Chambers Ireland
Advancing business together

# Stakeholder Consultation on the Revised National Digital and AI Strategy

## Submission by Chambers Ireland

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## About Chambers Ireland

Chambers Ireland is an all-island business organisation with a unique geographical reach. Our members are the Chambers of Commerce in the cities and towns throughout the country – active in every constituency. Each of our member Chambers is central to their local business community and all seek to promote thriving local economies that can support sustainable cities and communities.

## Questions

### What should Ireland's overall vision for an updated Digital & AI Strategy to 2030 be? (max. 500 words)

Ireland's updated Digital and AI Strategy to 2030 must aim to position Ireland as a globally trusted digital leader, rooted in a commitment to ethical innovation, economic competitiveness and societal well-being.

We propose a two-pronged approach to guide the Strategy. The Strategy should be grounded in terms of (a) enabling indigenous businesses to scale; and (b) ensuring the State is the most attractive location in terms of AI being the next wave of FDI. For both to happen, delivering critical infrastructure including water and wastewater, energy, public transport and housing will be essential. This must be accompanied by sustained investment in foundational infrastructure such as clean energy, broadband connectivity and sustainable data centres. These are not only essential for domestic AI capability but also align with global efforts to make AI development environmentally sustainable and equitably distributed.

A successful national strategy should be grounded in responsibility and enable the safe and secure development and deployment of AI. The strategy should champion ethical use of AI while driving productivity. This involves clear regulatory frameworks, strong data governance and public engagement to build confidence in digital systems. In addition, targeted use of the National Training Fund should be used where appropriate in conjunction with Skillnets to support the upskilling, newskilling and reskilling of businesses so that they can integrate AI into their operations.

The updated strategy should instead focus on tangible, measurable outcomes that support digital transformation across the economy. SMEs, which form the backbone of the Irish economy, must be prioritised with dedicated supports, funding and training opportunities to facilitate their digitalisation journey. We also emphasise the importance of inclusive digitalisation, particularly for rural areas, small businesses and underrepresented groups to ensure equitable access to infrastructure, skills and opportunities.

To ensure that digital transformation isn't hampered by red tape, the updated Strategy should include a dedicated focus on reducing regulatory burdens and streamlining administrative requirements for businesses. Drawing on our recent *Position Paper on Digital Simplification*[1], this could involve establishing an AI Regulatory Sandbox to allow companies, especially SMEs to trial innovations in a legally safe, one-stop environment, thereby fostering certainty and lowering compliance friction. Additionally, the Strategy should drive the creation of a unified digital compliance portal consolidating overlapping obligations under GDPR, the AI Act, the Data Act and cybersecurity frameworks. This portal would offer multilingual support, starting with the most widely used and in-demand languages within Ireland, in addition to accessibility-friendly user design, pre-filled templates, automated reporting tools and sector-specific guidance, all aimed at significantly reducing duplication, confusion and administrative burden.

Ireland's vision must be closely aligned with the EU's Digital Decade and Digital Compass objectives. This includes setting ambitious national targets in key areas such as digital public services, high-speed broadband connectivity, upskilling the workforce and scaling digital businesses. This presents an opportunity for the State to take a leadership role within the EU by piloting innovative approaches and leveraging our strong tech ecosystem and multinational base to attract investment and talent.

## In developing its domestic AI capabilities, what areas should Ireland focus on? Identify top 5 key AI actions/enablers the Government should prioritise to accelerate its AI ambitions (max. 500 words)

The Strategy should focus on a targeted set of actions that build both technical capacity and regulatory confidence, particularly for businesses.

The following five priorities are key enablers that the Strategy should focus on:

[1] https://chambers.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Position-Paper-on-Digital-Simplification-22-August-25.pdf

## Establish an AI Regulatory Sandbox

As the EU AI Act comes into force, many businesses especially SMEs, may struggle to navigate its legal and ethical requirements. The deployment of an AI regulatory sandbox would allow innovators to test AI solutions in a controlled, supportive environment while ensuring compliance with emerging regulations. This approach encourages responsible experimentation, reduces uncertainty for startups and gives regulators a practical understanding of how AI is evolving across sectors.

## Appoint a National AI Lead

A dedicated National AI Lead could serve as a central point of coordination and guidance AI use. This role would bridge gaps between government departments, industry stakeholders and the public and ensure alignment across initiatives. It would also provide hands-on support to businesses, particularly SMEs, in understanding how to adopt and integrate AI tools effectively.

## Expand AI Upskilling Initiatives

Building a workforce that can develop and manage AI is essential. Existing upskilling efforts should be expanded, with dedicated resources for training educators, SME staff and public sector workers. This includes integrating AI literacy into school and university curricula and supporting short, targeted training for employees in sectors likely to see early AI adoption, such as finance, healthcare and manufacturing. A portion of the National Training Fund should be strategically allocated to support AI-specific training initiatives, with delivery mechanisms such as Skillnet Ireland playing a key role in reaching businesses of all sizes. Leveraging Skillnets' employer-led model can ensure that training is demand-driven and responsive to real industry needs, helping to future-proof the Irish workforce and enable businesses—especially SMEs—to integrate AI into their operations effectively.

## Invest in Sovereign Data Infrastructure

AI innovation depends heavily on access to secure and high-quality data. It is therefore critical that our national data infrastructure is strengthened with the correct infrastructure in place to enable safe data sharing and storage, particularly for public interest and research purposes. Investing in sovereign, scalable infrastructure ensures that sensitive data remains under national

control, while enabling local developers and companies to build AI solutions without over-relying on non-EU cloud providers.

**Support Applied AI Research Ecosystems**

To ensure long-term innovation, efforts should be made to foster closer collaboration between universities, startups and established industry players. This can be done by:

1. Funding applied research programs that address real-world challenges,
2. Supporting AI-focused incubators
3. Encouraging cross-sector pilot projects.

Such an ecosystem would accelerate the development of market-ready AI solutions but and strengthen the State's appeal as a hub for investment and talent.

## Please suggest tangible priority actions the Strategy could include (max. 500 words)

To drive meaningful progress, the Strategy should engage both public and private sectors while building long-term research capacity:

**Launch a National AI Research Nexus**

While the State benefits from strengths such as CeADAR, the emerging AI Factory Antenna initiative, and domain-specific hubs like the Mater AI & Digital Health Centre, these efforts remain somewhat fragmented. Establishing a unified National AI Research Nexus would bring coherence and scale to Ireland's research ecosystem. Modelled on successful examples like the Netherlands' ICAI, Northern Ireland's AICC and Germany's DFKI, this Nexus would serve as a centralised yet collaborative institution, connecting academia, startups, FDI-scale multinationals and government. It would coordinate funding channels, facilitate high-performance computing access, host thematic labs and translate research into real-world impact. The Nexus could also integrate existing structures such as CeADAR and the AI Factory Antenna, strengthening governance and visibility, paving the way for Ireland to be seen as a global leader in applied AI and sustainable digital transformation.

**Update the AI Skills Assessment and Expand Digital Literacy**

Ireland lacks a dedicated, regularly updated AI skills map. A formal, ongoing assessment—linked to the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs would help align education and labour market needs in real time. As AI adoption accelerates, expanding digital literacy is also essential, particularly for older workers and non-technical roles. Programmes should focus on building confidence and practical skills, ensuring broader participation in the digital economy and supporting overall productivity.

**Develop AI Adoption Incentives for SMEs**

Many SMEs recognise the potential of AI but often lack the resources or confidence to experiment with it. To address this, Ireland should introduce targeted, sector-specific incentives such as innovation vouchers, pilot project funding and tax credits, all designed to be easy to apply for. Existing initiatives already help pave the way, such as:

- The Smart Regions AI Navigator Programme[2].
- The upcoming AI Studio @ AIM[3].
- The National Enterprise Hub serves as a central portal connecting SMEs with over 250 supports including grants and advisory services.
- The Grow Digital Voucher[4]

To promote homegrown innovation and accessibility, support should also be given to linguistic inclusion and the development of localised AI tools that reflect Ireland's cultural and language diversity. This includes making datasets, training tools, and digital platforms available in Irish and other commonly spoken languages, which will foster broader participation and relevance of AI solutions across all communities.

Per the Chambers Ireland Pre-Budget submission 2026[5], we advocated for targeted financial incentives to accelerate SME digitalisation and AI adoption. Key recommendations include introducing a tax credit for AI investments to reduce upfront costs, expanding funding for digital training and reskilling programmes and simplifying access to grants and vouchers by reducing administrative burdens. It also emphasises the importance of increased funding for regional digital hubs and innovation clusters to ensure SMEs outside urban centres benefit equally.

[2] https://www.enterprise-ireland.com/en/news/rdi-hub-celebrates-its-five-year-anniversary

[3] https://www.aimcentre.ie/ai-studio

[4] https://www.neh.gov.ie/business-supports/grow-digital-voucher

[5] https://chambers.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/2026-PBS-FINAL.pdf

## Given Ireland's ambition as a European regulatory hub, and centre of excellence, what opportunities do you see to improve our digital regulatory framework? (max. 500 words)

As Ireland positions itself as a leader in digital regulation within Europe, it has the opportunity to shape a regulatory environment that supports both innovation and trust.

**Ensure Regulatory Clarity and Proportionality for SMEs**

Consistent with our point alluded to elsewhere in our submission, the EU AI Act and other applicable legislation for the use of AI is complex and resource-intensive for businesses of all sizes. There should be clear, accessible guidance tailored for businesses to ensure they can comply without an excessive burden. This is essential to help foster innovation without compromising safety or ethics.

**Promote Balanced Regulation to Foster Innovation and Leadership**

The European Union's complex and fragmented regulatory environment is increasingly deterring startups from establishing or scaling within its borders. A significant concern is the proliferation of overregulation, where EU directives are transposed into national laws with additional requirements, creating a burdensome compliance landscape for businesses. This phenomenon, known as "gold plating," adds unnecessary complexity and costs, particularly impacting SMEs. For instance, the European Parliament has highlighted that gold plating and inconsistent enforcement of EU rules remain obstacles for the single market, disproportionately burdening SMEs and startups[6]. Furthermore, the European Commission's initiative to propose a unified set of rules for innovative companies across the EU underscores the existing challenges. Currently, startups face 27 different national legislations, leading to inefficiencies and discouraging investment. The Commission aims to create a "28th regime" encompassing

[6] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0151_EN.html

corporate law, insolvency, labour law, and taxation within a single, simplified framework to make the EU more attractive for innovative firms[7].

Building on this, Ireland has a unique opportunity to leverage its position as a home to many EU and global tech firms by becoming a preferred location for regulatory leadership. By proactively shaping and responding to emerging AI and digital governance frameworks, Ireland can attract further investment, top talent, and research partnerships. Embracing this role not only reinforces Ireland's reputation as a trusted centre for innovation but also helps to ensure regulation remains balanced—avoiding overregulation that protects incumbents while fostering a competitive and dynamic ecosystem for startups and SMEs.

**Promote Inter-Agency Coordination**

Digital and AI regulation often spans multiple agencies and departments. A more coordinated, cross-agency framework would reduce duplication, simplify compliance and make it easier for businesses to navigate regulatory requirements. This could include a digital regulation taskforce or shared compliance portal.

**Encourage Public-Private Collaboration on Regulation**

Including industry voices in regulatory design helps ensure that frameworks are realistic and future-proof. Ongoing engagement between government, academia, society and the private sector will make regulation more adaptive to technological changes and better aligned with real-world use cases.

[7] https://www.reuters.com/markets/europe/commission-wants-one-set-rules-across-eu-innovative-firms-2025-01-21/

## Please include any suggestions you have to ensure the strategy is inclusive and of value across society (max. 500 words)

To make Ireland's AI strategy genuinely inclusive and impactful, it must serve not only the tech sector but all parts of society, especially those at risk of being left behind.

**Bridging the Global AI Divide**

Ireland's strategy must acknowledge the growing global AI divide. Without intentional efforts, AI may reinforce global inequalities, with underserved regions and developing nations lacking access to infrastructure, data, skills and policy frameworks. This disparity not only threatens global co-operation but could also prompt restrictive policy responses like forced technology transfers or protectionist regulations undermining innovation and international collaboration. Ireland, as a developed and digitally advanced nation, can lead by example through inclusive infrastructure investment, support for international open data collaboration and innovation-friendly policies that empower local and global communities alike.

**Prioritise AI Literacy and Education for All**

AI shouldn't be a black box understood only by experts. Introducing age-appropriate AI education in schools, offering lifelong learning opportunities and running local community outreach programmes will help build a population that understands and can engage with AI meaningfully.

**Ensure Equitable Access to Digital Tools**

Connectivity and digital infrastructure must reach rural and underserved areas, where digital exclusion remains a real barrier. Targeted support for marginalised communities, older people and those with disabilities is essential to avoid deepening existing inequalities in the AI era.

**Promote Ethical AI Development**

Trust is critical. Ethical frameworks that focus on privacy, bias mitigation and transparency must be embedded into both public and private sector AI development. The government can lead by example through ethical procurement and open auditing of AI used in public services.

**Engage Civil Society in Co-Designing Services**

Involving NGOs, local groups and community voices in the design and testing of digital and AI services ensures they are grounded in real needs. This participatory approach also increases legitimacy and public trust in AI-enabled solutions.

**Support Creative and Cultural Sectors in Adapting to AI**

AI is already transforming how art, media, and content are created. The strategy should include support for creative professionals to adopt AI tools ethically while protecting their intellectual property and livelihoods. This includes fair licensing models, digital rights education and access to creative AI infrastructure.