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AI Readiness of UK Local Authorities 2025

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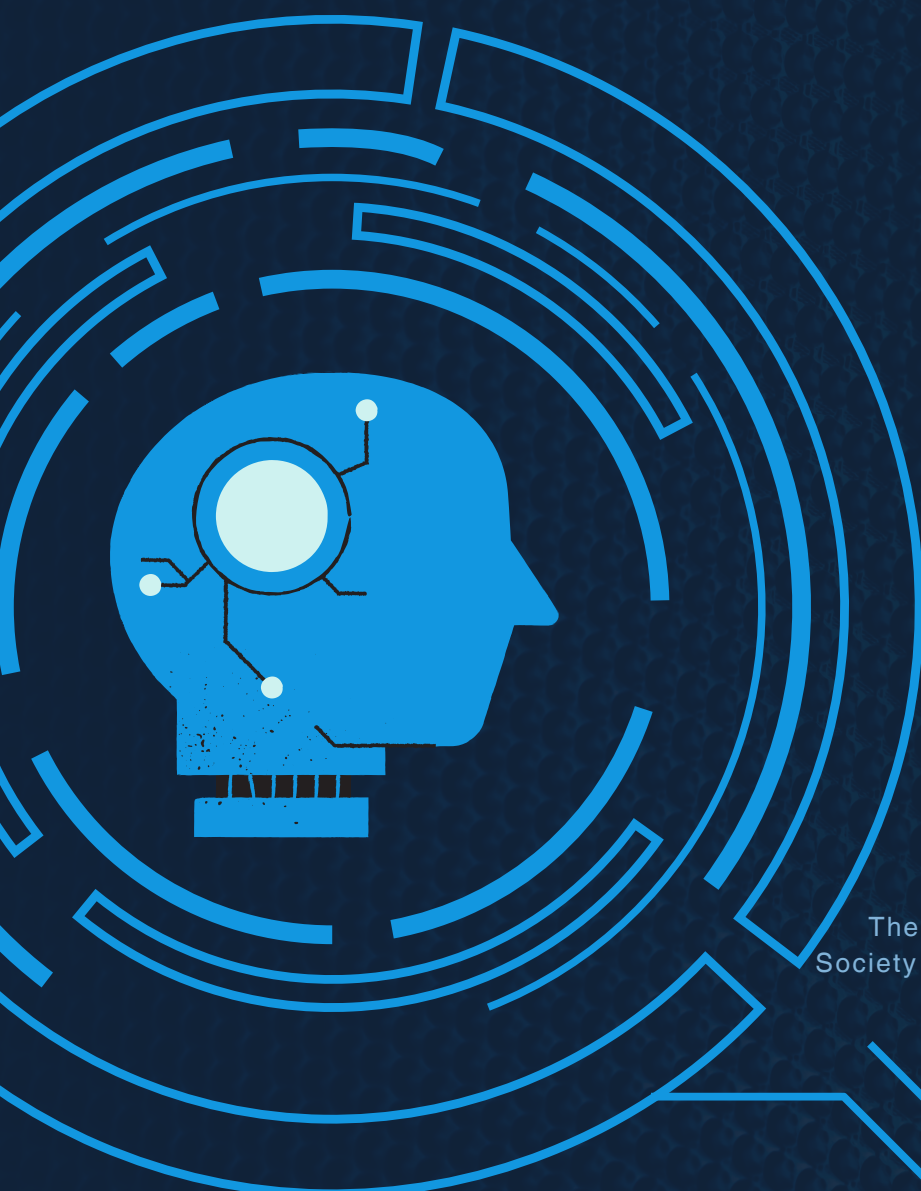
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AI READINESS OF UK LOCAL AUTHORITIES 2025

DATA-DRIVEN INSIGHTS ON MATURITY, CULTURE AND INNOVATION



Research by:



AND



Intelligent Automation
Systems Lab
Heriot-Watt University

In partnership with:

The Association for Public Sector Excellence
Society for Innovation Technology and Modernisation
Coram Children's Charity
Scottish Sustainability Network

With funding support from:

Interface



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This 18 month-long study provides a data-driven assessment of AI readiness across UK local government, examining 208 councils (56% of all authorities nationwide). The assessment combined quantitative scoring of 208 local authorities (based on publicly available information) with a staff questionnaire and external expert validation to ensure reliability. As only 26 local authorities were represented in the questionnaire responses, the analysis focused on the documentary analysis and scoring of the 208 local authorities by the research team, with the questionnaire used to inform this process as expert insights (all questionnaire participants were senior managers in local authority services). While this represents a substantial dataset, there is variation in sample sizes across the UK, particularly in Wales and Northern Ireland.

Key Question: “How ready are UK local authorities to adopt and scale Artificial Intelligence?”

The research has been structured around 3 dimensions: Data Maturity, AI Maturity and AI Culture, developed based on a review of industry and academic dimensions of readiness.

The analysis reveals a sector progressing at highly uneven speeds. Larger and unitary authorities generally hold structural advantages, yet performance varies widely: several smaller councils significantly outperform expectations, while some well-resourced councils underperform, confirming that size alone is not a reliable predictor of AI readiness. Instead, *internal factors such as leadership ambition, governance discipline, clarity of digital strategy and data capability emerge as the strongest drivers of progress.*

Most councils occupy a mixed-readiness position, where visible enthusiasm for innovation outpaces the organisational foundations needed to scale AI safely and consistently. At the same time, each region has unique advantages that it can leverage to accelerate its AI readiness, while benefitting further from its surrounding ecosystem of national innovation partners like APSE, SOCITM, Sustainable Scotland Network, Digital Catapults, and of course national and regional AI Offices.

England's opportunity lies in coordinating shared digital infrastructure between its county and district councils, learning best practices from metropolitan areas. **Scotland** could further leverage its established national programs by encouraging further use of innovation hubs like the Scottish AI Alliance, public/academia funding and collaborations, and resources the Digital Office. **Wales** could benefit from stronger interoperability and regional hubs, and **Northern Ireland** could progress through consolidating its system-wide capability, both exchanging best practices with the innovation hubs and research centres listed above, while learning from cases such as those provided by Coram. **Across the UK**, progress depends on strengthening governance, expanding specialist capacity and aligning national approaches to data, security, and AI assurance. These steps form the basis of a capability-led model in which councils of all sizes could adopt AI responsibly and enhance resilience in local public services.

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GLOSSARY

Acronym	Description
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AICC	Artificial Intelligence Collaboration Centre
APSE	Association for Public Service Excellence
COSLA	Convention of Scottish Local Authorities
DSIT	Department for Science, Innovation and Technology
GenAI	Generative Artificial Intelligence
IoT	Internet of Things
LA	Local Authority
LGA	Local Government Association
LGDP	Local Government Data Partnership
LLM	Large Language Model
ML	Machine Learning
NILGA	Northern Ireland Local Government Association
NLP	Natural Language Processing
Oflog	Office for Local Government
RPA	Robotic Process Automation
SME	Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise
SOCITM	The Society for Innovation, Technology and Modernisation
SSN	Sustainable Scotland Network

INTRODUCTION

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has rapidly evolved from a niche technology into a central driver of public sector transformation. In the United Kingdom, national frameworks such as the National AI Strategy (2021) have set ambitious digital reform goals. However, the realisation of these ambitions ultimately depends on the distributed capabilities of local authorities whose capacity, resources, and data readiness vary considerably.

Across the UK, there is a growing consensus on the need for more resilient, digitally enabled public services, supported by clearer governance, stronger data foundations and greater regional collaboration. Each part of the UK is pursuing this agenda through its own institutional pathways.

In **England**, the Local Government Association (LGA)'s State of the sector: Artificial intelligence 2025 update reports a clear shift beyond early chatbot use toward automation, predictive analytics, and data-driven decision-making. However, the LGA continues to highlight persistent barriers, including resource constraints, capability gaps, and the need for stronger governance and assurance frameworks.

In **Scotland**, COSLA and the Digital Office for Scottish Local Government have prioritised data maturity, shared platforms, and national AI assurance alignment within their 2025 digital workplan.

The **Welsh** Local Government Association (WLGA), meanwhile, emphasises interoperability, shared digital infrastructure, and workforce capability as essential conditions for scaling AI in line with the Welsh Government's Digital Strategy.

In **Northern Ireland**, NILGA's 2025 capability reviews point to enduring structural and capacity limitations among its 11 councils, shaping the pace at which emerging technologies could be adopted.

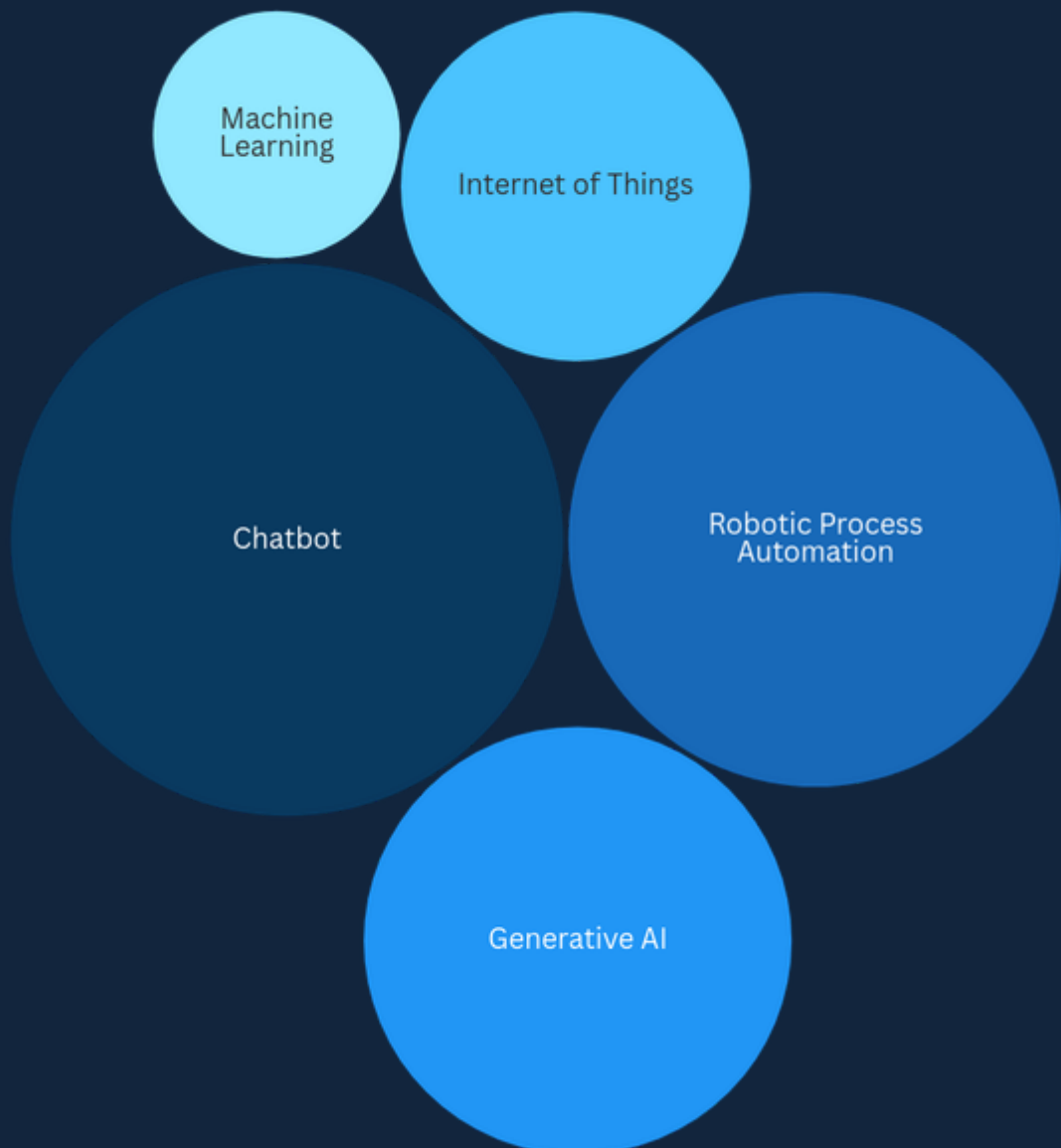
The following study reflects these differing national approaches while assessing all UK councils in their current administrative form. Against this backdrop, this research project seeks to answer a fundamental question:

'How ready are UK local authorities to adopt and scale Artificial Intelligence?'

CONTEXT: TOP AI TECHNOLOGIES

We identified and ranked the top five tools most commonly associated with AI within the local government ecosystem. These tools represent the core technologies driving digital transformation, operational efficiency, and data-enabled decision-making across councils.

It is however important to note that the examples given by councils can overlap (for example where chatbots and generative AI are named), or not directly refer to actual artificial intelligence use (for example in Robotic Process Automation). For this reason, we have streamlined our definitions for the study in a framework described in the following sections.



AI ENVIRONMENT: SWOT

AI capability across the UK public sector is advancing but uneven, with **England** and **Scotland** showing more mature structures, **Wales** building coordinated frameworks, and **Northern Ireland** developing early-stage capacity. Together, these efforts provide a growing base of guidance, governance and examples for public bodies exploring AI.

The SWOT analysis below unveils how these differing levels of maturity translate into clear strengths, persistent structural weaknesses, emerging opportunities and systemic threats that shape the UK's overall readiness for responsible AI adoption.



1. Strengths

National policies and sector frameworks give the UK a solid foundation to expand public-sector AI. **England** benefits from practical deployment support through the LGA AI Hub and the UK Government's AI Playbook (Cabinet Office, 2025), while **Scotland**'s national AI Strategy and Public Sector AI Taskforce provide clear ethical and governance direction (Scottish Government, 2021).

AI ENVIRONMENT: SWOT

Wales contributes structured guidance through the Centre for Digital Public Services and its national AI principles, ensuring transparency and inclusivity (Welsh Government, 2025). Early adoption examples across councils reinforce these strengths and illustrate increasing readiness (LGA, 2024).

2. Weaknesses

Foundational constraints continue to limit AI adoption across the UK's public sector, with legacy IT estates, fragmented data systems and uneven internal capability slowing the transition from pilots to scalable services.

A UK Government “State of Digital Government” study highlighted widespread dependence on outdated, end-of-life systems that are incompatible with modern data and AI tools (UK Government, 2024). Independent assessments reinforce this, noting that public bodies across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland face persistent issues with poor data quality, fragmented records and limited data-governance maturity, all of which prevent reliable AI scaling.

Combined, these weaknesses produce an uneven landscape in which only a minority of organisations have the infrastructure, skills or governance required to deploy AI safely and at scale.

3. Opportunities

Improved digital capability offers councils the chance to reduce costs and improve services, particularly by automating high-volume, straightforward demand so that staff can focus on residents with more complex needs or those who cannot use digital channels (National Audit Office, 2024).

The AI Opportunities Action Plan and the UK Government's AI Playbook both encourage a “scan–pilot–scale” approach, positioning the public sector as a major user that can shape the market for trustworthy AI and unlock productivity gains if successful pilots are replicated across places and services (DSIT, 2025; GDS, 2025).

At the same time, sector studies show that a rapidly growing UK AI industry of several thousand firms and tens of thousands of specialised jobs provides a strong supply base for councils to partner with, offering shared platforms, analytics tools and automation solutions that could be adapted for local priorities (Artificial Intelligence Sector Study 2024).

AI ENVIRONMENT: SWOT

4. THREATS

Oversight bodies warn that without consistent governance, public-sector AI deployment risks fragmentation, unequal adoption and declining public trust.

The National Audit Office (2024) identifies inconsistent safeguards, legacy constraints and variable local oversight as risks that could produce a patchwork of isolated pilots and contested algorithmic decisions, particularly in sensitive domains such as welfare, policing and health.

Parallel assessments from the Centre for Data Ethics & Innovation emphasise that, unless interoperable data systems, secure infrastructure and workforce capability are improved, AI may exacerbate regional and organisational disparities rather than reduce them.

Aims and Objectives

This report aims to:

- Provide a comparative overview of AI readiness (in terms of data maturity, AI maturity, and AI culture) across local authorities.
- **Apply a statistical lens to identify the dynamics of AI in local authorities.**
- **Provide actionable insights for policymakers and industry partners.**

Initial Findings

These initial findings will be further developed in the following sections.

- **Population size** has a strong correlation with AI readiness. Larger councils generally score higher in all three maturity dimensions.
- **Authority type** matters: County councils and London boroughs score higher, while small district councils often lag.
- **Regional disparities** exist: Yorkshire & Humber and London score higher; Northern Ireland and Wales score lower on the same dimensions. At the same time, each region has unique features and challenges.
- Connections between Data Maturity, AI Maturity, and AI Culture — some councils strong in one tend to be strong in others, but there are also *specialised digital trajectories*, which can help councils improve their practices in specific areas where they experience gaps. Some councils have strong data maturity but are weak in AI maturity/culture, and vice versa.

AI READINESS DEFINED

To conceptualise AI Readiness, the report unites existing models from industry practice and academic literature. Each existing model emphasises different aspects of AI development, such as maturity of the different types of AI algorithms and how they are deployed (Accenture's AI maturity framework), or the practices around them (Microsoft Responsible AI model).

The report also recognises the essential role of data maturity to underpin AI, looking at frameworks such as Data Orchard's data maturity framework, and several others. Our overall analysis therefore combines the awareness of different technology tools, their deployment, the responsibility of organisations in doing so, and the role of data maturity, digitisation, digitalisation, and digital transformation.

The main reasons for incorporating these areas are that we assert:

1. Data maturity forms the foundation for long-term, effective AI adoption, and digital transformation is a useful model for describing the development of data maturity.
2. AI adoption should be responsible by design; therefore, any evaluation of AI readiness must include an assessment of ethical considerations embedded into practice, and therefore in organisational culture.

The **readiness** concept was used to develop two main tools: a questionnaire and an analytical framework investigating **Data Maturity**, **AI Maturity**, and **AI Culture**. Each of these dimensions was further developed by the research team in collaboration with the **Intelligent Automation Systems Lab at Heriot-Watt University** to provide 5 levels for each dimension. These dimensions include governance, staff and leadership readiness, and technologies and infrastructure readiness, etc).

Our working definitions and framework are detailed below:

Artificial intelligence (AI) refers to engineered systems that use computational methods to perform, support, or automate tasks traditionally carried out by humans. These systems can analyse information, learn from experience, adapt to new inputs, and make recommendations or decisions based on data. AI is a branch of computer science focused on replicating aspects of intelligent behaviour in machines, and may include elements of automated decision-making.

Examples of AI technologies relevant to this study include:

- Machine learning and deep learning (systems that learn patterns from data)
- Generative AI (tools that create text, images, or other content using transformer models)
- Natural language processing (NLP) (systems that interpret or generate human language)
- AI for Predictive analytics (models forecasting outcomes based on historical/synthetic data)
- Computer vision (models that interpret visual information based on sensor data)

AI READINESS DEFINED

“AI Maturity” at an organisational level is referred to as the readiness of an organisation in terms of its capability to use and manipulate AI based on the understanding of it, and ultimately, to incorporate AI into organisational operations in order to scale up operational efficiency and/or effectiveness. AI Maturity presupposes a certain level of data digitalisation and digitisation, or namely, **data maturity**.

“AI Culture” is the organisational mindset, leadership support, and staff openness toward innovation, experimentation, and data-driven working, supported by organisational practices and artefacts like communication records, recorded best practices and training.

“Data” in this entire survey refers to any forms of knowledge collected for the council. It can appear as records which are then turned into information through analysis, prediction, or any other manipulation. Formats may include videos, maps, documents, audio files, etc.

“Data Maturity” reflects the extent to which a council can collect, manage, and use data reliably and securely to inform decision-making through coordinated analyses.

Council Data Maturity Levels	Council AI Maturity Levels	AI Culture in the Council
Poor and inconsistent practices around data (1)	No interest in AI adoption/experimentation at this time (1)	Has little to no messaging or awareness-raising about AI technologies or their potential impact among staff (1)
Beginning our journey in terms of valuing and working with data (2)	Early interest in and conversations around AI strategy (2)	Has top leadership that recognizes the value of AI technologies, though staff involvement or communication is limited. (2)
Growing our capabilities in terms of driving value from data (3)	Initial experimentation and pilot projects with AI (3)	Acknowledges the potential benefits of AI and includes employees and stakeholders in early discussions and awareness efforts.(3)
Mastering good practice with data consistently seen as a priority (4)	AI used in at least one workflow (4)	Prioritises experimentation with AI in certain operations, with relevant staff engagement and feedback considered during implementation.(4)
Broad and deep capability with prediction of future data needs, seen as an exemplar (5)	AI already deployed across several business units and processes (5)	Has successfully integrated AI into some operations or services, actively involving employees in ongoing evaluation and improvement (5)

COVERAGE

In the [questionnaire](#), the framework was translated into Likert scales with additional open questions. These were used for self-reported responses in the survey, together with free-text areas to record additional contextual information. Respondents’ self-reported digital literacy was also recorded to enhance the credibility of the survey results.

The respondents were senior managers or specialists in IT or digital development within local councils, who were contacted with the support of the [Association for Public Sector Excellence \(APSE\)](#), the [Scottish Sustainability Network \(SSN\)](#), and the [Society for Innovation Technology and Modernisation \(Socitm\)](#). APSE and Socitm also provided expert reviews and validation for the survey, together with [Coram-i](#), the Children’s Charity.

The framework was also applied to a [detailed analysis of 208 councils](#), involving several phases of (i) social media, (ii) case study and reporting, and (iii) policy and decision-making minutes documents analysis of the councils, relying on data from April 2020 to October 2025. The records were firstly scored according to the framework, then statistically analysed. The data was also reviewed once more in a parallel focus group to identify specific cases which stood out as key stories.

The selection of councils was made based on the availability of information on their data practices and AI use, retrieved between June 2024 and October 2025.

Region	Number of Councils ranked	Total Number of councils	Margin of Error
England	153	319	±8%
Wales*	12	22	±28%*
Scotland	32	32	N/A
Northern Ireland	11	11	N/A

•*The margin of error is higher for Wales due to the limited publicly available data used in this analysis.

DATA AND AI READINESS ACROSS THE UK

Evaluating a sample of 208 authorities reveals clear and consistent regional patterns in digital readiness across the UK. While data maturity is relatively well established in most regions, **AI maturity and cultural readiness remain notably underdeveloped.**

The following map provides a visual overview of how authorities across the UK compare in their digital and AI capabilities. Each map focuses on a different dimension: data maturity, AI maturity, and AI culture, and uses a consistent green, amber, red colour-coding system to illustrate variation.

Councils shown in **green** demonstrate high levels of capability and readiness, those in **amber** reflect moderate or developing maturity, and those in **red** indicate lower levels, where significant improvement or investment is still needed.

Scores are based on a **1 to 5 scale**, evaluating each authority across the three dimensions.

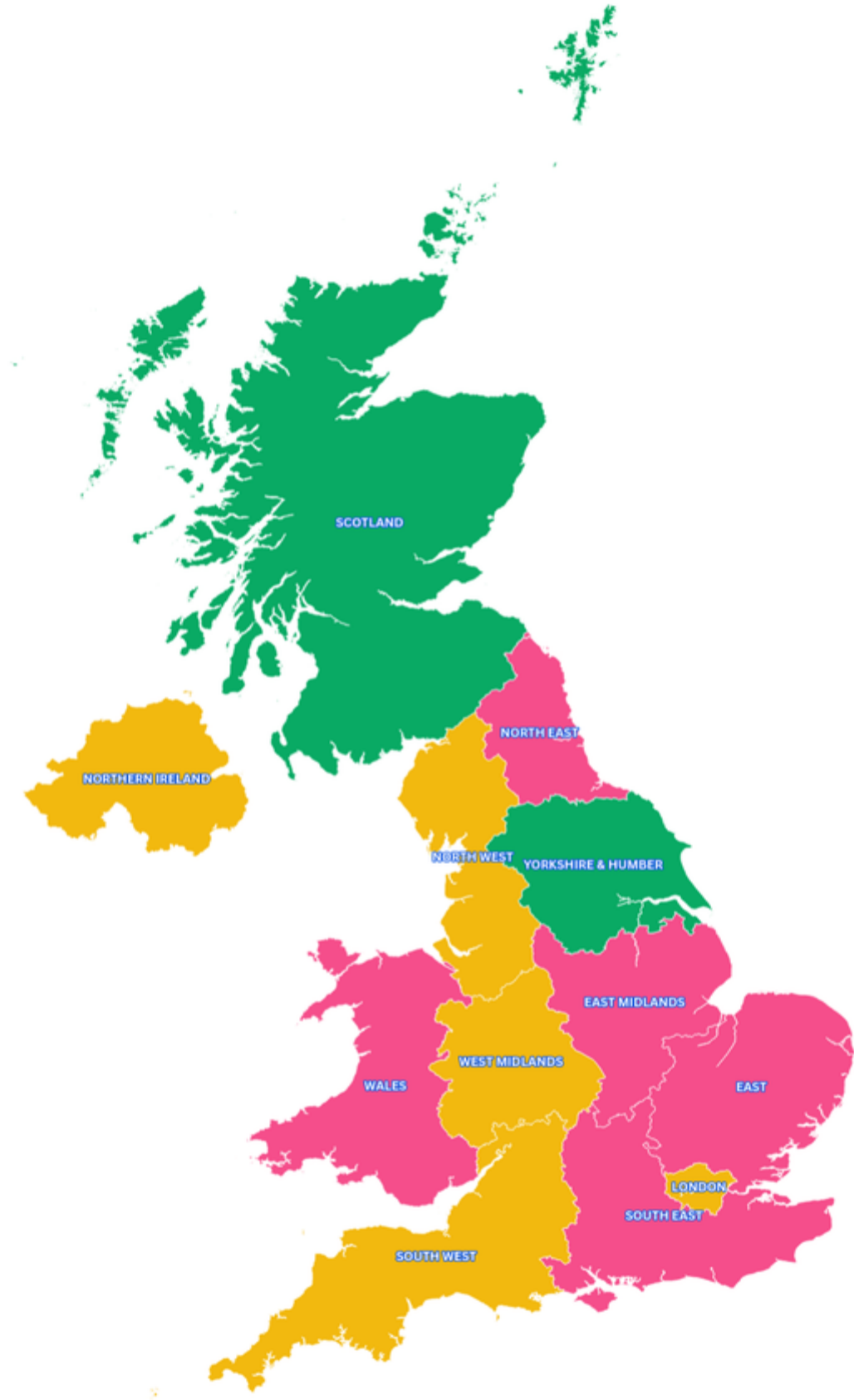
- Regions scoring 4 or above, such as Yorkshire and the Humber for data maturity or Scotland for AI maturity, are considered **high** maturity areas.
- Scores between 2 and 3 indicate **moderate** maturity, as seen in much of the North of England and South West.
- Scores of 1 to 2 fall into the **low** maturity category, with Northern Ireland and Wales particularly underdeveloped in terms of cultural readiness towards AI.

This regional analysis offers a clear snapshot of the current landscape and sets a framework for deeper exploration into the strengths and weaknesses influencing the pace and scale of data and AI adoption across the UK.

AI READINESS ACROSS THE UK: DATA

Data Maturity

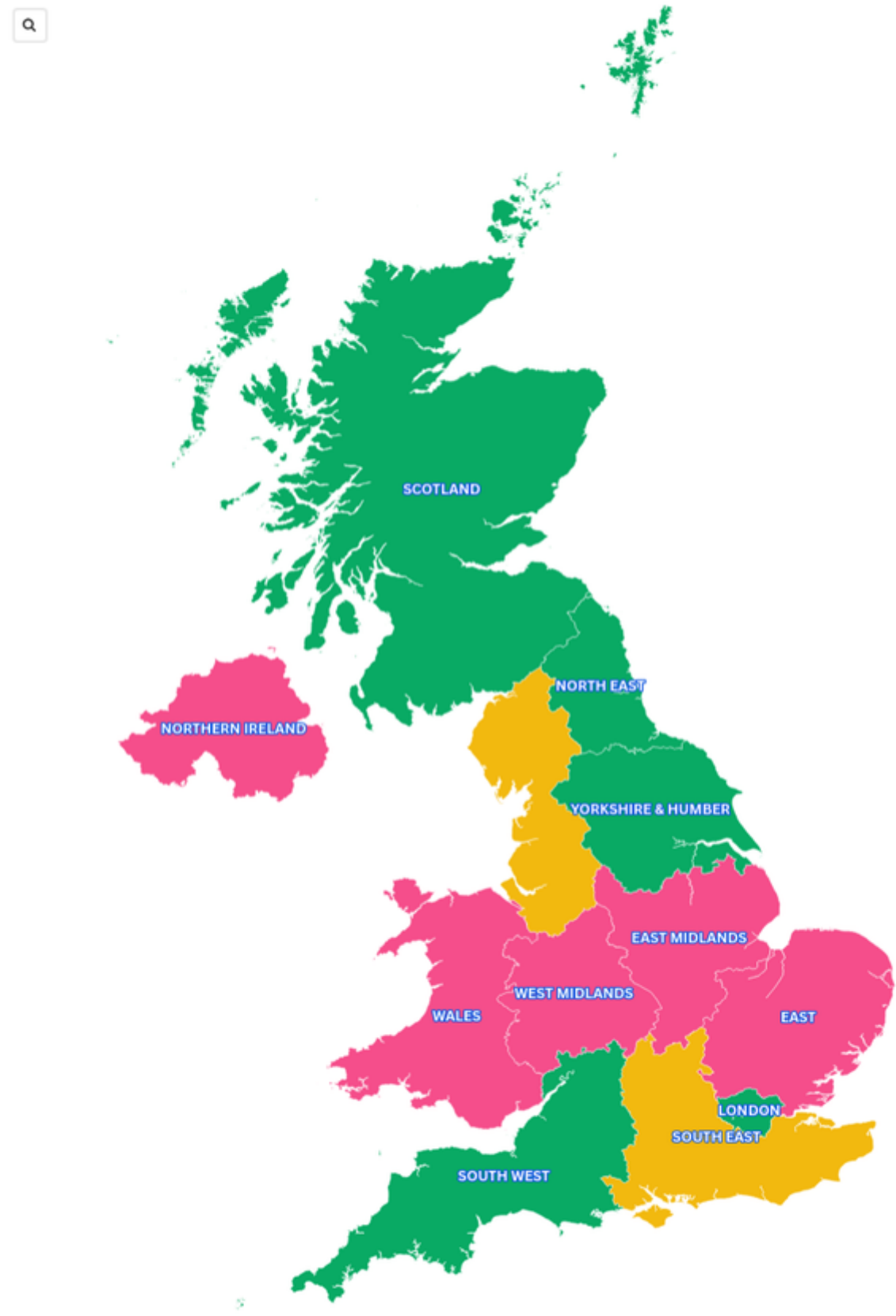
Low Medium High



AI READINESS ACROSS THE UK: AI USE

AI Maturity

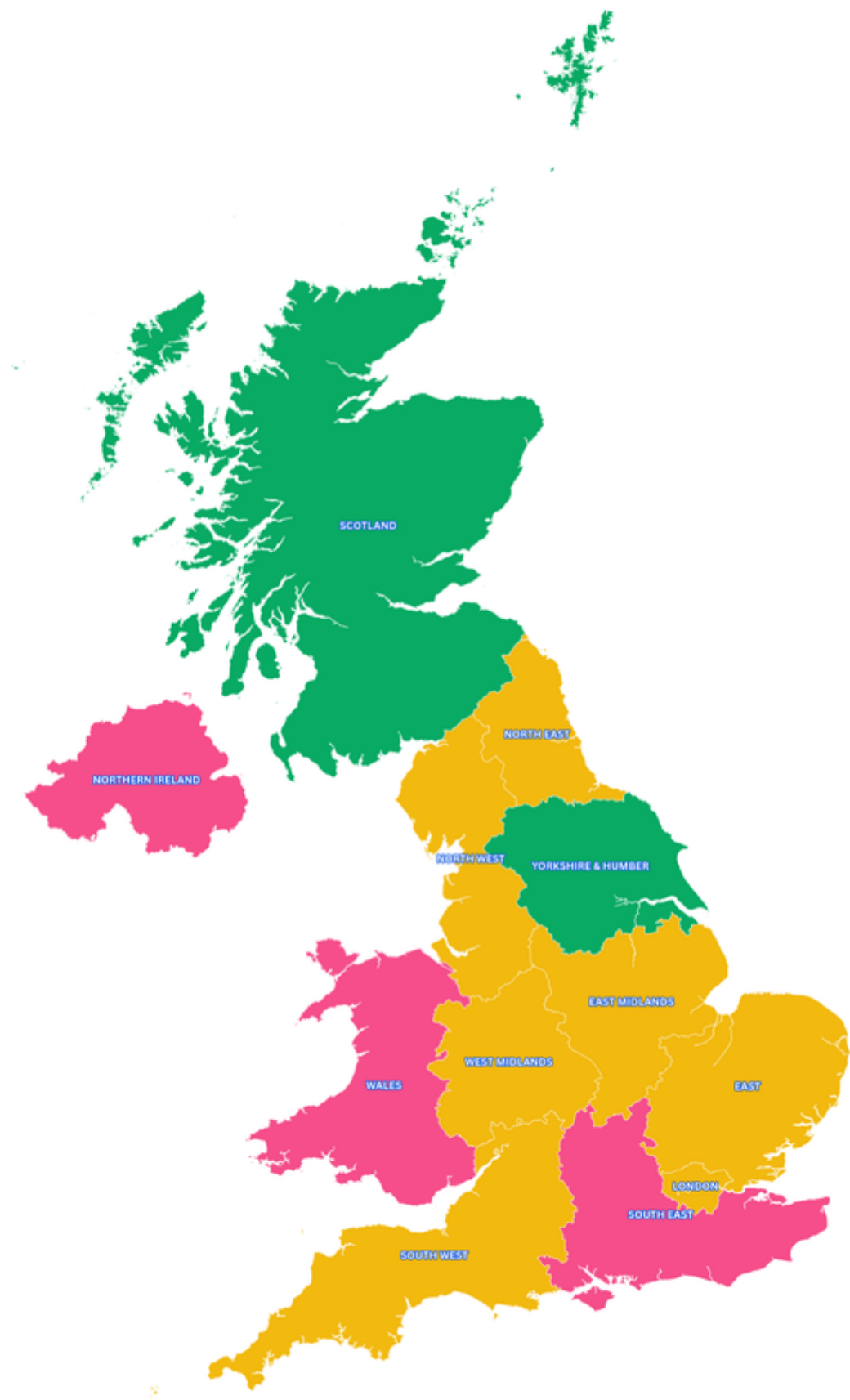
Low Medium High



AI READINESS ACROSS THE UK

AI Culture

Low Medium High

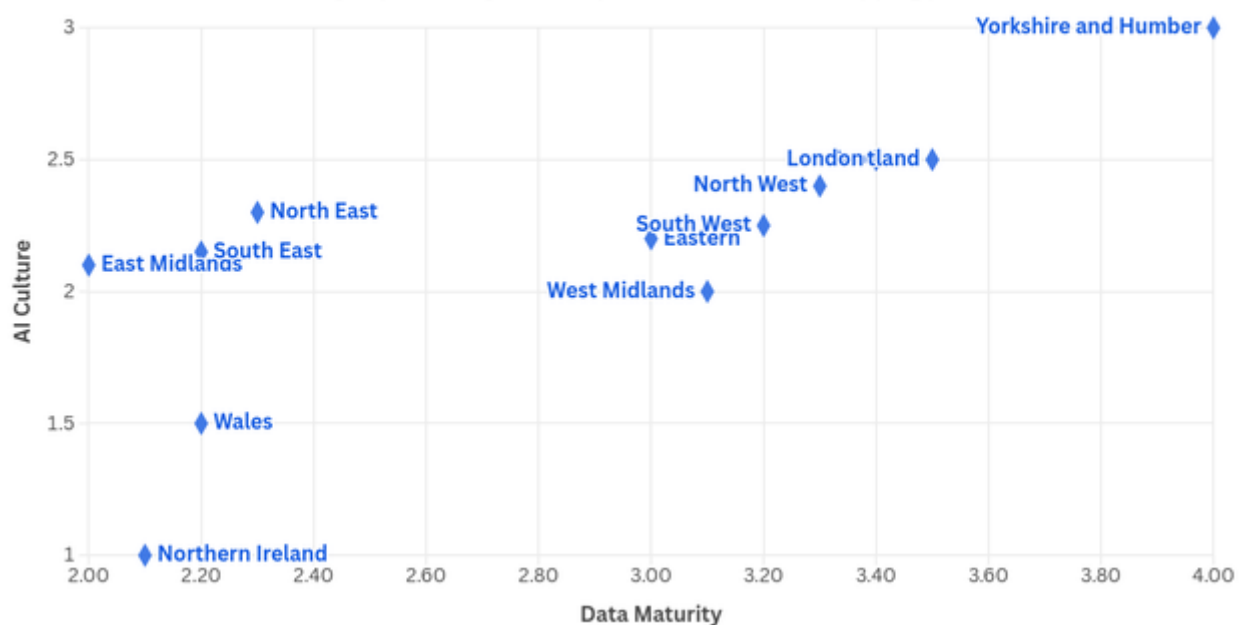


COMPARATIVE READINESS LANDSCAPE

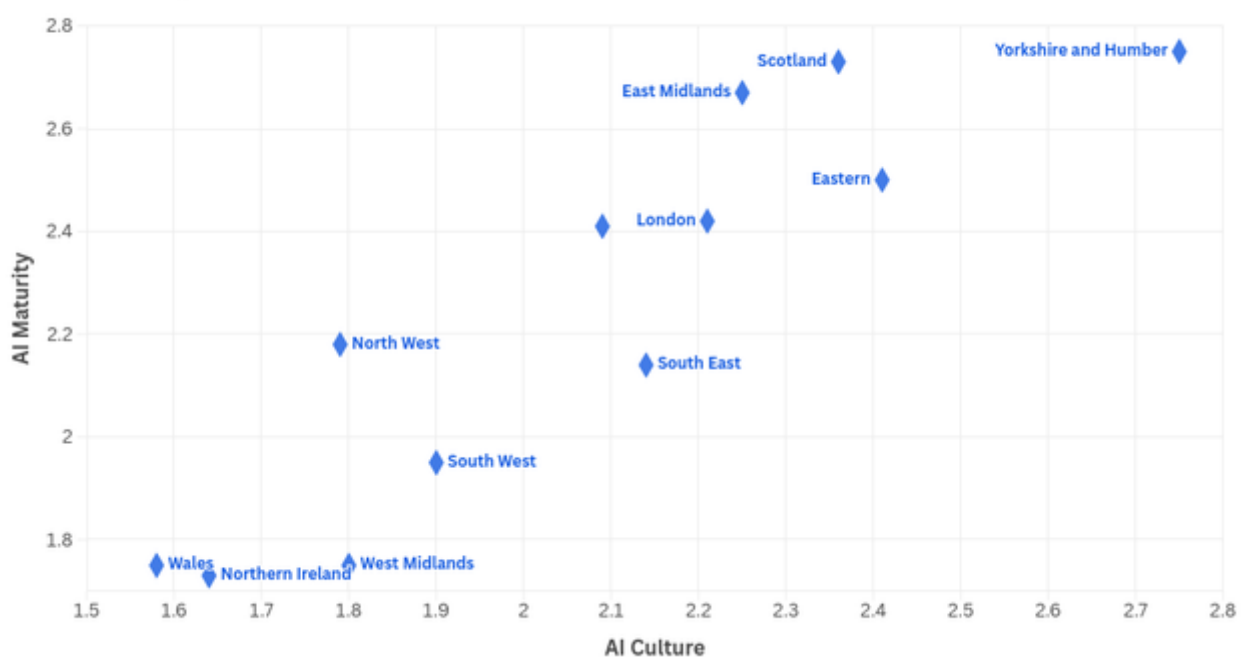
The two scatter plots below offer a comparative view of how different parts of the UK vary in their readiness to adopt, scale and benefit from artificial intelligence. Although only two relationships are visualised, the assessment draws on three core indicators: Data Maturity, AI Maturity and AI Culture.

Data Maturity vs AI Culture*

Several councils were artificially separated by decimal points due to the overlapping position.



AI Maturity vs AI Culture



COMPARATIVE READINESS LANDSCAPE

Together, these metrics show how **strong data foundations and organisational openness contribute to higher levels of AI capability**. Parts of the UK that have invested in data quality, integration and governance tend to support a healthier culture around AI experimentation, which in turn strengthens overall AI maturity. In contrast, areas with fragmented data landscapes or weaker cultural readiness often experience slower implementation, reduced impact and limited ability to scale early AI initiatives.



As can be seen in the graphs above, **the three dimensions are tightly interlinked, the regions naturally group into distinct tiers of performance ranging from high to mid-level to low performers.**

Scotland, London, Yorkshire and Humber rank higher across all dimensions, exhibiting a solid data governance, higher organisational culture and the capability to operationalise AI at scale.

Mid-tier regions like Southwest, West Midlands, Northeast illustrate partial alignment between capability and culture due to underdeveloped data systems and limited staff readiness.

At the lower end of the spectrum, regions such as Wales, Northern Ireland and the East Midlands highlight lower maturity levels due to structural challenges for example, siloed data landscape, insufficient cultural support and less confidence in AI leading to slower adoption and low impact.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS - SCOTLAND

Scotland's 32 unitary authorities operate within a well-established and aligned public-sector framework in the UK.

Sustainable progress was observed across all three metrics, underpinned by a unified national ecosystem, mandated benchmarking and shared capability models. The Scottish Government and COSLA's central leadership enabled councils to adopt common standards, access shared infrastructure and pooled expertise, directly influencing councils' data systems and emerging-technology maturity, reducing the risk of fragmentation, and empowering councils to thrive collectively rather than operating in silos.

The Scottish councils appear to be more balanced when it comes to being AI-ready, and a deeper dive provides a good picture.

Key Insights

- Scotland shows solid maturity across levels 2 to 4, but no councils have reached level 5 in data, AI, or AI culture.
- However, its coherent national strategy and strong central digital governance create consistency.
- Rural and island councils face persistent capability and resource gaps.

Data Maturity

Scotland's councils are pioneering its way with a stronger data baseline when compared to other regions within the UK. With 40% of scaling data infrastructure at Level 4 with 31.2% at Level 3, it has a structured data system in place with an agenda of making it more efficient.

Key drivers include:

- Strong data leadership supported by the LGDP and the Scottish Government's Data Maturity Programme, facilitated by the Digital Office, which enhances data governance, drives improvement plans, and fosters a data-driven culture across more than 40 organisations.
- Joint digital efforts by COSLA, the Improvement Service, and the Digital Partnership Board support authorities in tackling legacy systems and developing common, interoperable data standards.
- Investment in workforce skills development through targeted training and peer learning programmes from the Scottish Digital Academy and the Improvement Service.

As a result, councils are improving their strategies and are involved in more tactical and operational decisions.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS - SCOTLAND

The presence of 70% councils at level 3-4 alone implies that Scotland has successfully conformed to the fundamental conditions required to reach an operational data maturity.

AI Maturity

Scotland's AI Strategy (2021) was a ground-breaking initiative by the Scottish Government, led by the Scottish AI Alliance, ahead of what was to come in the form of a global AI revolution in 2022 with the mass availability of Large Language Models as generative AI tools. While many government organisations were caught by surprise with the rapid growth of tools such as ChatGPT, a significant number of Scotland's authorities were one step ahead.

AI adoption in Scotland is widely distributed, with 25% of the councils with no AI plans, 22% starting to acknowledge AI with early conversations. However, 31% of the councils are taking initiative with early pilots and experimentation, followed by 21% utilising AI in at least one of their workflows. These figures indicate that Scotland's national capability programmes and emerging AI guidance are assisting councils to strategically utilise AI; however, enterprise-level deployment is still hindered.

Examples of AI progress include:

- Pilot projects and initiatives in the majority of councils
- Gen AI is being adopted by all levels of employees
- Implementation of AI tools in planning, services and within administration.

While the progress of AI adoption in Scotland is promising, it faces **challenges when it comes to scaling**. Councils lack expertise and incur high costs in this journey towards complete AI adoption, and the impact of this lag is significantly sharper for smaller councils.

The Scottish Government's Consultation Hub is gathering feedback from the local population in regards to the AI initiatives that are already being implemented. So far, one of the key concerns from the public are regarding data privacy.

Scotland's aligned digital ecosystem places councils in a strong position for the future, but sustained investment in capability and structured operational models will be required to unlock enterprise-level AI maturity across all its local authorities.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS - SCOTLAND

AI Culture

Scotland's AI Culture is progressing but remains uneven, with most councils sitting at Levels 2–3 as they shift from a mainly top-down approach to staff-driven engagement. Strong cross-council collaboration and visible leadership support have enabled a few councils, such as Falkirk, Orkney, and North Lanarkshire, to reach Level 4, demonstrating more mature experimentation and active staff participation.

However, *workforce readiness varies*, with gaps in digital literacy, limited AI-specific training, constrained change management capacity, and weak organisation-wide feedback loops. To embed a truly adaptive and responsible AI culture, councils will need continued strong leadership, greater staff engagement and improved planning ensuring future workforce strategies support digital efficiency and create AI-friendly, data-driven workplaces

SCOTLAND AI USE CASES

Scotland is in a position on the AI growth chart where a good number of local authorities are adopting different ways to incorporate AI into a variety of their operations. These use cases also serve as an answer as to why, despite having a smaller number of councils, Scotland ranks higher than most other regions in the UK.

Fife council is currently operating an AI-powered installation for sorting household waste. The AI technology assists in identifying and sorting materials such as aluminum cans and PET bottles fulfilling regulatory requirements. The goal is to strengthen efficiency within the waste management system by achieving lower landfills and higher recycling rates.

Glasgow City Council is also following the path of Fife and is building a state-of-the-art Materials Recovery Facility MRF featuring robotic sorters and optical sorting technology to maximise recovery and purity of recyclables.

Aberdeen City Council has taken a different route towards using AI and has done so within its internal administration services. Aberdeen pioneered the AB-1 chatbot, which uses Microsoft LUIS to answer complex resident queries 24/7, with multilingual capabilities including local dialects and several community languages.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS - ENGLAND

England's local government structure is multi-tiered, encompassing unitary authorities, London boroughs, counties, and metropolitan and non-metropolitan district councils. This highly fragmented structure creates substantial divergence in digital and AI maturity, shaped by governance models, funding capacity and geography.

England's digital infrastructure and policy guidance operate via the Government Digital Service, Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government and Local Digital Programme. Urban authorities, particularly in metropolitan and London areas, have stronger leadership structures, higher economies of scale for investment in digital infrastructure and cross-authority collaborative frameworks, whilst smaller district councils' strategic alignment is constrained by factors such as funding, fewer frameworks and inaccessible talent markets.

Key Insights

- Clear divide between regions, with London, Yorkshire and Humber and the South West demonstrating more advanced data and AI maturity, while the East Midlands and Eastern regions remain concentrated at the foundational stages.
- Urban authorities consistently outperform rural districts, supported by stronger leadership models, collaborative digital ecosystems, and access to skilled labour markets.
- Fragmented governance continues to impede uniform progress, with districts particularly vulnerable to capability gaps, legacy systems and inconsistent investment cycles.

Data Maturity

Regional data maturity in England shows substantial variation. Yorkshire and Humber lead with Level 5 capabilities, followed by London at Level 4. Most regions, including the East Midlands and Eastern, are concentrated in mid-level maturity (Levels 2–3), while foundational immaturity is most evident in the East Midlands (10% at Level 1). Stronger regions benefit from integrated data strategies, shared infrastructure, and collaborative national programmes.

Authority-Type Analysis

- **County Councils:** 90% operate above Level 3, with over half (53.8%) at Level 4. These councils leverage centralised data governance, robust platforms and strategic leadership to drive operational use.
- **Metropolitan Councils:** 85% are at Levels 3–4, reflecting their scale, shared resources, and cross-department integration.
- **London Boroughs:** Balanced distribution; 50% at Level 3 and a third at Level 4, supported by London Office of Technology and Innovation and data-driven governance models.
- **Non-Metropolitan Districts:** Clustered around Levels 2–3 (90%), with limited adoption beyond Level 4, constrained by underinvestment and competing resource priorities.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS - ENGLAND

AI Maturity

AI adoption across England remains emergent. Early experimentation is concentrated in London, Yorkshire and Humber, South West and metropolitan areas (notable share at Levels 3–4), indicating more advanced strategy alignment and operational experimentation. In contrast, the East Midlands and Eastern regions show higher concentrations at Levels 1–2, signalling foundational capability gaps.

Authority-Level Analysis

- **County Councils:** 60% at Levels 3–5, deploying chatbots, RPA and AI in HR/planning.
- **Metropolitan Councils:** 70% at Levels 3–4, benefiting from innovation clusters and shared expertise.
- **London Boroughs:** Moderate adoption, balancing innovation with organisational caution.
- **Non-Metropolitan Districts:** Over 80% below Level 3; AI largely limited to conceptual discussion.

AI Culture

Cultural readiness mirrors structural and demographic differences. Most regions exhibit early-stage maturity (Levels 1–2), with caution and limited confidence in AI adoption. Yorkshire and Humber, London, the South West, and the North West show higher cultural maturity, with 30–50% of councils at Levels 3–4, reflecting leadership support and openness to experimentation. Level 4 maturity remains uncommon, concentrated in areas with proactive governance.

Authority-Level Analysis

- **County Councils:** 60% of staff environments above Level 3, showing strong engagement and experimentation.
- **Metropolitan Councils:** 40% at Level 3, 20% at Level 4, demonstrating a learning culture and progressive adoption.
- **London Boroughs:** Moderate cultural maturity, balancing innovation with bureaucratic caution.
- **Non-Metropolitan Districts:** Over 90% below Level 3, reflecting limited staff training, awareness and engagement.

ENGLAND AI USE CASES

Surrey County Council is the first UK authority to shift from manual pothole inspections to AI-enabled video assessments. Computer-vision cameras installed in highway vehicles now detect and photograph potholes automatically, creating repair logs without requiring staff to step onto the road. Future upgrades will expand detection to issues such as missing signs and overgrown vegetation. After successful trials since 2021, the council is rolling out the system more widely in partnership with Route Reports, enabling faster, safer, and more comprehensive monitoring across one of the country's busiest road networks.

London borough of Merton/Merton Council has a **live, operational AI/IoT use case** through its deployment of **Breathe London air-quality monitors** and **Vivacity Labs traffic sensors**, which together provide real-time data on pedestrian movement, transport patterns, and pollution across the borough. This system, confirmed in multiple council and news releases, collects continuous environmental and mobility data to inform planning, transport design, and sustainability decisions, supporting the borough's climate and smart-city goals.

Crucially, Merton states that **no personal data is collected** and the technology cannot be used for enforcement, positioning the initiative firmly within ethical and non-surveillance boundaries. As reported by the council, these sensors are already active across town centres, school areas, and major roads, making it one of the borough's most mature digital projects and a practical example of early AI-enabled urban management.

West Oxfordshire District Council: In a pilot project funded by the PropTech Engagement Fund, West Oxfordshire working jointly with Cotswold District Council deployed AI-enabled tools to manage and analyse public feedback submitted during planning consultations. The system uses machine-learning to auto-tag comments based on keyword lists and generative AI to summarise long qualitative responses into concise bullet-point summaries greatly streamlining the analysis of consultation input. This AI solution reduced the time required for officers to summarise and report consultation feedback by around 85%, enabling faster, more efficient processing of citizen engagement data.

Coventry City Council is moving into early operational AI deployment through targeted service-level initiatives. The council piloted Microsoft 365 Copilot across 300 staff to support document drafting and reduce administrative burden, demonstrating a practical commitment to testing AI-enabled productivity tools within core workflows (Socitm, 2024). In parallel, Coventry has partnered with Palantir Technologies to build a Strategic AI Platform designed to support children's services and social care, including AI-assisted transcription and case-note summarisation, positioning Coventry among the first UK local authorities to integrate AI into frontline service processes while maintaining human-led decision-making.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS - NORTHERN IRELAND

Under the 2015 reform, 11 unitary authorities were created in Northern Ireland. These district councils deliver all the local services. They are centrally coordinated by the Department of Finance, the Digital Shared Services, the NI Public Sector Shared Network (PSSN), NI Local Government Association (NILGA) and NI Statistics and Research Agency. (NISRA) All of these organisations ensure that the councils are managed holistically; however, limited local capacities and uneven data capability within the councils have created a lack of an AI strategy for the councils on an individual level.

Key Insights:

- Streamlining the authorities in 2015 paved the way for data sharing amongst councils.
- Uneven distribution of AI readiness across the region.
- Northern Ireland AI and Digital Office works locally to tailor AI guidance

Data Maturity

45% of NI councils fall within the mid-range of the data maturity (Level 3) spectrum, exhibiting *strengthening capacity in developing structured systems, interdepartmental integration and active experimentation in automation and analytics*. However, 18% of the NI councils lack council-specific data strategies. At the same time, only 36% of councils are beginning to shape a digital strategy. This highlights systemic constraints such as limited funding, skill shortages and uneven digital capacity.

Key Drivers:

- Digital Transformation Flexible Fund (DTFF): Provides targeted support for digital upgrades, innovation, and council transformation projects in partnership with local authorities, the NI Executive, and Invest NI.
- Office of AI and Digital (NI Executive): Drives the strategic vision for digital and AI adoption, investing in skills, culture change, and responsible innovation across councils.
- NILGA: Supports councils through guidance and advocacy to standardise data governance, improve digital connectivity, and strengthen long-term infrastructure and data maturity.

A few councils have reached Level 3 showing greater potential for NI's future growth. Although the restructuring occurred in 2015, this level of progress is notable given the substantial organisational adjustments and capacity building required over the past decade.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS - NORTHERN IRELAND

AI Maturity

AI maturity is an emerging concept, with 54% NI councils beginning to show interest through integrating AI into their digital strategies, followed by 9% advancing to piloting. The ranking indicates that **most councils are still in the exploratory phase due to structural and organisation barriers**. However, initiatives like the Artificial Intelligence Collaboration Centre (AiCC) and funding via Belfast and Derry City Deals are aiming to resolve these challenges, and facilitate resources, training and collaboration for councils interested in embracing AI.

Northern Ireland's responsible AI development is shaped by the UK Common AI Principles, the EU AI Act, particularly important given Northern Ireland's dual alignment with UK and EU markets, and the Northern Ireland AI and Digital Office, which adapts guidance and frameworks to local needs, ensuring AI adoption remains both compliant and contextually appropriate.

Key Barriers

- Councils are facing budget shortfalls, and the deficit is not likely to be met by the central government.
- The 2015 reform created a lack of standardised procedures which affected the efficiency of local government staff.
- Insufficient national coordination for AI governance, standards, or assurance.

AI Culture

Culture toward AI remains in its infancy, with over 50% of Northern Ireland's councils lacking AI-related discussion, only 27% acknowledging AI's importance, and 18% of councils including staff and stakeholders in early conversation. **The AI culture is highly conservative, driven by leadership's recognition of digital transformation and external partnerships, but held back** by a lack of dedicated AI leadership, staff training, ethical clarity, and prioritised funding for core infrastructure over innovation. This cautious approach is reflected in limited pilot activities focused mainly on automation and chat-based tools rather than advanced analytics.

Key Opportunities

- Shared ICT and data foundations could enable low-cost AI scaling once governance matures.
- AI-assisted customer service, asset monitoring, and document automation represent quick wins.
- Potential for a "regional AI collaboration model" to pool expertise across all councils.

NORTHERN IRELAND AI USE CASES

While Northern Ireland is still up and coming in integrating AI, AI adoption in Northern Ireland's councils is emerging through small-scale pilots, with **Belfast City Council** trialling Generative AI for communication and residents engagement.

Councils such as **Lisburn and Castlereagh** and **Mid and East Antrim** are pursuing process automation and digital grant programmes to support SME uptake of AI, while also introducing early workflow automation in planning and HR as a first step towards operational maturity.

Meanwhile, **Causeway Coast and Glens** is piloting IoT networks using LPWAN technology for environmental monitoring and asset maintenance, laying the groundwork for future predictive analytics in public infrastructure, as well as potential AI integration.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS - WALES

Wales operates a unitary authority model with 22 councils, out of which this study has ranked 12. Apart from the major council authorities, Wales also has a network of community and town councils. The Welsh Government sets national digital and AI policy frameworks, promotes collaboration (for example, via the Welsh Local Government Association Digital Team) and supports shared infrastructure and guidance rather than highly independent local pathways. For example, in 2024, a sub-group focusing on Robotic Process Automation (RPA) / AI was established for councils across Wales.

The pace and depth of digital/data/AI maturity among councils is relatively modest, reflecting resource, scale and capability constraints. However, The Welsh Government has also established an Office for AI and a Strategic AI Advisory Group, providing both funding and frameworks to support the responsible adoption of AI across the public sector. This includes training public sector staff in effective AI use and piloting platform-based AI tools to improve decision-making and service delivery. This fosters responsible innovation throughout the funding, training, and pilot projects, with robust ethical oversight.

Key Insights

- Data maturity in Wales is moderate, with most organisations still building essential data foundations.
- AI maturity remains at an early stage, marked by limited adoption and minimal strategic integration of AI tools.
- Wales' data maturity varies across authorities, but ongoing support from the Welsh Government and partners, through schemes such as Civiteq, continue to guide steady improvement.

Data Maturity

The assessment of Data Maturity across Welsh councils indicates that 50% of authorities are positioned at Level 2, while 41.7% have reached Level 3. 8.3% remain at Level 1, and none have achieved Levels 4 or 5. This distribution highlights a *developing but still foundational stage in data capability across Wales*. Most councils have established some data management practices and recognise the importance of data-driven decision-making, yet advanced integration, governance frameworks, and analytics capabilities are largely underdeveloped.

Key Insights

- Strong national policy alignment: Wales' AI and digital frameworks prioritise ethical, inclusive, and transparent implementation, creating a robust base for future maturity.
- Shared services and collaboration: National tools and cross-council forums support knowledge-sharing and collective problem-solving across local authorities.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS - WALES

- Foundational digital literacy: Recent evaluations of digital inclusion programmes show good basic digital skills among staff and service users, signalling readiness for further data and AI development.

The absence of higher-level maturity (Levels 4–5) suggests that local authorities would need to invest in infrastructure for data interoperability, upskilling initiatives, and embedding an evidence-based culture within operational processes.

Additionally, the limited availability of publicly accessible data for many Welsh councils serves as a proxy for lower maturity, indicating challenges in transparency, data management, and the foundational capabilities required for more advanced AI adoption.

AI Maturity

The AI Maturity landscape is even more nascent, with 33.3% of councils at Level 1, 58.3% at Level 2, and only 8.3% reaching Level 3. No authorities have attained advanced stages of AI development (Levels 4–5). *This distribution reflects an early awareness of artificial intelligence but limited practical adoption. Many councils are still in the exploratory or conceptual phase*, with AI discussions often centred on potential use cases rather than implementation.

The report notes that the research formed part of a wider project by the Welsh Workforce Partnership Council (WPC), which brings together representatives from the Welsh Government, employers, and trade unions. It highlights concerns around the accuracy and trustworthiness of AI, emphasising the need for improved understanding, education, and training. Existing public sector IT infrastructure, software, and functionality are also identified as potential constraints that may limit future AI integration.

AI Culture

The findings on AI Culture reveal that 50% of Welsh councils are at Level 1, 41.7% at Level 2, and only 8.3% have reached Level 3. This dimension emerged as the most constrained among the three, illustrating that *organisational culture remains a significant barrier to AI advancement*.

A low cultural maturity indicates limited awareness, internal advocacy, and leadership engagement with AI concepts. Many councils still view AI as a distant or complex technology rather than a practical tool for improving service delivery or operational efficiency.

Building an AI culture requires visible leadership support, internal champions, targeted

communication strategies, and a focus on demystifying AI to create confidence and curiosity among staff. Fostering such a culture will be essential for enabling broader AI adoption and integration in the Welsh public sector.

Key Initiatives

- Welsh councils are beginning to trial AI tools such as AI scribes, chatbot assistants, and early-stage public-sector AI prototypes, signalling growing confidence in controlled experimentation.
- Although widescale deployment remains limited, these pilots demonstrate that AI could enhance service delivery and internal efficiency.
- The Welsh Government's AI statement (September 2025) confirms dedicated funding for pilot initiatives across public services, reinforcing a national commitment to responsible, evidence-based AI adoption.

WALES AI USE CASES

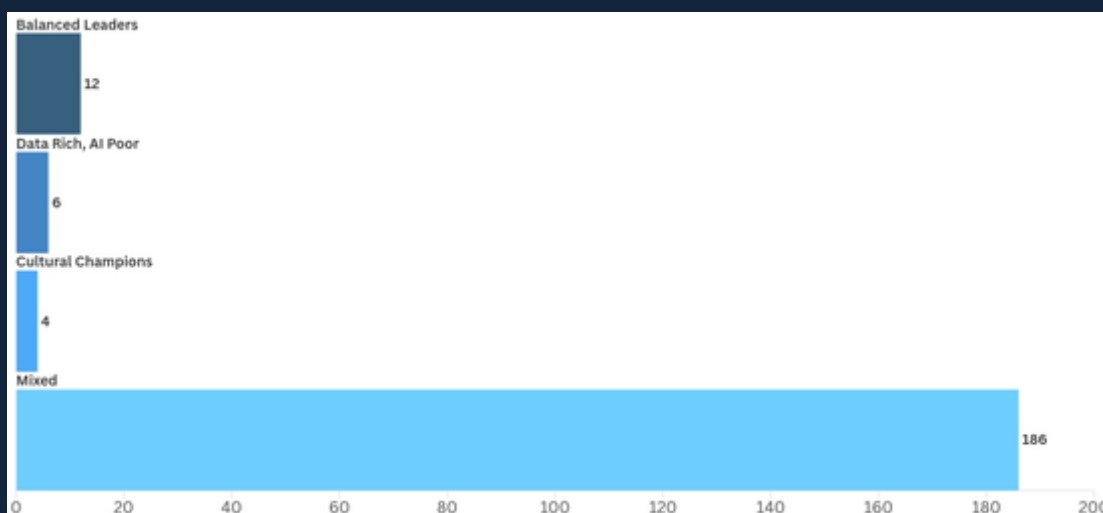
AI adoption in Wales remains limited but is gradually emerging, with activity largely centred on service transformation. Early adopters such as **Bridgend County Borough Council**, using its “Oggie” chatbot for resident enquiries, and **Powys County Council** are deploying basic conversational tools to handle both resident and staff queries, typically confined to narrow functional domains.

DIGITAL TRAJECTORIES ACROSS THE UK

To illustrate patterns in council-level digital performance, all authorities were grouped into four trajectory types based on their scores across Data Maturity, AI Maturity, and AI Culture. This segmentation highlights not only which councils are most advanced, but also the strategic pathways different authorities are taking.

The classification is based on the three dimensions:

- **Balanced Leaders (6%)** are councils that score 4 or above in both data maturity and AI maturity, and have a strong cultural readiness score (3 or above).
- **Data-Rich, AI-Poor (3%)** councils have high data maturity (4 or above) but low AI maturity (2 or below), indicating strong data foundations but limited AI adoption.
- **Cultural Champions (2%)** are councils with a supportive AI culture (3 or above) despite having low data maturity (2 or below)
- **Mixed (89%)** Mixed councils do not have a clearly dominant dimension, but instead possess a balance across the three dimensions, albeit at lower scores.



The dominance of the mixed category reflects the emerging state of AI Adoption throughout the country, showing a developing baseline of data maturity and AI experimentation.

DIGITAL TRAJECTORIES: BALANCED LEADERS

The organisations in this category are councils scoring 4 or above across all dimensions. This could be thanks to enterprise-grade data architecture, mature governance systems, successful AI deployments, and AI-adaptive organisational culture. Balanced Leaders appear across many areas:

- Scotland: Aberdeenshire, Falkirk, Glasgow City, Orkney Islands, West Dunbartonshire
- London: Enfield, Merton
- Yorkshire and Humber: Barnsley, Bradford
- West Midlands: Staffordshire County Council
- South East: Surrey County Council
- North West: Burnley

There are four common factors driving these councils to rank higher consistently across all dimensions: long-term investments, mature governance policies, strategic data integration within services, and leveraging partnership ecosystems. Each of these factors has been explored below:

1. Long-term reinvestment in data infrastructures

AI cannot function on weak or legacy systems; long-term funding is needed to maintain high-quality, interoperable data foundations.

Surrey County Council: has an established Data Strategy and analytic teams working across council data, and participates in the Surrey Office of Data Analytics to support multi-agency information sharing and insights, including work with adult social care data

Enfield Council: is extending automation and AI across customer contact, housing and other services, building on long-term investment in digital platforms and structured workflows.

Merton Council: collaborates through the South London Partnership on smart-city and IoT initiatives, using cross-borough engagement to shape shared data and digital infrastructure that supports public services and managed innovation

Bradford Council: takes part in regional initiatives that share and analyse data on health, education and community safety, using these insights to inform planning and better targeting of services.

2. Mature governance for digital transformation

Strong governance prevents fragmented digital efforts and unmanaged risks. It creates the stability required for digital transformation to scale effectively.

DIGITAL TRAJECTORIES: BALANCED LEADERS

Staffordshire County Council: Runs a formal ICT Governance Board, Technical Assurance Group and Business Stakeholder Group; its Digital Programme Board coordinates IT, service leads and finance to deliver a governance-led digital innovation strategy.

Falkirk Council: has a structured Digital Falkirk Strategy with governance arrangements that help priorities automation and data-integration projects across services.

Merton Council: Uses corporate transformation governance to align service redesign, data use and technology decisions, supporting safe and consistent digital adoption.

Barnsley Council: Operates a council-wide information-governance framework, supported by an information-governance policy suite and committee oversight, to promote the safe, secure and consistent use of data across its services

3. Governance-led data integration within service processes

By integrating data through strong governance, councils avoid siloed information and conflicting standards. This allows digital and AI solutions to operate smoothly across services and deliver more joined-up outcomes. **Barnsley Council** built a Vulnerability Index linking 26 datasets using unique property reference numbers to give a house-level view of risk, transforming early intervention approaches.

Aberdeenshire Council embeds governance-led digital projects across services so that shared, well-governed data supports more integrated service delivery and collaboration with partners.

Burnley Borough Council is joining up data and consolidating systems to support AI-enabled automation (including chatbots, RPA and AI for FOI handling), laying the groundwork for more integrated, multi-agency digital working.

Enfield Council is expanding automation and AI across customer contact, housing and other services, using tools such as chatbots and Microsoft 365 Copilot to create more consistent, data-driven workflows.

4. Partnership ecosystems

Balanced Leaders do not operate alone, they collaborate actively with innovation hubs, universities, SMEs, health partners, and neighbouring local authorities. **Glasgow City Council, for example,** co-leads a multi-million-pound partnership with the Smart Things Accelerator Centre (STAC) and UK Government to build a globally competitive smart-tech hub in robotics, IoT and clean tech.

DIGITAL TRAJECTORIES: BALANCED LEADERS

Orkney Islands Council: Works with renewable energy research centres and digital innovation labs through the Orkney Research & Innovation Campus, supporting AI-enabled marine and energy experimentation.

Bradford Council: Bradford Council collaborates with the University of Bradford on work such as health-related data and analytics, digital inclusion initiatives and exploratory AI-related projects

West Dunbartonshire Council: is a founding partner in Clyde-Valley digital skills and innovation collaborations, including shared digital infrastructure and data-sharing work that underpins predictive analytics pilots and common digital standards

DIGITAL TRAJECTORIES: DATA RICH, AI POOR

Councils in this group score 4+ above for data maturity but below level 2 in AI maturity. *Despite having stable data foundations for AI adoption, barriers such as implementation capacity, procurement constraints, limited organisational demand and workforce shortages hinder overall AI integration and deployment.* Below are examples of councils that exhibit strong data maturity but limited AI adoption:

Leicester City Council developed the Open Leicester platform as an integrated open data solution for analytics, API access, and dataset exploration. Another example of high data maturity, **Cheshire East Council** leveraged cross-council data-sharing platforms, and operational dashboards to enhance its services.

Perth and Kinross Council use Power BI and ArcGIS for business intelligence analytics, featuring 'Insight P&K' interactive locality profiles, while **Adur District Council** feeds into the Open data service, publishing multiple reusable datasets under the Open Government Licence.

Gloucestershire County Council uses SAP Analytics Cloud as part of its pioneering enterprise resource planning systems adoption, and **Rotherham MBC** uses internal SQL and Excel-based reporting with Civica Pentana for performance and risk management.

These councils have high latent AI potential as their challenge is not data readiness but transforming data through automations, predictive analytics, and service optimisation.

DIGITAL TRAJECTORIES: CULTURAL CHAMPIONS

These councils score 3+ in AI culture but lack the data architecture, integration, and governance required for responsible AI deployment. They are often enthusiastic adopters of new tools and automation but constrained by legacy systems.

For example, **West Northamptonshire Council** has actively piloted AI in customer services and to support tackling homelessness, reporting more than £500,000 in savings and demonstrating strong leadership support and staff openness, but it continues to operate with legacy systems and inconsistent data infrastructure.

London Borough of Croydon shows a high commitment to innovation through its digital transformation plan, AI summits and leadership visibility, and has trialled AI tools with around 80 percent accuracy, yet financial pressures and legacy components limit integrated data development.

Tewkesbury Borough Council has formalised an Artificial Intelligence Policy that encourages responsible experimentation and organisational learning, showing strong cultural readiness, but the policy also acknowledges the need for stronger governance and more mature data processes before AI could be systematically embedded.

These councils score high on AI culture because of *strong leadership highly supportive of innovation, staff openness in adopting automation and regional exposure to the digital innovation ecosystem*. However, their growth is often limited due to lower data maturity as a result of inconsistent data governance, inefficient data engineering capacity and legacy architectures.

DIGITAL TRAJECTORIES: MIXED

This trajectory model shows that *maturity is not linear*, councils do not simply progress from low to high. Instead, they follow *distinct strategic pathways, driven by: organisational structure, regional ecosystems, funding stability, legacy system complexity, governance models, leadership culture*. Understanding these trajectories allows national and regional bodies to **target investment, focus capability-building, and scale what works** in a more coherent and system-wide manner.

The majority of UK councils fall under this category. These councils show varied and uneven patterns across data maturity, AI maturity and organisational readiness, typically due to variations in funding levels, population size, fragmented organisation structures and legacy system barriers to automation and AI adoption. Examples include large city councils such as Leeds, Birmingham, Belfast and Edinburgh as well as counties, unitary authorities, and numerous coastal/rural authorities.

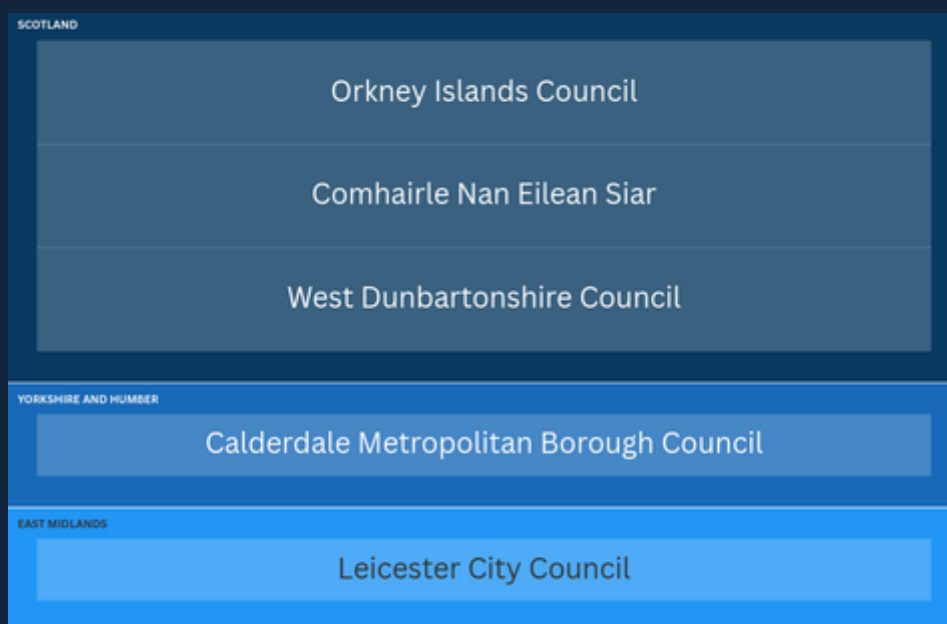
GAP ANALYSIS ON PERFORMANCE

The previous segments highlighted a crucial theme indicating larger councils have better resources and consequently higher data and AI maturity levels. To verify this claim, this particular section focuses on diagnostic analysis of which councils are performing above or below predicted expectations. Two structural factors strongly influence local digital capacity: the number of elected seats and population size were used as a proxy for organisational complexity and scale.

By comparing expected maturity scores against observed values, the tree-map below shows councils which outperformed and underperformed relative to their scale.

1. Outperformers: Exceeding Expectations

The outperformer group contains a mix of small, medium, and larger councils, which is important because it shows that *high data maturity is not tied to size alone*.



For example, several Scottish unitary authorities such as **West Dunbartonshire** perform above expectations despite being relatively small in population terms, while councils like **Leicester City and Calderdale**, both significantly larger, also exceed their predicted maturity levels. In contrast, island authorities such as **Orkney Islands Council** and **Comhairle nan Eilean Siar** are among the smallest in the UK, yet still surpass their expected maturity.

What unites these performers is not their scale but the strength of their internal approach to data and digital leadership. These councils make clearer strategic choices, adopting more cohesive governance practices, and moving faster to embed data-driven ways of working. Their performance shows that *maturity gains can occur in very different organisational contexts when leadership, clarity of purpose, and a supportive culture align*.

GAP ANALYSIS ON PERFORMANCE

2. Laggards: Underperforming for size and geography

This group also spans different population sizes and geographies, showing that underperformance is not limited to either small or large authorities.

For instance, **Ashford and Test Valley** are mid-sized district councils that fall below their expected maturity, while **North East Derbyshire** is smaller but still underperforms relative to its predicted score.

In Northern Ireland, **Ards and North Down** is one of the larger district councils yet sits in the laggard category, and **Monmouthshire** in Wales (a mid-sized authority) also underperforms its expected level.



The regression analysis highlights that these councils are not meeting the level of maturity that their size and structure would typically support, signalling that there is untapped potential that could be realised through stronger coordination, investment, and clearer leadership focus.

The examples above show that **maturity gaps emerge from organisational factors rather than just structural ones**. Councils may have strategic fragmentation, legacy processes, unclear ownership of data work, or a slower pace of cultural adoption.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The current AI overview has shown that AI Adoption across the UK local authority landscape is still emerging and fragmented. While size and geography initially suggested that specific councils may thrive, those who excel do so regardless, showing that internal organisational capabilities help councils excel beyond other factors.

Although each region has its unique strengths and challenges, best practice could be encouraged by learning from successful case studies in each region, benchmarking, and developing internal human capabilities (leadership, culture, training) at the same time as the technical. For example, sub-regional clusters could share analysts, GIS, and automation teams to accelerate innovation capacity beyond implementing the national-level programmes outlined in documents like the AI Opportunities action plan.

To maximise this, we suggest that this targeted approach is combined with leveraging sector-wide resources specific to councils from organisations like APSE, Coram, SOCITM, SSN, the Digital Catapults, as well as regional hubs like the Scottish AI alliance, and knowledge partners like universities, which are currently underexploited in most regions.

Beyond this, measuring impact in terms of human development and sustainability in addition to national economic indicators will give a more nuanced view of the actual impact of AI, especially capturing longer-term social outcomes. This will more clearly highlight potential areas which could be further supported or incentivised in terms of AI adoption.

England: Tiered Shared-Digital Model

England could leverage the unique features of its local authority structure through a tiered digital model where county councils run core platforms, metropolitan areas lead innovation, and districts focus on service redesign. For example, London could accelerate its AI Readiness with the support of local authority clusters that share tools and skills.

Suggested actions:

- Counties host shared data/AI platforms, cyber standards, and cloud procurement.
- Districts plug into county-led digital foundations instead of duplicating systems.
- Metros/unitaries produce reusable AI playbooks and demonstrator projects.

Scotland: National Platforms and Rural Levelling

Scotland could expand its performing regional shared platforms while enabling rural councils to pool capabilities through regional clusters that bring specialist expertise closer to remote authorities. Scotland also benefits from strong links between its universities and some local authorities, which can further be leveraged to inform councils at an earlier stage of development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Suggested actions:

- Scale national AI, cloud, and data integration platforms as shared capabilities.
- Standardise data pipelines across all councils.
- Leverage existing partnerships with innovation and research hubs to support LAs.
- Continue using additional funding mechanisms like CivTech for shared support.

Northern Ireland: Shared Systems and Long-Term Stability

NI could also address structural funding constraints by pooling digital capabilities and supporting councils to collaborate through cross-council clusters instead of working alone. However, the recognition of funding limitations is also important and worth reviewing.

Suggested actions:

- Support NI-wide platforms for data, analytics, investigate cybersecurity, and AI.
- Increase training and capabilities of the data/AI teams serving all 11 councils.
- Leverage funding to address key shortfalls prohibiting skills and capacity development.

Wales: National Architecture and Regional Skills

Wales would benefit from modernising legacy systems, upskilling its teams to improve capacity and tackle shortages through data management and AI.

Suggested actions:

- Develop data architectures based on shared standards.
- Replace ageing systems in social care, housing, and finance to unlock capacity.
- Co-design digital and AI services that support employees in upskilling and leveraging their applied knowledge.

Overall Focus

We envision shared digital platforms, regional collaboration, cross-sector partnerships, and targeted workforce development as ways to offer pathways to scale AI capability without requiring each council to build from scratch. ***Stronger national guidance for Local Authorities on AI assurance, data standards, and potential cyber security will also be critical in enabling safe, responsible adoption.***

The UK now requires a differentiated, capability-based model for local government AI transformation, one that leverages high-performing councils as regional innovation hubs, supports counties to provide shared digital infrastructure, enables districts to plug into common platforms, and empowers Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland to address country-specific structural constraints. ***Progress will depend not only on technology, but on leadership, governance, and the willingness to collaborate across institutional boundaries.***

CONCLUSION

This report provides a comprehensive, data-driven assessment of AI readiness across UK local government, covering a sample of 208 authorities and representing more than half of all authorities nationwide.

The findings reveal *a sector that is highly engaged and increasingly aware of the value of artificial intelligence, but progressing at markedly different speeds due to structural, financial, and organisational constraints.*

Four distinct digital trajectories **Balanced Leaders**, **Data-Rich/AI-Poor**, **Cultural Champions**, and **Mixed Readiness** illustrate the diversity of council pathways.

A small group of **Balanced Leaders**, including councils such as Calderdale, Surrey, Orkney Islands, and Glasgow, demonstrate what is possible when strong governance, partnership ecosystems, and long-term investment align. Their performance shows that *scale is not destiny; leadership ambition, strategic clarity, and data foundations matter more than geography or population size.*

In contrast, several larger authorities underperform relative to their resources, while a number of smaller councils significantly outperform expectations, underscoring systemic inconsistency in digital investment and organisational readiness.

Most councils sit within the **Mixed Readiness** category, reflecting a landscape where enthusiasm for innovation outpaces the capacity to implement it. Early AI adoption is visible across customer-facing and internal data analysis processes. Despite this, many councils still face significant barriers, including legacy systems, fragmented data, workforce shortages, and uncertainty surrounding ethics, standards, and regulatory compliance. These challenges risk widening the divide between advanced councils and those still struggling to modernise foundational infrastructure.

At the same time, the research highlights clear opportunities for councils to accelerate progress. Shared digital platforms, regional collaboration, cross-sector partnerships, and targeted workforce development offer pathways to scale AI capability without requiring each council to build from scratch. *Progress will depend not only on technology, but on leadership, governance, and the willingness to collaborate across institutional boundaries.*

Ultimately, AI represents a strategic opportunity to modernise public services, enhance resident outcomes, and build more resilient and data-driven local government. By acting on the insights and policy recommendations within this report and investing in the right capabilities, the UK can ensure that councils regardless of size or geography are equipped to deliver the next generation of public services.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The report focused on a comprehensive review of AI Adoption in UK Local Authorities, with a focus on AI Readiness as defined by Data Maturity, AI Maturity and AI Culture. Despite the breadth of this 18 month study covering 208 councils and representing 56% of all local authorities in the UK several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings.

1. Limited Primary Survey Responses

The initial questionnaire responses only represented 26 LAs. As a result, primary data alone was insufficient to build a fully representative national picture of AI readiness. To address this gap, the research team supplemented the initial results with extensive desk-based analysis.

2. Reliance on Publicly Available Information

Because most councils did not provide direct responses, the analysis draws heavily on publicly available information, including council websites, published digital or data strategies, annual reports, procurement documents, and public statements. However, transparency and reporting practices vary considerably between authorities. The research team is open to revising the information based on feedback - please contact us to do so.

3. Use of Secondary Research Tools

To enhance coverage, tools such as Perplexity, ChatGPT, and automated search methods were used to locate and cross-reference publicly available information. While these tools were entirely cross-checked and improved efficiency, they rely only on published sources.

4. Uneven Information Availability Across Nations

Variation in data availability affected the depth of analysis in some regions, particularly Wales and Northern Ireland. We have highlighted this through the confidence intervals for the reader's information.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

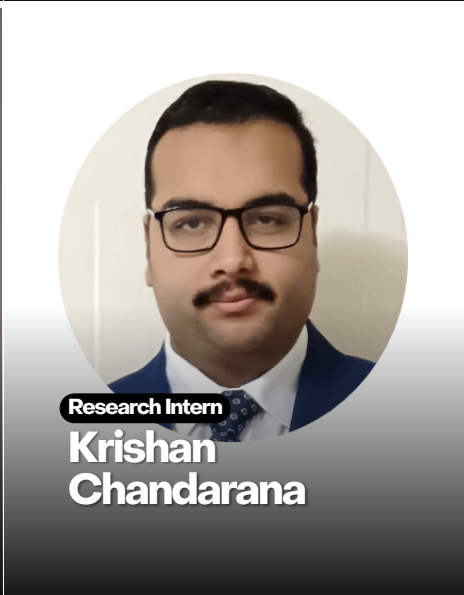
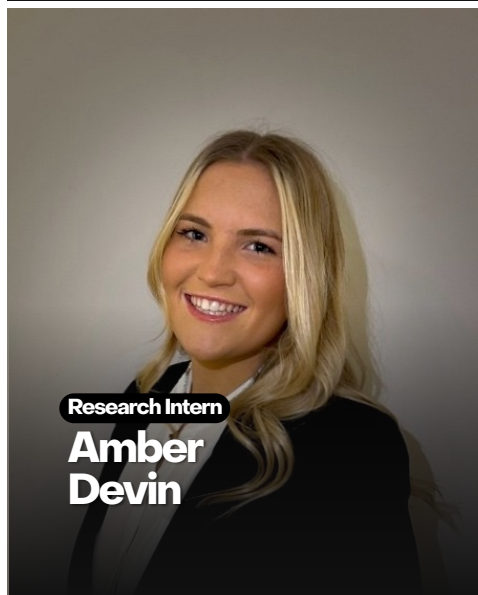
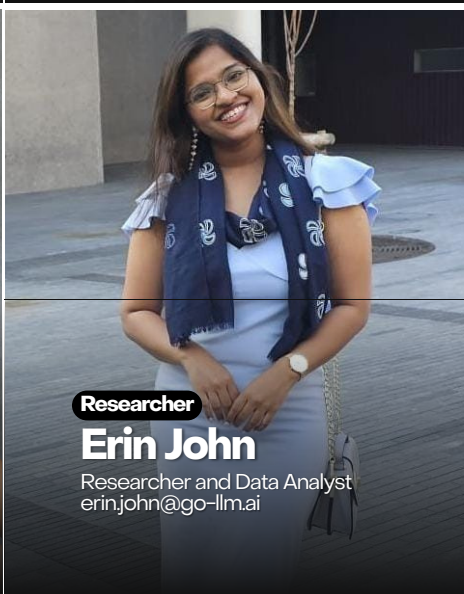
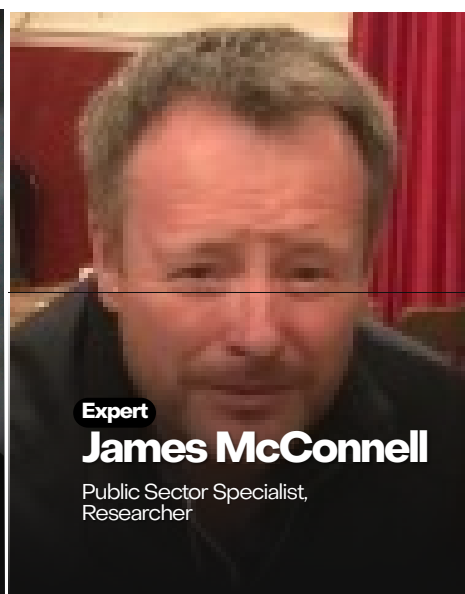
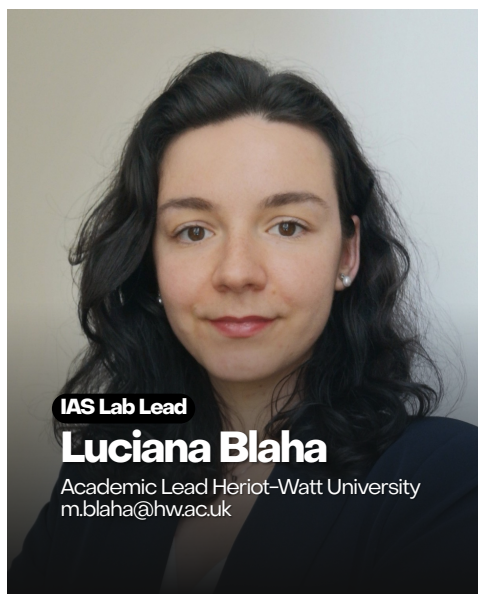
Further work for councils could go beyond designing structured frameworks to explicitly defining the roles and responsibilities of local organisations needed to turn strategy into delivery. This could include developing cluster-level plans for groups of councils and tracking performance through a shared repository that records each council's digital and AI maturity and supports tailored, data-driven recommendations for next steps.

The study also captured very rich data which was not included in this report in order to stick to the scope of the study. Future work may develop further on this data however, particularly with a focus on ethics and ethical frameworks, cybersecurity, sustainability, and diversity and inclusion, as all these aspects are increasingly relevant as organisations progress along the AI readiness journey.

Meet the team

GoLLM transforms feedback to insights via its flagship product D.A.V.E. (Dynamic Analytics Visualisation Engine) to enable smarter actions, including for public consultations, enterprise customer satisfaction and employee engagement, organisations market research, and more.

The IAS Lab at Heriot-Watt University connects business, computer science, and engineering researchers for impactful research on AI in organisations.



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George Tarvit

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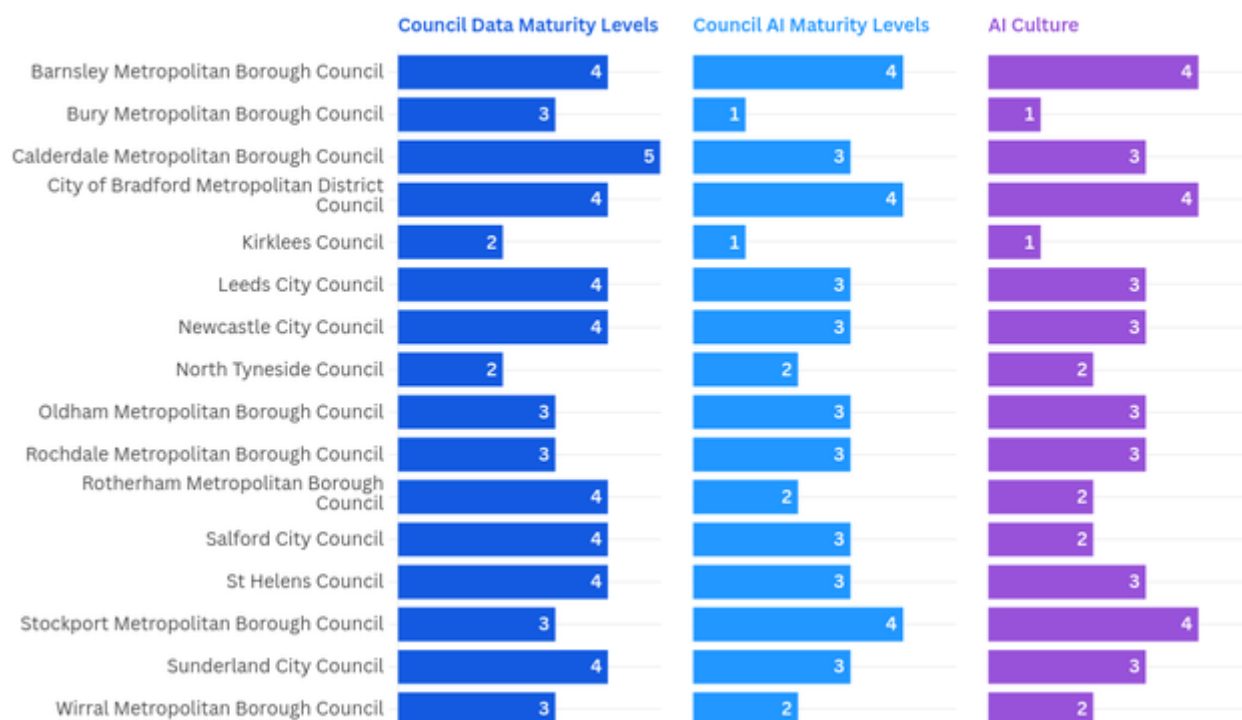


Interface
The knowledge connection for business

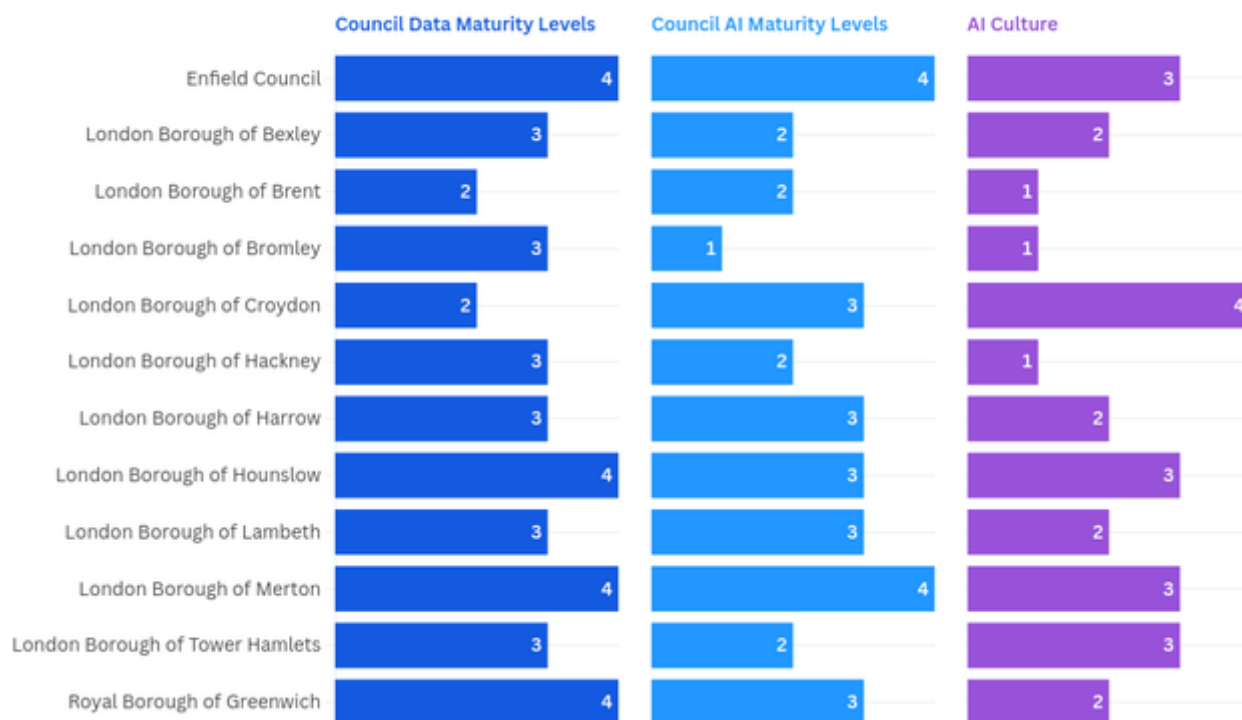
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APPENDIX A: ENGLAND SCORING BY TYPE

English Metropolitan Councils

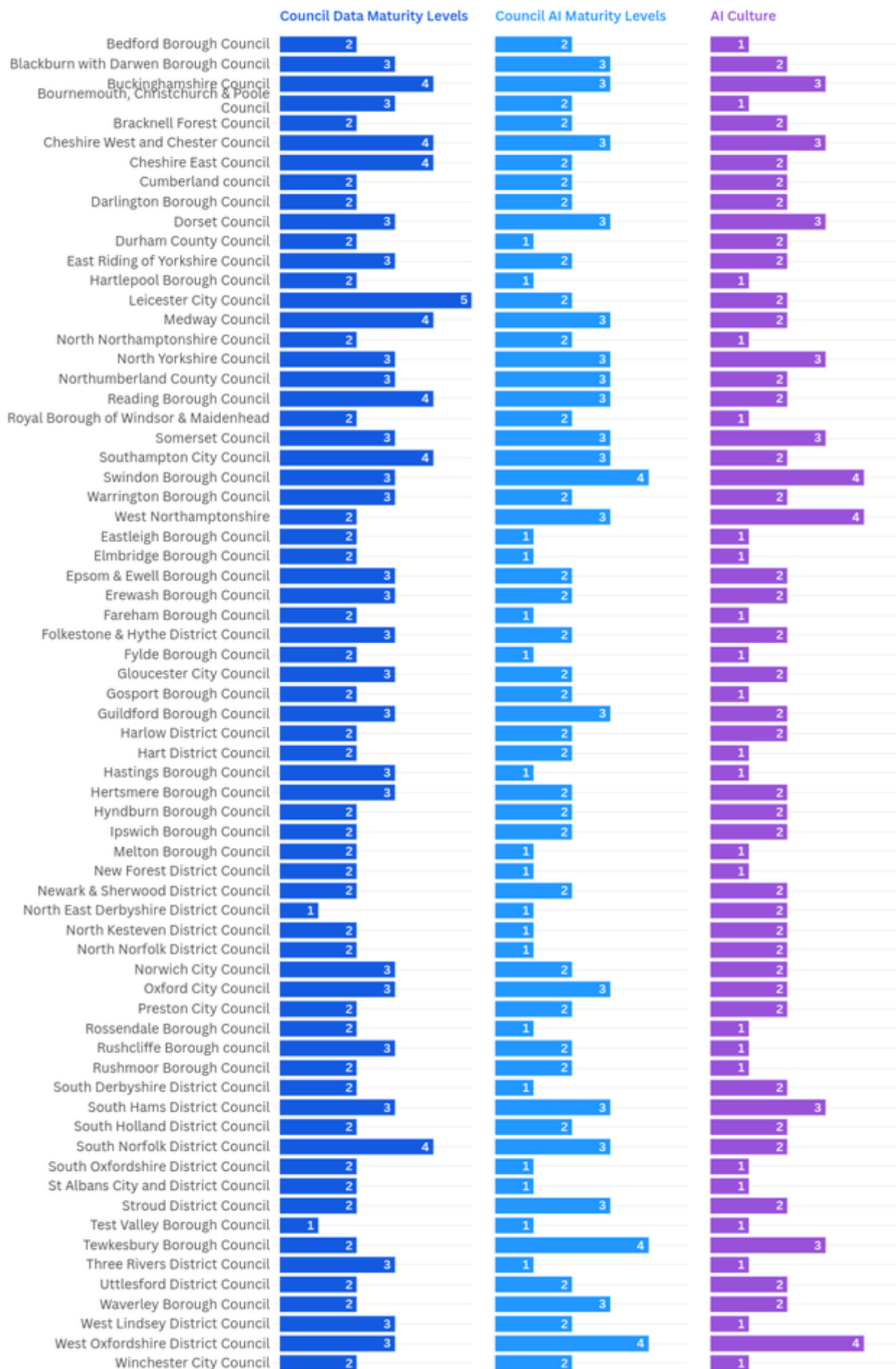


London Boroughs



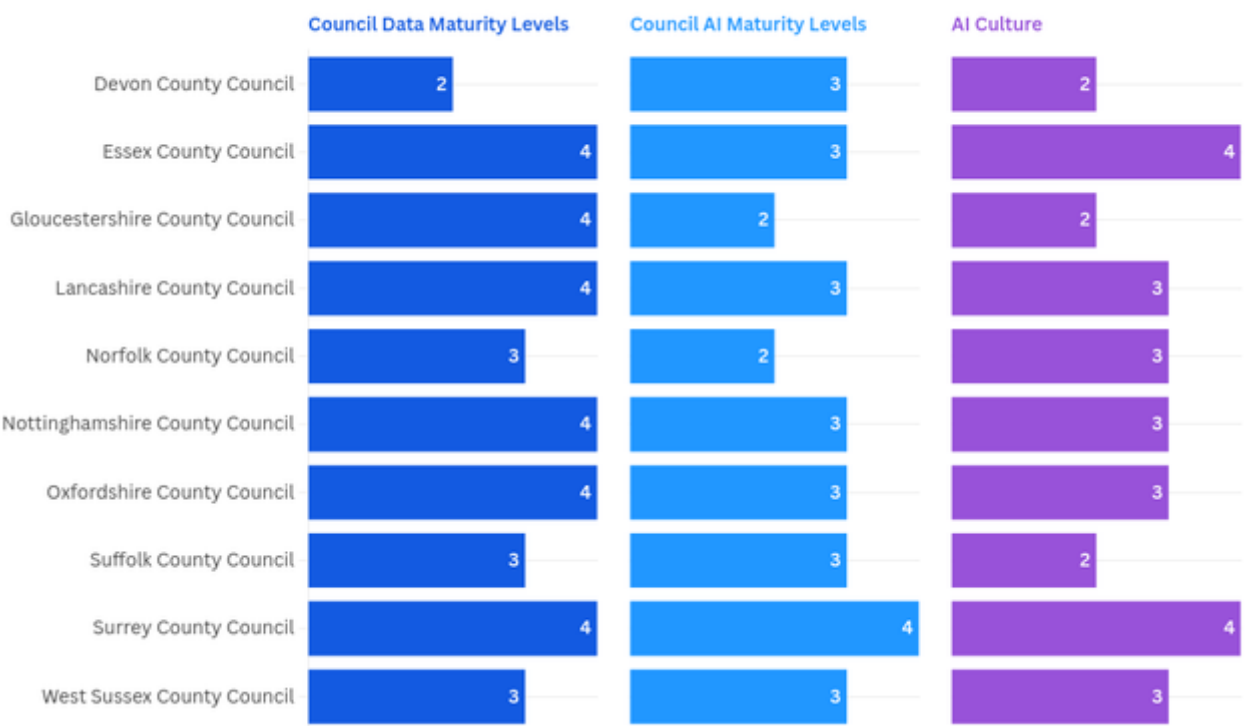
APPENDIX A: ENGLAND SCORING BY LA TYPE

English Unitary Authorities



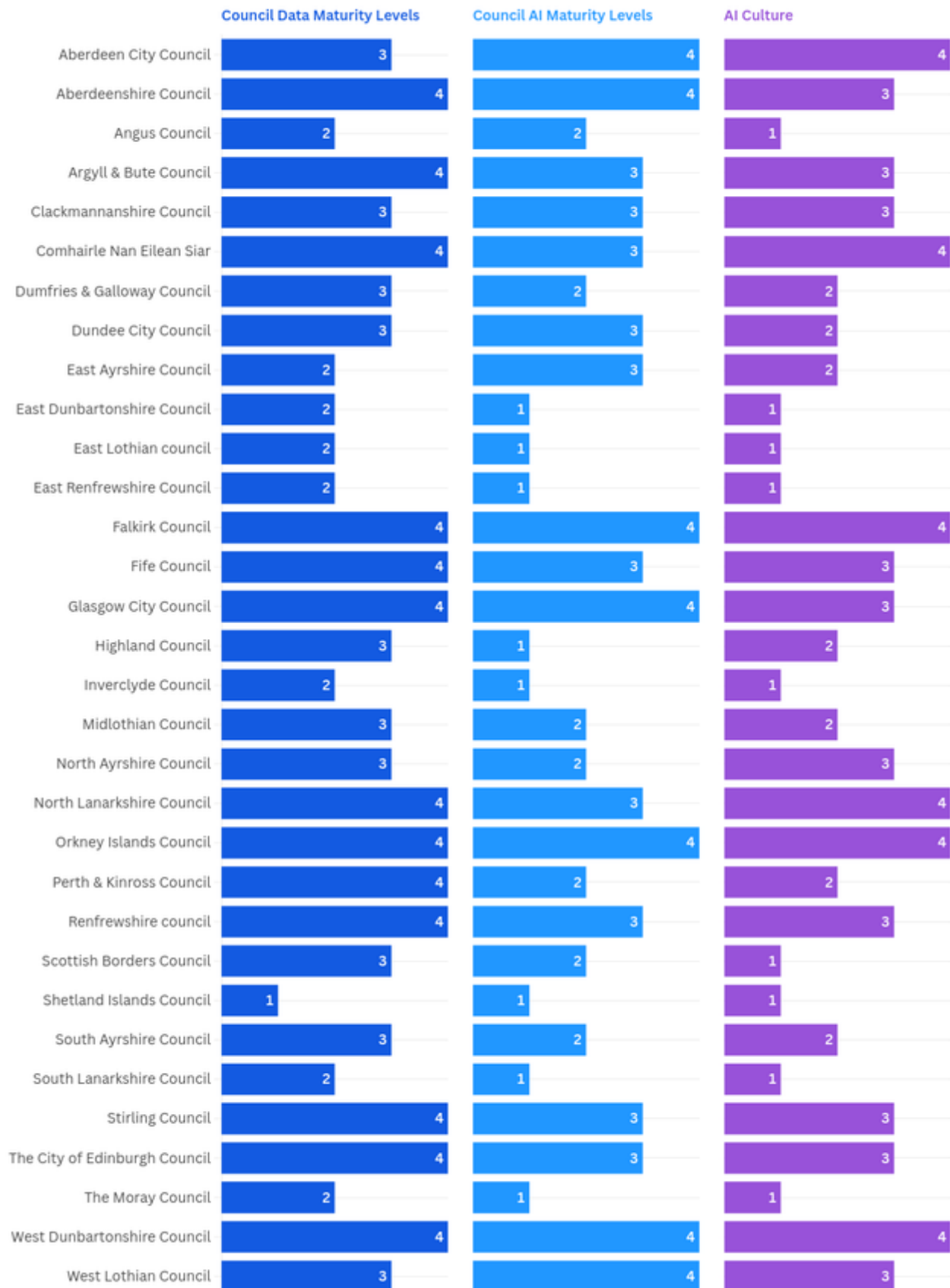
APPENDIX A: ENGLAND SCORING BY LA TYPE

English County Councils



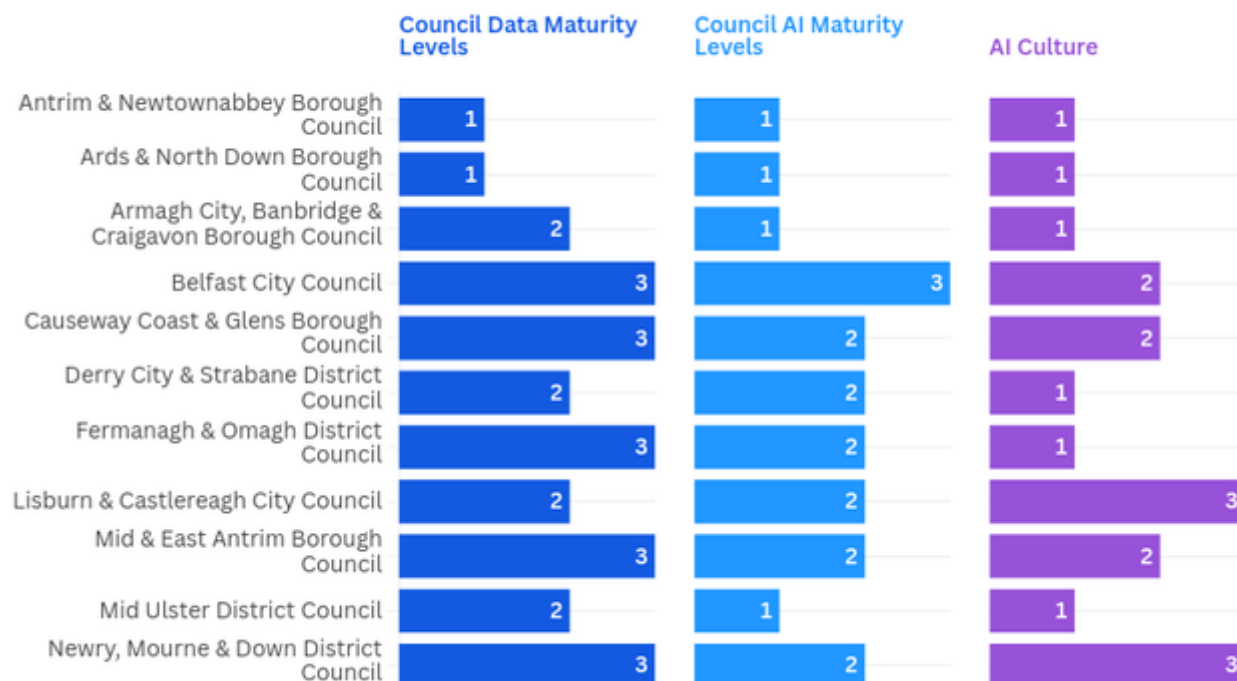
APPENDIX B: SCOTLAND SCORING

Scotland Unitary Authorities



APPENDIX C: NORTHERN IRELAND SCORING

Northern Ireland District Councils



APPENDIX D: WALES SCORING

Welsh Unitary Authorities

