

**Summary Report on
Centre for Public Policy and Administration
Seminar ‘The Potential for AI in the Public
Sector’
15 April 2025**

Purpose and Context

This summary distils key insights from a seminar hosted by the Centre for Public Policy and Administration (CPPA) at Queen's University Belfast on 15 April 2025. Convened in response to growing political and policy focus on AI - including the UK Government's AI Action Plan and the Paris AI Safety Summit - the event addressed how AI can be responsibly and rapidly adopted across public services in Northern Ireland.

The seminar gathered over 180+ invited participants from across the UK, Ireland, and Europe, including senior policymakers, technical experts, academics, and industry voices. Delegates were united by a shared ambition: to shape an AI-enabled public sector that is ethical, effective, and citizen-focused.

Methodology

The accompanying 23-page report draws on a range of structured outputs from the seminar, including transcribed keynotes and panel sessions, facilitator notes, and post-event feedback. The CPPA has synthesised these diverse contributions into a single record, balancing academic insight with practical governance priorities. The recommendations presented within reflect the workshop consensus that Northern Ireland has a unique opportunity to lead on responsible, citizen-focused AI in the public sector.

Contributors

The seminar agenda featured a series of keynote talks, thematic presentations, and concluded with an expert-led panel. Contributors included:

- **Professor Chris Johnson** (Chief Scientific Adviser, UK Department for Science, Innovation and Technology)
- **Professor Helen McCarthy** (Chief Scientific and Technology Advisor for Northern Ireland)
- **Professor Paul Millar** (Queen's University Belfast) | *Topics: Trust, ethics, and security of AI systems*
- **Professor Madalina Busuioc** (VU Amsterdam) | *Topics: AI in public sector decision-making and citizen-state interactions*
- **Professor Phil Hanna** (Queen's University Belfast) | *Topics: Skills and workforce development for AI adoption*
- **Professor Iain Styles** (Queen's University Belfast) | *Topics: Core AI technologies and their opportunities*
- **Professor David Smyth** (Queen's University Belfast) | *Topic: Sovereign AI compute infrastructure*
- **Professor David Crozier** (Director, Artificial Intelligence Collaboration Centre) | *Topic: Ecosystem development and collaborative AI.*

Key Themes

1. **AI as a Tool to Strengthen, Not Supplant, Governance**

AI was widely recognised as a means to improve decision-making, but not a substitute for human judgment. Delegates agreed that AI should drive efficiency, augment capacity and improve data integration, provided appropriate accountability frameworks are in place.

2. **Trust and Transparency Must Be Built In**

Trust cannot be assumed - it must be earned through transparency, explainability, and oversight. The risk of opaque, vendor-driven systems was flagged. Ethical auditing and public registers of AI use are seen as critical.

3. **Urgency Matched by Responsibility**

There was strong consensus that Northern Ireland must move quickly, but wisely. Waiting for perfection risks falling behind. Instead, pilot programmes, sovereign infrastructure, and audit-backed deployment were proposed to accelerate responsible innovation.

4. **AI Skills and Capability Are Prerequisites**

AI literacy - across all levels of government - is the linchpin of success. From procurement to policy, decision-makers must understand what AI can (and cannot) do. A public sector-wide upskilling effort is needed, with universities as key delivery partners.

5. **Ecosystem Collaboration is Fundamental**

No single actor can deliver effective AI adoption alone. Participants stressed the importance of universities, civic groups, tech firms, and policymakers working together on shared challenges, data governance, and the creation of interoperable public goods.

Key Insights

- **"A ship is safe in its harbour, but that's not what it's for."**
— Expressed during the panel discussion, advocating for bold but responsible deployment rather than delay in pursuit of perfection.
- **"Public administrators must become demanding and discerning users of AI."**
— Urging confidence and capability in commissioning and managing AI tools for the public good.
- **"AI should be used to support - not replace - human judgement."**
— A core seminar principle advocating for augmentation, not automation, of government decisions.
- **"Northern Ireland must shape its own path and act with purpose and urgency."**
— A shared sentiment from the final panel, highlighting the opportunity for regional leadership.
- **"Without vision, all we will see are barriers."**
— Professor Chris Johnson, emphasising the need for a clear, confident AI strategy.

Five Recommendations

The report proposes five priority actions to build a trusted, innovative AI ecosystem in Northern Ireland:

1. **Establish a Permanent Public Sector AI Forum**
A cross-sector body to coordinate AI strategy, surface challenges, and align ethics, infrastructure, and innovation across departments.
2. **Create a Public Register of AI Use in Government**
A transparent, public-facing database of deployed and pilot AI systems to foster trust, academic scrutiny, and civil society oversight.
3. **Introduce Mandatory AI Risk Audits in Procurement**
Embed a standardised risk declaration and audit framework for all AI-related public procurement to assess ethical, legal, and operational impacts.
4. **Pilot a Sovereign AI Design and Implementation Platform**
Invest in regionally governed infrastructure to ensure secure, value-aligned development of AI systems, reducing dependence on overseas vendors.
5. **Deliver an AI Literacy and Capability Framework**
Define baseline standards for AI knowledge in the public sector, supported by tailored professional development and university partnerships.

Conclusion

The seminar's recommendations are designed to align closely with national and international policy efforts, reinforcing Northern Ireland's opportunity to act as a confident contributor to global AI governance. Proposals such as investment in sovereign AI platforms and strategic data governance mirror the UK AI Action Plan's ambitions, including a x20 expansion of public compute capacity and the development of AI Growth Zones. The event too marked an inflection point: a clear and growing commitment to ensure AI is adopted wisely and in a timely manner.

The CPPA views this report not as a conclusion, but as a catalyst - supporting further forums, policy development, and the creation of a distinctive model of AI-enabled public governance that is strategic, ethical, and citizen-focused.