# Social Action Project Development Training

A case study of the Somers Town Future Neighbourhoods 2030 pilot

## Content

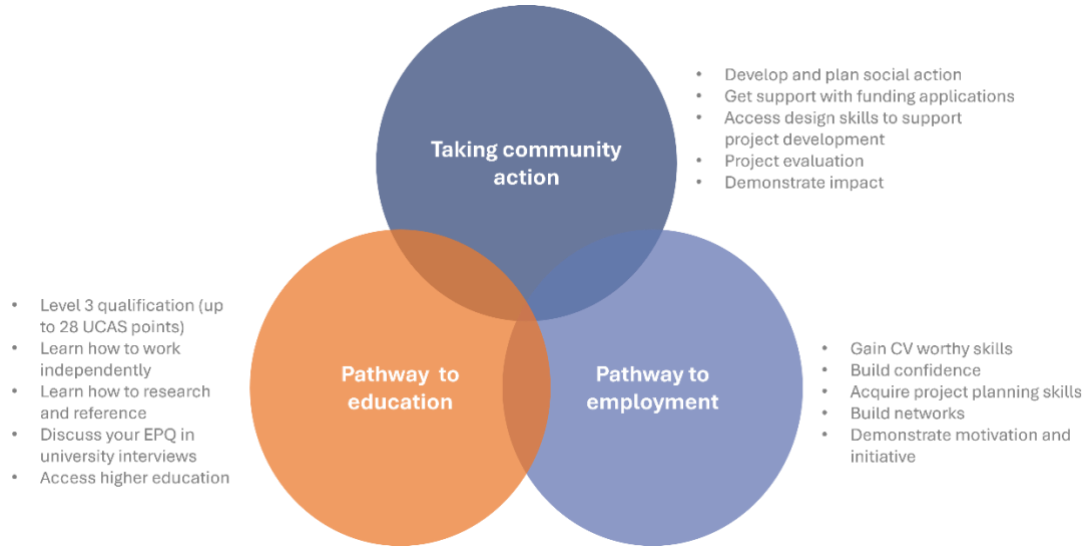
# Project Description

*The Social Action Project Development Training* is a design-led educational initiative that reimagines the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ), a Level 3 qualification used to prepare students for higher education or employment, as a format for community-based learning and social innovation.

Rooted in participatory research and community collaboration in Somers Town, the project supports learners, especially those underserved by traditional education systems. With tailored toolkits and methods, the course supports the ideation, development, and delivery of community-led social action projects.

The approach uses design methodologies to facilitate action-based learning and empower learners as changemakers. It does so by integrating a structured approach to problem-solving and sense-making into the fabric of local community life. The training draws on the strengths and motivations of diverse learners, and supports three primary outcomes.

1. a pathway to education
2. a pathway to employment
3. Taking community action




Rather than emphasising academic achievement, the program champions meaningful impact, learner agency, and community relevance. Formal and informal learning recognition is used to acknowledge and enable social action. The result is a hybrid model of learning that blurs the boundaries between education, activism, and co-design. This report explains how to course was developed, and how it directed community-led social action which continues to bear fruit.

# The pilot context

The pilots stem from an EU-funded research project conducted by T-Factor, a global research project that investigated social innovation in an urban contexts, along with a series of MA Industrial Design and MA Service Design projects at UAL (University of the Arts London)[i]. Together, they identified an opportunity to design a program that supports local capacity-building for social action, through reflection and recognition. The Somers Town Future Neighbourhoods 2030 programme offered an opportunity to pilot and further develop this idea.

## Somers Town, London Borough of Camden

Somers Town, located in the London Borough of Camden, is a diverse and persistently underserved neighbourhood. Whilst being known for its community spirit, it faces challenges around social mobility, education access, and opportunities for youth and adult learners. The area is also home to a vibrant network of community organisations that work at the grassroots level, empowering residents to participate in creative projects and social action.


## Future Neighbourhoods 2030

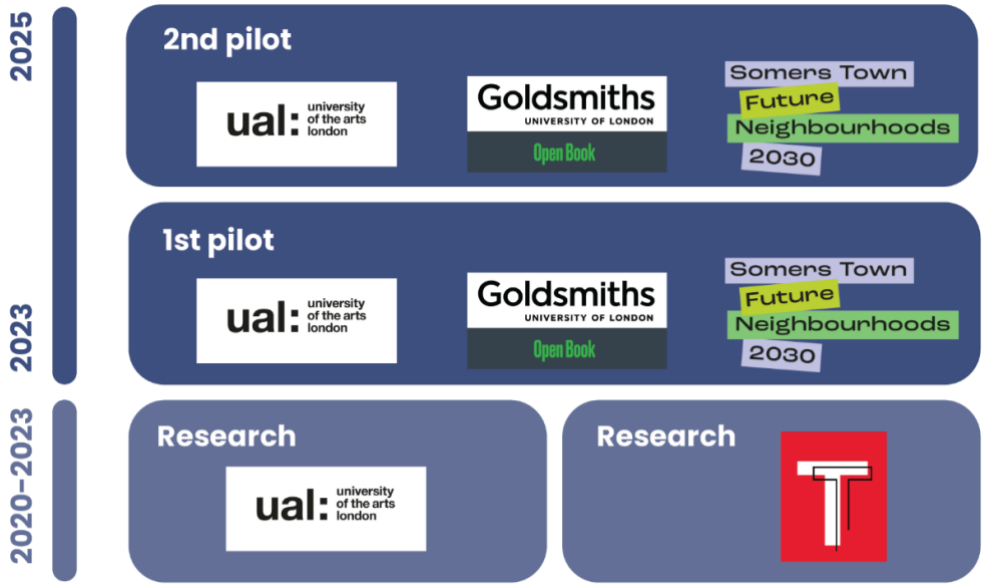
Future Neighbourhoods 2030 is a place-based initiative developed by the Greater London Authority aimed at accelerating resilience in London's communities facing climate change, social, and economic challenges. It focuses on local interventions that support equitable transitions to sustainable futures. The initiative empowers communities to shape their own neighbourhoods through innovation, participation, and partnership. These goals align closely with the aims of the Social Action Project Development Training.

## What is Social Action?

Social action refers to efforts undertaken by individuals or groups to make positive change within their communities. This can include volunteering, advocacy, community organising, peer mentoring, and other civic initiatives. In the context of this project, social action is both the content and the outcome of the learning journey: participants acquire tools to imagine better futures for their communities, and to design, implement, and reflect on tangible interventions.

# Delivery of the Somers Town pilot

The course pilots took place between 2023 and 2025. They were delivered by UAL in collaboration with Goldsmiths University. The program and its learning materials were informed by preliminary research conducted by UAL's MA industrial Design and MA Service Design students, and led by T-Factor. Reflection and gathering evidence was embedded into the delivery, ensuring analyses and integration of insights ran alongside the delivery of the course. This includes participant interviews and facilitator observations.

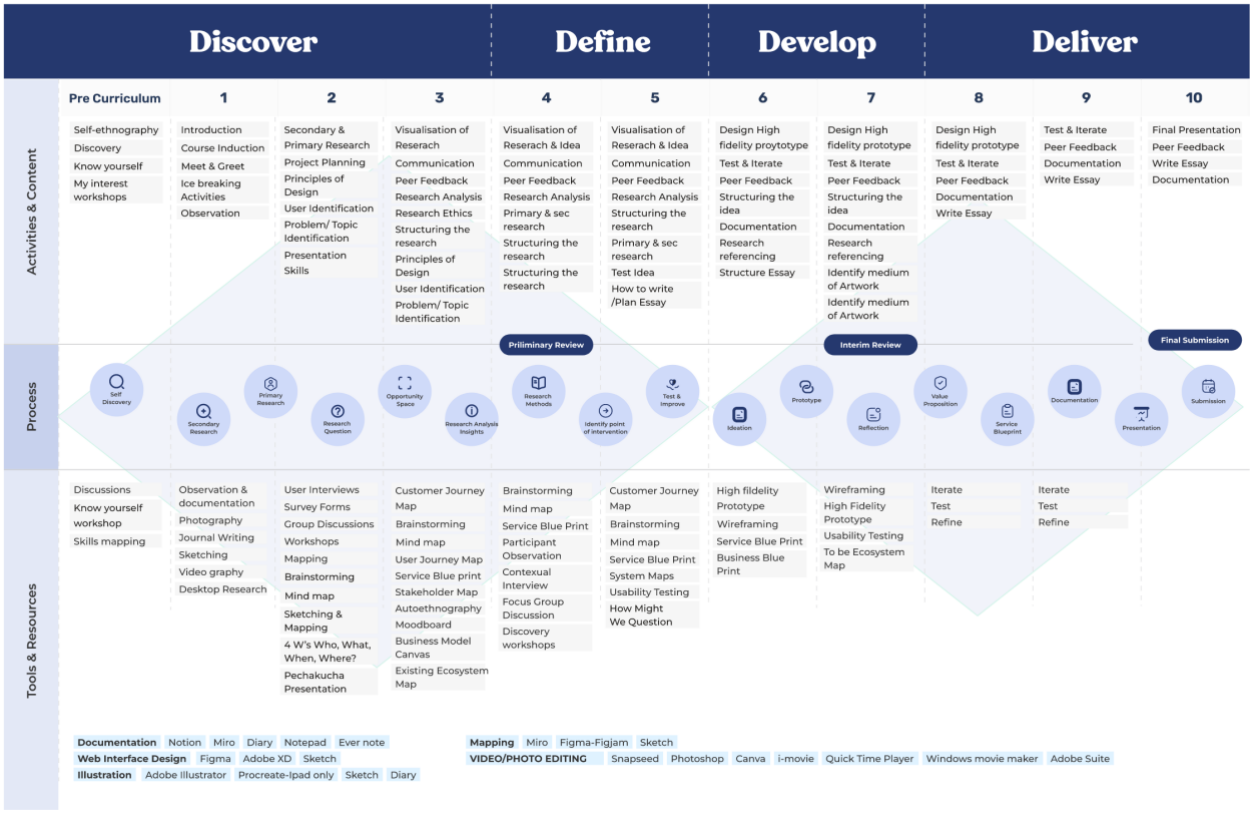



## A design-led EPQ curriculum

Most commonly undertaken during A-levels, an EPQ facilitates independent projects that can earn up to 28 UCAS points. It allows the learner to choose their own topic and project title, enabling it to be aligned with a specific context and personal motivations.[ii] The pilots revealed that this was a big driver for many of the participants. While the course was broadly framed through the lens of climate action, the topic remained open enough for participants to explore themes that were meaningful to both their community and themselves.

The artefact EPQ type was chosen as the for the pilots, as its focus is on the development of an artefact (which can be anything given shape by man), accompanied by a 1000-word dissertation[iii]. This type of EPQ follows a design framework that resembles the *Double Diamond*, a design framework refined and popularised by the Design Council. '*The Double Diamond is a visual representation of the design and innovation process. It's a simple way to describe the steps taken in any design and innovation project, irrespective of methods and tools used.*' – Design Council [iv]

Viewing the EPQ through the lens of a design process, the MA Service Design students mapped relevant design tools and methods onto the EPQ curriculum. This became the starting point for the Design-led EPQ and the development of the course materials, e.g. workbooks and worksheets.




Although the curriculum is heavily influenced by service design practices, the aim of the pilot was not to train community members in becoming design experts. Rather, design tools and methods are diffused into the community, by adapting language and aligning them within the framework of an EPQ. Doing so made it accessible and relevant for context specific social innovation. They are selected and adapted to enable social innovation by building relationships, building capacity, and co-designing activities.

## Course facilitation team

All learning sessions followed a similarly structured format, facilitated by the team. Typically, they began with a check-in. Learners shared progress, received peer and facilitator feedback. This created a space for mutual learning and inspiration, allowing participants to set examples for one another. Following this, a short lecture introduces the new activities. Learners then worked on these activities using the worksheets, whilst the facilitators provided one-to-one support to those who needed it. Sessions concluded with a planning segment, preparing for the following week.

Facilitation responsibilities can be divided into two categories: in-session delivery, as mentioned above, and out-of-session preparation and coordination. This includes:

- Preparing and printing learning materials
- Keeping attendance records
- Holding team reflection and planning meetings
- Preparing lectures
- Coordinating partnerships local organisations
- Communication with the learners

Communication ensured maintained learner engagement. WhatsApp groups were the main channel of communication during the pilots, since it was most familiar to the learners. It was used to send reminders and share external opportunities. Weekly emails supplemented this, sharing resources and summaries of the learning sessions. This kept continuity going beyond the sessions, and helped learners catch up if they missed a one.

The pilots proved that alongside the practical aspects of the course delivery, there is an significant degree of emotional care required from facilitators. As a learning format that advocates for diversifying learning and learning recognition, the learners internal circumstances and surroundings must be considered. If it is not, learners may struggle to stay motivated. While facilitators were not expected to provide professional care, they created a supportive environment where learners' basic and psychological needs were acknowledged and accommodated or signposted as much as possible. Doing so, recognised that self-actualisation through learning can only occur when these foundations are met[v].

Additionally, how the group relates to each other has an impact on the quality of learning. Running ice-breaker activities in the early session gave the groups an

opportunity to learn names, built trust, and open up. It demonstrated the value of connection between the group, as it paid of later in the course. Leading to peer-to-peer support, creating the conditions for open discussions, and encouraging collaboration.

## External learning support

Because the pilot operated open to anyone, skill and prior experience levels varied across the board. One of the main challenges for facilitators was managing this diversity, ensuring sessions remained both accessible and sufficiently challenging for everyone. This was addressed by drawing a distinction between two learning areas:

- **Social action skills**, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration, which were prioritised in taught sessions.
- **Practical skills**, such as IT proficiency or English language development, which were often needed but varied widely across learners.

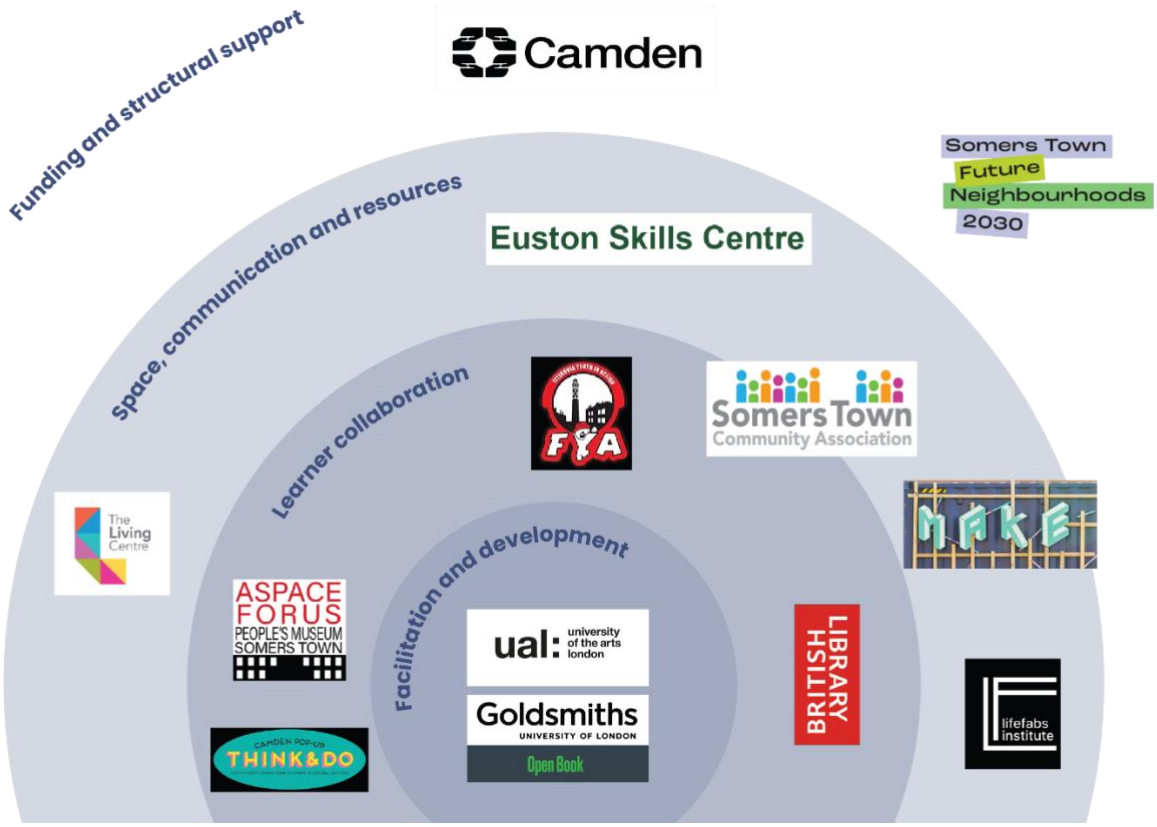
Rather than trying to cover all practical skills, we partnered with local organisations that offer learning support for these practical skills. Learners were signposted as needs emerged. This strategy aligned well with the EPQ format as it demands 120 hours of commitment, 40 hours taught, and 80 hours of independent learning. Focussing on the social action skills during in-class time, surfaced practical skills that learners wanted to develop. This way, it helped learners to identify and plan their independent learning.

Moreover, we partnered with organisations to provide learning resources. For example, a charity specialising in digital inclusion donated laptops for learners who needed them. Other partners contributed physical spaces for learning and exhibits.

## External partners

Making local connections that supported the course has been an important element of the pilots' success. A key insight is that social action cannot happens in the classroom only. External partners played a major role in bridging the gap between the class room and the community. This way, learners were matched with local resources and opportunities.

We found that participants are more likely to commit and see meaningful impact, when collaborating with local voluntary, community, and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations. Through collaboration, learners were able to touch on underrepresented challenges within the organisations, and gain practical experience in doing so. However, this did not come without challenges. As students' work was in service of an organisation, some struggled to maintain ownership over their work. They felt pressure to compromise their personal learning journey, to serve the organisation. This was addressed by check-ins with learners during the weekly classes, and mediating with partnering organisation to manage expectations and ensure partnership remained mutually beneficial.



## Community events

Community events played a role in both recruitment and making connections in the local area. Prior to the 12 week courses street engagement activities and taster sessions for both participants and partner organisations were run. Notably, recruitment was more significantly more effective when it was part of an existing community program. For example, taster sessions run in the local community centre achieved better retention than standalone street engagements. This can be attributed to the trust and credibility of the host in the community.

During the course, participants showcased their work through public events. These served as key milestones and helped to motivate and bring progress together. Having a goal to work towards was particularly useful during the converging phases of the Double Diamond process. Moreover, as the EPQ requires participants to present their projects for qualification, we aligned this requirement with opportunities to engage wider audiences.

We organised these presentations as events involving community partners and local leaders. Their presence provided learners with a valuable platform to share their ideas with individuals who could support or amplify their work.

Across the two pilot programmes, we held three public-facing events. Two final presentation events at the end of each pilot, and one interim event hosted at a community centre. Here, learners presented works-in-progress in the form of project posters. This encouraged them to communicate their ideas clearly and gather feedback from the community.

# Outcomes

In formal educational settings, such as universities and colleges, the success of an educational service is customarily measured by the grades of the students. In the pilots, however, we found that this was a driver for some, but not every participant. This section reflects on the three main aims of the course, the qualities of learning recognition in relation to them, and their importance to learner motivation.

## As a pathway to education

Participants from both pilots have used the course to plan and/or achieve their long-term learning goals. For some, this meant taking on courses that enabled them to continue developing and delivering their projects. For others, it provided experience and credits for stronger applications into higher education. Below outlines observations on the course as a pathway to education.

**Gaining confidence to learn**

The pilots showed that participants who have not been in education for a longer period of time, or left with bad experiences, were able to regain confidence learning through project development. A driver in this is acknowledging that learning does not only happen in classrooms, but by managing and adapting to new situations. Fundamental to this process, is the integration of REBEL (Recognition of Experience Based Educational Learning) to help learners reflect on their learning at the end of each phase.[vi] This way, REBEL is used as a tool for learning self-recognition, helping to identify and articulate acquired skills and experience.

**Identifying learning objectives**

In the first phase of the courses, participants worked out their topics based on personal strengths and interests. From there, they develop a question, and eventually, they piece together a puzzle of how they can develop the project they want. On this journey, specific learning goals emerged that extended beyond the scope of 12 weeks. However, by signposting participants to local learning providers, they were able to progress their learning journey. To give some examples of the topics that participants pursued during or after the course: IT (Excel, Powerpoint), sewing, mushroom growing in a bio-lab, and facilitation training.

**28 USAC points**

Receiving additional UCAS points is one of the most practical examples of how the course makes entry into higher education more accessible. Simply put, more UCAS points make a university application stronger. Having an opportunity to earn this outside of a formal learning setting was a strong driver for those who considered doing a degree.

**Relevant experience for university interviews**

Participants who considered higher education as a goal used the course as a way to gain compelling experience they can leverage in interviews. For example, one participant whose ambition was to study IT, developed a project giving walk-in IT advice in a community centre.

## As a pathway to employment

Participants have credited the course with helping them get work opportunities, highlighting its effectiveness as a pathway to employment. Below are several ways the course opens doors for career advancement.

**Relevant experience for job interviews**

The course's first week starts with identifying personal strengths, interests, and motivations. Working with these outcomes, participants then shaped their personal project and learning aims. Over the duration of the pilot, participants worked on these objectives, building experience they can talk about during interviews.

**Refined articulation of personal strengths and skills**

Alongside project development, the pilot focussed on personal reflection. This was an important element because the value of the course exceeds the individual's project success. To help put learning into words, the program has self-reflection designed into it, and participants built on this in small steps over time. At the end, participants built up their reflections and developed a deep understanding of what they can bring to the table in a working context.

**REBEL certificates demonstrating skills**

Through our partnership with REBEL, we trialled informally certifying learners. As an addition to the EPQ qualification, it offers learners an opportunity to receive learning accreditation for the skills they identify as important. A certificate shows 6 skills which they self-selected. A facilitator has to verify if they agree with the learner's reasoning, and then they can issue the certificate digitally. We included logos from partnering institutions to communicate the legitimacy of the document. Where the value of the EPQ qualification lies in the fact it is nationally recognised by education providers, the REBEL certificate can be more personal and more local.

ual: Goldsmiths Open Book Camden Somers Town Future Neighbourhoods 2030

**Future Neighbouhoods Project Development Course**

[redacted]

has demonstrated personal development in the following areas:

Life-wide attitudes & Values. **Commitment**
Life-wide attitudes & Values. **Empathy**
Life-wide behaviours & Engagement. **Initiative**
Life-wide behaviours & Engagement. **Planning**
Life-wide behaviours & Engagement. **Reflection**
Life-wide behaviours & Engagement. **Self-organisation**

**Certified by: rebel-tool.org**
January 15, 2025

## Taking community action

Both pilots have yielded projects that are realised in the community, having a lasting impact beyond the pilot. Below outlines the key drivers that enabled community action.

**Developing an idea**

In addition to generating new ideas, we saw how the course helped learners further develop the ideas they brought with them. This shows that enabling social action requires more than just seeing a problem and imagining a solution. It also demands a structure and an approach to work through what can feel like an overwhelmingly complex task.

The course supports learners in building useful skills for social action, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, creative thinking, and presenting. Moreover, it provides a framework that helps them navigate ambiguity and break projects down into manageable steps.

**Connecting to a local network**

The pilots demonstrated how local connections added value to the learners' experience. Those whose projects were hosted by local organisations had additional leverage to put their ideas into practice, as they could build onto established local relations rather than starting from scratch.  Some participants used the course to build capacity in the organisation they were already affiliated with, and others found collaboration opportunities along the way.

**Providing a formal setting for action**

Post pilot delivery interviews revealed that a formal project developing setting enables action. In other words, an individual might have an idea for an interesting project, but without a platform to explore this idea, the barrier to start is too big. The course provides participants with the confidence to develop ideas, and the credibility to share them. For example, being able to say you are doing a course adds legitimacy when emailing an experts for an interview.

**Support with funding applications**

We found that support with funding applications was a big motivator, especially for people who are already active in the voluntary and community sector. Everything in the course can be used to create a compelling funding application, but two sets of activities stood out. Firstly, *the value proposition* and *business model canvas* are tools that map the project value relations. Secondly, the budgeting worksheets helped participants to define the financial needs for their projects. In their final phase, participants used these to elegantly describe their proposals and demonstrated thoroughly detailed funding plans for it.

## Conclusion

The Social Action Project Development Training pilots in Somers Town show how revisiting a traditional *Extended Project Qualification* through a design-led, community-action lens can empower learners profoundly. Success, as defined in this context, is not only to complete a project, receive funding, or acquire qualification. Moreover, it is acknowledging growth in confidence, agency, and capacity to take action within their community. Some learners did not complete their projects. However, they walked away with increased self-confidence, practical experience, and an overview of pathways to further learning or employment.

With varying cohort sizes and the unpredictable nature of open-access community learning (including late joiners, dropouts, and mixed-ability groups) having more than one facilitator proved essential. This allowed the team to provide 1-to-1 support and emotional care, especially when learners navigated personal challenges alongside their projects.

Recruitment strategies success varies. Street-based outreach was largely ineffective, while partnerships with trusted community hubs significantly increased both sign-ups and retention. This shows the importance of embedding recruitment within existing social networks and programmes to leverage existing relations and trust.

This case study reinforces the idea that learning can be adaptable, relational, and rooted in learners' lived experiences. The pilots show that with design as a framework

and an EPQ to formally accredit learning, education can become a tool for personal development, civic agency, and systemic change.

# References

[i] Thorpe and Morgan-Hatch, 'D 5.1 Stakeholder Reports'; 'EPQ as Social Action'; 'Ladder'; 'Learning Empowerment'; 'Learning Through Design'.
[ii] 'What Is an EPQ and Why Should I Do One? (EPQ Advice #1)'.
[iii] 'Student Guide: Artefact'.
[iv] 'The Double Diamond - Design Council'.
[v] Psychologist, 'What Is Self-Actualization?'
[vi] 'REBEL (Recognition of Experience Based Education and Learning)'.