

# National AI Leadership Forum Report

22 October 2025

## Recommendations for Action Developed through the National AI Leadership Forum

This Forum heard a range of perspectives from different organisations under the Chatham House Rule. The content of this report reflects the discussions and insights shared and does not necessarily represent the views of all participants or organisations, nor should it be interpreted as statements of fact.



**WILLIAM FRY**

## Executive summary

On Thursday 25th September 2025, the Research Ireland ADAPT and Insight Centres, in partnership with Wiliam Fry, hosted the National AI Leadership Forum at the William Fry offices in Grand Canal Dock, Dublin. The event convened over 100 key stakeholders from across Government, academia, industry, regulators, and civil society and was held under Chatham House Rules to enable open and honest discussion. This report, therefore, reflects key insights from advance submissions and the event's discussions without attribution to individual participants.

This Forum built on work ADAPT has been doing throughout 2025 to map Ireland's AI ecosystem and bring the AI community together. It evolved from two high-level roundtables in March and May and aims to meet the needs of stakeholders and inform how Ireland can lead in the AI age. It was framed against a rapidly shifting geopolitical context and Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2026, which will provide a platform to strengthen Ireland's reputation as a trusted, competitive hub that combines world-class research, ethical oversight and fast, transparent regulatory pathways. Participants also underlined that Ireland's small size should be seen as an advantage point. Ireland's agility allows us to adapt policy faster than larger jurisdictions, but it requires dynamic, data-driven policymaking capable of responding to rapid technological change.

The Forum focused on the following themes: Governance and Coordination; Public-sector adoption; Trust, transparency and accountability; Skills, literacy and talent pipelines; Culture, language and the creative economy; Evaluation, testbeds and assurance; Ireland's international role; Inclusion and public dialogue; and Investment and market signals. This report sets out the key talking points and insights discussed under each of these themes.

The Forum reached a clear view that Ireland should pursue global leadership in trustworthy AI. This ambition was framed as practical if Ireland concentrates on governance and safety, evaluative capability, culture and language technologies, and high-impact public-sector exemplars.

There was very strong support for the development of a National AI Office as the system's anchor and for a Global AI Summit, which has since been announced for October 2026 during Ireland's EU Presidency.

Participants welcomed the State's recent regulatory progress, noting that Ireland is in the first wave of EU countries to designate its competent authorities under the EU AI Act, backed by a national single point of contact to coordinate with the European Commission and stakeholders. A National AI Implementation Committee has begun convening designated authorities. A National AI Office is being created to coordinate implementation, act as the EU contact point, provide central access to technical expertise, and host regulatory sandboxes that support safe innovation. Participants felt that plans must be matched by sustained public investment in AI infrastructure, compute capacity and research funding or Ireland risks lagging behind other EU Member states participating in large-scale AI Factory and cloud initiatives. At EU level, a Code of Practice for general-purpose AI and accompanying guidelines were noted as immediate reference points for providers and adopters.

The discussion highlighted four imperatives:

1. Demonstrate value through carefully selected public-sector use cases, with transparent evaluation and clear public communication.
2. Convert strong activity into coherence by aligning guidance, assurance and procurement across departments and regulators.
3. Renew and widen the skills base, from advanced research to workforce and citizen literacy, with specific provision for older people and SMEs. This must be underpinned by a sustained

investment in world-class research and innovation to ensure that Ireland is equipped to advance the science and knowledge that underpins trustworthy AI.

4. Use Ireland's regulatory experience and EU Presidency to shape international practice through evidence, not rhetoric, including an observatory function that publishes regular, data-driven insights on jobs, skills and adoption.

## 1. Governance and Coordination

The distributed designation of competent authorities was viewed as a significant step that embeds AI oversight within existing sectoral remits. The model was praised for aligning new AI functions with established expertise in financial supervision, communications, consumer protection, health and transport. The single point of contact provides a front door for citizens, EU counterparts and firms, reducing confusion about roles and improving consistency.

Strong backing was expressed for the planned National AI Office. The office is expected to convene designated authorities, maintain coherence of interpretation, and serve as the State's contact point under the EU AI Act. It would also concentrate technical capability that smaller authorities cannot sustain alone, operate regulatory sandboxes to test systems in controlled conditions, and publish practical guidance that explains how to adopt AI safely. Participants stressed that this centre of gravity should enable, not merely police, adoption, keeping human-centric outcomes, citizen trust and public services at the centre of Ireland's AI strategy.

While Ireland's designation of fifteen competent authorities was welcomed as a milestone, some participants felt that the current system still feels fragmented. Different agencies, departments and initiatives are active, yet some felt that citizens and businesses were uncertain about "who does what". The forthcoming National AI Office was therefore seen as essential not only for coordination but also for reducing duplication and providing clarity. The Implementation Committee, already bringing together the designated authorities, was described as a necessary step toward coherence, but it was stressed that coordination must be backed by sufficient resourcing and a visible public presence. Participants warned that momentum risks being lost if the National AI Office is delayed and should be prioritised as an immediate action and operation well before July 2026.

Participants highlighted that Ireland has an opportunity to show how innovation and regulation can reinforce each other rather than being in conflict. Ireland was seen as well placed to demonstrate the balance and act as a 'lab' for rapid regulation and policy development, showing Europe and beyond that agility and protection can go hand-in-hand. It was also suggested that AI could support Government and regulators in monitoring the implementation of legislation and anticipating future policy needs, strengthening Ireland's capacity for agile, evidence-based regulation.

Ireland's early progress was seen as a lever in Europe. With authorities already designated and a coordination structure in place, Ireland can help shape how the EU AI Act works in practice, including the voluntary Code of Practice for General-Purpose AI Models. The Forum emphasised that momentum now needs consistent delivery, visible to the public and to international partners.

Proposals included the development of a national positioning paper that will allow Ireland lead the debate ahead of Ireland's assumption of the EU Presidency; a risk register for AI deployment; and an annual showcase to demonstrate Ireland's progress and keep Ireland in the broader EU consciousness.

## **2. Public-sector adoption**

Health diagnostics, public service media, environmental data services and core administration were cited as immediate candidates where AI can improve accuracy or throughput. Contributors noted that clinical imaging tools report very high accuracy yet know of only one hospital is using such systems domestically. The view was that a small number of well-governed exemplars, independently evaluated and clearly labelled as 'assisted by AI', would build confidence and create a repeatable path for wider roll-out.

Some felt fragmentation was evident in the public sector, suggesting that while there is strong interest and enthusiasm, adoption is inconsistent. Some agencies and hospitals are experimenting with AI, while others remain cautious. It was suggested that public sector adoption can be slowed by very

practical barriers: procurement processes remain too complex for smaller suppliers; cyber standards are not applied consistently; governance arrangements lack clarity; and risk management practices vary considerably across organisations. The combination of designated authorities and the planned national sandbox was seen as a way to tackle these issues by providing a more unified framework. If standard assurance templates, model contract terms, and pre-approved components were made available through a central office, adopters would face less duplication and uncertainty, and could access a single portal that sets out what good practice looks like in clear, practical terms.

### **3. Trust, transparency and accountability**

Trust was treated as a precondition for success. Proposals included a public register of AI systems used by public bodies, describing purpose, benefits and safeguards in plain language, and a national AI risk register that sets out material risks and mitigations.

A submission highlighted that the 'Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty' requiring public bodies to have due regard for the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity, and protect the human rights in how they design and deliver services should be reflected in the Guidelines for the Use of AI in the Public Service. Another submission noted the importance of monitoring the broader socio-technical impacts of AI and emphasised that in domains such as judicial decision-making and public administration, AI systems must remain human-led, with clear accountability for decisions and safeguards for due process.

While it was noted that there already exists AI training and education certifications, participants strongly supported accreditation for AI literacy and professional training courses delivered by trusted institutions, creating a visible quality mark for such courses. Participants expressed that they were sometimes unsure of which AI tools and service providers to use as the technology is so new, and a

light-touch certification or kitemark for tools or services that pass agreed evaluations was discussed as a way to filter robust products from untested offerings.

The EU Code of Practice for general-purpose AI and the July guidelines were seen as immediate instruments to operationalise transparency, copyright diligence and safety expectations ahead of full regulatory timelines. Ireland's early institutional set-up positions it to convene providers and adopters around these norms.

There was also support for public engagement in pilots and for national communications campaigns modelled on GDPR awareness, ensuring citizens are informed about how and when AI is being used, assisted by clear 'AI labelling'.

#### **4. Skills, literacy and talent pipelines**

Skills were identified as a constraint on Ireland's ability to scale AI adoption, requiring both short-term awareness building and long-term capacity development. It was noted that earlier research training centres produced at least six hundred industry ready PhDs in AI-related fields through the Centres for Research Training, an achievement built on relatively modest investment, yet that pipeline has now ended. Participants called for renewal of this programme to maintain both research capability and regulatory assurance expertise, and stressed that research leadership and national competitiveness are inextricably linked.

At undergraduate level, it was reported that students are increasingly comfortable with AI tools, having never known a learning environment without them. This confidence at the top end of the skills pyramid contrasts with gaps elsewhere. The wider workforce, the civil and public service, and the general public were described as lacking basic understanding of how AI works. Concerns were also raised about the absence of clear guidance for second-level education, where teachers and pupils are navigating AI without structured support.

The need for targeted upskilling was highlighted across multiple groups. It was suggested that the civil service requires structured programmes focused on safe adoption and oversight, while SMEs need support that links training directly to implementation roadmaps. Concern was expressed for those “at the bottom of the pyramid”, noting that while elite research and undergraduate cohorts are progressing, the majority of citizens and workers have little grounding in how AI systems operate.

Ireland nonetheless has a strong base to build on. National e-learning platforms already reach tens of thousands of users each year, SOLAS is expanding digital upskilling pathways, and enterprise partnerships with training providers are well established. These efforts were praised for their reach, but participants argued that they remain fragmented. A proposal was made for an ‘AI Skills Gateway’ that would complement existing initiatives, including the work of the European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIHs), by bringing these elements together in one place, offering role-specific pathways and micro-credentials for business leaders, regulators, clinicians, educators, creators, SMEs and citizens. This proposal was framed as means to build trust and reduce potential duplication of effort.

Inclusion was a recurring theme. Older citizens were described as particularly absent from both planning and measurement, despite often being among those most impacted by digital transitions. The Forum heard that Ireland does not currently track digital skills beyond the age of 75, and that this data gap must be addressed. Programmes tailored to accessibility and confidence-building were urged to ensure that older people, alongside other groups at risk of exclusion, are fully included in Ireland’s AI skills agenda.

One written submission proposed that Ireland should leverage its global reputation education and learning innovation to lead in AI for Education. With strong foundations already in place, Ireland could establish an EdTech AI Testbed to evaluate and co-develop responsible AI tools for teaching and learning, and become the gold-standard model for the ethical and effective use of AI in education internationally.

## 5. Culture, language and the creative economy

Culture was consistently described as a strategic asset for Ireland's AI positioning.

Concerns were raised by representatives of the creative sector about the use of works in AI training without consent or attribution, with participants emphasising that music and other creative content are already at the forefront of AI's disruptive impact, and that without safeguards there is a real risk of displacing human creativity. The establishment of a dedicated sandbox for cultural and creative industries was proposed, with lawful, licensed data and a trusted infrastructure to ensure innovation can continue while human creativity is preserved.

The discussion stressed that the goal should not be to block innovation but to ensure it develops responsibly. With the right guardrails, AI could enrich cultural expression and support creativity rather than replace it. A cultural and language sandbox, hosted under the planned National AI Office, was therefore seen as a way to encourage experimentation while protecting rights, ensuring consent, and promoting Ireland's distinctive cultural and linguistic assets.

The Irish language remains under-represented with English dominating mainstream language models, and several participants argued that Ireland could lead internationally in protecting minority languages. By demonstrating how minority languages can be successfully embedded in products and services, creating methods and tools that are relevant beyond Ireland, we can play a major role in protecting minority languages from digital extinction. The link between creative rights, copyright frameworks, and cultural preservation was flagged as urgent.

## 6. Evaluation, testbeds and assurance

Participants agreed that emerging generative and agentic AI systems will require new approaches to evaluation. Existing frameworks were described as inadequate for assessing the reliability, safety and performance of such systems. It was suggested that Ireland should invest in national testbeds,

reference datasets and standard metrics that can be shared across regulators, public bodies and adopters, ensuring that systems are assessed consistently.

Synthetic data was identified as one useful tool for evaluation, particularly in domains where access to real data is constrained for privacy or security reasons. The planned national sandbox was seen as the practical mechanism to combine testing with supervision, allowing regulators to gain hands-on experience while giving adopters clear, predictable pathways to deployment.

The Forum highlighted that shared evaluation infrastructure would reduce costs for individual agencies, avoid duplication of effort, and provide comparability across sectors. It was argued that such infrastructure would also strengthen public confidence, since it would demonstrate that AI systems are subject to transparent and repeatable tests before use in sensitive contexts.

## **7. Ireland's international role**

Ireland's place in the global AI landscape was a recurring theme. Participants noted that while Ireland's regulatory approach and English-speaking status, along with the presence of major technology firms gives it a distinctive position within Europe, some cautioned against overstating Ireland's regulatory reputation internationally. This was described as placing Ireland in a natural role as a bridge between EU regulatory ambition and transatlantic innovation, a position few other Member States can easily replicate.

The recent designation of competent authorities under the AI Act, together with a national coordination model, was regarded as a platform for influence. These developments were seen as strengthening Ireland's ability to contribute in Brussels while maintaining credibility with global partners, though participants differed on the extent to which Ireland's regulatory reputation is recognised internationally.

The idea of Ireland hosting a Global AI Summit during Ireland’s EU Presidency, was suggested as an opportunity to convene international leaders, showcase domestic exemplars, and formalise cooperation, and since the Forum was held, such a summit has been confirmed by the Government to be taking place in Ireland in October, 2026.

Participants suggested that an AI Observatory, producing regular data-driven insights on jobs, skills, adoption and public attitudes, could provide the evidence base to support this international role and inform policy between summits.

Some voices felt that Ireland’s regulatory record has at times been criticised internationally and that over-reliance on US technology could leave the country vulnerable if transatlantic relations deteriorate. It was suggested that Ireland should prepare a “plan B” to avoid excessive dependence on a single technology ecosystem. Others stressed the importance of maintaining perspective, warning that AI is being overstated in the public debate and that narrow applications, rather than sweeping transformations, are where the immediate focus should lie.

The question was posed as to whether we take on this global leadership role not because we can, but because we should, as we are the best placed country in the world to do so.

## **8. Inclusion and public dialogue**

The Forum cautioned against a narrow expert conversation. Older citizens, people with disabilities and those with limited digital access must be visible in policy and programme design. A national conversation that blends small thematic dialogues with larger set-pieces was recommended, supported by clear public communications that explain how AI is used, what benefits it delivers, and what recourse exists if things go wrong.

## 9. Investment and market signals

The advice was to invest where Ireland has comparative strength: governance and safety, health and other regulated services, language technologies and cultural applications. Participants also highlighted that sustained investment in fundamental and applied AI research is critical to attract talent, build domestic capability, and shape global standards. Human capital should lead technology spend so that organisations can absorb AI effectively. A targeted transformation fund was proposed to accelerate adoption in sectors with strong spillovers, complemented by shared procurement frameworks that lower barriers for SMEs and public bodies. Education was highlighted as a strategic area for investment, both to pilot responsible AI in schools and higher education and to position Ireland as a leader in educational technology exports.

Procurement was identified as a practical bottleneck. Public-sector organisations find it difficult to work with smaller AI firms, tilting the scales in favour of larger enterprises. It was argued that this stifles innovation and prevents promising Irish companies from scaling. Drawing on examples from the US, where procurement reform has opened space for startups, Ireland could adopt a more coordinated national approach. The shared procurement frameworks would reduce duplication, cut costs, and lower the barrier for entry for SMEs.

## Twelve proposed action points

The twelve actions proposed here emerged from the advance submissions to the Forum and the engaged discussion at it. They do not necessarily reflect the views of everyone who attended, but they do represent critical areas where there was considerable agreement and support.

1. The National AI Office should act as the coordination centre for the EU AI Act, the national sandbox and public engagement initiatives, with a clear remit to enable safe adoption. Its establishment should be accelerated to ensure Ireland retains leadership momentum.
2. Ireland should develop a national AI investment programme with dedicated funding for research, compute infrastructure, and innovation, ensuring Ireland remains competitive.
3. Ireland should maintain a single public portal that maps responsibilities, funding, guidance, training and sandbox access, giving adopters a clear route to implementation.
4. Ireland should establish an AI observatory function that publishes regular, evidence-based insights on adoption, skills, jobs and public attitudes to guide agile policy.
5. Ireland should use a Global AI Summit in 2026 to formalise international cooperation, showcase domestic exemplars and signal a coherent national model that balances innovation with assurance.
6. Ireland should introduce accreditation for AI literacy and professional training programmes, including voluntary certification or kitemarks for tools and training programmes that meet agreed evaluation standards.
7. Ireland should select a small set of public-sector exemplars in health, media, environment and administration, with independent evaluation and visible 'assisted by AI' labelling.
8. It was proposed that Ireland should publish a public register of AI systems used by public bodies, linked to a national AI risk register that explains material risks and mitigations.

9. Ireland should renew investment in advanced research training and collaborative programmes linking academia, industry, and Government, to ensure Ireland is acknowledged as a research leader.
10. Ireland should create an 'AI Skills Gateway' that delivers role-specific micro-credentials for leaders, regulators, educators, clinicians, creators, SMEs and citizens, with dedicated provision for older people and other digitally disadvantaged groups.
11. Ireland should operate sector-specific sandboxes, including for cultural and language applications, with lawful data access and clear rights safeguards.
12. Ireland should build a shared evaluation infrastructure, including testbeds, reference datasets and standard metrics, integrated with the sandbox to train regulators and support adopters.

## APPENDIX

**Roundtable Participants**

ADAPT Research Ireland Centre
Age Action
AI Accountability Lab
AI Advisory Council
AI Ambassador
AI2
Allied Irish Banks
Amazon
An Garda Síochána
Bank of Ireland
Business Post
Central Bank of Ireland
Chartered Accountants Ireland Limited
Citi
Clanwilliam Group
Coimisiún na Meán
Commission for Communications Regulation
Congress
Courts Service
Data Protection Commission Ireland
Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science
Department of Health
Department of Justice and Equality
Department of Public Expenditure and Reform
Department of the Taoiseach
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
Dogpatch Labs
Dublin City University
EirGrid
Electoral Commission
Enterprise Ireland
Environmental Protection Agency
Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman
Google
Health Service Executive
Houses of the Oireachtas - Tithe an Oireachtais
Ibec
IBM

