RESPONSIBLE DATA-CENTRE SITING: PUBLIC VALUE, COMMUNITY VOICE, AND SOCIAL LEGITIMACY

Evidence from the proposed Potters Bar development

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Executive summary

This policy report examines the attitudes to the proposed hyperscale data centre in Potters Bar through a representative survey of 204 adults and 18 interviews with residents, community representatives, experts, and other stakeholders. Opposition is substantial: 62% oppose the development, 74% express concerns, and 80% feel that residents' views receive little or no consideration.

The analysis shows that opposition cannot be dismissed as mere "not-in-my-backyard-ism". Residents question whether the development's purpose, scale, and location have been adequately justified; doubt the existence of local benefits whilst anticipating concentrated local burdens; perceive a lack of opportunities for meaningful influence; face substantial inequalities in terms of resources and expertise; and feel distrust following perceived selective and misleading communication.

In light of these findings, an assessment of individual data-centre proposals against existing planning and environmental requirements seems necessary but insufficient for responsible siting. Siting decisions must also ensure social legitimacy, based on demonstrated public value and possibilities for community influence. The report therefore recommends strategic national planning; the clear demonstration of public value; earlier and more meaningful community participation; independently resourced public scrutiny; and enforceable commitments supported by transparent reporting. Together, these measures would support publicly legitimate data-centre development.

Why data-centre siting matters

Data centres are warehouse-like buildings containing the computing and network equipment used to store, process, and transmit digital data. They support cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and services ranging from communication and finance to healthcare, scientific research, and public administration. Data centres vary considerably in purpose and scale. They include facilities operated by individual organisations, shared colocation centres, smaller facilities and large hyperscale developments providing cloud or AI computing capacity[1].

As data centres are physical infrastructure, they need to be located on land. They also require electricity, cooling, network connectivity, and backup systems. The relative importance of these requirements differs by facility and use. Services involving rapid data transfer may need proximity to users or existing network clusters, whereas AI-training facilities may place greater emphasis on access to electricity and possibly access to

[1] https://post.parliament.uk/research-briefings/post-pn-0762/ (accessed: 07.08.2026).

water for cooling. Data-centre location and design consequently shape their implications for land, energy, and water resources, surrounding infrastructure, and neighbouring communities[2].

The UK Government considers additional data-centre capacity important for economic growth and productivity, digital resilience, and the development of AI innovation and leadership. In September 2024, it designated UK data infrastructure as Critical National Infrastructure[3]. Although this designation does not in itself confer planning permission, national planning policy in England has nevertheless become more supportive of data-centre developments. The Government is also promoting accelerated construction through AI Growth Zones[4].

Whilst the UK's ambitions towards data-centre development are strong, the cumulative and long-term local and broader national and social effects are less clear. Assessments identify potential pressures relating to electricity networks, water resources, carbon emissions, land, construction, noise, and backup energy generation. These effects vary substantially according to scale, location, technology, and energy supply, so that not every data centre presents the same demands[5]. Local authorities must therefore reconcile national digital ambitions with responsibilities for their communities, including housing, environmental protection, infrastructure coordination, and engagement[6].

Data-centre siting decisions are consequently not only a technical question. They also involve decisions over what capacity is needed, where the facility should be located, how expected benefits and burdens will be distributed, and how affected communities can participate in the planning process.

The Potters Bar data-centre proposal

Potters Bar is a Hertfordshire commuter town with a population of approximately 22,500, situated 21 kilometres north of central London. The proposed development occupies an 85-acre Green Belt site east of South Mimms Services in the south of Potters Bar, between the M25/A1(M) interchange and Dame Alice Owen's School, a renowned, partly

[2] https://post.parliament.uk/research-briefings/post-pn-0762/ (accessed: 07.08.2026).
[3] https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2024-09-12/HCWS89 (accessed: 07.08.2026).
[4] https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-10315/CBP-10315.pdf (accessed: 07.08.2026).
[5] https://www.globalactionplan.org.uk/files/big_tech_data_centres_2025_09_26.pdf and https://post.parliament.uk/research-briefings/post-pn-0762/ (accessed: 07.08.2026).
[6] https://www2.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses/local-government-response-sustainability-data-centres-uk (accessed: 07.08.2026).

selective secondary school. Only half of the site is expected to host buildings and hard infrastructure, with the rest planned to remain open space[7].

The outline planning application for the Potters Bar data centre provides for phased construction of up to 187,000 square metres, approximately two million square feet, of data-centre floorspace, together with offices, substations, plant, service areas, and related infrastructure. DC01UK, a joint venture between Hertfordshire-based property developer and contractor GRIGGS and Chiltern Green Energy, submitted the application in September 2024. Hertsmere Borough Council's Planning Committee granted outline permission on 23 January 2025, establishing the principle and broad parameters of the development whilst reserving matters of layout, scale, appearance, access, and landscaping for later approval[8]. In October 2025, Equinix, an American multinational digital infrastructure company, acquired the site, renamed it the Hertfordshire Campus and announced planned investment of £3.9 billion in a facility exceeding 250 megawatts[9].

Proponents emphasise the project's contribution to UK digital capacity, investment, and local revenue. Equinix projects 2,500 construction jobs, more than 200 permanent roles, and £18 million in annual business rates[10]. Opponents, including the Potters Bar Special Interest Group Residents' Association, contest development at this scale on Green Belt land close to homes and a secondary school. Concerns include landscape and biodiversity loss, resource pressures, disturbance, and limited community influence[11]. The Potters Bar proposal therefore provides an important case through which to examine how national digital ambitions are experienced and questioned locally.

Research methods

The study used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research. The researchers commissioned Survation, a London-based polling and market research company, to conduct telephone interviews with a representative sample of 204 Potters Bar adults between 12 and 18 June 2026. Results were weighted by sex, age, and ward to reflect the local adult population. The questionnaire comprised nine substantive closed-ended questions, five demographic questions, and one open-ended question,

[7] https://newsroom.equinix.com/2025-10-30-Equinix-to-invest-GBP3-9-billion-in-UKs-critical-national-infrastructure-in-boost-to-countrys-economy (accessed: 07.08.2026).
[8] https://hertsmere.moderngov.co.uk/mgAi.aspx?ID=41794 (accessed: 07.08.2026).
[9] https://www.hertsmere.gov.uk/news/data-centre-in-hertsmere-given-outline-permission-by-planning-committee and https://newsroom.equinix.com/2025-10-30-Equinix-to-invest-GBP3-9-billion-in-UKs-critical-national-infrastructure-in-boost-to-countrys-economy (accessed: 07.08.2026).
[10] https://equinixtogether.com/hertfordshire/ (accessed: 07.08.2026).
[11] https://pottersbarcommunitynews.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/summer-25.pdf (accessed: 07.08.2026).

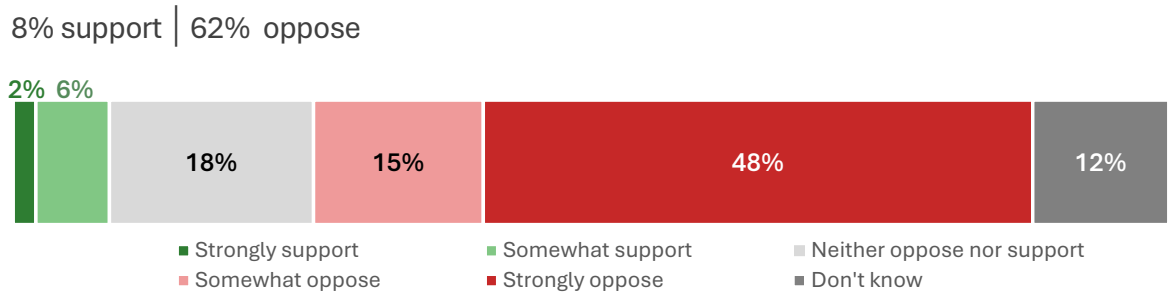
measuring the prevalence and strength of attitudes towards the proposed development. It was complemented by 18 semi-structured purposively sampled interviews, numbered IP01 to IP18, with residents, community representatives, experts, and other stakeholders. Lasting about one hour, the interviews explored understandings of data centres, expected benefits and burdens, planning and consultation, and responsible siting. The survey therefore established the distribution of local attitudes, whilst the interviews explained and contextualised them.

Potters Bar residents' attitudes to data centres

The survey results provide a strikingly consistent picture. Opposition to the proposed data centre in Potters Bar is substantial and strongly felt. Most respondents do not anticipate local benefits but have concerns, more than half expect the development to negatively affect themselves or their household, and four in five feel that their views receive little or no consideration from decision-makers and developers.

As Figure 1 shows, 62% of respondents oppose the construction of the data centre, compared with only 8% who support it, an opposition-to-support ratio of nearly eight to one. Opposition is also considerably more intense than support: 48% strongly oppose the development, whilst only 2% strongly support it. A further 18% neither oppose nor support the development, whilst 12% do not know.

Figure 1: Support for or opposition to the proposed Potters Bar data centre



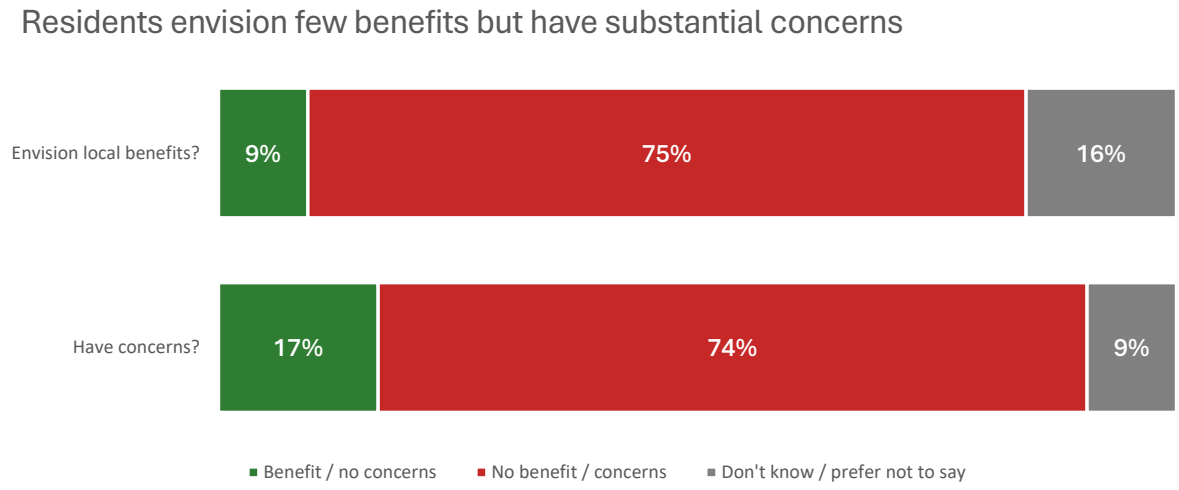
Question: Overall, do you support or oppose the construction of a data centre in Potters Bar, if at all?
Base: All respondents (n=204). Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Source: The authors, based on Survation data, June 2026.

This opposition coincides with a pronounced imbalance between limited perceived benefits and substantial concerns. Figure 2 shows that three-quarters of respondents do not envisage seeing benefits from the development. A small minority of 9% anticipates benefits from local employment and business growth as well as investment in local

infrastructure and amenities. In contrast, 74% of respondents express concerns, compared with 17% who do not.

Figure 2: Perceived benefits vs. perceived concerns



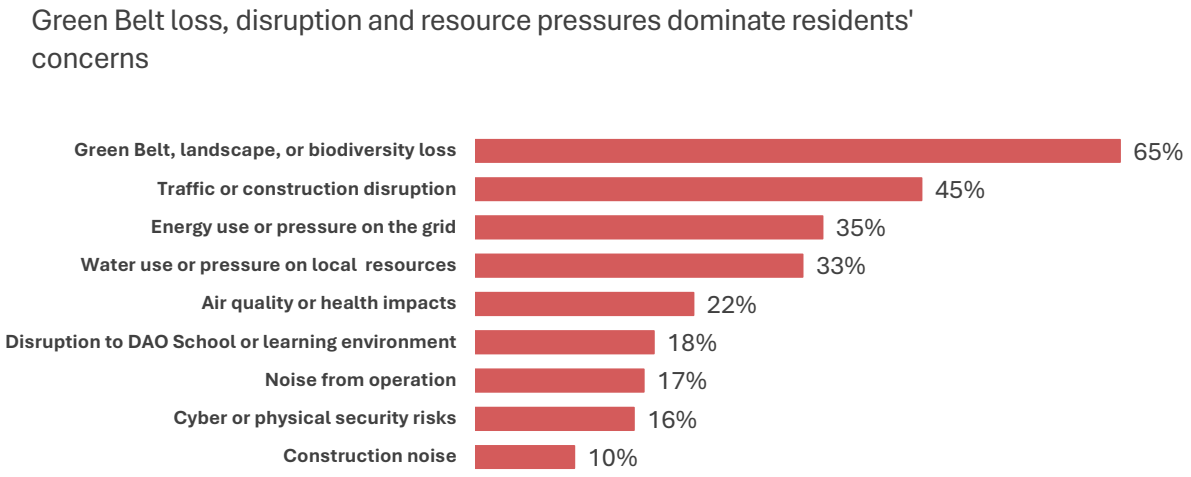
Benefits: Whether respondents envision benefits from the data-centre development in Potters Bar.

Concerns: Whether respondents have concerns about the data-centre development in Potters Bar.
Base: All respondents (n=204)

Source: The authors, based on Survation data, June 2026.

Figure 3 summarises residents' concerns, emphasising local and broader environmental effects. Amongst the 74% of respondents who expressed concerns, 65% selected the loss of Green Belt, green space, landscape or biodiversity as one of their three principal concerns. Traffic or construction disruptions follow at 45%. Wider resource pressures are also prominent, with 35% expressing concerns over energy use or pressure on the electricity grid and 33% being concerned over water use or pressure on local water resources. Smaller but still substantial groups identify air-quality or health impacts, disruption to Dame Alice Owen's School, operational noise, and security risks.

Figure 3: Concerns about the proposed Potters Bar data centre

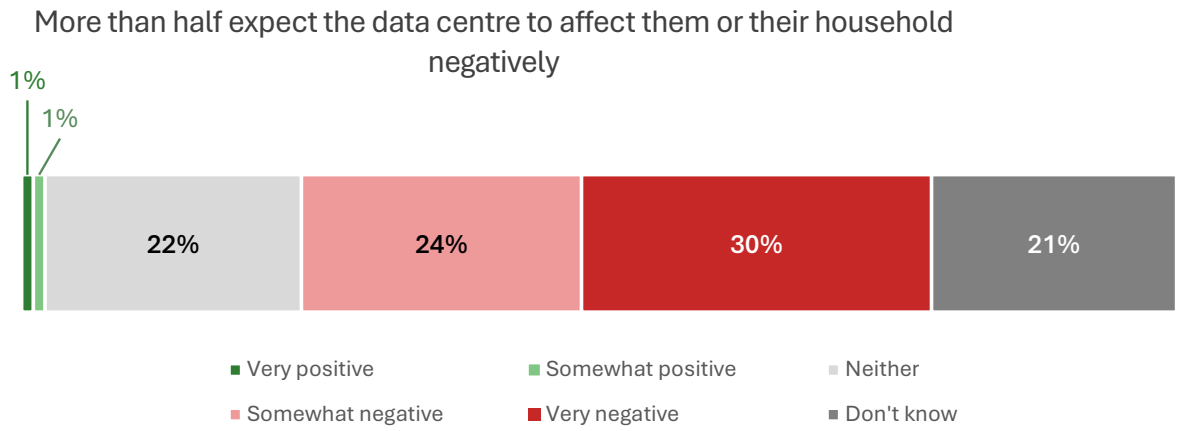


Question: Which three of the following concern you most about the development of a data centre, if any?
Base: Respondents who expressed concerns (n=155). Respondents could select up to three answers.

Source: The authors, based on Survation data, June 2026.

These concerns are also understood as personally relevant (Figure 4). 54% expect the development to affect themselves or their household negatively, including 30% who anticipate a very negative effect. Only 3% expect a positive effect, whilst 22% anticipate neither a positive nor negative effect, and 21% do not know.

Figure 4: Expected personal or household effects of the proposed Potters Bar data centre



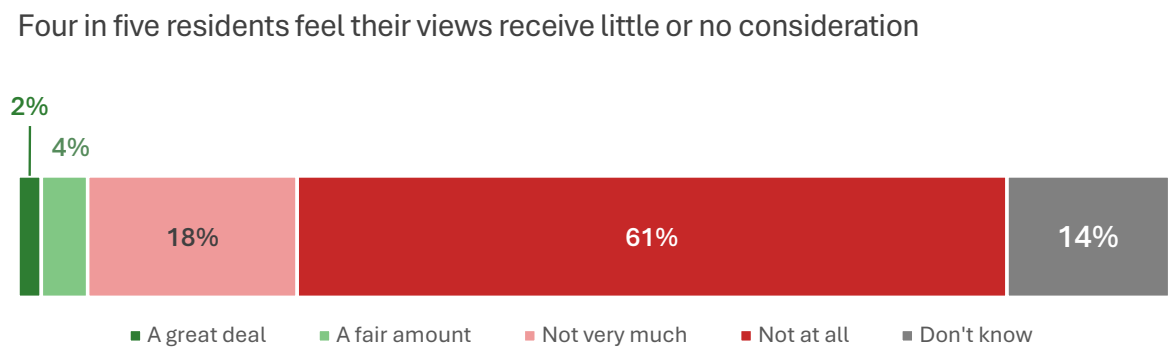
Question:Overall, how positively or negatively do you expect the data centre will personally affect you and your household, if at all?

Base: All respondents (n=204). Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Source: The authors, based on Survation data, June 2026.

Residents also perceive a serious deficit in voice and influence (Figure 5). The vast majority of respondents, 80% or four in five, feel that decision-makers and developers consider their views not very much or not at all. Most strikingly, 61% feel that their views receive no consideration at all. Only 6% believe that their views receive a fair amount or a great deal of consideration.

Figure 5: Perceived consideration of residents' views by decision-makers and developers



Question: To what extent do you feel that your views about the data centre are taken into consideration by decision-makers and developers, if at all?
Base: All respondents (n=204). Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Source: The authors, based on Survation data, June 2026.

Overall, the findings reveal a highly coherent pattern of local resistance. Residents perceive few benefits, substantial and personally relevant burdens, and little opportunity to influence the decisions being made. Opposition therefore reflects both concerns about the expected consequences of the development and about the fairness and responsiveness of the decision-making process. Taken together, these findings raise questions about the project's perceived legitimacy. The interviews help understand how residents formed their assessments.

Questioning social legitimacy: Why residents oppose the development

Participants' accounts show that the unwillingness to host the development locally cannot be simply reduced to "not-in-my-backyard-ism". They questioned whether the planned data centre had been sufficiently justified and its impacts sufficiently scrutinised, who would benefit from it, and why its anticipated burdens should be

concentrated in Potters Bar. Five interconnected themes of opposition emerge from their accounts: contested necessity, an unequal distribution of benefits and burdens, a democratic deficit relating to limited opportunities for meaningful participation, imbalances in resources and power, and distrust arising from perceived misrepresentation and non-responsiveness. Whilst analytically distinct, these themes are closely interrelated, shaping and reinforcing one another.

1. Contested necessity

Accepting that society needs data centres does not mean accepting every data centre, at every scale, in every location. Participants were unconvinced that the proposal's purpose and public value had been demonstrated or its scale and siting justified.

Interview participants did not hold a single position on whether data centres are necessary. Many accepted a need for some digital infrastructure, including for cloud computing, public services, scientific research, and commercial applications. IP14, a participant with two decades of professional experience in IT, explained why organisations increasingly rely on data centres. They provide expandable computing capacity and reliable data access and back up across different locations. IP14 also explained that some time-sensitive activities may benefit from being close to London, whereas other uses can be served from farther away.

A small group of participants was fundamentally sceptical of AI-driven demand for data centres. These participants questioned necessity based on their views of data centres as the physical infrastructure of an AI-driven social transformation whose effects on work, inequality, human judgment, and mental wellbeing remained poorly understood.

Across these positions, participants distinguished a general need for data-centre capacity from the justification of the planned Potters Bar development. They questioned whether its purpose and the need for its large scale and specific location had been sufficiently demonstrated. As IP04 explained:

> *"I don't personally have an objection to data centres. I know that obviously moving forward, we're going to need them. I think we don't need as many in the areas that they're trying to put them in."*

Participants asked how much additional UK capacity was required overall, whether already existing capacity and utilisation had been duly considered, and what services the proposed new facility would support. They distinguished essential or publicly valuable

uses, such as medical research and public-service records, from consumer generative AI, advertising, entertainment, and other commercially driven uses. According to IP01:

> *"There's clearly a distinction between … maintenance of patient records and giving access to it, or medical use of data, [and] a chatbot that is used for fun or used to generate pornography … And yet currently, all of those things are put in one box as equally socially useful."*

Without knowing the facility's eventual users and functions, participants found it difficult to assess the development's claimed social value against its local and environmental costs. The absence of clarity about ownership and control was also important. As IP01 further observed:

> *"Local communities don't even really know who the economic actor they're inviting into their community is."*

Participants also questioned the speed of what several described as a *"race"* or *"gold rush"* towards increasingly large facilities. IP10 connected this speed to insufficient scrutiny of industry claims:

> *"There may be a combination of a kind of unthinking, frantic push for more data-centre construction … and being too willing to take the claims made by the industry at face value."*

At both national and local levels, participants felt that projects were considered in isolation rather than through a holistic assessment of their combined demands on resources. Nationally, they questioned the absence of a coherent strategy addressing the cumulative and long-term implications of data-centre expansion for electricity, water, and climate commitments. Locally, they situated the proposed data centre alongside housing, energy, and other infrastructure developments placing additional demands on land and services. They therefore called for an assessment of not only individual applications but also of how much capacity overall was needed and where its cumulative demands could be accommodated responsibly. As IP10 argued:

> *"There needs to be a better assessment of what do we actually need, how much of it, and then where should it go."*

For some participants, slowing the pace of expansion was therefore necessary to create sufficient space for informed decision-making based on strategic planning and public scrutiny.

Participants also questioned the application of the newly introduced "grey belt" category for land. This category has been introduced through national planning policy. Identifying land as grey belt does not automatically remove it from the Green Belt or grant planning permission. The land on which the Potters Bar data centre is to be built is designated Green Belt. When assessing the application, Hertsmere's planning officers nevertheless

concluded that it fell within the national-planning policy of grey-belt land. Some interviewees experienced this as a relabelling of visibly green, actively farmed land to weaken its expected protection.

Relatedly, the government's aim to protect the security and resilience of data centres by designating them as Critical National Infrastructure was questioned by some participants. Some respondents considered this designation as asserting a general national necessity without resolving questions about the purpose, scale, cumulative effects, and appropriate location of individual developments. Participants did not necessarily deny that digital systems supporting essential public services could be critical. Rather, they asserted that designating all data centres as critical obscured the distinction between services on which society depends and the wider commercial expansion of cloud and generative-AI capacity. In their accounts, the specific case for individual developments therefore remained insufficiently demonstrated.

2. Unequal distribution of benefits and burdens

Those expected to benefit were not those expected to bear the costs. Participants saw the promised gains as unlikely to reach the community and the costs as risking permanent damage to life in Potters Bar.

The interviews help explain the survey's pronounced imbalance between limited anticipated local benefits and widespread, personally relevant concerns. Participants asked who would receive benefits and bear costs, where they would be experienced, how long they would last, and whether they could be reversed.

The interviews identify possible benefits, including national investment, greater digital capacity, temporary construction work, permanent employment, business-rate income, and transport or infrastructure improvements. Participants consistently distinguished potentially substantial but temporary construction activity from a much smaller permanent operational workforce. One participant with direct experience of operational data centres described relatively small on-site teams comprising security, technical, management, and facilities staff.

Most interview participants questioned whether the resulting employment would benefit Potters Bar. They doubted that specialist operational roles would necessarily be filled locally, expected limited additional spending in local businesses, and anticipated that established construction companies and specialist teams would undertake much of the work. IP09 reported being told by the developers, when asking them about local disruptions to traffic during a consultation:

> *"Don't worry, traffic won't be a problem because there won't be many people working there."*

The participant considered this difficult to reconcile with wider claims about substantial job creation. Although the apparent tension may partly reflect the distinction between construction and operational employment, it reinforced uncertainty about how many jobs would effectively be generated by the data centre.

Participants also recognised that the development could generate substantial business-rate revenue, but questioned whether this would translate into visible benefits for Potters Bar. IP18, who works in local government and has direct experience of financial pressures on local authorities, explained:

> *"The revenue the local authority will get through business rates will be quite significant. Now, how that revenue is going to be distributed locally … I wouldn't have confidence that that would be translated into benefits to the people of Potters Bar."*

By contrast, two participants from the same household associated large technology investment with younger workers, housing demand, and local renewal. Both specified however that they had only very limited knowledge of the specific proposal. Their accounts illustrate the intuitive appeal of the economic-development narrative. Other participants recognised possible national benefits, including expanded digital capacity and business access to cloud services, but expected few direct gains for the host community.

Participants located potential benefits at different levels. Developers, investors, landowners, contractors, technology companies, and future users were expected to receive commercial gains. National government could claim investment and enhanced digital capacity, whilst local councils might receive additional revenue. Benefits to Potters Bar residents were considered less direct and less certain. An NGO participant also warned that the costs of expanding electricity and water infrastructure could ultimately be transferred from large technology companies to ordinary consumers and host communities through increased bills. For IP17, the central injustice was that the anticipated revenue would not accrue to those experiencing the development's effects:

> *"We're the ones that are going to have to put up with it."*

Participants contrasted these uncertain or widely distributed gains with locally concentrated burdens: Green Belt and habitat loss, construction traffic, noise, resource pressures, and disruption near Dame Alice Owen's School. They distinguished temporary burdens associated with construction from longer-term changes to the environment and character of the area. Construction was expected to bring heavy vehicles, congestion, dust, and noise over several years, particularly on the roads already busy during rush-

hour around the school. IP09 also drew attention to children with autism or ADHD who may be especially sensitive to persistent or intermittent sounds, expressing concern that noise could heighten anxiety or interfere with concentration.

Longer-term concerns included the conversion of agricultural Green Belt land, loss of established habitats, operational noise, and demands on electricity and water. Water concerns nevertheless require qualification in the Potters Bar case. The outline application indicated that dry or air cooling was likely to be used rather than water-consuming cooling. Substantial direct demand for cooling water is therefore not anticipated. Interview participants' understandings on that issue varied. Some believed that cooling would involve substantial water use, some did not know which cooling system was proposed, and others were aware of the planned low-water design but expressed doubts about whether it would ultimately be delivered. At a wider scale, participants questioned whether accelerated data-centre expansion would make climate, energy, water, housing, and food-security objectives harder to reconcile. Not all these effects were considered certain, and their extent would depend on the facility's final design and operation. This uncertainty in itself was important, however, because participants believed potentially irreversible decisions were being made before the long-term consequences were fully understood.

For residents closest to the site, this distributional conflict was also experienced as an imposed burden. As IP06 put it:

> *"Would you want to have a data centre in your back garden? I'm getting it and I have no choice."*

The interviews further revealed that Green Belt land was valued not only environmentally, but as part of everyday recreation, identity, and wellbeing:

> *"It's what makes life good … what you have around you. And we came here for a better life away from London and fumes." (IP17)*

Participants described walking, exercising, observing wildlife, spending time with family, and using the landscape as a source of calm. Their accounts also conveyed an anticipated sense of loss. The development would remove valued features of the landscape that could not simply be recreated through later mitigation. Referring to the planting proposed by developers and the implications of the data centre's height, IP07 explained:

> *"They were going to plant trees and beautiful plants and everything. But … their trees aren't going to suddenly spring up to 30 metres high … We won't be able to get the sunset back."*

Participants did not regard replacement planting, financial contributions, or infrastructure improvements as equivalent to mature habitats, established landscapes and ways of life that they feared would be permanently altered.

Opposition therefore reflected perceived distributive injustice: economic and technological benefits might accrue nationally or for certain private parties, but place-specific and potentially irreversible costs would have to be borne by residents. This imbalance also had a temporal dimension: short-term economic activity was contrasted with the lasting conversion of the site and loss of established landscape.

3. Limited opportunities for meaningful participation

Participants perceived a strong democratic deficit, reducing participation to "tick-box exercises" that recorded residents' views without giving them influence over the site, scale, or form of development.

The interviews help explain why a large majority of survey respondents felt that their views had received little or no consideration. They reveal deficits in participation, whether in terms of notification, consultation, or influence.

Notification was described as uneven. Some households close to the site received letters, whilst others learned about the data-centre plans through neighbours, social media, parent networks, or campaign activity. Participants in several interviews referred to 775 notification letters that Hertsmere Borough Council had issued. Interviewees contrasted the necessarily limited reach of formal notification with the scale of the development and the population of the town. Campaigners consequently sought to widen awareness by distributing leaflets, knocking on doors, creating maps, organising meetings and site walks, and informing local parent groups. IP06 summarised the underlying democratic purpose as such:

> *"If people know, they can make up their minds, but if they don't know, then they can't."*

Participants believed that the proposal's repeated association with South Mimms also contributed to delayed awareness in Potters Bar. Although council documents call the site location "Land East of South Mimms Services, St Albans Road, South Mimms"[12], the site lies within Potters Bar Furzefield ward. Based on the officially stated location, some

[12] https://hertsmere.moderngov.co.uk/mgAi.aspx?ID=41794 (accessed: 05.08.2026).

residents consequently assumed that the proposal concerned the motorway-services area rather than Potters Bar land opposite Dame Alice Owen's School.

Consultation experiences varied. Participants widely criticised a first event held in Ridge, a village near Potters Bar, for its limited notice, inaccessible rural location, and lack of representatives able to answer technical questions. Participants generally regarded the later Equinix exhibition at Dame Alice Owen's School as better attended, more accessible, and to an extent more informative. IP09 reported obtaining more answers because representatives possessed greater knowledge of data centres. Nevertheless, some important information, including details about noise and generator-testing schedules, remained unavailable because, according to the developers, further modelling and detailed design work had not yet been completed. Consultation thus provided limited opportunities for influence where questions remained unanswered or relevant information would become available only at later planning stages.

Both exhibitions used a drop-in format centred on posters or visual displays and individual exchanges with developer representatives. This allowed residents to ask questions but provided no shared forum in which they, developers, councillors, and independent experts could examine evidence, hear one another's concerns, debate alternatives, or respond collectively. Consultation therefore created some opportunities to receive information and voice viewpoints, but little deliberation. In the words of IP07:

> *"To me it was … a box-ticking exercise. You know, we've consulted with the local people and we've told them all about it. But to me it was a* fait accompli *anyway. I don't think it mattered what anyone was saying."*

Formal opportunities for participation also included written objections and limited public representations at the Planning Committee. These mechanisms allowed residents to place concerns on record, but interview participants did not experience them as providing dialogue with councillors or a clear route to substantive revision of the proposal. Participants discussed possible alternatives, including smaller-scale development, different locations, and stronger environmental safeguards, but increasingly regarded any form of influence as confined to mitigating impacts rather than reconsidering the underlying site, scale, or principle of the development. Supportive statements by officials made prior to the committee decision further contributed to the perception among engaged participants that the proposal's fundamental direction had already been settled, although it remained officially subject to formal planning procedures.

The timeframe involved in obtaining access to information also affected whether these formal opportunities could be used effectively. As IP05 explained:

> *"You put a Freedom of Information request in, it doesn't come back immediately. It takes months. By the time that's come back, sometimes the decision has been made … and it's too late. So it's like we don't have a voice."*

The democratic deficit lay not in the complete absence of procedure, but in the failure of existing procedures to give residents a meaningful opportunity to influence consequential decisions. Residents could receive information, submit objections, and make limited representations, yet they saw no credible route through which these activities could alter consequential choices about the site, scale, or principle of development.

4. Unequal resources and power

Participants identified profound power imbalances as an additional reason for the lack of influence. Unequal access to resources and expertise left them questioning whether evidence could be assessed independently and fairly.

Participants understood limited influence as resulting not only from the design of consultation, but from unequal access to time, money, information, expertise, and institutional authority.

Local opposition depended on extensive unpaid work undertaken alongside employment, caring responsibilities, and everyday life. Participants described reading planning documents, drafting objections, distributing leaflets, monitoring planning portals, pursuing information requests, organising meetings, and searching for specialists. Developers, by contrast, could undertake these activities through paid professional teams. Formal opportunities to participate therefore demanded fundamentally different commitments from the parties involved.

The volume and technical nature of the evidence intensified this imbalance. Noise, air quality, traffic, energy, water, biodiversity, and landscape effects required forms of analysis that residents could not readily produce themselves. Residents possessed detailed knowledge of local roads, land use, flooding, Dame Alice Owen's School, and everyday use of the landscape, but this knowledge had to be translated into technical reports before it could carry comparable weight within the planning process. Drawing on experience of several major planning disputes, IP02 observed:

> *"Residents are generally working outside of their comfort zone. They're not experts. They are pitched against developers who employ experts and who have an answer for everything."*

Potters Bar campaigners consequently sought independent specialists who could scrutinise the applicant's visualisations and future evidence on noise, air quality, and other impacts. Finding appropriate expertise was itself demanding. As IP09 explained:

> *"It's very difficult … We start by reading articles that cite experts and then contacting them and looking at scientific journals … It's very time consuming."*

Access also depended on money. Community groups had to fundraise for specialist reports and possible legal advice, and their capacity to do so varied considerably. IP02's wider planning experience showed that an affluent and established community could raise substantial funds, retain professional advisers, and participate as a formal party at an inquiry. Newer or less affluent campaigns might rely on a small number of volunteers and informal assistance. Formally equal rights to object can therefore produce unequal practical capacities to challenge evidence and sustain participation.

Even where funds were available, access to expertise was not assured. Drawing on other planning disputes, IP02 reported difficulty finding consultants willing to work for resident groups because developers represented much of their present or prospective client base. This illustrates a structural difficulty faced by communities seeking independent technical evidence.

Information rights and complaint procedures also require procedural knowledge and persistence. Residents described information requests, formal complaints, repeated correspondence, and escalation to the Ombudsman. Observing the campaign's efforts to navigate these routes, IP18 described the resulting burden:

> *"You would lose your mind into the maze of fighting with a local authority. Literally, you are batted from process to process to process to process."*

Although formally available to all, these procedures favour those with the time, confidence, administrative knowledge, and persistence to navigate them. Institutional complexity can therefore reproduce unequal influence. This imbalance was also experienced through the relative scale of the parties. Contrasting the local campaign with the company proposing to develop the site, IP06 asked:

> *"Why try and fight these big companies? I mean, Equinix is like a global player in the whole data-centre market. You know, what can we do? We're just the little people."*

Nor did interviewees invariably regard councils as the most powerful actors. An NGO participant described a second imbalance, between local councils and developers:

> *"You've got the world's wealthiest companies on the one hand, and then you've got extremely resource-constrained councils on the other." (IP10)*

Planning authorities may indeed face heavy caseloads, limited specialist capacity, and dependence on evidence commissioned by applicants. Longstanding financial pressures due to austerity may also increase the attractiveness of developments promising investment, infrastructure contributions, and business-rate revenue.

The interviews therefore revealed layered power relations. Residents were disadvantaged relative to both developers and public authorities, whilst local authorities could themselves be disadvantaged relative to major corporate applicants. These inequalities shaped whose evidence could be produced, whose knowledge became authoritative, and who could sustain participation, helping to explain why formal opportunities generated so little perceived community influence.

5. Distrust through perceived misrepresentation and non-responsiveness

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The aforementioned issues left residents distrustful of developers and public authorities. Distrust was intensified by perceptions of misleading presentation of information and "radio silence" in response to questions.

Distrust emerged through repeated encounters with information residents regarded as selective, promotional, difficult to verify, or insufficiently responsive to their questions. These experiences affected trust not only in the developer, but also, in some accounts, in the council and the wider decision-making process.

IP18's changing understanding illustrates particularly well how distrust developed over time. They first encountered plans for cycle lanes and additional parking near Dame Alice Owen's School through a school-related parent channel. Presented as welcome local improvements, these initially appeared unconnected to a much larger development:

> *"They're doing bike lanes. Who can oppose bike lanes? That's a really lovely idea. And they're making a bigger car park. Oh, what a wonderful thing … I said, 'Oh, okay, not bad. Good, good plan.'"*

Only after attending a local meeting and seeking further information did IP18 understand these projects' relationship to the proposed data centre:

> *"There's a context to that leaflet that I had been oblivious to."*

This later understanding changed how IP18 interpreted the original communication. What had appeared to be straightforward information about local improvements came to be experienced as selective framing that foregrounded attractive amenities whilst

omitting the wider project. Doubts deepened when IP18 learned how far the proposal had already progressed and when questions submitted by parents to DC01UK through the school remained unanswered for several months. By the time the project site was sold on to Equinix in October 2025, DC01UK had still not provided the anticipated answers. Two further participants independently recalled the same episode. The school provided a channel for submitting questions, but the anticipated answers from the developers did not materialise.

Uncertainty about how the different elements of the local proposal fitted together also generated suspicion. IP04 struggled to reconcile the language of a technology "campus" and training hub with expectations of a relatively small operational workforce:

> *"Is there a bigger plan that we're not being exposed to here?"*

Unable to assemble a coherent account of the project from the information available, IP04 described the situation as "all a little bit fishy". This language does not establish that information was deliberately concealed but demonstrates the strength of the suspicion created by participants' inability to understand clearly what was proposed and why.

Some participants also believed that the proposal's repeated association with South Mimms understated its immediate relevance to Potters Bar. IP07 believed that early communication had disproportionately focussed on South Mimms, not Potters Bar, describing this as "hugely disingenuous, deceitful even".

Participants also questioned whether computer-generated images adequately represented the development's scale. They recalled images in which people and screening trees appeared disproportionately large relative to the buildings. When participants questioned these representations, they did not obtain substantive answers or answers that were perceived as dismissive. At the later exhibition, when questioned about the proportions, a developer representative reportedly described the image as:

> *"just an artist's impression"*

before adding:

> *"But hopefully you'll get used to it."*

Rather than addressing whether the presentation accurately conveyed the development's scale, this response presumed eventual acceptance. Campaigners also described promised notes that remained unavailable several months after a February 2026 meeting with Equinix. Such experiences were perceived as dismissive because they offered reassurance, deferred detail, or presumed acceptance without supplying the requested evidence.

Finally, participants questioned the council's official record of 500 supportive representations, listed under the heading "Neighbour responses", compared with 924

objections[13]. Whilst anyone was entitled to comment on the planning application, several participants questioned whether the presentation of these published figures adequately reflected the geographical composition of the support. One participant described requests for aggregated location data, eventually escalated to the Information Commissioner's Office, and recalled that approximately 124 of around 486 supporters lived within ten miles of the proposed site. If accurate, this would place about 362 supporters beyond a ten-mile radius. Further requests sought three-mile and one-mile breakdowns. The reported difficulty in obtaining this information was itself central to the development of distrust.

The council's record of 500 supportive representations is not disputed. However, the representative survey found that only 8% of Potters Bar residents supported the development, compared with 62% who opposed it. This sharp contrast helps explain why participants questioned where the supportive submissions had come from and why the difficulty they experienced in obtaining geographical information intensified rather than resolved their distrust. Distrust consequently fed back into each of the preceding themes, deepening scepticism about asserted necessity, promised benefits, evidential fairness, and the integrity of the decision-making process.

Policy implications and recommendations

Responsible data-centre development requires more than mitigating impacts after a site has been selected. It requires scrutiny of how sites are chosen, how infrastructure and natural resources are allocated, and how environmental and community consequences are evaluated. The Potters Bar case shows how insufficiently demonstrated necessity, unevenly distributed benefits and burdens, limited community influence, unequal resources, and non-responsive communication can reinforce one another and create distrust. These processes risk generating wider social costs, including loss of valued environments, unpaid demands on communities, displacement of other public priorities, declining institutional trust, and political alienation. Such costs are collectively borne but are rarely given adequate weight when projects are assessed against investment, growth, and digital-capacity claims. When this occurs, data-centre development risks losing social legitimacy. The following five recommendations seek to address this problem through stronger strategic justification, fairer distribution of responsibilities, meaningful participation, independent public scrutiny, and continuing accountability. They directly respond to the five broader issues around data-centre siting decisions identified in the interviews.

[13] https://hertsmere.moderngov.co.uk/mgAi.aspx?ID=41794 (accessed: 07.08.2026).

1. Establish a national strategy for data-centre need, scale, and location

National policy should not promote further expansion without a clear assessment of how much additional data-centre capacity is required, what it will be used for, and where facilities of different scales can be accommodated responsibly. The strategy should coordinate data-centre development with housing, infrastructure, resource, climate, and environmental planning. Until it is in place, government should consider a temporary pause on further very large or hyperscale approvals.

- **Audit existing and planned data-centre capacity**, including how much existing capacity is used, what services it supports, and its demand on electricity, water, and land.
- **Develop a national spatial strategy** based on a comprehensive view of land, electricity, water, ecological, and infrastructure constraints.
- **Require decisions to identify trade-offs** with housing, climate commitments, and other public priorities.
- **Scrutinise investment and sovereignty claims** by assessing how much economic value remains in the UK and disclosing who will ultimately own, control, and use the facility.

2. Distribute public support, private benefits, and wider social costs fairly

Data-centre development relies on publicly provided infrastructure, access to natural resources, public planning capacity, and host communities. Where public support enables private investment, it should produce demonstrable public value. Policy should prevent the costs associated with data-centre development from falling disproportionately on households, public authorities, and affected communities.

- **Require data-centre developers and operators to contribute fairly** to the additional grid, water, and transport infrastructure their facilities require.
- **Protect households and other users from displaced costs**, including higher infrastructure and utility bills caused by a surge in demand from large data centres.
- **Make public support conditional on public value**, beyond investment and economic-growth claims, including demonstrable benefits for host communities.
- **Review ownership and governance models for Critical National Infrastructure**, including options that give public institutions a durable stake in its control, value, and benefits.

3. Lower barriers to early and meaningful participation

Meaningful participation should begin once clear information is available about a proposal's purpose, approximate scale, potential sites, resource requirements, and likely impacts, but before its location and scale are fixed. Engagement should then continue as more detailed information becomes available, giving affected communities a credible opportunity to shape consequential choices.

- **Require staged engagement whilst meaningful alternatives remain open**, including different sites, scales and layouts. Appropriate mitigation should be considered where impacts cannot be avoided.
- **Make participation accessible** through accurate and timely notification, local venues, multiple communication channels, and sufficient time to understand and respond to the proposal.
- **Provide opportunities for collective deliberation**, where residents, developers, councillors, and independent specialists can question evidence and consider alternatives together.
- **Require a published community response statement**, explaining what residents proposed, what changed in response, what did not change, and why.

4. Create independent public capacity to assess, challenge, and enforce

Data-centre developers and operators possess substantially greater financial and technical resources than residents and many local planning authorities. A national, independent public body should provide the specialist capacity needed to scrutinise data-centre proposals and monitor operational impacts. It should be publicly governed and funded through proportionate levies on developers and operators, without allowing those contributing funds to select experts or influence their findings.

- **Establish an independent data-centre oversight body** to support national strategy, advise planning authorities, coordinate cumulative assessment, and maintain specialist expertise on resource, infrastructure, environmental, health, and community impacts.
- **Require developers to fund independently commissioned assessments**, with the oversight body or relevant public authority appointing and directing the specialists.
- **Provide independent assistance to affected communities**, including access to technical and planning advice, underlying evidence, and plain-language explanations.

- **Use ongoing developer and operator levies to fund continuing monitoring and enforcement** throughout construction and operation.

5. Ensure continuous accountability for promises and performance

Trust requires that claims relating to investment, employment, resource use, environmental performance, and community benefits are clearly evidenced, and that commitments influencing planning decisions remain enforceable throughout construction and operation.

- **Require public disclosure** of ownership and control, intended functions, resource requirements, the number, duration, and type of jobs expected, and promised community benefits.
- **Distinguish clearly between confirmed commitments, forecasts, and aspirations**, and require independently checked visualisations and claims about resource use and environmental performance.
- **Require a published impact and mitigation schedule**, clearly identifying anticipated harms and mitigation measures to be funded by developers and operators, secured through enforceable planning conditions or obligations.
- **Make material commitments legally binding**, using planning conditions, Section 106 obligations, or equivalent agreements with delivery dates and clear responsibilities.
- **Publish actual performance and compliance**, including energy and water use, emissions, noise, generator testing, employment, community benefits, and any corrective action taken.