

✦ ACCELERATING AI CONFERENCE · MILTON KEYNES · 9TH JUNE 2026

From curiosity to capability

The state of AI adoption among SMEs across the South Midlands.

63%

of pre-event respondents were just exploring or in early experimentation

81.5%

said someone was at least somewhat responsible for AI

7.4%

had dedicated regular time or projects for AI learning

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Executive summary

The South Midlands is not short of AI ambition. Milton Keynes gives the region an unusually visible testbed for connected, autonomous and robotic technologies, while Bedfordshire, Luton, Northamptonshire and the surrounding business community bring universities, growth support, SMEs and technology firms into the same conversation. The issue is not whether the region has a credible AI story. It does.

The harder question is whether everyday SMEs across the South Midlands are ready to use AI well enough, safely enough and quickly enough to turn that story into broad economic value.

The evidence from the Accelerating AI Conference on 9th June 2026 is clear. The mood in the room was positive, but the adoption base is still thin. The event was open to SMEs and business leaders from across the region, not only Milton Keynes, so the findings should be read as a South Midlands signal rather than a Milton Keynes-only view. In the pre-event survey, 63% of respondents said their organisation was either just exploring AI or in early experimentation. In the live poll, almost three quarters of maturity responses fell into the same two categories. Only one live poll respondent described their organisation as mature, with AI embedded in core processes.

The starkest finding is the gap between nominal ownership and real capacity. In the pre-event survey, 81.5% said their team had someone responsible, or somewhat responsible, for AI or automation. Yet only 7.4% said their team had dedicated regular time or projects for learning or testing AI. Put bluntly: many organisations have given AI a name on paper, but not the time, budget, governance or operational space needed to make it work.

HEADLINE FINDING

The South Midlands has the ingredients to lead practical AI adoption for SMEs. The gap is that many firms are still not ready in the way they run, govern and measure AI inside their own businesses.

That matters because AI adoption has already moved beyond writing prompts into the redesign of work. The most advanced examples at the conference were not about replacing a search box with ChatGPT. They were about agents, secure workspaces,

workflow automation, organisational knowledge, customer service, marketing operations, finance, robotics, public service design and AI-supported decision-making.

This creates a widening divide. On one side are businesses that use AI as a practical operating layer: they map workflows, connect data, put humans in control, measure value and redesign roles. On the other are businesses still experimenting in a largely unstructured way. The second group may feel active because staff are using tools, but activity is not the same as capability.

Key findings

- **Adoption is real, but shallow.** Most local respondents are using or testing AI, yet the majority remain at exploration or pilot stage. The data points to broad curiosity, not deep adoption.
- **The ownership gap is severe.** Four in five pre-event respondents claimed some AI responsibility in the team, but fewer than one in thirteen had dedicated regular time or projects. That is the single clearest sign of under-preparedness.
- **Use is concentrated in general-purpose work.** The live poll showed strongest use in business strategy and planning, marketing content, data analysis, internal productivity and image or video generation. These are useful entry points, but they are not the same as operational transformation.
- **Confidence sits in the middle.** Average organisational understanding in the live poll was 3.19 out of 5. Average personal confidence was 3.33. Respondents were neither ignorant nor expert. That middle ground is where mistakes are most likely if governance is weak.
- **Sentiment is mixed, not negative.** The most common live poll words were excited and motivated. But cautious, overwhelmed, anxious, apprehensive and scared also appeared. Local firms do not need another hype cycle. They need clarity.
- **The South Midlands has the right ingredients.** Milton Keynes has live smart-city projects and public-sector AI use cases. The wider region has a Growth Hub, universities, practical technology firms, business media, national partners and a convening platform through Accelerating AI and MK Tech Week. The next task is to connect those assets into a repeatable adoption pathway.

The core message

The South Midlands should stop treating AI adoption as a question of tool awareness. The more important question is whether SMEs can turn AI into better work: faster response times, stronger customer experience, better decision-making, safer operations,

more capacity and new services that were previously too expensive to build.



AI will not fix broken workflows.
It is just going to accelerate them.

MATTHEW RIGBY-WHITE, QOOB · Accelerating AI Conference transcript, 9th June 2026

That line captures the central point of this paper. AI is not a shortcut around management. It exposes management. Poor data, unclear ownership, weak processes, loose permissions and vague objectives become bigger problems when agents and automation are added. The organisations that win will not be the ones with the longest tool list. They will be the ones that redesign work with care.

01 Why this matters now

By mid-2026, AI adoption is no longer a future trend for SMEs. It is an operating question. How should work be designed? Which tasks should be delegated to agents? What data can safely be used? Who checks outputs? What happens when a system gets it wrong? How should a small firm measure value when the benefit is better responsiveness or saved management time, rather than a simple cost line?

National evidence points in the same direction as the local data. ONS data from late December 2025 found that about a quarter of UK businesses were using some form of AI technology, up 15 percentage points since the question was first introduced in September 2023. Around 15% said they planned to adopt AI within the next three months. [1] A separate UK government AI Adoption Research publication, using a different methodology, found lower overall adoption: around 16% of businesses were using at least one AI technology, while 80% neither used AI nor had plans to adopt it. [2]

The exact number matters less than the pattern. Adoption is rising, but mature adoption is still limited. The government research also found that the most common uses among adopters were natural language processing and text generation, while agentic AI was the least adopted technology. That is important because the conference conversation was already focused on agents, multi-step workflows and AI-supported operations. The leading edge is moving faster than the base.

Microsoft's 2026 Work Trend Index frames the same challenge as a management problem. Its research found that organisational factors such as culture, manager support and talent practices accounted for more than twice the reported AI impact of individual mindset and behaviour: 67% versus 32%. [3] That should concern SMEs. Many small firms assume the problem is individual: who can prompt best, who knows which tool to use, who has the most curiosity. The stronger evidence says the environment around those people matters more.

That message came through repeatedly at the conference. The technology is available. The constraint is the organisation: leadership, permissions, data, time, training, process design and a willingness to change how work is done.

The local moment

Milton Keynes remains the natural convening point for this conversation. The city's digital and technology programme describes a decade of work around connected, autonomous and robotic innovation, including a city-operated standalone private 5G network in 2018,

StreetCAV connected autonomous vehicle work, the ongoing StreetCAV+ project and RoboPASS, a licensing framework for robotics deployments in public spaces. [7]

That matters for two reasons. First, Milton Keynes has visible proof that advanced technologies can be tested in the real world, not just discussed at events. Second, the discipline needed for physical AI, including safety cases, connectivity, public trust, clear operating domains and governance, is also needed for software agents inside businesses.

The opportunity is therefore bigger than helping SMEs use AI to write better emails. The South Midlands can become a practical adoption region: a place where firms learn how to apply AI safely, measure outcomes honestly, and move from curiosity into capability.

02 About the Accelerating AI Conference

The Accelerating AI Conference took place at The Ridgeway Centre, Milton Keynes, on 9th June 2026. It was the fourth Accelerating AI event and was created to make AI practical for SMEs, not abstract, vendor-led or locked behind jargon.

The event was free to attend and open to SMEs and business leaders from across the region. It was not limited to Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire or any single county boundary. Some attendees were local; others travelled from elsewhere in the South Midlands and beyond. For that reason, this paper positions the findings as a South Midlands SME signal, with Milton Keynes as the convening city and regional testbed.

The event was organised by Matthew Rigby-White of Qoob, Lionel Naidoo of Dragon IS and Andy Paul of Fliweel.tech. Kerry Lewis-Stevenson of Business Times / Business MK opened the day and helped frame why the discussion matters to the regional business community.

Supporters, speakers and contributors included Microsoft, Dragon IS, Qoob, Milton Keynes City Council, Smart City Consultancy, South Midlands Growth Hub, University of Bedfordshire / Luton AI, Fliweel.tech, Zoho, techUK and the wider MK Tech Week ecosystem.

SPEAKERS, PARTNERS & CONTRIBUTORS

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DRAGON
INFORMATION SYSTEMS

FLIWEEL.TECH

Microsoft

Z O H O

University of
Bedfordshire

LUTON.AI

South Midlands
Growth Hub

techUK
FOR WHAT COMES NEXT

Business MK

British
Business
Bank

Milton Keynes
City Council

SMART CITY
CONSULTANCY

The programme focused on practical adoption: AI agents, Microsoft Copilot, marketing operations, public-sector use cases, robotics in public spaces, business support, funding, university-business collaboration, digital employees, operational transformation and a closing panel chaired by techUK.

The value of the conference is not only the content on the day. It is the network around it. Accelerating AI is becoming a practical regional forum where SMEs, public bodies, universities and technology firms can compare notes, learn from mistakes and turn interest into safer, more useful adoption.

03 How to read the evidence

This paper draws on four evidence streams:

- A **pre-event survey** completed before the Accelerating AI Conference. It received 27 responses for analysis.
- A **live poll** completed during the event on 9th June 2026. It received 53 responses, with two blanks on some questions.
- **Conference transcripts** supplied by the organisers. These included the welcome, individual speaker sessions, audience interviews and the closing panel. The transcripts were not in order and contained automatic transcription errors, so speaker identification was cross-checked against the agenda provided by the organisers.
- **External evidence** from ONS, GOV.UK, Microsoft, OECD, techUK, YouGov, Milton Keynes City Council, MK Tech Week and the Accelerating AI website.

The local data should be read as directional, not statistically representative. The audience was self-selecting: people who attended an AI conference are likely to be more interested in AI than the average SME. The event was open to SMEs and business leaders from anywhere, so it should not be read as a Milton Keynes-only census or as a pure sample of businesses registered in one county. Some respondents represented public bodies, larger employers, consultancies and technology firms. The sample is best understood as a window into an engaged South Midlands business ecosystem around SMEs.

That limitation makes the findings more useful, not less. If an engaged, AI-curious South Midlands audience still sits mostly at exploration and pilot stage, the wider SME base is likely to need even more support.

Evidence base

SOURCE	SAMPLE	TIMING	HOW IT IS USED
Pre-event survey	27 usable responses	2–5th June 2026	Baseline readiness, maturity, ownership, time, questions and concerns
Live poll	53 responses	9th June 2026	In-room maturity, use cases, tools and sentiment
Conference transcripts	12 transcript files	9th June event, transcribed 10th June	Speaker themes, case studies and recommendations
External sources	National and regional sources	2025–2026	Benchmarking and policy context

04 The South Midlands adoption picture

The data shows a South Midlands SME audience that is active, interested and somewhat confident, but not yet structurally ready. That distinction matters. Many respondents have used AI tools. Fewer have redesigned workflows, measured value or created reliable governance around usage.

AI adoption maturity: most respondents are still early

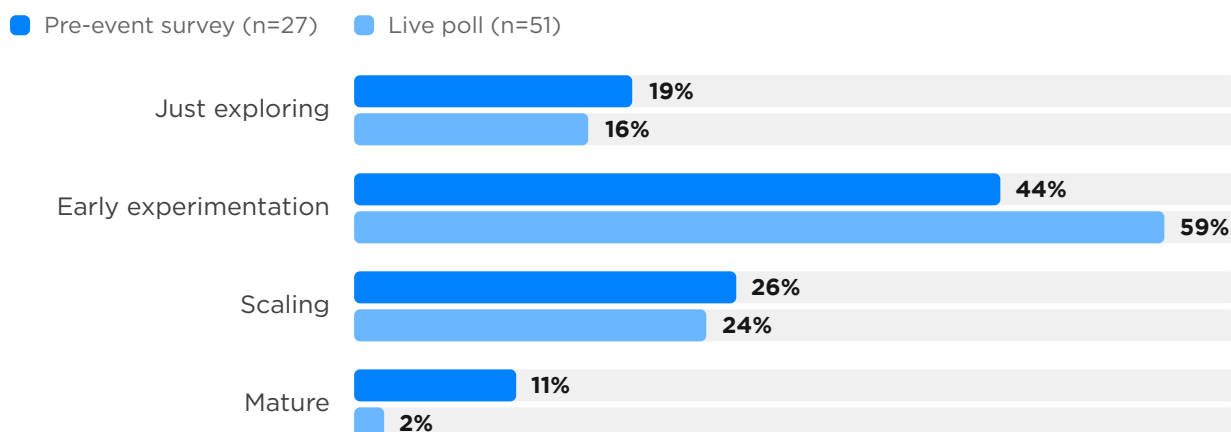


Figure 1. Adoption maturity in the pre-event survey and live poll. Live poll percentages exclude two blank maturity responses. Source: Accelerating AI pre-event survey and live poll, June 2026.

4.1 Maturity is clustered at the early stage

In the pre-event survey, 44.4% of usable responses described their organisation as being in early experimentation, and 18.5% said they were just exploring. That makes 63% in the two earliest categories. The live poll reinforced the point: 56.6% of all respondents chose early experimentation and 15.1% chose just exploring. Only 1.9% of live poll respondents described their organisation as mature.

This is the adoption gap in plain language. Businesses are using AI, but many are still finding their way. The conference audience was not hostile to AI. It was engaged. Yet most respondents were not beyond pilots and proofs of concept.

4.2 The ownership gap is the sharpest warning sign

The ownership gap: responsibility is claimed, but time is scarce

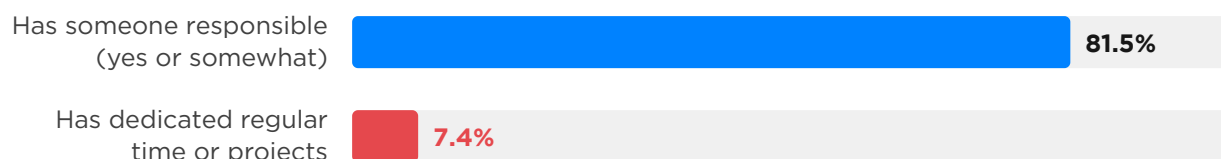


Figure 2. Pre-event survey: responsibility versus dedicated time. n=27 usable responses. Source: Accelerating AI pre-event survey, June 2026.

The ownership data is the strongest evidence of under-preparedness. Before the event, 33.3% said their team had someone responsible for AI or automation, and 48.1% said someone was somewhat responsible. Only 18.5% said no one was responsible.

That looks encouraging until it is compared with time allocation. Only 7.4% said their team had dedicated regular time or projects for learning or testing AI. More than half were actively researching or testing, and 37% were experimenting occasionally, but protected time was rare.

WHY THIS MATTERS

AI adoption does not fail because nobody is curious. It fails because nobody has enough time, authority or permission to turn curiosity into changed work.

4.3 Tool use is broad, but still concentrated in assistants

Tool use is concentrated in general-purpose assistants

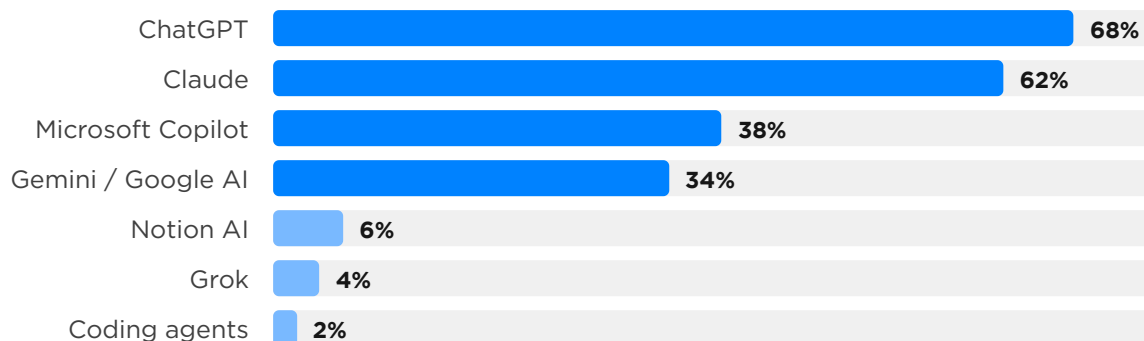


Figure 3. Live poll: tools mentioned by respondents. Multi-select and free-text mentions mean totals can exceed 100%. Source: Accelerating AI live poll, 9th June 2026.

The live poll showed strong use of general-purpose tools. ChatGPT and Claude were the most mentioned, followed by Microsoft Copilot and Gemini or Google AI. This fits the national picture. The government's AI Adoption Research found that natural language processing and text generation were the most common uses among AI adopters. [2]

The risk is that tool access is mistaken for adoption. A team with ChatGPT, Claude or Copilot can still lack an AI strategy. It can still have poor data, weak permissions, no shared prompt standards, no review process and no measurement. Tool access lowers the barrier to experimentation. It does not, by itself, create capability.

4.4 Use cases are practical, but mostly horizontal

Where AI is being used now

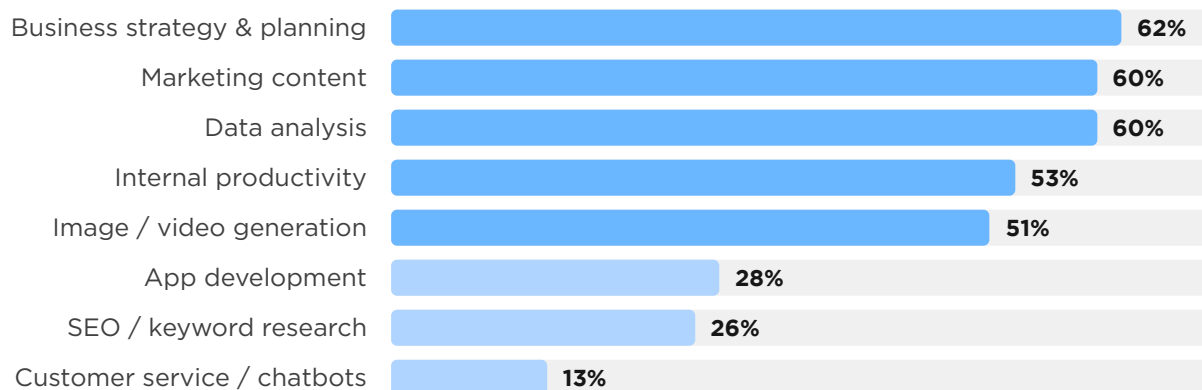


Figure 4. Live poll: current AI use cases. Multi-select percentages can exceed 100%. Source: Accelerating AI live poll, 9th June 2026.

The live poll suggests that respondents are using AI where it is easiest to start: strategy and planning, data analysis, marketing content, internal productivity and image or video generation. These are sensible entry points. They are also mainly horizontal tasks, used across many functions.

The next stage is more demanding. It means moving from isolated tasks into workflows: sales qualification, proposal generation, customer support triage, cash flow queries, management reporting, content operations, planning validation, research pipelines, compliance checks and operational scheduling. This is where value becomes more durable, but only if governance and measurement improve at the same time.

4.5 Sentiment is optimistic, but not settled

Sentiment is optimistic, but not settled

■ Positive ■ Cautious ■ Negative

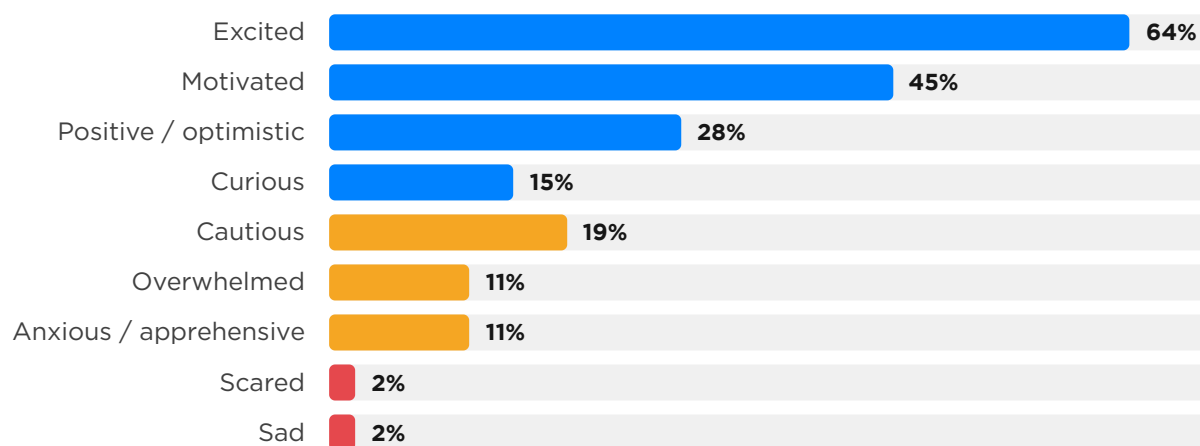


Figure 5. Live poll sentiment. Respondents could use more than one word, so percentages are mentions rather than exclusive categories. Source: Accelerating AI live poll, 9th June 2026.

The live poll mood was mainly positive. Excited, motivated, optimistic and curious were common. But the same room also contained caution, anxiety, overwhelm, apprehension and fear. This matters for communication. Local AI adoption work should not talk to SMEs as if they are resisting progress. Many are not resisting. They are trying to work out what is safe, useful and worth their time.

The better message is not “move faster” on its own. It is “move deliberately, but do move”.

05 What the conference revealed

The conference transcripts show a strong consensus across very different speakers. The language varied, but the message was consistent: start with the problem, redesign the workflow, protect the data, keep humans accountable and measure the outcome.

5.1 Kerry Lewis-Stevenson: the gap is already visible

Kerry Lewis-Stevenson opened the event by naming the reason for the conference: a real gap between businesses genuinely using AI and those that are not. She also framed Milton Keynes as the right convening place for a wider regional discussion, citing the city's smart-city history, autonomous vehicles, drone delivery trials and robotics projects.

The important part was not the technology itself. It was the pace. Kerry's opening warned that business owners can spend a few hours with AI, feel more productive and still have little idea how far behind they are. That is exactly what the survey data later showed: high interest, some usage, but limited structured readiness.

5.2 Louis Nicholson and Lionel Naidoo: agents change the management question

Louis Nicholson of Microsoft introduced the idea of frontier firms and the shift from AI as assistant to humans working with agent teams. The Microsoft view, supported by the Work Trend Index, is that agents are moving into the workforce and that the more advanced organisations are rethinking work around them rather than bolting AI onto old processes.

Lionel Naidoo of Dragon IS made this more concrete for SMEs. His central argument was that as agents take on more execution, people gain more agency: more time to direct work, make decisions and own outcomes. He also stressed that small businesses can move faster than large organisations because they have fewer layers, less legacy and shorter routes from idea to action.



The blocker is the organisation. It is the leaders in this room that are ultimately responsible for the adoption of AI within their own businesses.

This is a useful corrective to the idea that AI adoption is mainly a technical project. The technical tools are increasingly accessible. The hard work is leadership: picking the right workflow, setting quality standards, securing data, and giving staff permission to change how they work.

5.3 Matthew Rigby-White: marketing shows the wider business shift

Matthew Rigby-White of Qoob used marketing as a live example of how roles are changing. His argument was not that marketing is being replaced. It was that marketers are becoming thinkers, builders, creators and architects. He gave two practical examples from Qoob: Watchtower, a website intelligence system built in three days, and internal agents such as Alfred and Penny, used for marketing and finance support.

The broader lesson for SMEs is that AI can now make previously uneconomic ideas practical. A problem that once needed months of developer time can sometimes be prototyped in days. That does not remove the need for professional oversight. Matthew was equally clear about risks: weak code review, tone drift, low-quality output, permissions, over-automation and the danger of making a brand sound artificial.

For local business leaders, the takeaway is simple. Do not ask only which AI tool the marketing team should use. Ask which part of the marketing operation should work differently now.

5.4 Lisa Beckett: public-sector AI adoption can be pragmatic

Lisa Beckett set out Milton Keynes City Council's approach to AI adoption. It was deliberately pragmatic: test and learn, small prototypes, clear business cases, in-house skills, data governance and careful allocation of more advanced licences. She was explicit that the council has not simply bought the first AI product offered by a supplier.

Her examples matter because they show public-sector adoption in practical terms. AI transcription in children's and adult social care is saving around 60 hours per month and allowing social workers to focus more on the quality of conversation. The council's chatbot had been live for eight days at the time of the conference and was answering 96% of questions asked.

The council's message for SMEs is not "buy more AI". It is "choose use cases carefully, govern them properly, and do not digitise poor processes".

5.5 Ian Pulford: physical AI needs public trust and rules

Ian Pulford of Smart City Consultancy moved the discussion from software into physical AI: autonomous vehicles, robots, drones and public-space robotics. His contribution matters because physical AI makes governance visible. A chatbot failure can be embarrassing. A robot or autonomous vehicle in a public space has safety, legal and public trust implications.

Ian described autonomy as a service and the need for connectivity, control rooms, safety cases, operating domains and licensing frameworks. That thinking can also help software adoption. As AI agents begin taking actions inside businesses, SMEs will need their own version of an operating domain: what the agent may do, what it may not do, when it must ask for approval, and who is accountable.

5.6 Andy Paul: agents can give small firms unfair-looking capacity

Andy Paul of Fliwheel.tech explained AI agents in practical terms: goal-oriented systems that can operate autonomously, interact with their environment, learn, perform multi-step workflows and, in some cases, work with other agents. His strongest example came from Blue Touch Paper, a two-person consultancy building an AI-centric operating model around its own channel intelligence and organisational knowledge.



Two people can act in a way that I
do not think even 200 people do.

JOHN SIDWICK, BLUE TOUCH PAPER · during Andy Paul's Fliwheel.tech session, Accelerating AI Conference transcript, 9th June 2026

This is a powerful SME story because it shows the upside without pretending the risks disappear. The same session stressed data sovereignty, guardrails, audit trails, governance, compliance, testing, human override and kill switches. Small firms can now build and deploy tools that were previously out of reach. That makes caution more important, not less.

5.7 Sam Hunter and Kelly Griffiths: support exists, but businesses need to use it

The South Midlands Growth Hub session was important because it connected AI ambition to business support. Sam Hunter described the Growth Hub's role as an impartial route into advice and expertise across Northamptonshire, Milton Keynes and

Bedfordshire. The Growth Hub's own AI tools, Elliott and Julia, showed that the organisation is not just talking about AI adoption; it is using it to handle demand and support enquiries.

Kelly Griffiths set out the Capital Growth Grant due to launch in July 2026, with grants of between £5,000 and £25,000, 50% match funded, open to eligible SMEs in Milton Keynes, Bedfordshire, Luton and Northamptonshire. Crucially, she stated that eligible projects could include intangible projects involving AI implementation, as well as website and software development.

For SMEs, this is practical. One barrier in the pre-event survey was cost or uncertain ROI. Grant-funded diagnostics, expert sessions and implementation support can help firms take the first serious step without betting the business on a vague idea.

5.8 Ed Braund: universities must become an interface

Ed Braund of the University of Bedfordshire argued that universities should help move AI from research and specialist communities into real-world use. His Luton AI example is relevant to the region because it describes a university acting as an interface: understanding business problems, translating research into practical ideas, supporting workforce skills, and helping with governance and trusted deployment.

Luton AI has engaged with more than 500 organisations and worked on more than 70 bespoke AI projects, according to Ed's presentation. That is a useful model for Milton Keynes and the wider South Midlands. Universities can support adoption, but only if they work from business problems rather than waiting for research to find its own path to market.

5.9 Robert Simpson: AI value is operational, not just technological

Robert Simpson of Zoho gave perhaps the clearest business framing. He argued that many AI business cases are better understood as operational transformation cases, not technology cases. The mistake he sees is "AI for AI's sake": workshops, whiteboards, long lists of ideas and disconnected pilots that never reach measurable problems.

His alternative is to start with friction. What is slow? What is repetitive? Where are customers waiting? Where is staff capacity being drained? Where are decisions delayed? This is the right question for SMEs because it takes AI out of the abstract and puts it into the work.

Robert also warned that AI exposes organisational weakness. Poor data, disconnected systems, unclear ownership and broken workflows do not disappear when AI is added. They become more visible.

5.10 Usman Ikhlaq and the panel: AI fluency is the next skill gap

Usman Ikhlaq of techUK chaired the closing panel and drew together the day's themes. The panel described a shift from curiosity to practical application over the past 12 months. It also showed the breadth of adoption: some businesses are still trying to understand ChatGPT, while others are using AI as the operating system of the business.

The panel also raised the skills issue. AI literacy is knowing what AI is and where its limits sit. AI fluency is the higher-order capability: using it effectively in work, integrating it across workflows, managing agents and knowing when human judgement must remain in control. That distinction should shape local skills policy.

06 The risks are not where many SMEs think they are

The common SME fear is that AI is expensive, technical, risky and hard to start. All of that can be true. But the bigger risks shown by the conference are more ordinary: unowned change, bad data, weak permissions, poor process design and overconfident experimentation.

Risk 1 Mistaking experimentation for adoption

Using AI tools is useful. It is not the same as changing the business. A team can have active ChatGPT and Copilot users while still lacking a shared view of what AI should improve, how success will be measured, or which data is safe to use.

This is why the survey's ownership gap matters. The region needs fewer vague commitments to "look at AI" and more named, time-protected adoption projects.

Risk 2 Automating bad work

Several speakers made the same point in different ways. Do not automate chaos. Do not digitise poor processes. Do not put agents on top of messy systems and hope the work becomes clean. AI can make a weak process faster, but that is not the same as making it better.

Risk 3 Weak data and permissions

Data security, privacy and safe use appeared in the pre-event concerns. They also appeared repeatedly in the talks. Once agents can take actions, permissions stop being a back-office issue. They become a business risk. If an agent can see a file, summarise it, post to a social channel, email a customer or write into a system, the business must understand exactly what it has allowed.

Risk 4 Low-quality output that looks professional

AI can make weak work look polished. That is dangerous. It can produce longer emails, plausible research, smooth marketing copy, code that appears to work, or summaries that miss the point. Human review is not a ceremonial step. It is where quality, judgement and accountability sit.

Risk 5 Tool overwhelm

The volume of new tools is itself a barrier. Even confident practitioners at the conference described the pace as hard to track. SMEs should not try to follow every product announcement. They should follow their own friction points, then choose tools that solve a defined problem inside a governed workflow.

07 The South Midlands adoption opportunity

The South Midlands has a stronger platform than many regions for practical AI adoption. Milton Keynes provides the visible testbed and convening power. The wider region brings SMEs from Bedfordshire, Luton, Northamptonshire, Buckinghamshire and beyond, plus the Growth Hub, universities, technology firms, national partners and a shared need to improve productivity.

MK Tech Week 2026 is scheduled for 12–16 October and describes itself as the city’s flagship annual technology and innovation festival. The 2025 edition brought together more than 23,000 people across 30+ events, according to the Tech Week website. **[8]** The next Accelerating AI Conference takes place on 13 October 2026, with details and registration interest available at acceleratingai.co.uk. **[12]** Together, they give the South Midlands a ready-made platform for turning AI awareness into practical adoption work.

The danger is that the region becomes known for impressive demonstrations while everyday SMEs remain under-supported. The opportunity is to do the opposite: use Milton Keynes’ innovation reputation, and the reach of the wider South Midlands, to make practical AI adoption normal for smaller firms.

What the South Midlands can credibly claim

- **A real-world testbed.** Milton Keynes has experience with autonomous vehicles, robotics, drone-related projects and digital twin work.
- **A joined-up regional ecosystem.** The conference brought together the Accelerating AI organisers, business media, Microsoft, Dragon IS, Qoob, Milton Keynes City Council, Smart City Consultancy, South Midlands Growth Hub, University of Bedfordshire / Luton AI, Fliweel.tech, Zoho and techUK.
- **Public-sector proof points.** MKCC is already using AI in social care transcription, chatbots, planning support and digital twin work.
- **Business support routes.** The South Midlands Growth Hub can connect firms to advice, experts and funding across Milton Keynes, Bedfordshire, Luton and Northamptonshire.
- **Academic capability.** The University of Bedfordshire's Luton AI model shows how universities can translate research into business and public value.

What the region should not claim yet

- That SMEs are broadly mature in AI adoption. The survey and poll do not support that.
- That tool usage equals readiness. It does not.
- That AI benefits will spread automatically. They will need governance, skills, funding and local coordination.
- That the main barrier is attitude. The data suggests many businesses are positive. The gap is capacity, clarity and execution.

08 Recommendations for SMEs

The best next step for most SMEs is not to create an AI strategy document that sits in a folder. It is to run a small, serious, measured adoption cycle. Pick one workflow. Make it safer and faster. Learn from it. Then repeat.

1 Name an AI lead, and give them time

Do not let AI sit in the corner of the owner-manager's already overloaded diary. The pre-event survey shows why this fails. Responsibility without dedicated time becomes good intention. Give someone explicit authority, a small budget, and regular time to test, document and report progress.

2 Start with friction, not tools

Ask: what work is repetitive, slow, error-prone, disliked, expensive or dependent on knowledge trapped in someone's head? That is where AI should start. Avoid the question "what can we do with this tool?" until the problem is clear.

3 Choose one workflow for 30 days

Pick one area with visible value and manageable risk. Good starting points include meeting preparation, customer enquiry triage, proposal drafting, internal knowledge search, management reporting, social media briefing, invoice chasing, data cleansing or website quality monitoring.

4 Map the current process before adding AI

Write down how the work happens today: inputs, systems, people, approvals, outputs, timings and pain points. If the process is unclear, AI will not make it clear. Fix the process first.

5 Use secure, governed environments where possible

Many SMEs already pay for Microsoft 365, Google Workspace, CRM systems, finance tools and project management platforms. Start by understanding what those systems can do safely before moving sensitive work into unmanaged tools.

6 Keep humans in the loop where it matters

Human review should be mandatory when AI touches brand, money, customers, legal risk, sensitive data, HR, safety or compliance. For some low-risk internal tasks, review can be lighter. For customer-facing or regulated work, it must be explicit.

7 Measure usefulness, not novelty

A useful AI project should improve something observable: time saved, response speed, fewer errors, better first drafts, higher customer satisfaction, faster reporting, improved pipeline visibility, reduced backlog, or work that was previously unaffordable.

8 Build AI fluency across the team

Prompt tips are useful, but they are not enough. Staff need to understand what AI is good at, where it fails, how to check outputs, how to protect data, when to escalate, and how to redesign work around human judgement.

09 Recommendations for local government and regional partners

The region does not need another AI awareness campaign on its own. Awareness is already high among the engaged audience. The next stage is structured adoption: diagnostics, funding, skills, shared governance, practical examples and one clear route into support.

1 Use Accelerating AI as the South Midlands AI adoption forum

Accelerating AI already provides the right vehicle: a trusted, practical, SME-focused forum that brings businesses, public bodies, universities, technology firms and support partners into the same room. The next step is to formalise it lightly, not bureaucratically. Use it to share use cases, lessons, failures, templates, adoption data, funding routes and practical next steps across the South Midlands.

2 Turn the AI readiness scorecard into a practical diagnostic

Give SMEs a simple way to assess where they are and what they should do next. The scorecard in this paper should become an online diagnostic linked to Growth Hub support, expert sessions and implementation partners. It should not be a vanity maturity rating. It should ask about ownership, time, workflow focus, data, permissions, skills, governance and measurement, then route the business towards a sensible next step: learn the basics, run one governed pilot, redesign a workflow or scale what is already working.

3 Fund AI diagnostics and implementation sprints

Many SMEs do not need a large AI programme. They need a good first project. Local funding should support short diagnostics, workflow mapping, governance review and low-risk prototypes, especially for micro and small businesses that cannot absorb consultancy costs easily. A useful sprint should end with evidence: what changed, what was saved, what failed, what risk was found and whether the business should stop, repeat, integrate or scale.

4 Build a South Midlands AI support directory

Businesses need one place to find out what support is available. The directory should bring together funding, grants, Growth Hub advice, Hour with an Expert sessions, university support, AI training, governance guidance, case studies, free events such as Accelerating AI, MK Tech Week activity, the YouTube and Spotify podcast, and the LinkedIn community. It should be kept current and written for busy business owners, not specialists.

5 Co-create sector-specific playbooks

A retailer, manufacturer, creative agency, professional services firm, care provider and logistics business will not adopt AI in the same way. Regional partners should work with the Accelerating AI team and the organisations around the conference to produce short playbooks for key local sectors. Each playbook should cover practical use cases, likely risks, data considerations, starter workflows, support routes and examples from businesses in the region.

6 Share public-sector lessons honestly

Milton Keynes City Council can play an important role by sharing what worked, what did not, and how governance decisions were made. Public-sector transparency can raise trust and help SMEs avoid avoidable mistakes, especially around data, permissions, human review and procurement.

7 Connect universities to business problems

Universities should not only provide talent. They should help firms frame problems, test approaches, understand ethics and evaluate whether AI is genuinely useful. The Luton AI model offers a strong example of this interface role, and the region should make it easier for SMEs to find and use that kind of support.

8 Treat AI adoption as an economic development issue and measure it

AI readiness will affect productivity, competitiveness, customer experience, skills and investment. It should sit alongside wider regional economic plans, not as a side topic for technology specialists. Repeat a short regional survey twice a year to track maturity, use cases, time investment, governance, confidence, adoption barriers and business outcomes. The region needs trend data, not just event feedback.

10 A 90-day action plan

The following plan is designed for SMEs that want to move from experimentation to controlled adoption without overcomplicating the first step.

PERIOD	FOCUS	ACTIONS	EVIDENCE OF PROGRESS
Days 1-15	Choose the problem	Name an AI lead. Pick one workflow. Map the current process. Define success. Check data sensitivity and permissions.	A one-page problem statement, baseline and risk note.
Days 16-30	Prototype narrowly	Test one tool or agent in a controlled setting. Use non-sensitive or approved data. Keep a human review step.	A working prototype or assisted workflow used by one or two people.
Days 31-60	Measure and refine	Compare outputs with the baseline. Record errors, saved time, quality issues and staff feedback. Tighten prompts, permissions and review rules.	A short results report showing what improved, what failed and what must change.
Days 61-90	Decide and scale	Decide whether to stop, repeat, integrate or scale. Document the workflow. Train the next group of users.	A repeatable workflow with an owner, review process and agreed metric.

11 AI readiness scorecard

This scorecard is a practical starting point for SMEs. Score each area from 0 to 3, then use the result to decide the next step. It is intentionally simple. The aim is not to produce a perfect maturity assessment. The aim is to reveal whether a business is ready to move beyond ad hoc experimentation.

DIMENSION	0	1	2	3
Ownership	No owner	Informal interest	Named owner	Named owner with time and authority
Workflow focus	No clear use case	Tool-led ideas	One mapped workflow	Prioritised backlog of workflows
Data and permissions	Unknown	Some awareness	Access reviewed	Permissions and data flows documented
People and skills	No training	Prompt tips only	Basic AI literacy	AI fluency and review standards
Governance	No guidance	Informal caution	Written rules for use	DPIA, audit and review approach where needed
Measurement	No baseline	Anecdotal benefits	Simple metrics	Regular reporting against value and risk
Scaling	Ad hoc use	Individual usage	Team pilot	Repeatable adoption cycle

0-6

Not ready for anything beyond low-risk personal productivity experiments.

7-12

Ready for one controlled pilot.

13-17

Can start building repeatable team workflows.

18-21

Ready to scale selected use cases, provided governance keeps pace.

Conclusion and call to action

The Accelerating AI Conference showed a South Midlands region with energy, talent and credible examples. It also showed a readiness gap that should not be softened for PR. The gap is not about whether people have heard of AI. They have. It is about whether SMEs can make AI useful, safe and repeatable inside the business.

The next stage for the South Midlands should be practical. Use Accelerating AI as the forum. Turn the readiness scorecard into a useful diagnostic. Fund diagnostics and implementation sprints. Share public-sector lessons. Connect universities to business problems. Build sector-specific playbooks. Create one clear place where businesses can find support, funding, training and events. Measure progress twice a year.

The region has a chance to move first in a grounded way: not by claiming every business is AI-ready, but by admitting most are not, then building the support system that helps them get there.

Keep the momentum going

The next Accelerating AI Conference takes place on 13th October 2026 as part of MK Tech Week. It should be treated as the next checkpoint for the region: a place to bring evidence, not just enthusiasm. By then, SMEs should be able to show what they have tested, what they have learned and what support they still need.

Businesses, councils, universities, funders and support organisations should use the months before October to move at least one practical AI workflow forward. Start small, document the work, keep humans in the loop and share the lessons with the wider community.

Register interest and find event updates at acceleratingai.co.uk. The Accelerating AI community is also building beyond the conference, with podcast conversations on YouTube and Spotify, plus a LinkedIn group for people who want to keep sharing tools, questions, examples and lessons between events.

FINAL THOUGHT

The winners will not be the businesses that talk most loudly about AI. They will be the ones that make one useful workflow better, learn from it, and keep going.

A Appendix A: data tables

A1 Pre-event survey headline metrics

METRIC	RESULT	NOTES
Usable responses	27	One obvious test response removed from 28 total responses
Average organisational understanding	3.00 / 5	Self-rated
Average personal confidence	3.22 / 5	Self-rated
Just exploring	18.5%	AI maturity category
Early experimentation	44.4%	AI maturity category
Scaling	25.9%	AI maturity category
Mature	11.1%	AI maturity category
Someone responsible or somewhat responsible	81.5%	Yes plus Somewhat
Dedicated regular time or projects	7.4%	Team time investment

A2 Live poll headline metrics

METRIC	RESULT	NOTES
Responses	53	Live poll on the day
Average organisational understanding	3.19 / 5	Self-rated
Average personal confidence	3.33 / 5	Self-rated, two blanks
Just exploring	15.1%	All live poll responses
Early experimentation	56.6%	All live poll responses
Scaling	22.6%	All live poll responses
Mature	1.9%	All live poll responses
Most common tools	ChatGPT, Claude, Microsoft Copilot, Gemini / Google AI	Free-text and multi-select mentions normalised
Most common use cases	Business strategy, marketing content, data analysis, internal productivity	Multi-select, percentages can exceed 100%
Most common sentiments	Excited, motivated, optimistic, cautious	Word mentions, not exclusive categories

A3 Pre-event concerns: grouped themes

THEME	EXAMPLES FROM RESPONSES	INTERPRETATION
Keeping up and tool overwhelm	“keeping up with changes”; “overwhelm from number of AI solutions available”	Businesses need curation and decision support, not just more tool recommendations.
Skills and confidence	“not sure how it can improve my business”; “learning how to create prompts”	Basic literacy still matters, but it should lead quickly into workflow redesign.
Data, privacy and safe use	“GDPR compliance”; “data security and privacy”	Governance templates and safe-use guidance would remove avoidable friction.
Accuracy and trust	“often makes mistakes”; “accuracy”	Human review and quality standards must be built into adoption from the start.
Cost and ROI	“cost”; “clients still struggle to get value from it”	Funding and better measurement can help SMEs move from vague interest to evidence.
Context and organisational knowledge	“getting the knowledge out of my head”; “the problem of context”	The next adoption stage is not prompts; it is business memory and workflow context.

B Appendix B: speaker evidence map

SPEAKER	ORGANISATION / SESSION	EVIDENCE USED IN THIS PAPER
Kerry Lewis-Stevenson	Business Times / Business MK, Welcome	Framed the gap between genuine AI use and non-use, and placed the event in Milton Keynes' smart-city context.
Louis Nicholson	Microsoft, AI in the workplace	Explained agents entering the workforce, frontier firms, agent teams and the shift from assistant to delegated work.
Lionel Naidoo	Dragon IS, Copilot and agents	Connected agent execution to human agency; emphasised organisational readiness, governance and a 90-day adoption plan.
Matthew Rigby-White	Qoob, Building marketing teams with AI	Provided survey interpretation, marketing workflow examples, internal agents and warnings on broken workflows, tone and permissions.
Lisa Beckett	Milton Keynes City Council, AI adoption at MKCC	Provided public-sector examples including social care transcription, chatbot performance, governance and digital twin work.
Ian Pulford	Smart City Consultancy, Autonomy as a Service	Linked AI to robotics, autonomous vehicles, public-space deployment, connectivity, control and safety frameworks.
Sam Hunter and Kelly Griffiths	South Midlands Growth Hub	Outlined advisory support, expert access, AI-enabled Growth Hub support and Capital Growth Grant eligibility.
Ed Braund	University of Bedfordshire, University role	Positioned universities as an interface between frontier research, skills, governance and business problems.
Andy Paul	Fliweel.tech, AI agents in action	Explained agentic AI, multi-agent systems, deployment considerations and the Blue Touch Paper case study.

SPEAKER	ORGANISATION / SESSION	EVIDENCE USED IN THIS PAPER
Robert Simpson	Zoho, Beyond AI pilots	Framed AI business cases as operational transformation, warned against pilot fatigue and recommended readiness scoring.
Usman Ikhlaq	techUK, Panel chair	Drew together adoption, AI fluency, sector variation, future uncertainty and the need for joined-up regional learning.

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