

Solent AI & Digital Skills Needs Report

February 2026

1. Executive Summary

Purpose. This report provides an evidence-based view of AI and digital skills supply in the Solent, matched against employer demand and capability, to inform near-term actions and longer-term planning.

Training provision spans at least 128 distinct listings across Further Education (FE), Higher Education (HE), apprenticeships and short courses.

AI-specific offers (incl. Artificial Intelligence, Data Science, Robotics) are present across multiple providers; we identified over 100 AI and Computing and Tech related listings, including Master of Science (MSc) courses as well as Skills Bootcamps and short courses.

Working in collaboration with AI Lab, the Solent Growth Partnership conducted AI Capability Survey to gather feedback from businesses across Hampshire and The Solent region around their current use of AI, their competitive advantages within the tech and AI sector and the support they need around the development and use of AI within their organisations. Around 40% of respondents report having an AI ethics framework in place, indicating room to strengthen responsible AI foundations.

The majority (53%) indicate they would value AI training and support, highlighting demand for applied, workplace-focused upskilling.

The most frequently cited barriers cluster around: Funding & Investment, Skills & Training and organisation-specific needs.

Organisations most commonly request support with: Skills & Training, Integration & Deployment, and organisation-specific needs.

2. Methodology

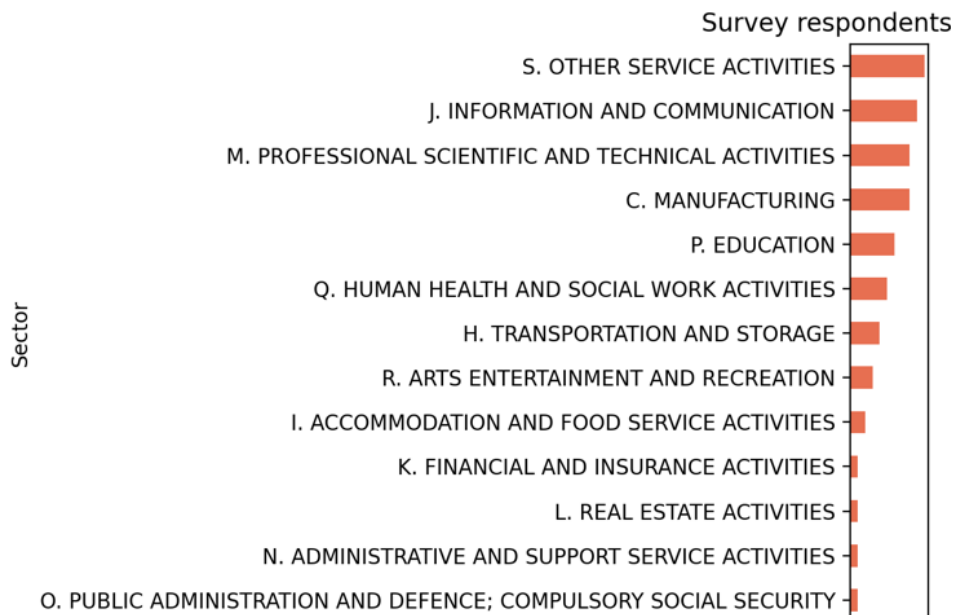
This analysis triangulates two core evidence sources:

- Skills supply mapping: a consolidated list of AI and IT courses and training programmes across FE/HE and apprenticeships was compiled - including Skills Bootcamps and short courses in the Solent region.
- Business demand and capability: summary results from the Solent Growth Partnership AI Capability Survey captured organisation profiles, AI adoption patterns, capability areas, qualitative barriers and support needs.

Focus groups and one-to-one interview inputs were not provided for this draft; placeholders are included for incorporation when available.

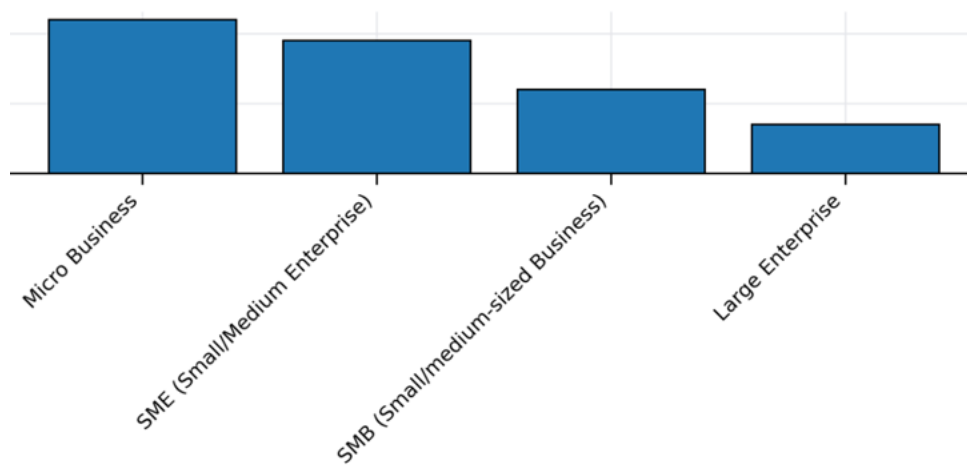
3. Sector Overview

Survey responses span a broad set of sectors, with the largest shares in 'Other Service Activities', 'Information & Communication', 'Manufacturing', and 'Professional/Scientific/Technical Activities'.

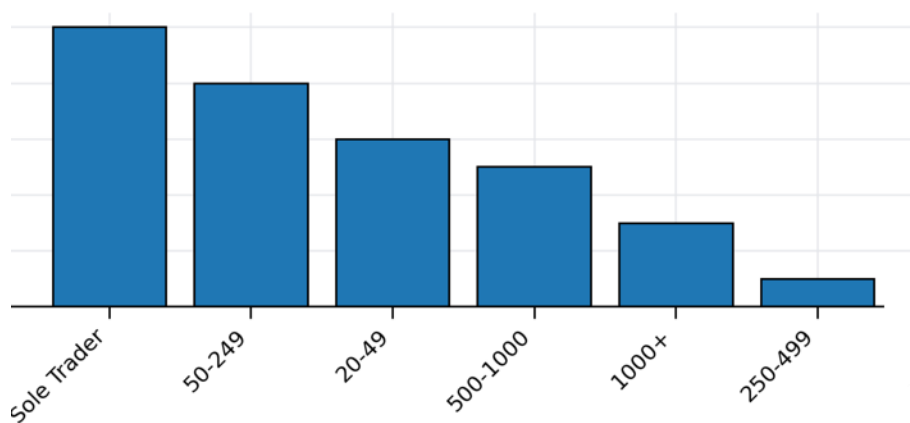


Company size skews towards micro and SME organisations, with participation also from larger enterprises.

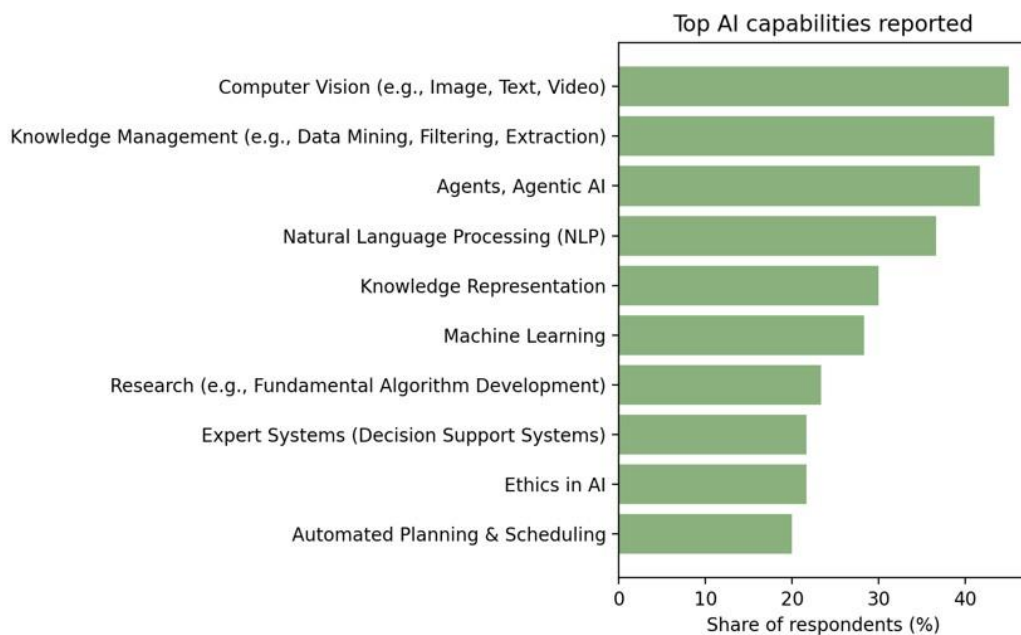
Organisation Classification (count)



Number of Employees (count)



Overall, the AI survey highlights a strong concentration of AI capability across several core areas, with Computer Vision, Knowledge Management and AI Agents emerging as the most established strengths among respondents. These findings suggest that organisations in the region are already engaging with advanced, applied AI techniques, while also developing supporting disciplines such as Natural Language Processing, Machine Learning and Knowledge Representation. Together, this capability profile indicates a solid foundation for future innovation and collaboration across the Solent's growing AI ecosystem.

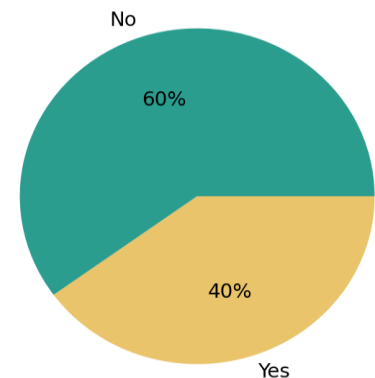


4. Findings: Skills Needs Analysis

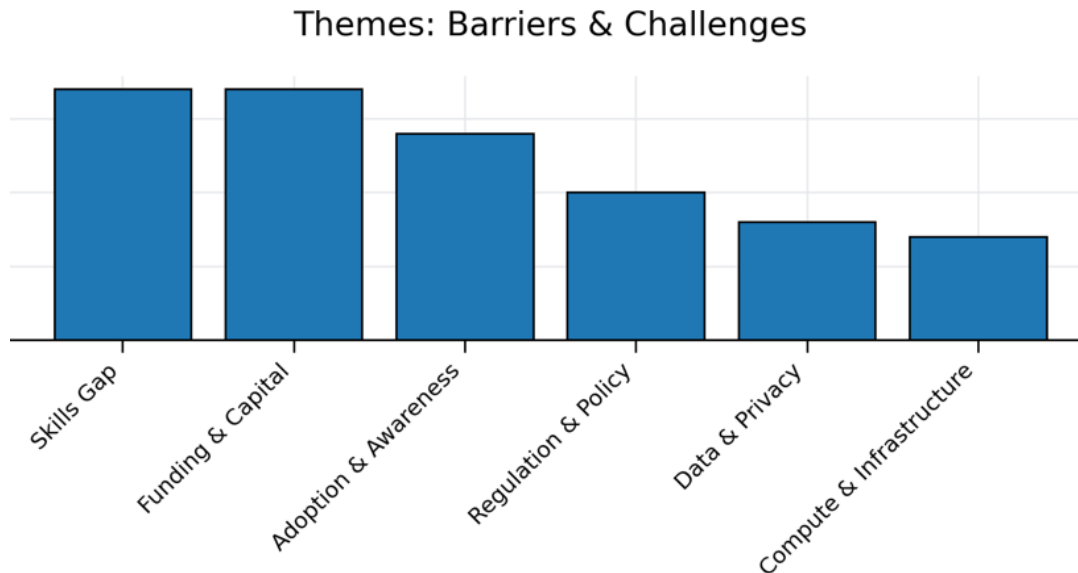
Quantitative highlights from the survey:

- Internal adoption is the most common deployment route.
- 19 organisations report AI in external products/services.

AI ethics frameworks in place



Qualitative themes from free-text responses:



The above findings indicate that the Solent Region faces a clear set of challenges that could slow progress in developing and adopting advanced technologies. The most significant barriers reported are the skills gap and limited access to funding and capital, both of which directly constrain organisational capacity to innovate.

Concerns about data privacy and infrastructure-though less prominent, remain important.

Together, these challenges highlight the need for coordinated investment in skills development, improved access to resources and clearer guidance to support the region's long-term growth and competitiveness.

5. Key Skills Gaps & Priorities

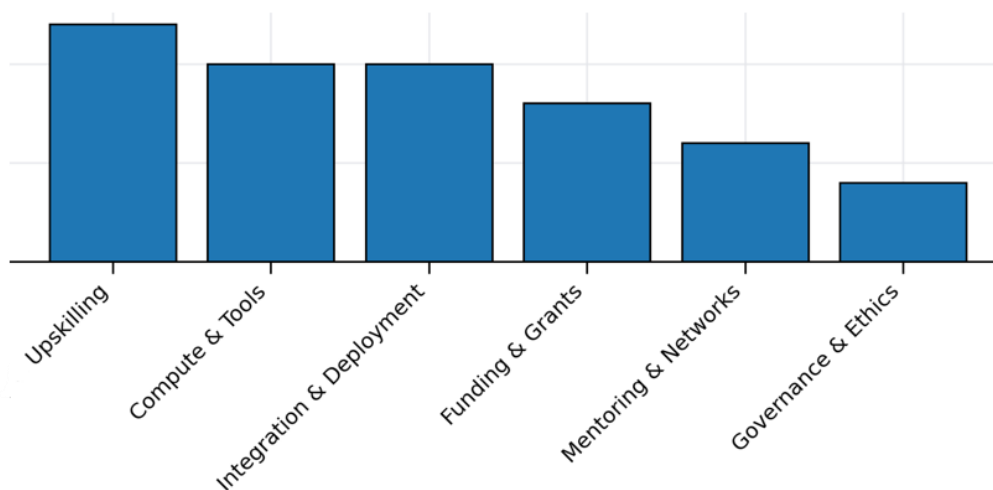
- Applied AI skills for non-specialists (prompting, workflow automation, data literacy).
- Systems integration, M365/CRM/ERP automation and AI DevOps practices.

- Responsible AI, governance and data protection for SMEs.
- Understanding of computing/infrastructure options and cost optimization.
- Commercialisation and funding pathways for AI projects.

The responses from the AI Capability Survey around support needed show that organisations across the Solent Region see upskilling as their most urgent priority.

Support for integration and deployment also features strongly, indicating a need for hands on guidance to AI operational use more accessible. Funding, mentoring and stronger networks remain important, while governance and ethics, though ranked lower, continue to be essential foundations. Together, these insights highlight a clear demand for coordinated investment in skills, infrastructure and practical adoption support to accelerate the region's AI readiness.

Themes: Support Needed





6. Recommendations

- Expand short, stackable training aligned to employer workflows (e.g., applied AI for business functions, data literacy).
- Broker partnerships between employers and providers to co-design modules on deployment, integration and responsible AI, using live business projects via our universities. Note that Apprenticeship Units will be coming to market in April 2026 which includes an AI Unit.
- Create a regional AI Skills Hub: a single front door for advice, provider directory, and access to pilot opportunities and mentors, using the already established brokerage models in the region.
- Offer targeted support for SMEs: including an opportunity for businesses to assess themselves to define their AI maturity with guidance provided to move to the next stage, cohort-based “adopt AI” programmes combining hands-on training with implementation.
- Signpost funding and procurement pathways and provide bid-writing clinics to accelerate innovation projects.

7. Conclusion

The Solent has an active education and training offer across Levels 2-7 and a pragmatic employer base experimenting with AI. Strengthening applied skills, integration capability and responsible AI will unlock faster adoption and productivity gains. The actions above provide a practical roadmap for the next 12 months, while establishing foundations for longer-term growth.

8. Appendices

- **Appendix A**

Solent Growth Partnership mapping document of courses available in the Solent and Hampshire area.



- **Appendix B**

Solent Growth Partnership and AI Lab *AI Capability Survey* Results.

- **Appendix C**

Digital AI Skills Directory.