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Members of the Save Brick Lane campaign protested against the construction of an AI datacentre in the east London neighbourhood in June. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

View image in fullscreen Members of the Save Brick Lane campaign protested against the construction of an AI datacentre in the east London neighbourhood in June. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

UK government met 137 businesses over AI datacentres – but no environmental groups

Investigation finds dozens of ministers and civil servants moved into AI roles as government developed datacentre expansion plans

The UK's policy on datacentres and AI was developed without any meetings with environmental groups, an investigation has found. The nonprofit organisation Spotlight on Corruption said a "considerable revolving door" shaped the government's development of "AI growth zones", a central plank of the former prime minister Keir Starmer's AI and economic policy, with 38 ministers, senior civil servants and special advisers hired to positions in AI companies between July 2024 and September 2026.

Meanwhile, even as top officials left government for jobs at OpenAI and Anthropic, government departments largely failed to engage meaningfully with stakeholders outside the technology industry. Kamila Kingstone, a campaign lead at the NGO, said: "The government totally failed at the most senior level to speak to environmental NGOs or community groups when developing its flagship policy on AI datacentres. This is despite the serious environmental implications of its plans." Over 12 months, Spotlight on Corruption filed 40 freedom of information requests to 18 government agencies, seeking details of meetings and investment figures relating to the government's policymaking on the growth zones, covering the period between July 2024 and June 2026. The investigation found that ministers, permanent secretaries and directors general involved in developing the policy met 137 businesses – some several times – to discuss Britain's datacentre policy. By contrast, senior officials met only two community groups and no environmental organisations. View image in fullscreen Approval has been given for a £500m redevelopment of the Truman Brewery site in Brick Lane, east London, to include a datacentre. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian Of the 38 senior officials who left government, nine were from the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, which has played a central role in shaping Britain's AI strategy. These included a former minister for AI and intellectual property, a former AI adviser to the prime minister, a former director of AI opportunities, a deputy director of AI international policy and a head of AI engineering. AI growth zones were a groundbreaking policy under which the government promised to "turbocharge the economy" and create jobs by building massive datacentres across five regions – in Starmer's words, "mainlining AI into the veins" of the country. The policy aimed to pave the way for Britain to build big datacentres, some of them larger than any datacentre that has been built in the country so far. These developments, often partnered with US tech companies, would supposedly bring in thousands of jobs. Investigations by the Guardian have called the policy into question, suggesting that it rests on assumptions that do not hold up, financial figures that were not audited and exaggerated projections for job creation. In particular, the Guardian has shown there is little realism behind announced plans to power these developments, and claims that they will use purpose-built renewables. In fact, different government departments appear to diverge on how much electricity the UK's datacentre plans will actually require – and what their environmental cost will therefore be. Meanwhile, there has been growing opposition to datacentres in Britain, with campaign groups protesting against planned developments in places ranging from Auchtertool, a rural village north of Edinburgh, to Brick Lane in east London. View image in fullscreen Fourteen local campaigns rallied in September at Holyrood against datacentres planned in Scotland. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod/The Guardian Chi Onwurah, the MP for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West, said the growing backlash – and the far larger opposition in the US – was a warning that the

government needed to seek greater community input. skip past newsletter promotion

after newsletter promotion “It is critically important that AI benefits communities and is also shaped by them,” she said. “I’ve been concerned about what we’ve seen in the US, where there’s a strong feeling that datacentres are being imposed without adequate consultation. We can see the backlash influencing the midterms. It’s really important that communities are involved in datacentres and AI growth zones and see the benefits.” Spotlight on Corruption’s investigation suggests that previous policy was largely shaped by conversations with business, and that the government “failed to take the environmental and social impacts [of datacentres] seriously”. While the government met a handful of civil society groups, these meetings were “held a few days before the launch of the policy, meaning they had no meaningful input”, according to the report. Finally, many further meetings between businesses and Starmer’s administration would not have been disclosed, said Spotlight on Corruption. This is largely because Starmer’s policy was led by a special adviser, Jade Leung, whose role was subject to far less stringent transparency requirements. Spotlight on Corruption also looked at how other countries – including Canada, Germany and Australia – developed policy. It found these countries consulted far more widely on introducing datacentres and had more stringent environmental criteria. It said the UK had “fallen behind equivalent jurisdictions” in developing an equitable strategy. A government spokesperson said: “We are clear that datacentres should create British jobs, strengthen supply chains and deliver benefits for the communities that host them, while prioritising clean power and using water responsibly – and meet with these companies to make sure that happens. We want to work closely with industry, local authorities, environmental groups and communities, and welcome opportunities to hear their views. “For most proposed datacentre developments, community benefits are considered through the relevant local planning processes. We have already announced measures which will enable local authorities hosting datacentres in AI growth zones in England to keep all the additional business rates they generate.”

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