

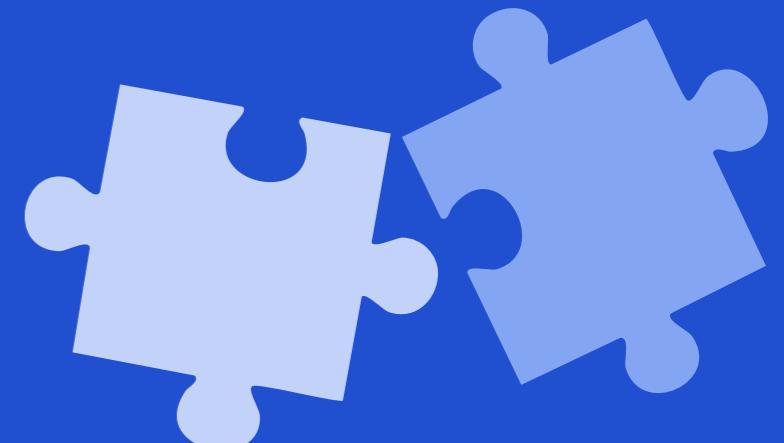
Closing the Capability Gap: Embedding Service Design in Frontline Professional Development

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About the Research



Research Team

This report was written by Veron WK Lai, Senior Lecturer at the University of the Arts London. Veron brings over a decade of industry experience working across the public and private sectors, alongside her teaching practice on the MA Service Design (London College of Communication) and the MA Industrial Design (Central Saint Martins). This dual position as both practitioner and educator shapes the report's commitment to bridging design theory with real-world practice inside public-sector organisations.

The research was supported by two Research Assistants who are both studying MA Service Design at the London College of Communication, University of the Arts London: Jasleen Ashta and Kangyuheng Zhu.



Fig.0.1. Photo of the Research team, from left: Jesleen Ashta, Veron WK Lai, Kangyuheng Zhu

Together, the team approached this project as a design inquiry into systems, behaviours, and realities of public service work. Aiming to understand not only what needs to change, but how design-led learning could realistically apply within the everyday pressures of frontline roles in the public sector.

Interview Contributors

Six expert practitioners took part in semi-structured interviews, offering diverse perspectives across local government, design consultancy, academic research, and professional training. Their insights were essential for grounding this report in contemporary practice and organisational realities.

Eleanor Rogers,
Service Design Associate,
Ealing Council

Laura Duarte,
Head of Policy & Service Design,
Ealing Council

Professor Silvia Grimaldi,
Academic & Public Sector Researcher,
University of the Arts London

Martyn Evans,
Head of Product, Unboxed

Katie Murrie,
Director of Business, Development and Strategy,
Service Design Academy

Kim Anderson,
Director of Learning and Partnerships,
Service Design Academy

These contributors were selected because they work directly with or in support of public-sector teams navigating Continuing Professional Development (CPD), capability-building, and service transformation. While this report did not include frontline worker interviews, the participating experts provided valuable system-level and practice-level insights into current barriers, opportunities, and implementation realities.





The Case for Extending Design Capability to the Frontline

Service design has gained substantial traction across the UK public sector in recent years. The Government Digital Service have promoted user-centred approaches as central to modern public service delivery, and the Scottish Digital Academy offers structured design pathways for public sector staff. These developments signal meaningful progress toward more people-centred & responsive public services.



Service Standard

Meeting users' needs

- 1 Understand users and their needs
- 2 Solve a whole problem for users
- 3 Provide a joined up experience across all channels
- 4 Make the service simple to use
- 5 Make sure everyone can use the service

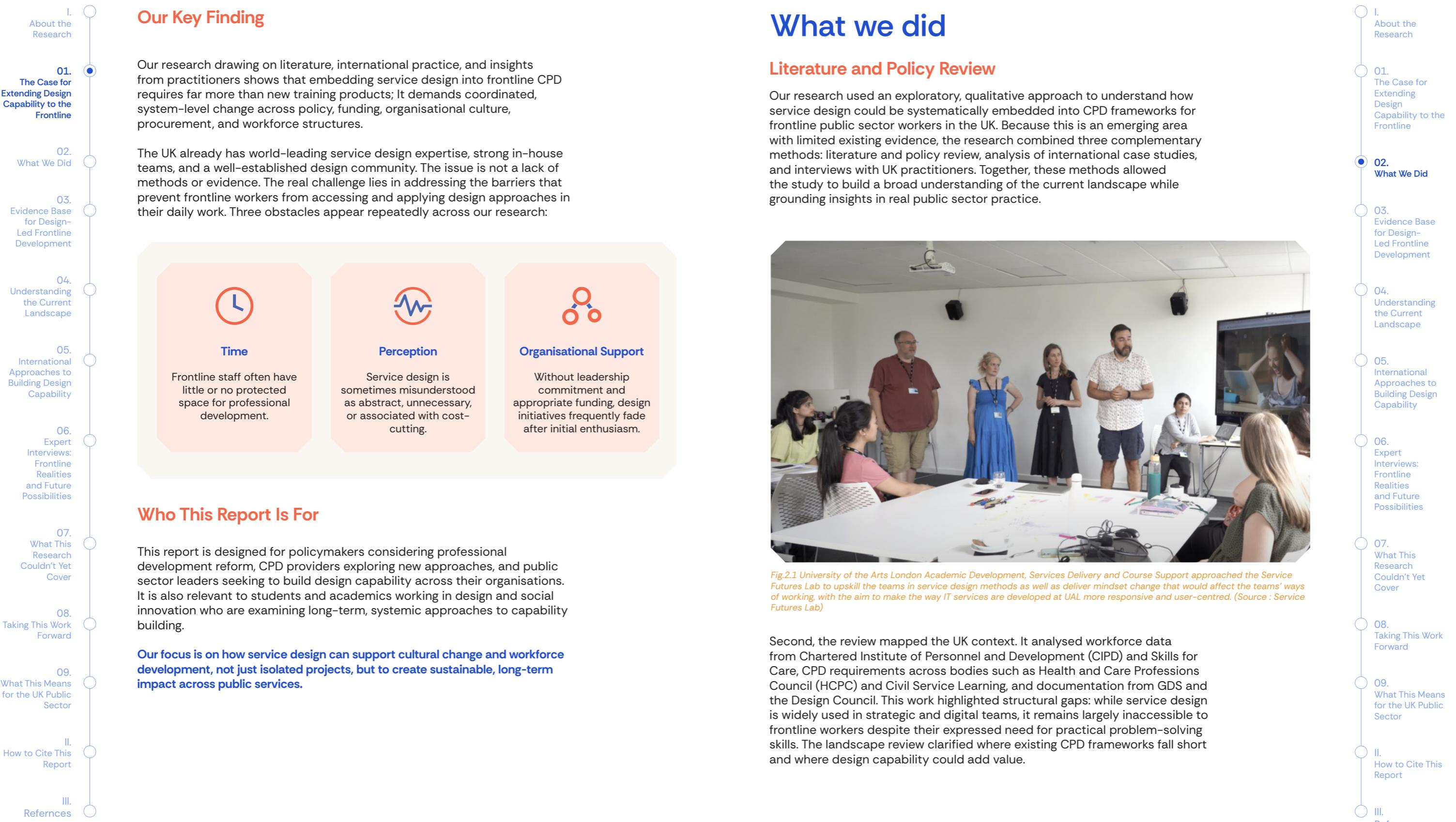
Fig 1.1. The GOV.UK Service Standard outlining five principles for meeting users' needs, including understanding users, solving whole problems, and ensuring accessible, simple services. (Source: GDS)

However, a significant gap remains. While service design training is increasingly accessible to managers, specialists, and digital teams, it rarely reaches the frontline workers who interact with the public every day. This includes care workers, housing officers, librarians, benefits advisors, and many others who represent nearly a third of the UK workforce. Despite being the face of public services and often managing complex, high-pressure situations, frontline staff remain largely excluded from opportunities to develop design capability.

Most frontline workers access learning through established Continuing Professional Development (CPD) frameworks that focus on compliance, safeguarding, and essential role-based competencies. Service design does not currently sit within these structures and is not yet recognised as a core professional capability or an avenue for career development. This presents a structural barrier that limits how widely design-led problem-solving can spread across public services.

The Challenge We Examine

How can service design be effectively embedded into CPD frameworks for frontline workers, and what systemic changes would be required to make this sustainable?

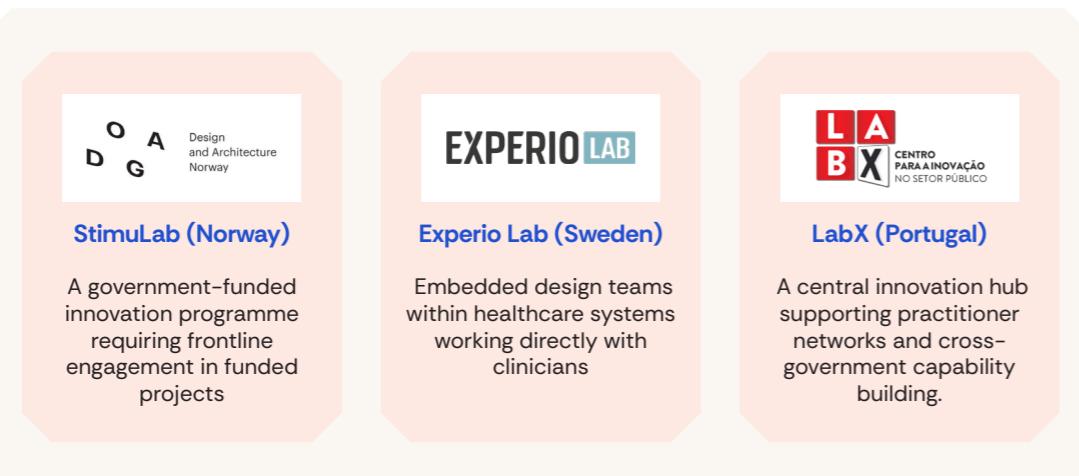




International Case Study Analysis

To understand how other countries have embedded design capability at scale, three long-running international initiatives were selected using purposive sampling. Selection criteria required that programmes directly involve frontline workers, systematically integrated into workforce development structures, and have operated for at least five years.

The cases selected were:



These cases represent different governance approaches, including centralised funding, embedded teams, and national networks. Providing diverse models relevant to UK public sector structures.

Expert Practitioner Interviews

Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with UK professionals working across service design, workforce development, and public sector transformation. Participants included a frontline practitioner, a local authority service design leader, an academic researcher, consultant, and two design educators. This provided perspectives from practice, leadership, academia, consultancy, and training.

Interviews followed a structured guide covering five areas: the current CPD landscape; barriers to integrating design; examples of successful practice; future possibilities; and practical pathways towards implementation. Conversations were conducted between August and October 2025 and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. All participants gave permission to be named, and all data was handled confidentially in line with ethical guidelines.

This mixed-methods approach enabled the project to combine evidence from policy, practice, and international experience, building a robust foundation for identifying opportunities to embed service design within frontline CPD.

Evidence Base for Design-Led Frontline Development

Through our literature reviews, evidence across adult learning, workplace development, and public sector innovation strongly supports embedding service design into frontline CPD, provided it is taught through methods aligned with how adults learn best. Research shows that frontline staff learn most effectively through experiential, collaborative, and work-integrated approaches. Service design practice embodies these characteristics, but whether service design education does so depends on pedagogical choices. This section examines the evidence base and considers how practice-based approaches to teaching service design can maximise alignment with effective professional development.

How Adults Learn Best

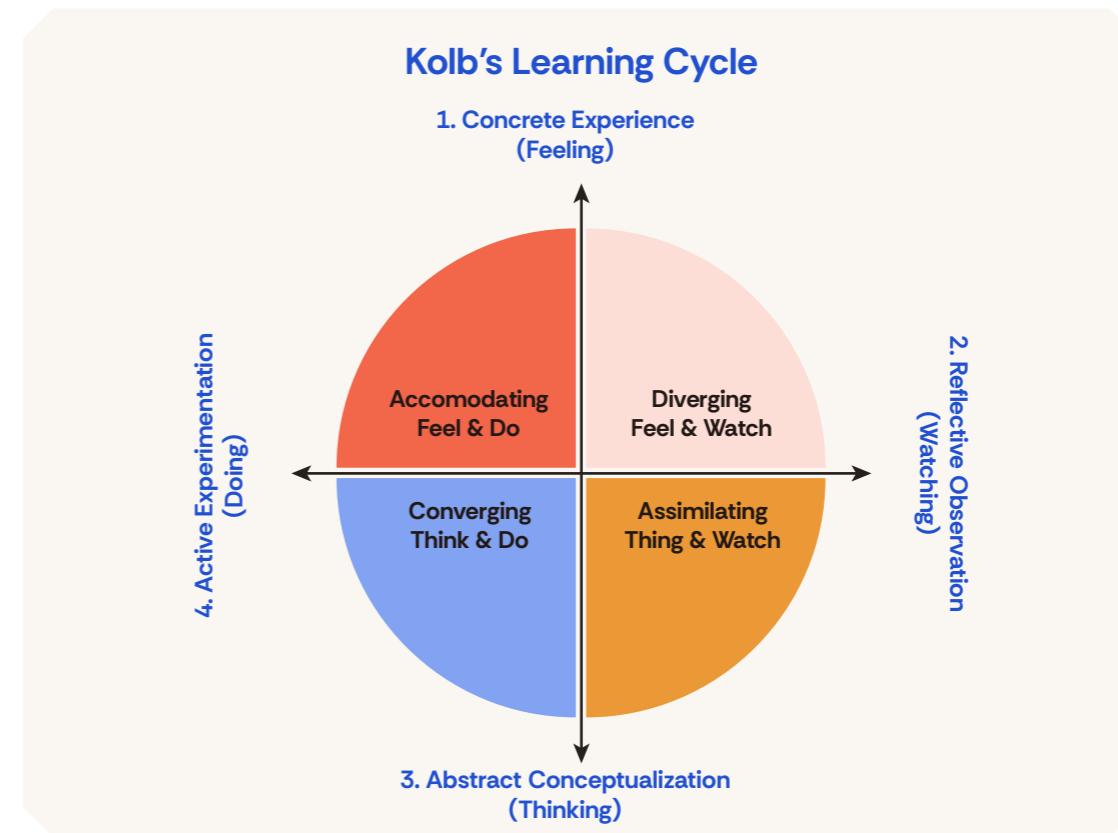
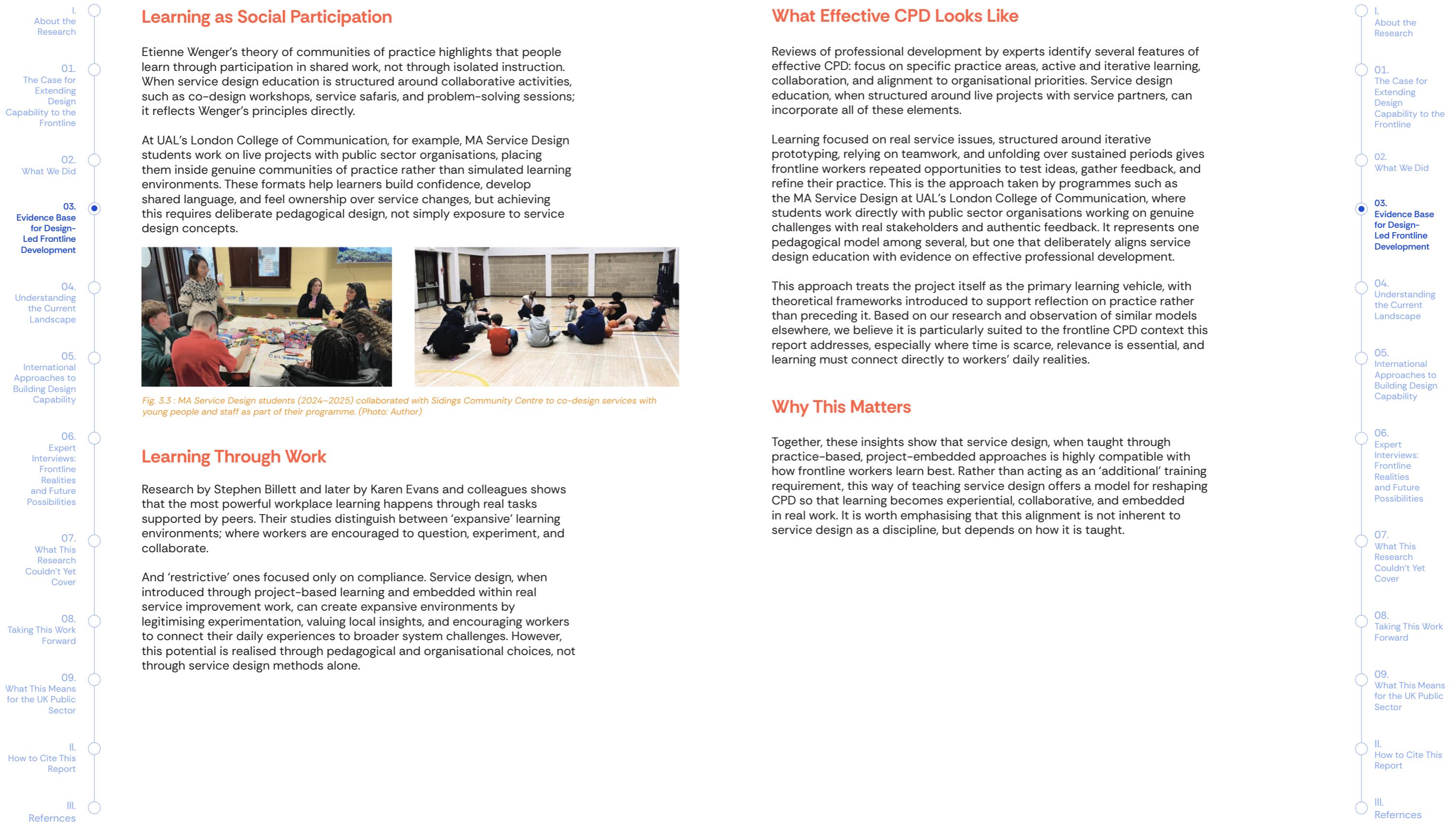


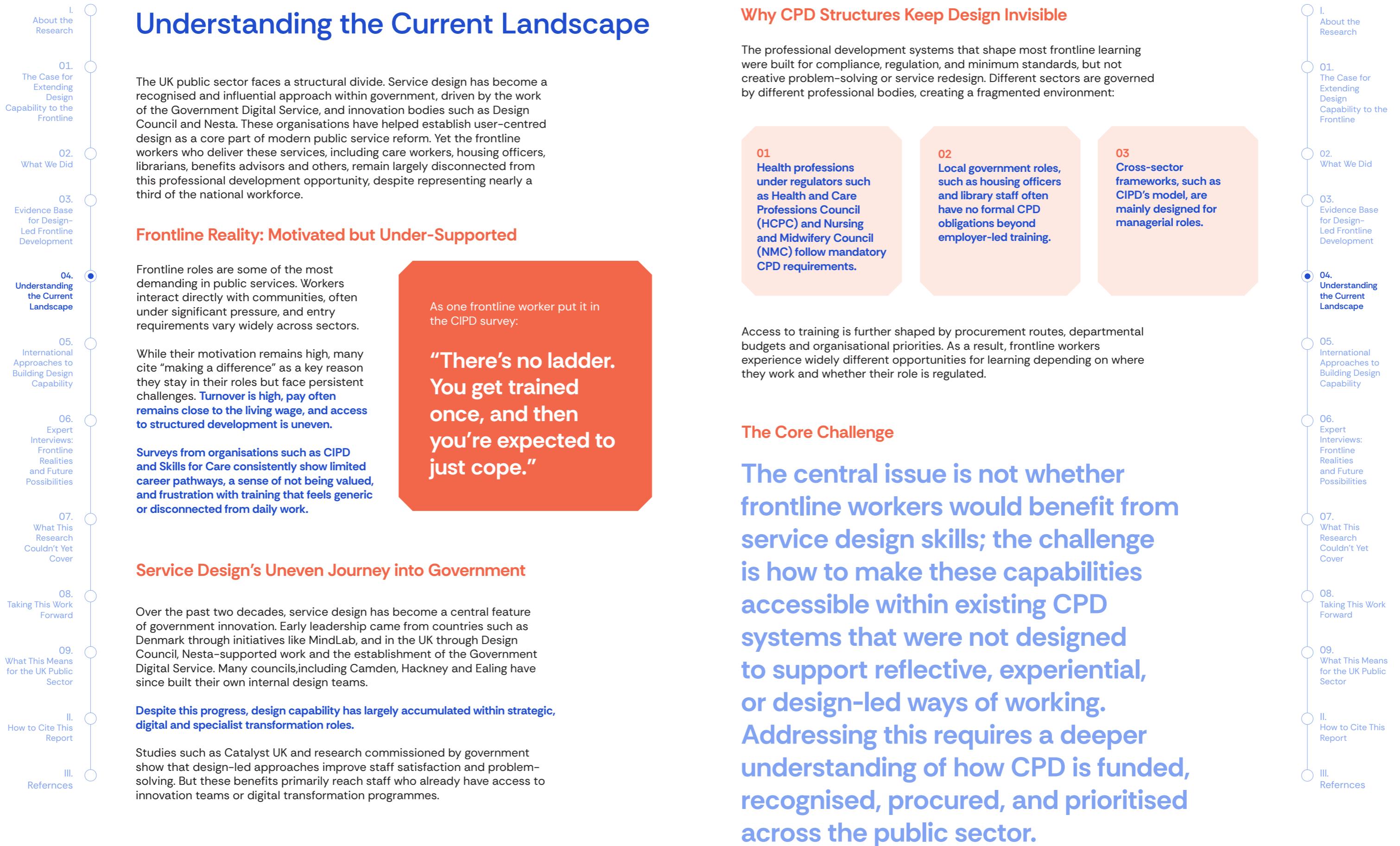
Fig. 3.1. Redrawn version of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (adapted from Kolb, 1984).

Much of what we know about effective adult learning stems from the work of David Kolb, whose experiential learning model emphasises learning through doing, reflecting, conceptualising, and experimenting. Service design practice mirrors this cycle, when designers continually move between concrete experience, observation, conceptualisation, and active experimentation.

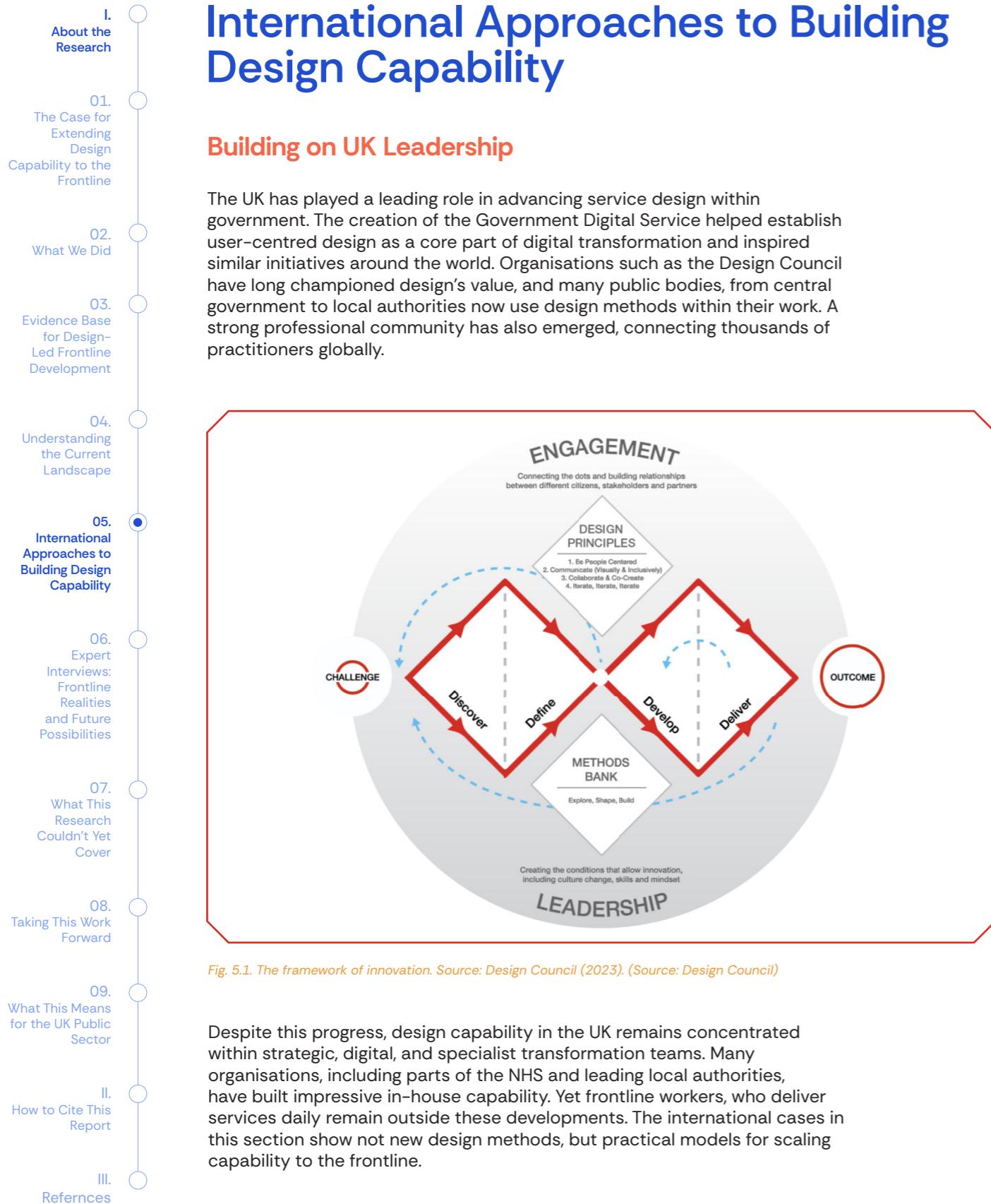
When service design education is structured around live projects, frontline staff learning to map service interactions or test prototypes engage in the same hands-on, reflective learning that Kolb identifies as essential for developing real capability. This alignment is not automatic; it depends on teaching approaches that embed learning within authentic practice rather than abstracting it into classroom instruction.



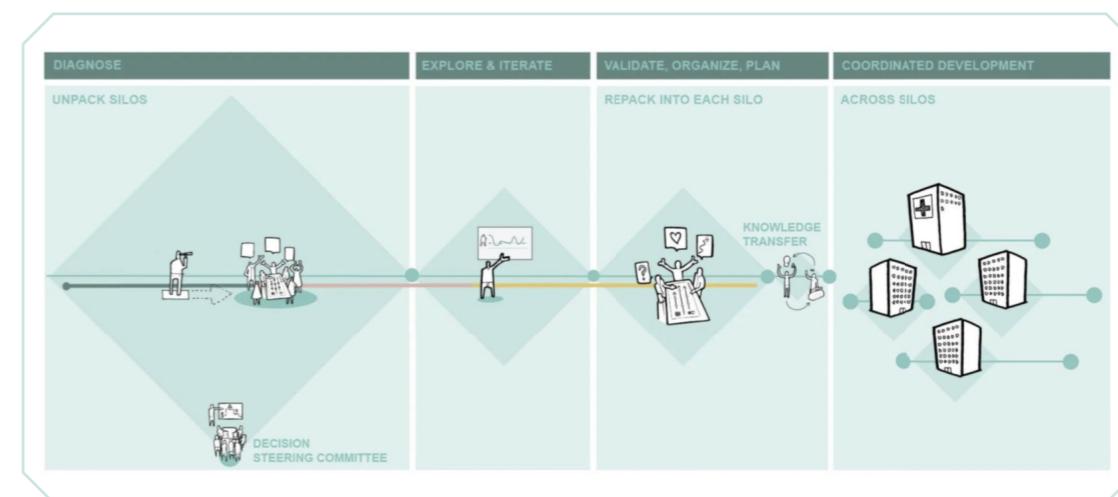




International Approaches to Building Design Capability



StimuLab (Norway): Government-Funded Capability Building



StimuLab is an innovation programme launched in 2016 by Norway's Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation. It provides NOK 1–2 million per project for agencies to work with external designers and innovation partners, using a structured "triple diamond" process to diagnose problems, co-create ideas, and test solutions with both frontline staff and public. Agencies apply with real service challenges, and successful projects receive dedicated resources to bring in design expertise while actively involving frontline staff.

By 2019, StimuLab had funded over 29 major projects across government, including a redesign of the driver's licence service projected to save NOK 940 million over ten years through streamlined workflows and reduced administrative burden. The programme's secretariat ensures quality, capability-building, and cross-agency learning through toolkits and shared governance structures.

Key Insights for the UK:

When funding explicitly supports both service improvement and workforce development, organisations build internal capability at the same time as delivering outcomes. Central government funding combined with structured methodology and compulsory frontline participation creates scalable capability building, not just isolated innovation pilots.



Experio Lab (Sweden): Embedded Design Teams in Healthcare

Experio Lab began in 2013 within the Värmland regional healthcare authority and has since grown into a distributed network of seven labs embedded across Sweden's healthcare system.

Each lab houses a permanent interdisciplinary team, including designers, clinicians, and improvement specialists working directly inside hospitals and care services.

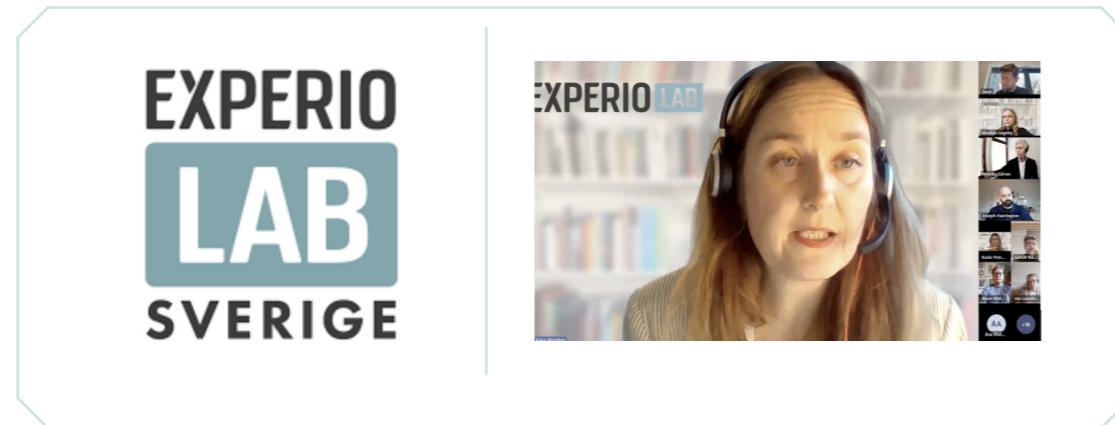


Fig. 5.4.. Experio Reflections by Experio Lab, which is a programme of texts, films, and conversations designed to stimulate dialogue on design practice, society, and the future. (Source: Experio Lab)

Their projects redesign patient journeys, communication materials, digital tools, and care pathways through co-creation workshops with staff and patients. Examples include simplified maternal communication protocols that reduced anxiety, redesigned waiting-room experiences, and prototypes for digital health apps tested in situ.

Crucially, every project functions as on-the-job learning: frontline staff gain service design skills by participating in research, mapping, prototyping, and testing as part of normal work rather than through external courses. This model reflects a deliberate pedagogical decision to embed capability-building within service delivery, rather than treating learning and practice as separate activities.

Key Insights for the UK:

Embedding design expertise inside service organisations creates long-term capability and cultural change, particularly when learning is tied to real-world service delivery. Permanent design teams can shift everyday practice and spread capability organically across frontline services.

LabX (Portugal): A Central Hub with Network Effects



Fig. 5.5. Participatory diagnosis sessions conducted in Vila Nova de Gaia made use of Agora falo eu! ("My turn to speak!"), a gamified instrument adapted and developed by LabX for a joint civic-education initiative with various public bodies, supported by the Secretary of State for Citizenship and Equality. (Source : LabX)

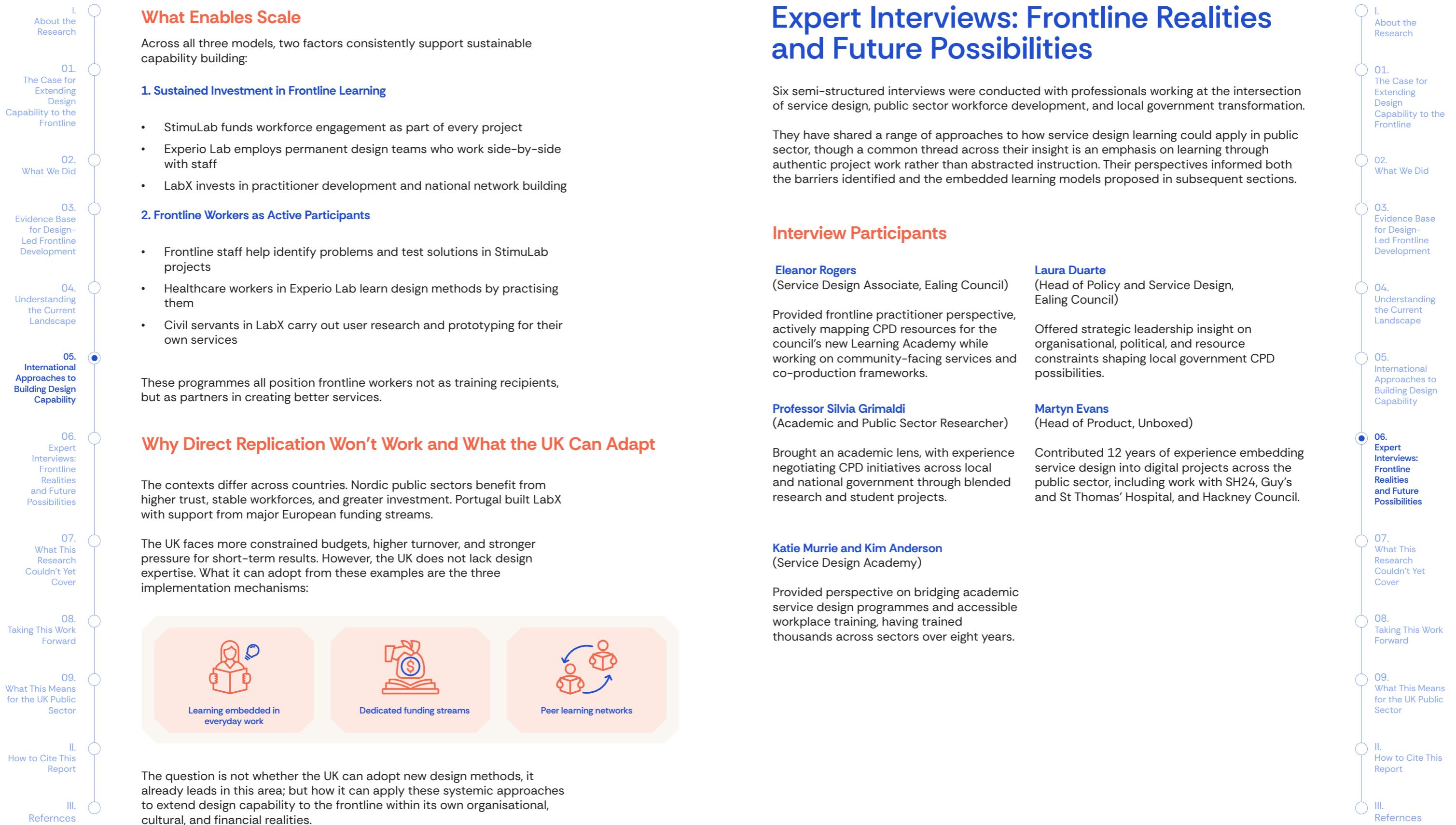
LabX was created in 2017 with EU support as Portugal's central public administration innovation lab, housed within the Administrative Modernisation Agency. It employs civil servants, designers, and analysts who run projects using a consistent four-phase methodology: research and problem framing, co-creation, prototyping, and user validation.

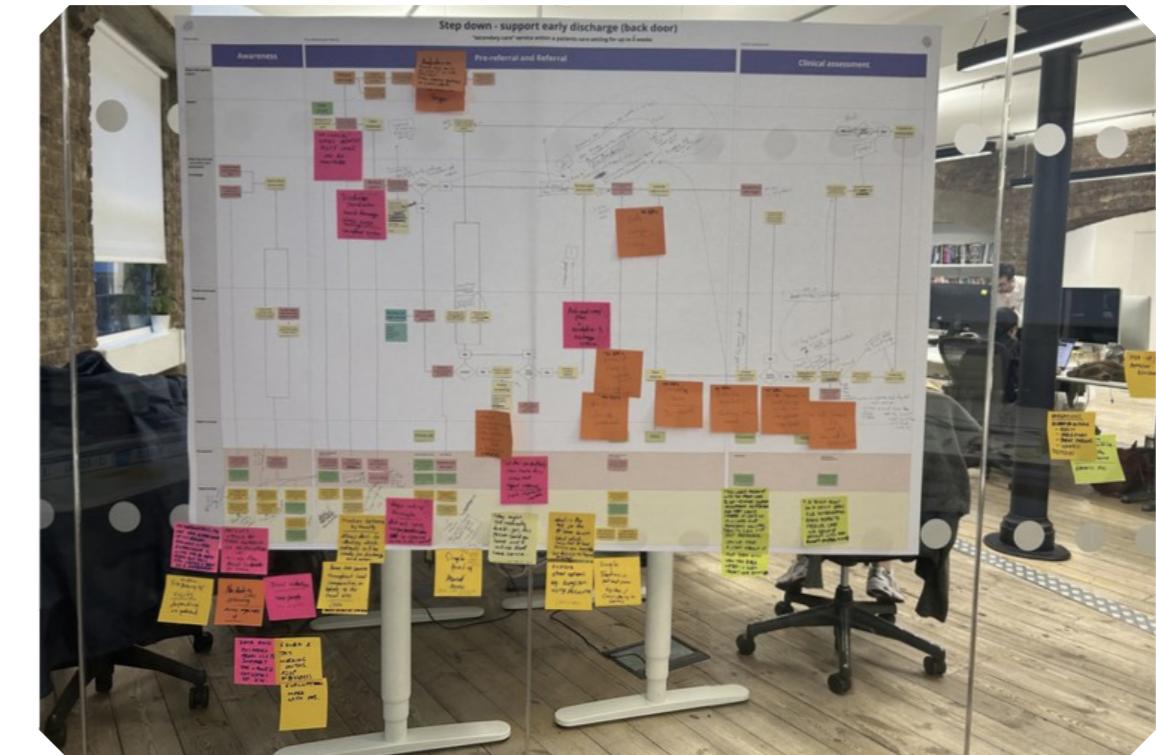
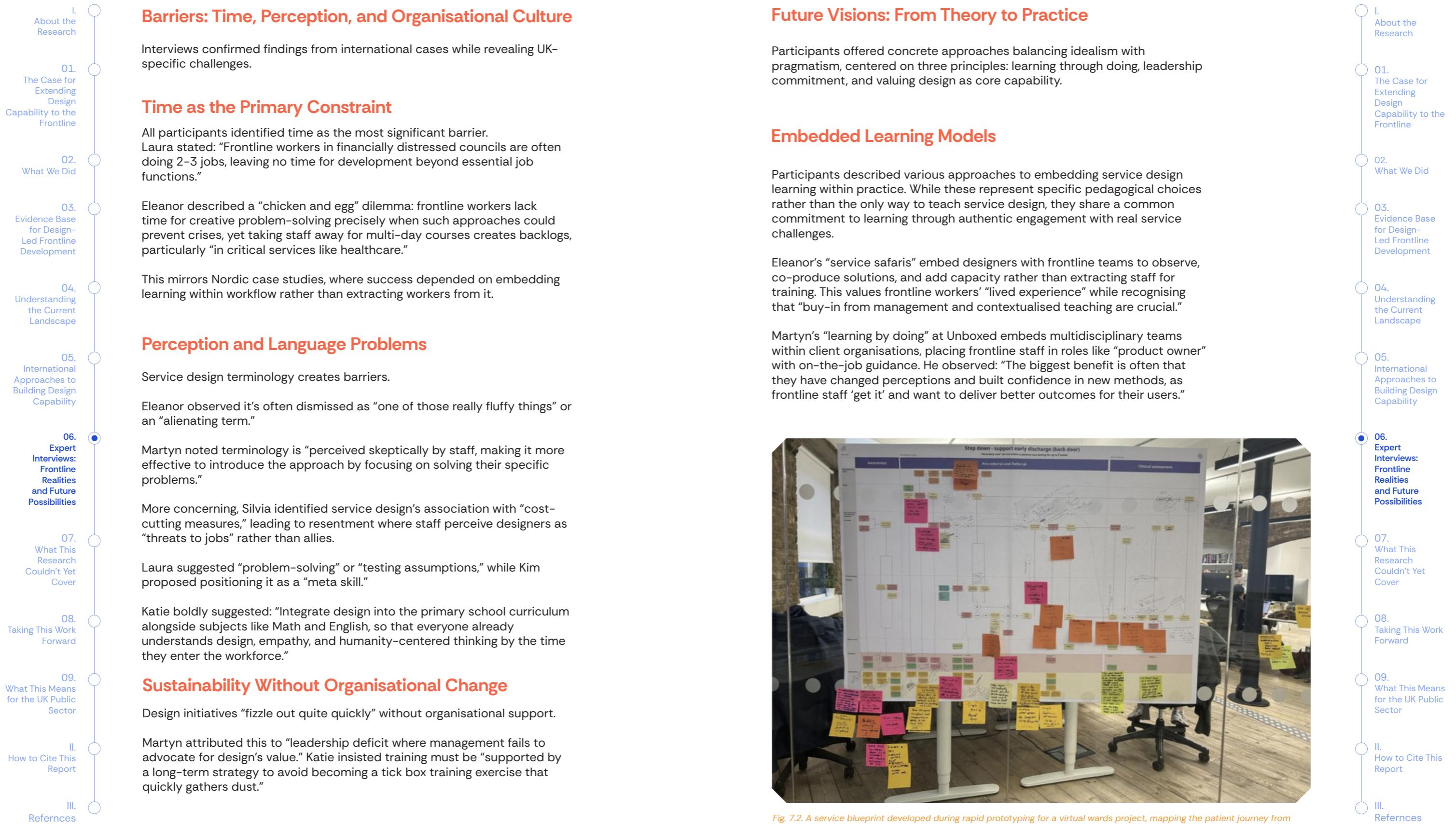
LabX has delivered major improvements such as Espaço Óbito, a unified bereavement service that simplifies complex administrative tasks for grieving families, and redesigned signage and queuing systems in Citizen Shops to reduce waiting times.

Beyond project delivery, LabX emphasises capability-building through its "Innovator in Residence" programme, allowing public servants from any department to spend a year working in the lab and returning as internal champions. The lab also coordinates a national Network of Public Administration Laboratories, spreading tools, training, and shared standards across government.

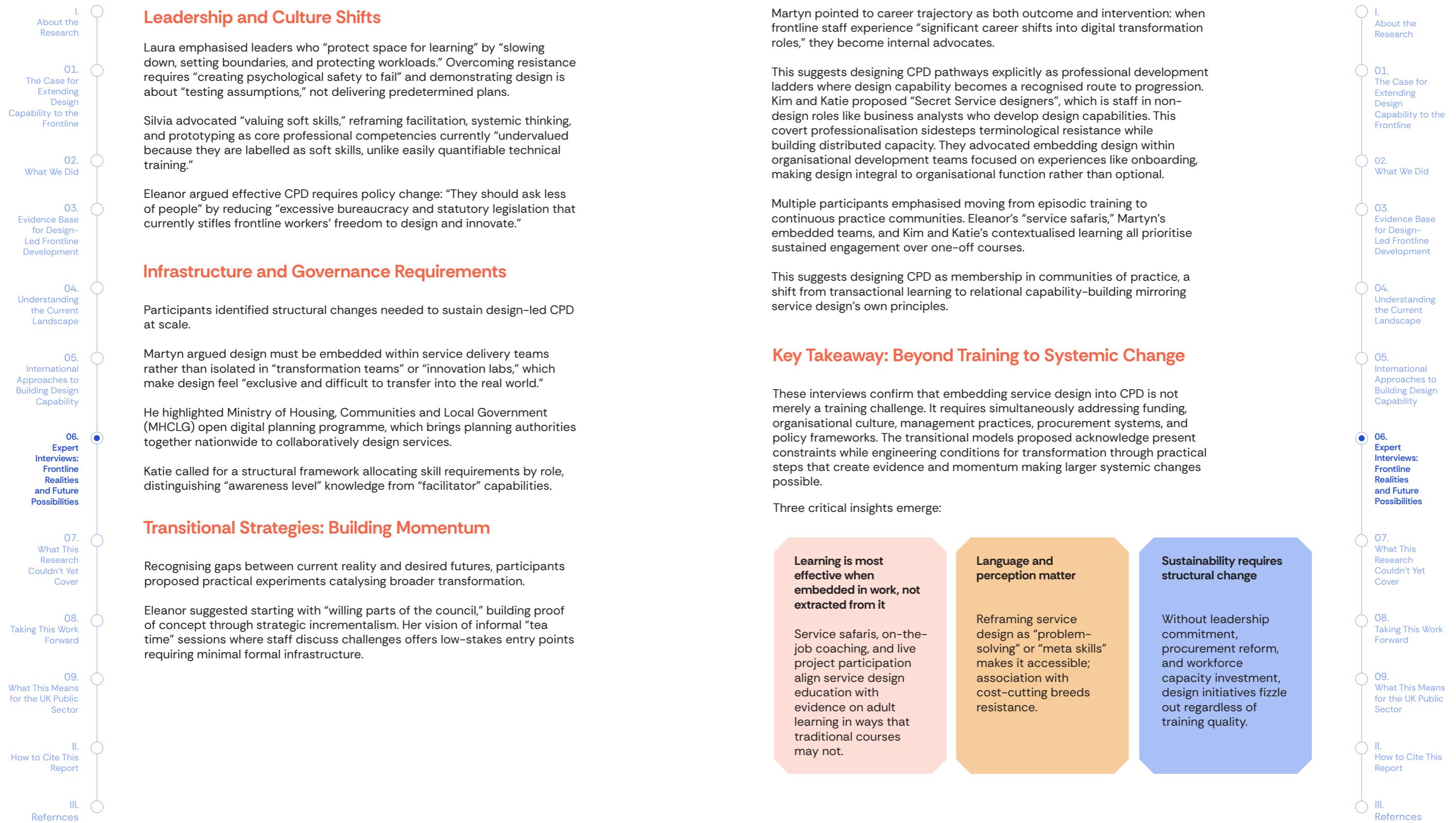
Key Insights for the UK:

A central hub can act as a catalyst, by setting standards, building networks, and spreading capability across multiple organisations. Combined with training pathways, this model builds a distributed, scalable community of practitioners.





Kim and Katie's Service Design Academy applies training to real workplace challenges, measuring success through learning outcomes using a "maturity matrix" rather than focusing solely on project outputs. This emphasis on capacity building over deliverables reflects a fundamental reorientation of CPD success.





What This Research Couldn't Yet Cover

This report establishes a strong conceptual foundation for embedding service design within CPD frameworks for frontline public sector workers. However, as an exploratory, design-led scoping study, it naturally reflects certain boundaries in its scope that point directly to the priorities for the next stage of work.

First, this phase did not include direct participation from frontline workers. Interviews focused on designers, managers, and academics to map the systemic landscape and identify structural barriers. While this provides valuable strategic insight, it means the lived experiences, learning conditions, and day-to-day realities of roles such as care workers, librarians, youth workers, or housing officers remain underexplored. Capturing these perspectives is an essential next step and will be central to shaping an applied, grounded CPD model.

Second, the international case studies were analysed through published materials rather than conversations with programme teams or participants. This reflects the desk-based nature of the current phase, but it also highlights the opportunity for future work to gather deeper implementation insight, contextual nuance, and practical lessons that can only be surfaced through primary engagement.

Third, the UK perspectives gathered are concentrated primarily in London local government and design-led organisations. This provides useful depth but does not yet reflect the full breadth of the UK public sector, including emergency services, education support staff, youth work, or authorities outside London. Broadening this diversity in subsequent research will support a more complete understanding of sector-wide CPD needs.

Finally, this phase did not include observational fieldwork or testing of proposed approaches such as service safaris, embedded learning, or micro-modules. These practical trials will be essential to understand how frontline workers learn in real contexts, what adaptations are required, and how CPD interventions can be made feasible within the constraints of stretched services.

Together, these gaps do not weaken the findings, they clarify the agenda for the next phase. They signal a shift from conceptual framing to applied, participatory, and field-tested research, creating the evidence base required to design CPD models that are not only desirable but deliverable in real frontline settings.

Taking This Work Forward

To move from strategic argument to actionable implementation, the following research activities are essential:

Co-Design with Frontline Worker Ethnographic Observation



Figure 9.1. Co-design workshop with frontline practitioners, using facilitated discussion and shared artefacts to explore service design learning needs.
(Source: Author)



Figure 9.2. Ethnographic observation session, documenting how learning and collaboration emerge within everyday frontline workflows.

Conduct participatory research directly with frontline staff across sectors and regions to co-develop service design learning approaches.

Methods:

- **Co-design workshops exploring current learning barriers and future CPD aspirations**
- **“Day in the life” narrative interviews mapping how informal learning and problem-solving currently occur**
- **Micro-surveys capturing wider frontline perspectives on design relevance and accessibility**

Make sure it reflects frontline realities rather than assumptions, and to build approaches with rather than for frontline workers.

Conduct observational research (shadowing, field visits) to understand how learning happens (or doesn't) in daily frontline workflows.

To uncover structural and cultural factors shaping CPD access and design interventions that fit within, rather than disrupt existing work patterns.





Pilot Testing at Small Scale



Figure 9.3. Small-scale pilot testing of CPD interventions with frontline practitioners, enabling rapid experimentation and iteration within real-world settings. (Source: Author)

Test low-fidelity CPD interventions in real-world frontline settings.

Examples:

- **Short, testable learning modules that tailor to the specific needs of the organisation**
- **“Service safari” pilots where designers embed briefly with frontline teams**
- **Peer learning network experiments connecting frontline practitioners across organisations**

To generate evidence of what works, understand implementation challenges, and refine approaches before wider rollout.

Policy and Leadership Engagement



Figure 9.4. Policy and leadership engagement through facilitated group discussion, exploring shared priorities, coordination, and pathways for adoption at scale. (Source: Author)

Strategic conversations with public sector leaders, professional bodies (Skills for Care, CIPD, HCPC), and policymakers to build coalitions and funding mechanisms.

Expert interviews surfaced appetite for innovation but highlighted gaps in cross-sector coordination and funding. Policy pathways and governance frameworks must be built to support adoption at scale.

What This Means for the UK Public Sector

This report highlights a clear opportunity for strengthening the UK’s public sector by embedding service design into the professional development of frontline workers. The UK already has a strong foundation: leading design teams, established digital capability, and a public sector that increasingly recognises the value of human-centred approaches. Yet this capability remains concentrated in specialist and strategic roles. The workforce delivering services every day, nearly ten million people still has limited access to the problem-solving methods that could help them improve services, reduce pressure, and support better outcomes for the public.

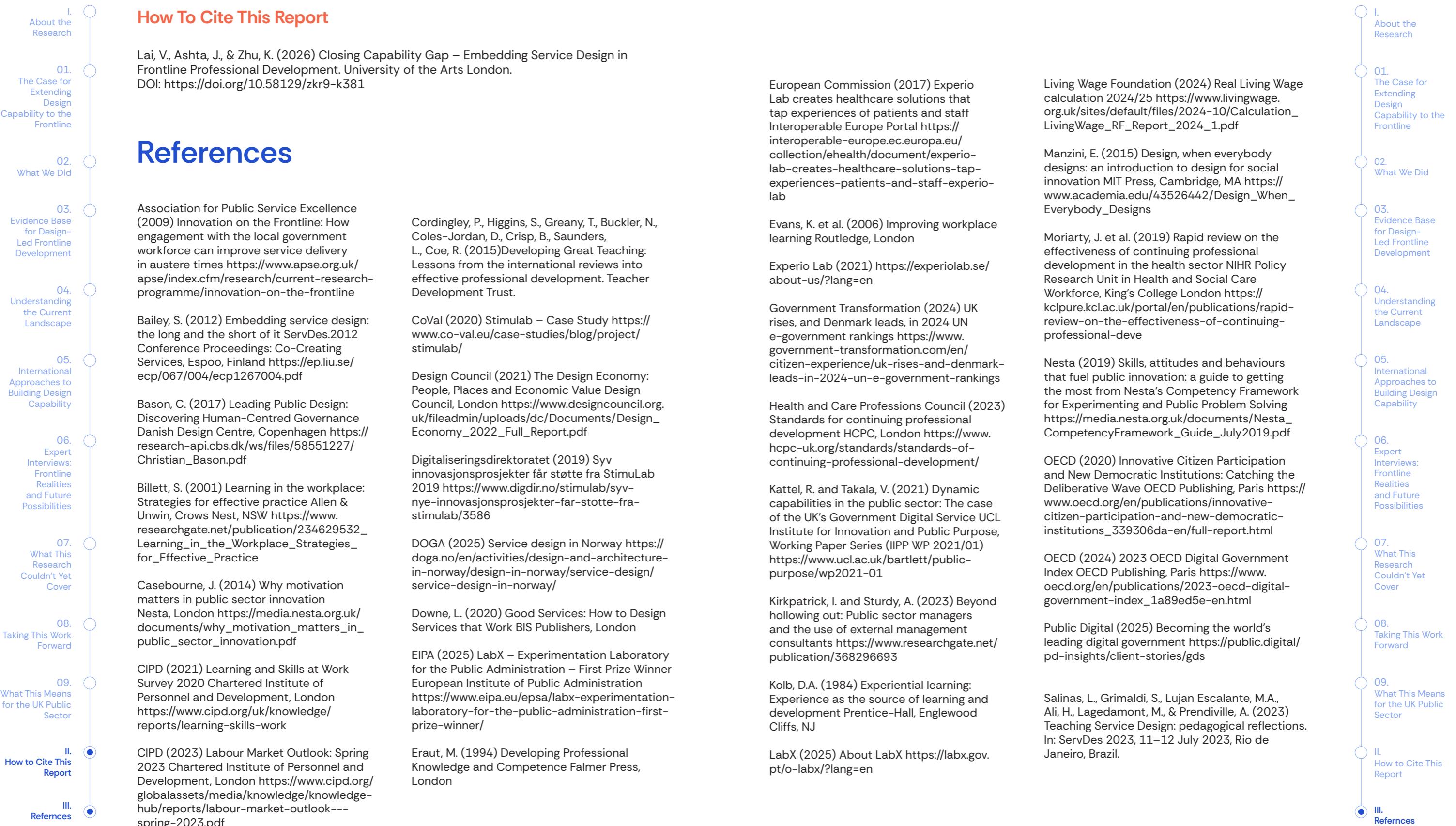
Evidence from adult learning and workplace practice shows that service design, when taught through project-based, practice-embedded approaches aligns closely with how frontline workers learn best: through hands-on experience, collaboration, and reflection. When learners engage on real service challenges, these activities become authentic learning experiences rather than abstract exercises. This pedagogical approach, used in programmes such as the Service Futures Lab, MA Service Design at UAL’s London College of Communication and reflected in the international cases examined in this report, mirrors the learning conditions that build confidence, adaptability, and practical problem-solving. However, this alignment depends on educational design choices, not on service design methods alone.

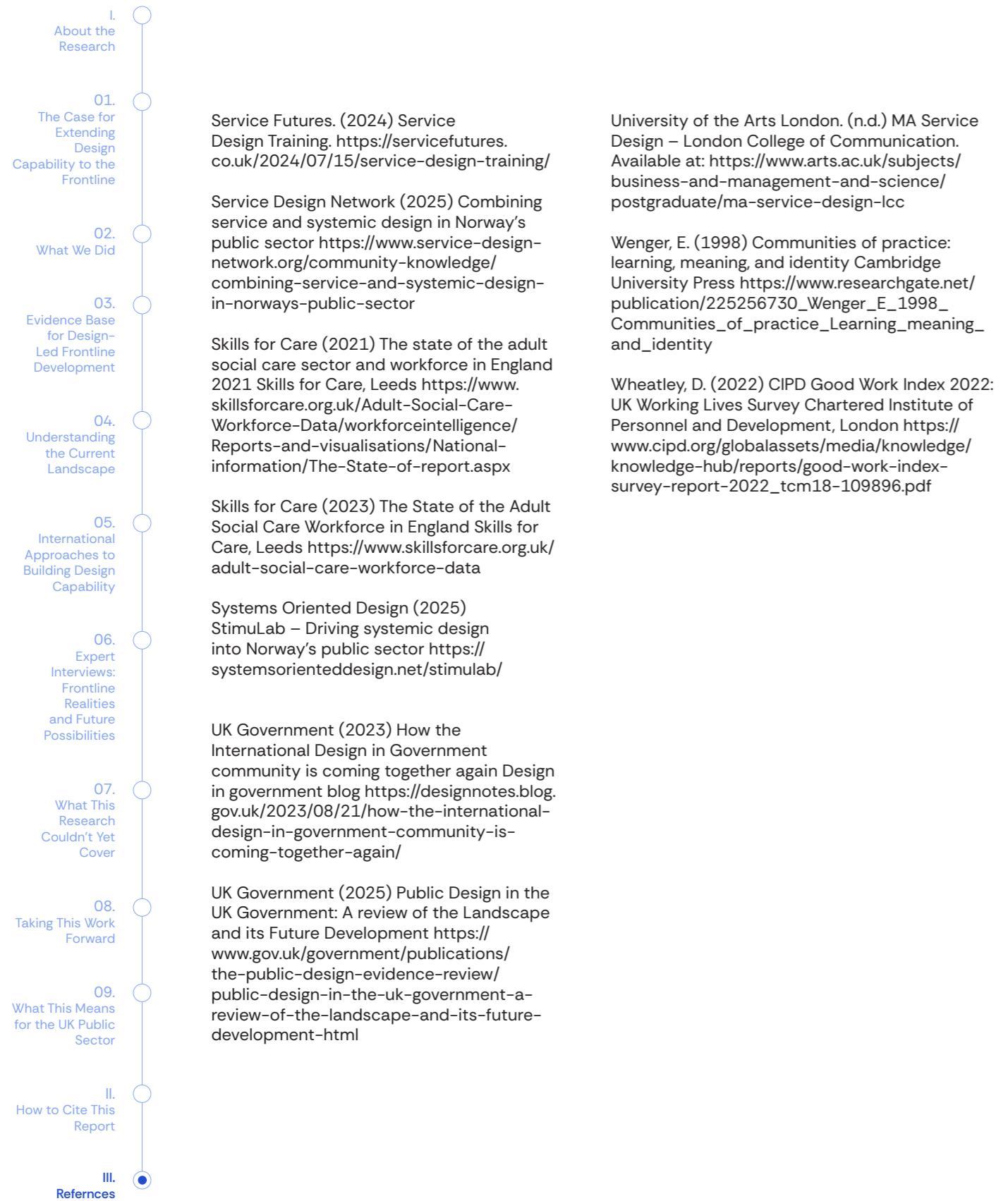
International examples from Norway, Sweden, and Portugal demonstrate that it is possible to scale design capability in ways that reach staff on the frontline. These programmes succeed because they embed learning into day-to-day work, invest in capability alongside service improvement, and build supportive communities of practice. They show that design can become part of how public services operate, not just an innovation project or specialist function.

While this research offers a strong foundation, it also identifies important gaps. More direct engagement with frontline workers is needed to ensure that future approaches reflect their lived experience. Pilot activity in real settings will also be essential to refine models, understand practical barriers, and build a credible case for wider adoption.

Overall, the findings point to a significant opportunity for the UK. At a time when public services face increasing pressure, investing in the skills, creativity, and insight of frontline workers offers a practical route to more resilient and adaptable services. Service design provides a proven set of tools and mindsets to support this shift. What is needed next is system-level commitment across policy, leadership, funding, and workforce development, to embed these ways of working more widely and equitably across the frontline.







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