

The Demonisation of Data Centres

Data centres underpin every aspect of modern digital life – yet the industry faces a mounting reputational crisis driven by misperception, political opportunism and its own reluctance to speak up.

Our latest polling shows a public that is not hostile, but undecided, badly misinformed and increasingly anti-data centre.

The demonisation of data centres is accelerating. National media coverage of the sector has increased five-fold in the past three years, and over half of that coverage focuses on energy consumption, water usage and planning opposition.

Our analysis of national media coverage since the turn of the year finds that 90% carries a critical quote, typically from one of many highly organised campaign groups¹.

At the end of April, the conversation turned. Analysis of the digital networks of both the UK public and MPs shows salience rising and sentiment falling in the same moment (Fig. 1)². Criticism has consolidated around four arguments – water, power, planning and noise – and on each of them, the sector is losing.

Campaign groups such as Foxglove and Global Action Plan are not only highly visible across media, they are also winning the argument on the platforms that increasingly shape everything else, dominating phones and feeds.

The problem is not that scrutiny exists. It is that the scrutiny is, at least in part, founded on misperception – and the industry has been too slow to correct it.

The perception gap is vast

Nepean has now polled the British public twice on data centres, most recently a nationally representative sample of 2,000 adults³.

A third of the public thinks data centres consume more than 10% of the UK's electricity, and 59% put the figure at 6% or above (Fig. 2). The average estimate is 7.8%. The House of Commons Library puts the true figure at around 2.5%⁴.

On water it is worse. Asked to compare the industry with the sport of golf, 49% say data centres use more water and only 11% correctly say less (Fig. 3).

The Water Research Centre puts English data centre use of drinking water at around 1.9 billion litres a year – roughly 0.2% of the non-household market⁵.

These are not small errors of calibration. They are misperceptions that distort the debate and embolden political opposition.

The trend is a more serious problem. Six months ago, 82% of the public thought data centres are essential or important to daily life. That has fallen to 68% (Fig. 4).

Underneath it sits a collapse in attitudes to AI. The net expectation that AI will improve quality of life has fallen from 54% to 44%, while the expectation that it will worsen has more than doubled, from 12% to 27% (Fig. 5).



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Political opposition is coalescing

A political coalition is forming. The Green Party has broken cover: in August, Zack Polanski called for a moratorium on all but local-scale data centres and for the removal of the sector's critical national infrastructure designation⁶. Several MPs on Labour's soft left have voiced support for his policy.

The Government's position remains pro-data centre and pro-AI. It rejected the moratorium outright⁷. But the Prime Minister is likely to come under pressure not just from the Greens, and the NIMBYs on the opposition benches, but also from the tech- and AI-sceptics on his own backbenches.

The public remains largely undecided

Much of the public confusion stems from the relatively recent conflation of all data centres with AI, which in turn carries the concerns over power and water, fuelled by media.

All is not lost, however.

Asked whether data centres' energy and water use is justified by the benefits they provide, only 38% of the public say yes. But only 21% say no.

The largest bloc – 41% – sits in the middle: 'neither', or 'don't know' (Fig. 6). This is not an overly hostile public. It is an undecided one.

The sector's problem is not that its arguments do not work. It is that nobody is making them.

The industry has a fast-shrinking window to act but narrative alone is insufficient. It needs swift organisation, consensus on collective and contentious issues – power, water, planning, AI Growth Zones – and a fundamentally different working relationship with government.

Data centres are being demonised not because the facts are against them, but because no one is making their case.

¹Nepean analysis of UK national media coverage of data centres since January 2026.

²DeepSeer analysis of influence-weighted online conversation about data centres across UK public and MP networks, May 2025 – May 2026. Fig. 1 shows the public network.

³Nepean polling. Latest wave: 2,000 UK adults, weighted to be nationally representative. Earlier wave: 1,022 UK adults, conducted six months previously and unweighted, so small differences between waves should be read as indicative.

⁴House of Commons Library, 'Data centres: planning policy, sustainability, and resilience', research briefing CBP-10315, 2026.

⁵Water Research Centre, research commissioned by MOSL, the market operator for England's non-household water market, using 2024 consumption data.

⁶Zack Polanski, interview with the BBC, 28 August 2026, as reported in Novara Media, 'Zack Polanski Calls for Temporary Ban on "Energy Guzzling" Data Centres', 28 August 2026.

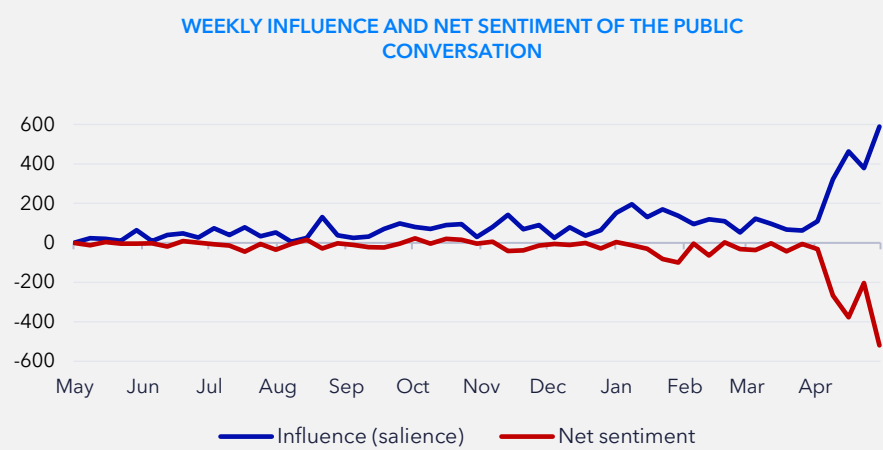
⁷Government spokesperson, statement to the BBC, 28 August 2026.



Data Sheet

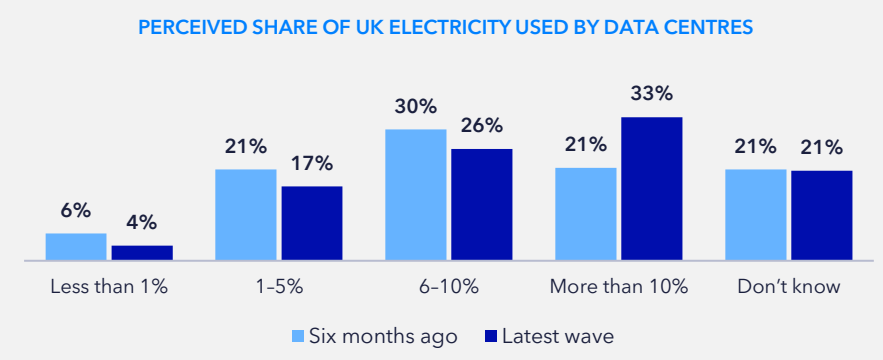
Figures 1: Weekly influence and net sentiment of the UK public’s online conversation about data centres, May 2025 – May 2026. Net sentiment is positive minus negative influence.

Source: DeepSeer digital network analysis.



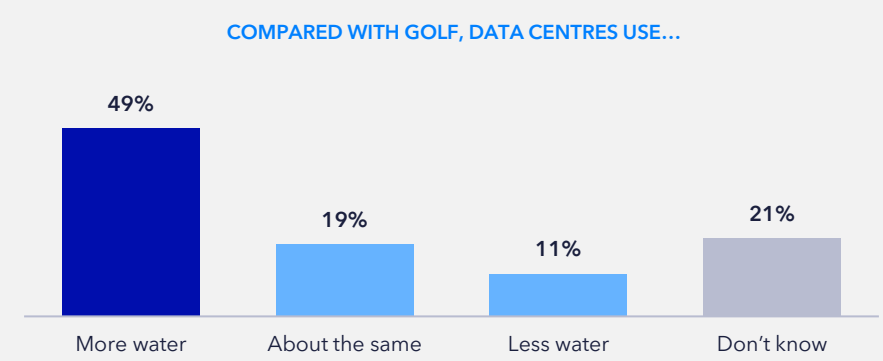
Figures 2: Public estimates of the share of UK electricity used by data centres, six months apart.

Source: Nepean/Obsurant polling; latest wave 2,000 UK adults, earlier wave 1,022 UK adults.



Figures 3: Public estimates of the share of UK electricity used by data centres, six months apart.

Source: Nepean/Obsurant polling, 2,000 UK adults.



Data Sheet

Figures 4: Share who see data centres as essential or important to daily life, and who say they benefit personally, six months apart.

Source: Nepean/Observant polling; latest wave 2,000 UK adults, earlier wave 1,022 UK adults.

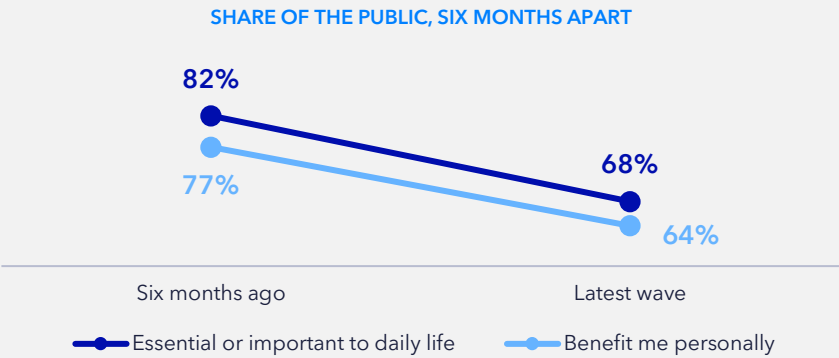


Figure 5: Expectations of AI's effect on respondents' own quality of life and on society, six months apart.

Source: Nepean/Observant polling; latest wave 2,000 UK adults, earlier wave 1,022 UK adults.

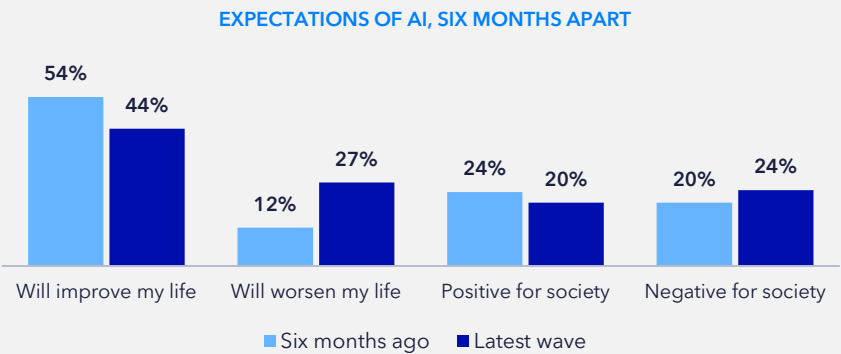


Figure 6: Whether data centres' energy and water use is justified by the benefits they provide.

Source: Nepean/Observant polling, 2,000 UK adults.

