

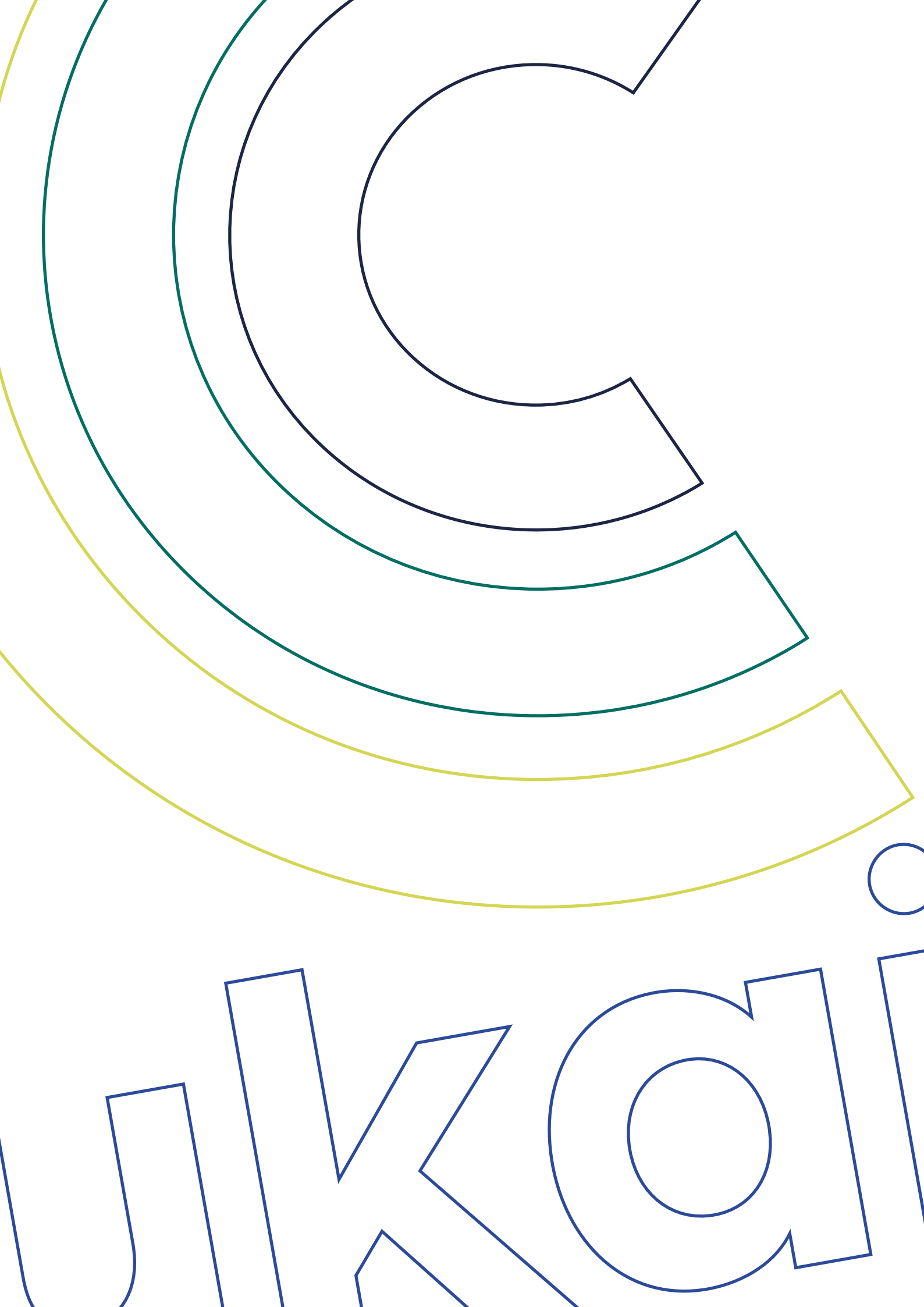


**ukai**

**Getting Britain Growing Report**

**AI and Skills  
Building Capability for  
Regional Growth**





# Contents

Foreword	2
Artificial Intelligence Will Not Replace Education – it Will Redefine What it is For	3
Executive Summary	5
Context and Challenges	6
What Changed as a Result of this Sprint	6
Core Propositions and Delivery Model	7
Draft Implementation Plan Delivering AI and Skills Capability for Regional Growth in Sussex	11
Next Steps	16
Conclusion	17
About Us	18

# Foreword

**A**cross the economy and public sector, artificial intelligence is becoming a foundational technology, shaping how organisations operate, how decisions are made, and how people interact with work, education, and public services. The South East of England is well placed to lead this shift, with strong foundations in research, innovation, and entrepreneurship. Yet it also faces skills gaps, digital exclusion, and public sector capacity pressures that risk limiting progress.

In my role as Chief Executive Officer of UKAI, I regularly speak with businesses, policymakers, educators, and technologists across the UK. A consistent message emerges: the UK does not lack ideas about AI. What we lack is coherence and confidence in translating those ideas into delivery. This workshop on AI and skills was designed to confront that challenge directly.

The South East is often described as a single, prosperous 'Greater London' hinterland, but this masks a more uneven reality. World-class universities and technology firms sit alongside small- and medium-sized enterprises experimenting without support, communities with limited access to opportunity, and institutions struggling to keep pace with change. In this workshop, we used a 'Sprint Methodology' to bring these tensions into focus.

Participants spoke candidly about the frustration of strong ideas failing to translate into action. They questioned whether Sussex, or the South East more broadly, has a shared plan for AI adoption, and highlighted the difficulty of sustaining commitment and investment. Yet this was not a pessimistic conversation. Contributors recognised that AI is already embedded across sectors, and that the real challenge is how to adopt it responsibly, inclusively, and productively.

AI literacy emerged as a central theme. Many people are using AI tools daily, but few are using them well. Too often, AI is treated as a shortcut rather than a tool for analysis, decision support, and organisational learning. This creates missed opportunity and unnecessary fear. Crucially, AI literacy is not a narrow technical skill. It includes critical thinking, ethical judgement, and confidence – understanding where AI adds value, where it introduces risk, and how humans remain in control.

Education and skills reform, therefore, sat at the heart of the discussion. Participants described an education system struggling to keep pace with technological change, producing graduates who often require significant retraining. At the same time, the Sprint highlighted that skills development cannot be confined to young people or formal education. Adult learning and peer-to-peer knowledge sharing are essential if AI adoption is to be widespread and fair.

Rather than attempting to solve everything at once, participants argued for starting somewhere tangible. Sussex emerged as a credible testbed, with councils well placed to convene across industry, academia, and communities. Proposals for shared infrastructure, common standards, and clearer accountability are not about bureaucracy, but alignment – ensuring effort compounds rather than fragments.

From a UKAI perspective, this Sprint reinforces a national lesson. Success in AI will be defined not by who builds the most advanced models, but by who adapts fastest. The South East has the assets to lead. This Sprint has helped clarify how those assets might be aligned. The task now is to move from insight to implementation, with urgency and collaboration.

**Tim Flagg**  
Chief Executive, UKAI





## Artificial Intelligence Will Not Replace Education – it Will Redefine What it is For

**A**s a local Member of Parliament in the South East, and as a member of the Education Select Committee, I know AI has now become an integral and essential part of our everyday lives. AI is how we work, how organisations operate, and how decisions are made across the economy.

That reality has prompted an understandable rush to focus on technical skills – coding, data, machine learning – and to ask whether our education system is keeping pace. But in our anxiety to prepare for an AI-enabled future, there is a danger we will ask the wrong question. The issue is not whether AI makes education less important. It is whether we are finally ready to be honest about what education has always been for.

AI will undoubtedly change the labour market. Many roles will be transformed, some tasks will be automated, and new occupations will be created. People will need to understand how to work with intelligent systems, how to interrogate outputs, and how to use technology productively and responsibly. That much is clear.

What is less often acknowledged is that the rise of AI makes human skills more valuable, not less. As machines take on more routine and analytical work, the capabilities that distinguish people – judgement, empathy, communication, collaboration, and creativity – become the true source of economic and social value.

AI will never be able to replicate a meaningful conversation, build trust in a community or exercise moral judgment in complex, ambiguous situations. Those are not secondary skills. They are foundational.

This is why the debate about education in the age of AI cannot be reduced to a narrow argument about STEM versus the arts, or technology versus the humanities. That framing is false, and it is unhelpful. A strong education system in an AI-driven world must be broader, not narrower.

One of the most striking features of AI is how it changes access to knowledge. Facts are no longer scarce. Anyone can ask a question and receive a detailed explanation, explore a topic in depth, or compare multiple perspectives in seconds. That does not make education redundant; it changes its emphasis.

The purpose of education has never been to teach facts alone. It has always been to equip people with the ability to take on the next problem – to analyse, to question, to apply knowledge and to adapt. In an AI-enabled world, that purpose becomes more important than ever.

It is necessary to prioritise a curriculum that focuses on problem-solving, critical thinking, and communication alongside technical competence. So too is an education system that recognises that learning does not stop at the school gate or graduation ceremony. As technology evolves, adults will need constant opportunities to reskill, retrain and learn from one another throughout their working lives.

There is also a wider point here about confidence and trust. Much of the fear surrounding AI comes not from the technology itself, but from a lack of understanding about how it works and how it should be used. If we want businesses, public services, and communities to adopt AI responsibly, we must invest in literacy and confidence, not just regulation.

This is where leadership matters. Policymakers, educators, and employers cannot ask others to adapt if they are not willing to do so themselves. Understanding AI is not optional for those making decisions about skills, procurement, public services, or economic strategy. It is part of modern governance.

The prize for getting this right is significant. The countries and regions that succeed in the age of AI will not simply be those that invent the most advanced technologies. They will be those that adapt their economies fastest – embedding AI into workplaces, education systems, and public services in ways that enhance human capability rather than diminish it.

For the UK, and for regions like the South East, that is an opportunity we should grasp with confidence. AI does not signal the end of education, but it challenges us to return to its core purpose – preparing people not for a single job, but for continuous personal and professional development.

**Peter Swallow MP**  
Member of Parliament for Bracknell  
Member of the Education Select Committee





## Executive Summary

As part of the Get Britain Growing conference at the University of Sussex, Chamber and UKAI brought together industry, academia, and government to find practical ways to stimulate and sustain growth across the region. We heard from several high-profile speakers, including Peter Kyle MP, the Secretary of State for Business and Trade. Afterwards, the audience split into three 'sprints', specific workshops following a consistent methodology, each tasked with generating specific recommendations.

Sprint 3, the AI and Skills Sprint, examined how the South East can build the skills, structures, confidence, and governance required to harness AI for sustained economic growth and public value. While the region possesses significant assets – including research excellence, innovative businesses, and strong investment networks – these strengths are not yet translating into coordinated AI adoption at scale.

Participants highlighted a gap between strategy and execution. AI is already present across sectors, yet adoption remains uneven, risk-averse, and poorly supported by existing skills and education systems. The absence of a shared regional framework has resulted in fragmented initiatives, duplicated effort, and limited accountability for outcomes.

The Sprint identified AI literacy as a foundational constraint. Many leaders and organisations interact with AI tools daily but lack a deep understanding of how to deploy them responsibly, productively, and strategically. This deficit constrains decision-making, procurement, workforce planning, and public trust.

Education and skills systems were described as structurally misaligned with the pace of AI change. Rigid accreditation models, long qualification cycles, and weak links between industry and education mean graduates are often not work-ready, while adult learners struggle to access flexible retraining pathways.

The Sprint proposed the formation of a coordinated, place-based AI and skills framework for Sussex, designed to align public sector leadership, industry demand, and education provision. Core proposals included the creation of a Sussex AI coalition, a shared AI manifesto, investment in AI literacy for leaders, agile learning pathways, and the establishment of clear accountability for delivery.

The outputs of this Sprint offer a credible foundation for regional AI leadership that can be tested locally and scaled nationally.

## What Changed as a Result of this Sprint

Key shifts resulting from the Sprint include

- Movement from abstract discussion to a place-based delivery model, with Sussex identified as a practical starting point.
- Agreement on coalition-building as the primary governance mechanism for AI adoption.
- Recognition of AI literacy as a leadership and civic capability, not solely a technical skill.
- Clear articulation of education and accreditation reform as central to AI readiness.
- Stronger alignment between industry, education, and public sector priorities.
- Identification of shared infrastructure and accountability as prerequisites for scale.

## Context and Challenges

The South East is often characterised as a high-performing region, yet this masks significant internal variation and structural challenges. Alongside world-class universities and technology firms sit communities experiencing digital exclusion, skills mismatches, and limited access to opportunity.

A recurring concern raised during the Sprint was the difficulty of converting dialogue into action. Participants described a pattern of high-quality discussions followed by limited follow-through, driven by unclear ownership, short-term funding cycles, and institutional risk aversion.

AI adoption is further constrained by low levels of trust and understanding. In many organisations, particularly in the public sector and regulated industries, fear of reputational or ethical risk has resulted in informal “no AI” policies or highly restrictive guidance. These approaches limit experimentation and reinforce siloed working.

Digital exclusion compounds these challenges. Without access to connectivity, devices, and confidence, large sections of the population are unable to participate meaningfully in AI-enabled education, employment, or services. This creates a real risk that AI amplifies existing inequalities rather than reducing them.

Finally, the Sprint highlighted the lack of a shared narrative about the South East’s AI strengths. While individual clusters exist, there is limited collective articulation of regional assets, competitive advantages, or strategic priorities, weakening the region’s ability to attract investment and influence national policy.

## About Us



UKAI envisions the UK as a global powerhouse for AI innovation, recognised for its dynamic ecosystem of pioneering businesses, unique financial landscape, world-class universities, and exceptional talent. UKAI sees AI as a key player in addressing society's biggest challenges, while unlocking new avenues for economic growth and social good. The UK can lead the world in responsible and ethical AI, setting a global standard for innovation with integrity.

UKAI's vision is for AI to benefit everyone, striking the right balance between groundbreaking innovation and protecting public interests. Achieving this requires close collaboration between government, businesses, and society. UKAI is committed to driving this interaction, ensuring that the right regulations, resources, and support systems are in place to maximise the potential of UK AI businesses.

UKAI believes that AI has the transformative power to not only drive economic growth but also to uplift communities and reduce social inequalities. By leveraging AI to upskill people, create new job opportunities, and make cutting-edge technologies accessible to all, the benefits of AI are shared across society. UKAI's vision is for AI to enhance communities, improving public services, healthcare, education, and more. By championing responsible and inclusive AI development, UKAI aims to create a future where everyone - regardless of background - has the opportunity to thrive in an AI-driven world.

As the champion for UK AI businesses, UKAI advocates for their interests by fostering collaboration, offering leadership, and building a thriving AI ecosystem that benefits workers, companies, society, and the broader economy. Our goal is clear: to ensure the UK remains a global leader in AI development, ethics, and innovation.

[www.ukai.co](http://www.ukai.co)



Independent, cross-party, and not-for-profit – as a policy institute, Curia turns policy into practice as the UK's first "do tank".

Curia hosts research groups, including:

- Health, Care and Life Sciences Research Group
- Clean Energy and Environment Research Group
- Housing, Transport, and Infrastructure Research Group
- Foreign Policy and Defence Research Group

As well as hosting ad hoc investigations into contemporary, relevant policy topics, Curia provides evidence-based consultancy services, due diligence, and socio-economic and environmental analysis. Research groups share best practice through partner publishing and broadcasting agency Chamber UK.

Curia, as the publisher of this policy report, retains full editorial control over its content. The editorial team at Curia has exercised autonomy and impartiality in shaping the report's narrative, analysis, and conclusions. The sponsors have not been involved in the decision-making process or influenced the substance of the report.

[www.curiauk.com](http://www.curiauk.com)



WIKI

