

Data Centres to Expand Across UK Amid Growing Environmental Concerns

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The UK is pressing ahead with plans to expand data centre infrastructure nationwide, fuelled by rising demand for artificial intelligence and digital services. The government has classified data centres as Critical National Infrastructure and introduced AI Growth Zones to facilitate faster development.

Major projects are already in motion, including a £10 billion site in Northumberland and additional planned facilities in Yorkshire, East London, Manchester, and parts of Scotland, intended to increase digital capacity over the next five years.

The expansion faces operational challenges. Industry surveys cite limited power availability and a complex planning system as key factors. Analysts note that without grid upgrades and improved approval processes, the UK may fall behind other countries in digital competitiveness.

Environmental groups have raised concerns about emissions and water usage. In Northumberland, reports indicate the new data centre could significantly increase local industrial emissions. Similar concerns have emerged in Oxfordshire, where an AI campus is proposed near a planned reservoir. Servers require large quantities of water for cooling, and operators are implementing more efficient cooling technologies to reduce consumption.

Planning considerations have included approvals on certain Green Belt lands, highlighting the balance between strategic infrastructure development and environmental safeguards.

Currently, data centres account for an estimated 1–2% of the UK's electricity consumption, a figure expected to rise. Local utility providers, including Anglian Water in Lincolnshire, have warned that proposed hyperscale facilities could strain drinking water reserves and sewage systems.

Residents in smaller communities, such as Abbots Langley, have expressed concerns about disruption, noise, and changes to local character.

Supporters of the expansion note that data centres contribute to economic growth, enabling cloud computing, advanced AI applications, and technology-driven industries. They also provide employment opportunities and help maintain the UK's competitiveness in the global digital economy.

Policymakers are tasked with balancing infrastructure growth with resource management. Adequate planning and investment in energy and water systems are required to support expansion while managing long-term sustainability.