4.2 UK Policy and the Industrial Push

The UK government's shift to an "industrial push" (as highlighted in the "AI Opportunities Action Plan") aims to counter the immense global power imbalance in compute infrastructure and hardware development that power AI advances:

- **US Dominance:** As reported in the stateof.ai analysis, US-based companies control approximately 75% of global AI supercomputer capacity. Furthermore, the concentration of compute power has shifted from public to private hands, with companies now controlling 80% of AI supercomputers (up from 40% in 2019). Such US dominance adds risk to the UK's reliance on such infrastructure.
- **UK Strategy:** The UK plan is to prioritize investment to increase compute capacity by 20x by 2030. Its approach to implement light-touch regulation reflects an effort to maintain competitiveness and support the potential economic boom this brings. Aligned with a flexible AI governance approach, such a proactive industrial stance aims to provide the foundational infrastructure required to support the massive productivity gains sought by the UK professional audience.

However, this it has been acknowledged that the UK's ambitious industrial strategy faces significant headwinds. The 20x compute expansion target requires not only substantial capital investment but also addressing critical dependencies in the semiconductor supply chain, where the UK has limited domestic capability. Additionally, energy infrastructure presents another constraint, as AI data centres demand considerable power capacity that current grid planning may struggle to accommodate.

Moreover, the light-touch regulatory approach, while designed to attract investment and foster innovation, must navigate the tension between competitive positioning and the growing international consensus around AI safety frameworks. Feedback from recent studies indicates that the UK government will need to demonstrate that its industrial ambitions can be reconciled with responsible AI development if it is to secure the public trust and international partnerships essential for long-term success.

EXPECTATIONS FOR 2026 – TOWARDS OPERATIONAL MATURITY

Commentary during Digital Leaders AIWeek and subsequent feedback from a survey sent to participants crystallizes the needs of the UK professional community for 2026, pivoting squarely towards implementation and operational maturity.

5.1 Continuous and Practical Support Infrastructure

Based on Digital Leaders AIWeek experiences, the core need identified by the UK professional audience is to move past conceptual analysis and experimentation toward increased practical guidance for deploying AI at scale. Attendees explicitly requested:

- **Practical Resources:** Continuous access to content, guidance, training, and support for AI deployment, including tools, templates, and frameworks. This is supported by the LGA finding that lack of resources (people and funding) is a key inhibitor for local council readiness.
- **Localized Expertise:** There is a strong demand for greater understanding of the variety of AI deployment contexts. This can be addressed with more local events, regional hubs, and in-person meetups to foster community and democratize expertise geographically across the UK. This aligns with the need to localize expertise and resources given the intensity of the global AI talent wars.
- **Information Services:** Enterprises of all kinds, but particularly SMEs, find services providing information on available and reliable AI technology vendors to be highly useful. Policy makers are advised to look for cost-effective ways to deliver easily findable, accessible, current, and specific information and advice, especially on legal concerns, regulatory updates, and evolving business use cases for AI.

5.2 Strengthening the Governance Foundation

For 2026, experiences from Digital Leaders AIWeek confirm that the UK's AI governance focus requires a shift from a planning phase to operational delivery.

- **C-Suite Priority:** AI governance is projected to become even more of a C-Suite Priority. This will require investment in platforms and processes capable of enhancing AI system transparency, bringing visibility of AI use across organizations, and enforcing AI tool access controls and usage policies.
- **Accountability:** Updated policy guidance is needed to address core AI legal risks. A significant share of G7 enterprises favours regulation establishing clear accountability when AI is used. Furthermore, providing certification or accreditation schemes for AI solution providers is considered "helpful" or "very helpful" by enterprises. However, in the UK the balance between supporting speed of AI tool adoption and enhancing AI regulation is much less clear. Debate on such topics will continue into 2026 with increased interest in AI certification schemes to provide assurance regarding aspects such as AI provenance, data authenticity, and model reliability.

CONCLUSION

The state of AI practice in the UK in 2025, synthesized from the comprehensive data of Digital Leaders AIWeek, Digital Leaders AI100 awards, and several comprehensive external sources, reveals a confident, strategically minded professional community across the UK public and private sectors that has effectively defined its priorities around productivity, skills, and responsible governance. The planning and learning phases are mature, characterized by high digital confidence and a clear understanding of AI's potential value for leadership.

However, the foundation of AI practice remains brittle due to a critical implementation gap and increasing governance concerns. Organizations currently seek the practical insights, accessible expertise, and robust operational frameworks necessary to translate strategic intent into secure, scalable deployment, especially when tackling core AI foundational issues such as data quality, ethics, and ROI assessment.

The expectation for 2026 is much greater focus on a national mobilization to achieve operational maturity, guided by the UK's industrial policy goals. This requires shifting resource allocation towards continuous, localized support (including regional hubs, mentorship, and practical tools) and increasing support for enterprise-wide governance to manage the complexity of AI adoption. The enthusiasm and strong advocacy demonstrated by the Digital Leaders AIWeek audience suggest that the UK ecosystem is poised for this transition, provided the necessary practical and regulatory infrastructure is rapidly delivered.

By addressing these practical challenges, the UK can ensure that in 2026 its high aspirations continue to be translated into secure, scaled, and profitable AI operations, cementing the UK's competitive position in the global AI race.

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APPENDIX A:
DIGITAL LEADERS AIWEEK 2025 STATISTICAL DATA

This appendix provides detailed statistical breakdowns from Digital Leaders AI Week, 13-24th October 2025.

Table A1: Attendee Roles

Distribution of Digital Leaders AIWeek attendees by organisational role

Role	Percentage
C-Suite	21%
Senior Management	13%
Middle Management	44%
Professional/Technical	22%

Table A2: Geographic Distribution

Regional breakdown of Digital Leaders AIWeek participants.

Region	Percentage
South East	35%
South West	12%
Outside UK	11%
Midlands	9%
Scotland	9%
North West	8%
Wales	7%
Outside the UK	9%

Gender distribution: 57% female, 41% male, 2% not disclosed.

Table A3: Sectoral Representation

Breakdown of 1,938 organisations represented at Digital Leaders AIWeek, by sector.

Sector	Percentage
Private Sector	37%
Public Sector	20%
Charity	11%
Academic	8%

Table A4: Topic Popularity

Percentage of attendees registering for at least one talk at Digital Leaders AIWeek on each topic.

Topic	Percentage
Productivity & Efficiency	79%
User Experience	74%
Workforce & Skills	70%
Regulation & Compliance	69%
Innovation & Collaboration	68%
Bias & Ethics	67%
Data & Decision Making	62%
AI for Good	60%
HealthTech	56%

Digital Inclusion	56%
Cyber Resilience	33%
Net Zero	33%

Table A5: Digital Leaders AI100 Awards Nominations by Sector

This year's AI100 finalists attracted 8,300 votes.

Sector	Percentage
Private Sector	62%
Public Sector	20%
Charity	11%
Academia	8%


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