

Artificial intelligence in public service reform

Introduction

The Scottish government has published its programme for government which puts into practice its public service reform strategy. This is a programme of workforce reduction, cuts and automation, which artificial intelligence (AI) will be at the heart of. It has also published its AI strategy, which sets out how AI will be put at the core of public services, and how the government will prioritise investing in AI companies and infrastructure. This briefing summarises examples of existing AI use in public services, the Scottish government's AI strategy, how AI is key to its reform agenda, and sets out UNISON's position on the use of AI in public services.

AI strategy

The Scottish government is positioning AI as a key tool for economic growth. Its AI strategy positions AI as a vital industry, and the public sector as a key market for that industry. Public services are also set out as a way to build public trust in AI. There is a risk that public services are increasingly being seen as a fertile ground for AI functions and companies to grow in, rather than the backbone of society which AI should be designed to complement and genuinely enhance. Taken alongside the public service reform strategy, these strategies paint a picture of boosting economic growth by encouraging AI companies into and within Scotland, by boosting AI infrastructure, and by using AI tools to automate more services and reduce the size of the public sector pay bill.

AI in public services

Education

The programme for government commits to 'streamlining' data in education and cutting 'unnecessary bureaucracy', with public reform central to 'tackling inconsistencies in how national education policy is applied'. This is likely to involve AI. AI is already being used in education.

In March 2026, the Scottish government published a review of additional support for learning (ASL) in Scotland. In a speech on the review's publication day, then education secretary Jenny Gilruth announced a £700,000 of funding for new AI app 'Trellis' to automate administrative tasks for teachers associated with ASL. That the government made no commitments to proper training or a structured career pathway for school support staff, and instead siphoned off £700,000 to a private company, sets a worrying precedent for how AI will be prioritised as reform continues.

The Trellis app was developed through the CivTech scheme. CivTech is a Scottish government project which matches public sector organisations who have a 'challenge' they would like to solve, with developers, often private tech companies. The intellectual property of the 'solution' developed always belongs to the company. While companies can give assurances that none of the data which has been used to create the product is passed on to future customers, the fact is that it is public information which has shaped the models, which are then generating private profit from public funding.



KEY POINTS:

- **AI is a key part of the public service reform strategy which seeks to reduce the workforce and automate services**
- **AI is being rolled out across public services including in education and the NHS**
- **The Scottish government positions the public sector as a key market for AI companies**
- **Public services are already generating profit for private companies selling AI products**



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AI is central to reform plans for the NHS. The programme for government commits to “developing an AI hub to accelerate safe adoption of AI across the health and care system and continue rollout of services.” AI has already been rolled out or piloted in a number of areas. Some of these functions involve processing of sensitive biometric data, monitoring of staff and patient activity, and automated decision-making. All of these areas are high risk, and adequate governance, regulation and safeguards must be in place to protect patients and staff and ensure that these systems are working in their interests. NHS staff must also be empowered to challenge automated decisions that they feel are not clinically appropriate.

Datacentres

Large datacentres to support AI have been planned across Scotland. The government’s AI strategy says that such datacentres are vital for ‘AI sovereignty’, which means the extent to which AI functions, servers and technologies are held within a country. Yet public investment in these developments is still leaking to companies based overseas. Capacity of two datacentres in the North Lanarkshire ‘AI growth zone’ has been contracted out to CoreWeave, an American company. These datacentres are likely to be harmful to the environment and be a significant drain on energy and natural resources. While DataVita, the Scottish company involved in the Lanarkshire site, say their plans are sustainable and will be powered by renewables, reporting by the Guardian raised serious questions about how valid these claims are.

UNISON approach

UNISON believes that technology must serve people, not the other way around. AI use must be responsible, ethical, and fair. When it comes to service reform, AI must be used in keeping with UNISON’s values for public services – democracy, investment, fairness, and partnership.

Partnership

AI should be deployed in partnership with staff. Workers must be at the centre of decisions about AI, which should be used to support workers, not replace or control them.

Democracy

All public services should be democratically accountable. The rolling out of AI products in Scottish public services is highly undemocratic. Usually, neither the service user nor staff have any input in how the model, purchased from a private company, is designed or how it works. The Scottish government’s AI strategy does set out that a user-centered approach to introducing AI is needed and mentions a citizen engagement programme, but the strategy positions the public as needing to be educated to adapt to AI and its uses, rather than having a say in how AI tools can work best for them and the services they rely on. This is the wrong way around.

Investment

AI cannot be seen as a quick fix for under investment in public services. Any productivity savings made by AI use should be reinvested in staff and services.

Fairness

AI should not be used as a reason for job losses. New AI tools being introduced as headcounts are reduced should not be seen as savings, but as public money which has leaked out of the public realm into private company profit.

Action for branches

- Communicate with members to ensure they are informed about the Scottish government’s programme for government and wider public sector reform strategy
- Engage with all staff on the importance of trade union membership – there has never been a more important time to be a member of UNISON
- All UNISON members should ensure that their contact details are up to date and their myUNISON member portal is activated

Additional reading

- [Scottish government AI strategy: 2026-2031](#)
- [Guardian reporting on DataVita sustainability claims](#)
- [Strengthening additional support for learning \(Trellis app announcement\)](#)
- [UNISON Scotland briefing: Public service reform update](#)
- [National Wealth Fund: announcement of public investment in DataVita’s North Lanarkshire site, contracted out to CoreWeave](#)
- [CivTech Scotland: the process](#)



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