

# Technology in Public Services

## Briefing for House of Commons debate, Monday 2 September 2024

The government should make good use of new technologies to deliver better public services with better outcomes for the public, as well as economic growth. Navigating the best course towards that future depends on us avoiding hype and overblown promises, and getting to grips with the real challenges of tech adoption in the public sector. Partnering with the public and civil society is essential for the effective delivery of technology for public services.

### How should the government prioritise technology for public services?

It takes time and resources to deliver effective technologies; the government needs to prioritise, engage early, and fail fast to avoid costly mistakes.

- **Should they avoid algorithmic decision making about already vulnerable people?**

Some types of tech, particularly AI, are inherently risky; all can be buggy. Recent scandals – including the [Horizon scandal](#), [Australian Robodebt scandal](#), [Dutch childcare benefits scandal](#) and [Michigan unemployment benefits scandal](#) – demonstrate the very human cost of automated accusations of fraud.

- **Should they focus on fixing the foundations?** The [Prime Minister said](#) ‘We’ll move forward this autumn with harnessing the full potential of AI’, while parts of the NHS still use fax machines; the police grapple with old computer equipment; and civil servants struggle to find (and share) basic data needed to improve policy and public services.

We think the government should:

- **partner with public servants** to identify where technology would most make a difference to public service delivery. This includes working with unions to ensure work in the public sector continues to be [good work](#) and is [key to the successful introduction of AI](#).
- **partner with the public** to identify where technology is and isn’t acceptable and what they value most in public services (see e.g. recent [public attitudes research on AI in education](#)).
- **partner with civil society** to combine the skills of technologists with domain expertise and insights from affected communities on whether and how technology can address issues.

### How should the government build and retain public trust?

According to [a recent survey](#), over half of people don’t trust local or central governments to keep their data safe. Recent fiascos, from protests about [exam algorithms](#) to a [GP data grab](#) leading to 1.5m people opting out of their data being used, show the damage that can be done.

- **Should there be transparency requirements across the public sector?** Government departments are now mandated to publish [information about the algorithms they use](#), but

other public bodies aren't. For accountability, including to Parliament, the government needs to share pre-deployment impact assessments and actual impact measures.

- **Should there be conditions or expectations on private sector uses of data about the public?** [Research finds](#) the public are able to navigate tensions between risks and benefits of data sharing, and are generally happy for public data to be used for public benefit, with the right safeguards. However, they are suspicious of tech company motives and resistant to public data being used for private profit, especially for companies outside the UK.

We think the government should:

- **partner with civil society** to enable it to support early identification and mitigation of risks; rapid detection and correction of harms; and act as an accountability check that provides assurance to the public. To be empowered, civil society needs legal rights and resources, as well as access to information about public sector uses of technology.
- **build public voice into governance** structures and processes to help make tricky, value-laden decisions about the public benefit of data collection, use and sharing. Public consultation can also help build public familiarity and confidence with new technologies.
- **equip public bodies** such as schools, hospitals, police forces and local authorities with the skills and resources to help them navigate the intricacies of procuring, implementing and evaluating technology, including how to partner effectively with local communities.
- **diversify innovation policy**, to incentivise development in civic tech and social enterprises and to create technologies and economic growth that is targeted towards public purpose.

## Further reading

- [Prioritising AI](#) and [AI Adoption](#) for public services (August 2024)
- [Written evidence: PAC inquiry into artificial intelligence in government](#) (May 2024)
- [Giving communities a powerful say in public sector data and AI projects](#) (April 2024)
- [People's Panel on AI](#) (November 2023)
- [A progressive vision for data and AI policy](#) (October 2023)

## About CONNECTED BY DATA

**CONNECTED BY DATA** is a campaign to give communities a powerful say in decisions about data, to create a just, equitable and sustainable world. We want to put community at the centre of data narratives, practices and policies through collective, democratic and open data governance. We are a non-profit company limited by guarantee founded in March 2022.

We also convene [a Data and AI Civil Society Network](#) spanning a range of different charities, campaign groups, and research and policy organisations, and would be happy to arrange introductions to other organisations in the network, or other ways to engage with the network.

You can keep in touch with our work by [signing up to our newsletter and Data Policy Digest](#).