

Residents in Newport and Cardiff oppose hyperscale datacentres near homes

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A house in the shadow of a datacentre in Newport, south Wales. All photographs: Joel Redman/The Guardian

The AI boom is pitting local residents against corporate giants seeking to power their energy-hungry networks – but one Welsh city is fighting back

By Tom Wall . Photographs: Joel Redman

Dale Johnston opens the gate to his neat suburban garden on the western fringes of Newport in South Wales . There's a trampoline and a slide on the lawn for his grandchildren, and chairs for him and his wife. He should be enjoying the light draining from the perfect autumnal sky – but almost his entire view is blotted out by a vast expanse of prefabricated panels. The 23 metre-high grey hulk looming over him and his neighbours is a hyperscale datacentre. It is heralded by the area's Labour politicians as a job creator, yet all Johnston can think about is what he has lost: "Before, the sun used to come around here and it was lovely." The way residents have been treated is "disgusting".

Johnston, who used to work for a chemical company in the city, worries what their lives will be like when the centre is switched on: the 36 sets of air blast coolers, needed to stop the chips inside overheating, most likely generate a constant drone, while regular testing of 60 back-up diesel generators, to prevent costly interruption to the flow of data, could produce harmful fumes. He already has to keep his bathroom window closed to stop the low hum from another facility on the rapidly expanding 46-acre datacentre campus that borders the small enclave of 27 houses. His wife, a nurse who works night shifts, can barely sleep already. He shakes his head in despair: "We just don't know what's going to happen." View image in fullscreen 'The MPs backing the development won't come round here to see what they've done': Dale Johnston in his garden Johnston can talk about little else, but he feels no one in authority is listening. He's invited councillors and MPs backing the development to visit his garden. But "they won't come around here to see what they've done". This is the frontline of Britain's datacentre boom, which is pitting residents against giant US tech firms seeking to build a network of facilities capable of providing the immense computing muscle for powerful AI models. There are 315 hyperscale datacentres waiting to connect to the national grid, which carries electricity from power plants to homes and businesses (hyperscale typically means facilities with at least 5,000 servers and 10,000 sq ft in size). Combined, these new centres will require 73GW of power, 28GW higher than the typical peak energy demand of 45GW on a cold winter's day. Wales is one of the main development hotspots outside London. It already has the largest datacentre capacity beyond the capital, with new hyperscale facilities planned for former industrial and urban sites. The Keir Starmer-led Labour government viewed this as an inevitable revolution , which the country must embrace or be left behind. It established five AI growth zones to push more datacentres through the planning system and speed up connections to the national grid. The new prime minister, Andy Burnham, has signalled little will change, turning down calls for a moratorium and insisting datacentres bring economic benefits. But anti-datacentre groups springing up in villages, towns and cities across the country see it rather differently: as the imposition of a resource-hungry, polluting industry that increases profits for often US big tech, with little tangible benefit to local people or the country as a whole. Digital storage is nothing new. The first home PC users saved files on floppy discs and hard drives; businesses used their own server rooms in the 80s and 90s, then moved to off-site facilities as their needs grew. But the development of cloud computing services in the 2010s, such as Google Drive, and AI chatbots in the 2020s, like ChatGPT, led to even greater information and processing demands, which the tech industry insists can only be met by larger and larger datacentres. This has driven huge speculative bets on hyperscale hubs, which investors and tech firms hope will one day reap the rewards of an AI-led transformation of the economy. Globally, it is estimated spending on new facilities could reach \$7tn by 2030 – more than double the cost of the New Deal, the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe after the second world war and the Apollo

space programme combined, even allowing for inflation. The US is at the forefront of the boom, already hosting roughly half of the world's hyperscale capacity. But the industry is facing a furious backlash, with three-quarters of Americans now opposed to datacentre development and blaming it for increasing energy bills, threatening water supplies in drought-hit areas and spewing out toxic fumes. More than 500 counties and municipalities have passed permanent or temporary datacentre bans .

'This is not an anti-tech town': backlash to datacenter in city once home to IBM

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Loudoun County in northern Virginia sits in what is known as Data Center Alley because it is home to more facilities than anywhere else in the world. Greg Pirio's life was turned upside down when a gas-powered datacentre opened 150 metres from his home last year. "This neighbourhood was calm and peaceful, and it's turned into this nightmare," he says on a video call. "Our quality of life has been degraded so much." The noise from the centre's eight gas turbines is "like being at an airport with all these engines roaring," Pirio says. "It has given many of my neighbours headaches. It has kept children up at night." Pirio, who used to work for the Voice of America radio station, has also developed health problems since it opened, including dry eyes and chest tightness. Once he had to leave his house because he was struggling to breathe: "I know whenever the diesel generators are on, because I feel it in my lungs." View image in fullscreen An aerial view of the datacentre in Newport ... View image in fullscreen ... and the outside of the building The UK has not yet seen the same level of opposition as the US. But anti-datacentre groups are gathering momentum. Residents in east London are waging a high-profile campaign against a new datacentre on Brick Lane, including protesting outside the offices of Angela Rayner, the communities secretary, who overturned a council decision blocking the scheme. Seasoned campaigner Owen Espley, who works for environmental charity Global Action Plan, is helping scores of residents' groups organise against planned datacentres. "This summer has been wild. Every other week a new group has popped up. Petitions are getting thousands of signatures in days," he says. "Communities are in uproar, and most politicians are playing catch-up." Espley has been taken aback by the gulf between the government's conviction that there is no alternative and ordinary people's deepening understanding of the complex issues at stake. "There has been a real grassroots questioning of datacentres that connects British Bangladeshis in Brick Lane with Hertfordshire villagers and communities in Northumberland, who want good jobs to come back," he says. "It is astounding." In fact, there are many alternative pathways to market-led expansion – from tougher regulation to prioritising publicly-owned data infrastructure – which serve communal goals, such as the heart disease and dementia research powered by Bristol University's new Isambard-AI facility . "First, we need strong standards for private datacentres," Espley says. "Second, we need industrial strategy to deliver our own public computer, rather than an assumption that US big tech building and owning everything is the only way forward." On the deprived eastern edges of Cardiff, the early morning sunshine is warming a car park dotted with scraggly weeds. The perimeter fence is overgrown with brambles, with patches of singed, blackened grass from a recent wildfire visible just beyond. It looks abandoned but soon cars carrying doctors, nurses and other NHS staff start arriving. They are here to catch free buses to Cardiff's Heath hospital, the largest in Wales. Hundreds are said to use the park and ride every day, but it is under threat because Labour-controlled Cardiff council wants to sell the land to a property developer, Curtis Hall, to build a hyperscale data facility. The centre will use up to 150 megawatts (MW) of electricity a year, more than triple the demand of a city the size of Cardiff. The development is one of the most controversial in Wales. Council meetings have been disrupted and more than 1,200 planning objections lodged. Last month, the new Plaid Cymru-led government ordered the council to put the application on hold while it considered whether to take the decision out of councillors' hands. Campaigners are determined to keep up the pressure on the Welsh government. Sue Elias, a retired librarian with seemingly endless reserves of energy, dashes back and forth reattaching her "Ditch the datacentre" banner to the car park fence and taping leaflets to the bus stop glass. "What is going to happen to all the people who use the park and ride? It's bonkers," she says. View image in fullscreen Sue Elias rallying opposition to the building of a datacentre on the local park and ride ... View image in fullscreen ... which Abi George, a midwife, uses it every day to get to work Elias has leafleted the park and ride every Wednesday morning for six weeks. Today she is collecting signatures for an open letter to prove it is well used – so far she has added the names of 1,300 staff and patients. "I've not done anything like this before but I'm told I'm a natural," she says with a mischievous smile, before breaking off to speak to staff arriving for the next bus. She belongs to community-based union Acorn, which has campaigned against the scheme, and has taken part in protests , including bursting into a council planning meeting in July. "We'd sent emails, done petitions, but we'd had nothing back – tumbleweed. They're our elected representatives ... They should be talking with us." It is hard to find anyone in support of the plan in the queue for the bus, which runs three times an hour. "I use it every day. Without it, I probably wouldn't continue working at the hospital," says Ami George, a midwife.

"Parking there causes that much stress." Across Cardiff's Rhymney River, which curves around the proposed datacentre development, the area's newest residents have only recently moved into 100 homes built under the city council's flagship house-building programme. Nick Richards, a freelance filmmaker and skateboarder, and his wife arrived in November. "It felt like the stars had aligned because there is a brand new skate park up the road ... the best in Cardiff. It's amazing," he says. "I never pictured myself living in suburbia but when we came we saw kids playing outside and thought, this is a really nice area." View image in fullscreen Nick Richards, who moved to a new estate two months before a datacentre planning application was submitted Like many other residents on the estate, Richards had no idea the council was planning to sell the park and ride to a datacentre developer. They moved in two months before the planning application was submitted. Instead of enjoying their new life, they now fear they will never be able to sell. Their home is 300 metres from what the plans describe as the temporary energy centre, which includes seven giant gas turbines. They are expected to power the facility around the clock for five years, according to documents filed by the developer. "I feel trapped," Richards says, pacing his kitchen. "I couldn't look prospective buyers in the eye and not say there's going to be seven gas turbines right next to them." Richards has pored over the planning documents and leafleted every house on the new estate, including a care home, which will be just 150 metres from the turbines. "This datacentre will be powered by gas turbines," he says. "They will pump nitrogen dioxide into our atmosphere. There will also be fine particulate matter and formaldehyde. All these toxins cause health conditions, such as asthma, COPD and heart disease." Air quality assessments commissioned by the developer estimate the emissions will be within safe levels. Curtis Hall says the scheme cannot proceed without 100% compliance with all environmental and public health regulatory requirements. skip past newsletter promotion

after newsletter promotion There are more than 100 other planned UK datacentres aiming to use gas turbines due to the long wait to be connected to the grid. Richards doesn't want his estate to be a test case. "Within a mile of this datacentre are 30,000 people. But the people building this centre don't live here ... They don't give two shits about Welsh people." A stone's throw away is Llanrumney Hall, once the home of privateer and slave trader Sir Henry Morgan, who gave his name to Captain Morgan rum. It is now a thriving community centre, with a cafe, recording studio and creche. Labour councillor Lee Bridgeman is vaping on an outdoor table, dressed in a hoodie and baseball cap. He ran the local youth centre until it was lost to austerity-era cuts, and though he's a high-ranking councillor, jointly responsible for housing and communities, he does regular youth work shifts in the area, one of the poorest in Cardiff. "Llanrumney runs through my veins," he says. "I'm not your usual politician. I don't go to conferences. I got into politics to help the community." Bridgeman is charming and friendly – but he is not afraid of a fight. He is one of the few public figures in the area who has spoken out in support of the development, sometimes clashing with anti-datacentre campaigners on local Facebook groups. "Some of the information being spread is scaremongering," he says. "They are telling residents their electricity bills will go up ... the river and reservoir will be drained ... It's false information." View image in fullscreen Labour councillor Lee Bridgeman, who supported plans for a datacentre in Cardiff ... View image in fullscreen ... until local residents, like those at this public meeting in a boxing club, changed his mind Many of these fears stem from the US, where the rapid expansion of hyperscale facilities has been linked to rising electricity bills, water shortages and toxic air pollution. Bridgeman argues that "planning processes are totally different in the UK. So whereas [US authorities] turn a blind eye to some of the environmental impacts of those monstrosities, that would never happen in the UK." He "wouldn't be comfortable" if the gas turbines were running for five years but thinks they might not be needed if the datacentre can connect to the grid sooner. The backlash has caught him by surprise, but he blames outside activists. "I didn't see it coming. I didn't think there would be this much interference," he says. Emotions are running high in the city. Some residents say they have been blocked by councillors when trying to question them on Facebook. Planning committee members have received threatening emails, Bridgeman says. "Threats like 'I will come after you ... we will make your life hell.' That shouldn't happen." Although the datacentre will employ only up to 125 people when it is built, Bridgeman believes it could encourage other big companies to east Cardiff: "I'm told the knock-on effect could lead to thousands of jobs." Later that day, residents squeeze into the local boxing club for a public meeting about the datacentre plan. It is standing room only, with people lining the walls. Bridgeman repeats his claim that few locals have complained: "I have hundreds of emails from residents ... So far I've had two emails with regards to the datacentre." Some in the audience react angrily. There are shouts of, "We don't know you, that's why" and, "Have you heard of social media?" One woman stands up and says, "Don't tell me you haven't been privy to the meetings ... or things online." In a show of hands, roughly three-quarters of the 80 to 100 people in the room indicate they are from Llanrumney, almost all opposed. There are cries of, "There you are ... you don't need emails!" and, "That's every person!" Almost three weeks later, Bridgeman performs a sudden about-turn, submitting a formal letter of objection to the scheme, noting that he has heard from a large number of residents. The UK hyperscale buildout has been focused on London, but datacentre developers are

increasingly targeting areas outside the south-east, to escape severe electrical grid capacity limits. Wales already has the largest datacentre capacity of anywhere outside the capital. Many more could be coming: five of Wales's largest new and proposed datacentres will consume more electricity than all Welsh homes put together. While the previous Welsh Labour administration welcomed the building spree, claiming giant tech firms' investment would generate thousands of jobs, the Plaid Cymru-led government has been more circumspect, with ministers emphasising it must benefit Wales. In the light and airy Welsh parliament building, which overlooks Cardiff Bay, opposition is growing. Plaid Cymru's Nick Carter, who is the Senedd member for Caerdydd Ffynnon Taf, which includes Cardiff East, worries that the surging market will benefit developers and US tech firms rather than the public. "As a party, we're not going to want to see a proliferation of datacentres, haphazardly being built across the country, on what may be an opportunistic basis," he says. View image in fullscreen Plaid Cymru's Nick Carter, who fears datacentres benefit only developers and US tech firms Carter, who has a background in commercial property, has examined the Cardiff plans in detail. He says the developer, Curtis Hall, has no track record in datacentres; "They could be a front for someone else: Google, Microsoft, whoever. I can understand why these operators need datacentres, but I'm not sure members of the public share the need." In response, Curtis Hall says it never claimed it would operate the facility itself, adding it had been working on datacentre projects for five years. Carter is glad the Welsh government has intervened in Cardiff. But he doesn't believe Wales needs to follow Scotland by imposing a moratorium on new datacentres: "The Welsh government is developing a strategy for datacentres nationally. We'll see what comes out of that." However, it is not clear how the Welsh government can meet its goal to reach net zero by 2040 without limiting datacentre expansion. Carter admits, "It's massively problematic." In Westminster, similar questions have been asked. The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology tells me the government will enable the development of datacentres by generating unprecedented amounts of clean power. A soft autumnal dusk descends on the residents living beside the new datacentre in Newport. Its sleek industrial-grey walls cast shadows across the closest gardens and homes. Much of the anger and frustration that met the original proposals has given way to weariness and resignation. Some residents talk of moving away, while others are mollified by meetings with the US-based data campus operator, Vantage. Yet their troubles may only just be beginning – right now, only one of the three Vantage datacentres is operational. Microsoft will be opening its own nearby soon. When all are running, there could be upwards of 500 air handling units working at the same time, with back-up diesel generators needing regular testing, so they can immediately fire up if there is a power cut. Newport council's chief scientific officer warned during the planning process that the fumes from all the generators had the "potential to cause unacceptable air pollution levels under use, and testing needs to be understood and mitigation proposed, if needed". The council tells me it doesn't have a duty to monitor emissions from generators, but says its officers check air quality management plans, and ask managers to minimise the impact of generator tests. Vantage says all its facilities operate in accordance with noise and air quality controls. It says it will monitor impacts and investigate concerns when the new centre opens. Some residents have already given up on democratic process. Johnston fought the proposals through the planning process but felt he was ignored. "We've been let down by all of them. I've had electoral roll cards come through my door. But I'm voting for none of them ... I can't trust them. They don't care about any of us." Over the road are older homes, where staff working on a nearby wealthy estate once lived. Sonia Thomas, a retired teacher, has lived in the same housekeeper's cottage since 1969. She can remember when orchards and fields fanned out in front of their gardens but now she doesn't even know if the sun is shining. "From inside you see grey, not blue," she says, glancing at the datacentre filling the sky. "It's horrible."

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