

Data Centres and Strategic Planning Policy

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The UK's data centre sector quietly underpins our digital economy. The UK's strength as leader and net exporter of digital services depends on state-of-the-art digital infrastructure that is secure, efficient, reliable and competitive. It also depends, now and in the future, on adequate capacity, both in terms of data centres (data infrastructure) and connectivity (telecommunications). UK Government's policy ambitions for growth and recovery rely on world-class data infrastructure both at national and local level.

The UK is poised to be a world-leading digital economy but strategic policy lacunae, combined with patchy awareness at the implementation level, are eroding our ability to deliver the digital infrastructure that the UK needs to compete globally. Data centres are not referenced in the latest iteration of the National Planning Policy Framework nor in the supporting guidance. Local authorities and planners therefore struggle to understand the role of data centres within the digital economy, in particular their criticality, complexity, and locational attributes.

Where should data centres fit in the National Planning Policy Framework?

- Section 10 (supporting high quality communications): From a strategic planning perspective, data centres, combined with fixed and mobile telecommunications networks, comprise our digital infrastructure.
- Section 6 (building a strong and competitive economy): Together with the ecosystem of data-dependent companies that tend to develop around them, data centres underpin those high tech clusters that planners are urged to accommodate. The sector has also proved resilient to the challenges of COVID-19: operators have been able to pay rent and rates on time and the sector is not associated with redundancies or furlough.
- Section 7 (Ensuring the vitality of town centres): Data centres are usually located on trading estates and will not impact local traffic or draw consumer trade away from town centres.
- Section 11 (promoting effective use of land): Data centre projects are typically brownfield development on post-industrial sites.

Why should data centres be included?

- The UK's economic future depends on adequate digital infrastructure capacity. This is not limited to digital services exports but about our ability to exploit digital technology to improve productivity and competitiveness across all economic sectors.
- The successful delivery of a multitude of government policy agendas depends on world class digital infrastructure, from Levelling Up, to our Plan For Growth. Government cannot deliver on its strategic or its manifesto commitments without world class digital infrastructure.
- Best in class digital infrastructure enables the spread of high value jobs from existing clusters in London and the South East to anywhere in the UK, providing the potential for new centres of excellence.
- Lack of awareness among planners is frequently cited as a barrier to the deployment of data infrastructure.

What would good look like?

- Data centres accommodated appropriately in strategic planning policy.
- Accompanying guidance to help local planners understand the characteristics of this type of development and make properly informed decisions.
- Raised awareness among local authority planning and growth teams in areas where data centre developments are likely to take place.
- A route to share information and best practice between the industry and planning professionals and within the planning community.

Next Steps

The sector is keen to open a dialogue with policy makers and professionals within the planning process and is happy to provide data or more detailed material to facilitate the discussion. In the meantime, further information about the UK data centre sector is [here](#).

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