

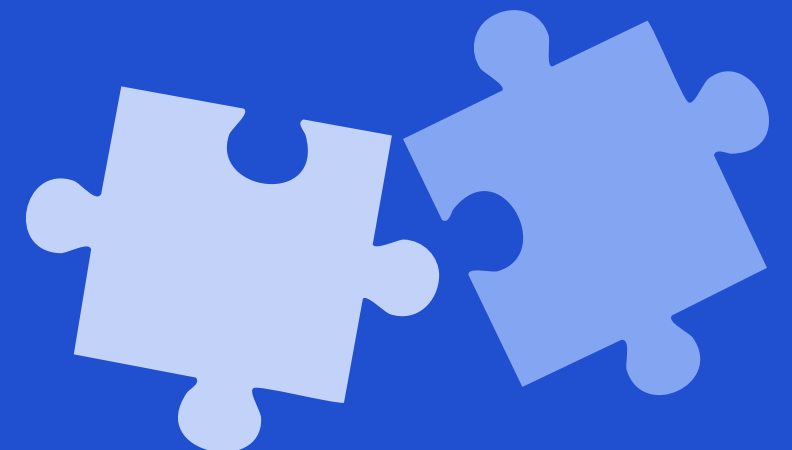
Closing the Capability Gap: Embedding Service Design in Frontline Professional Development

January 2026

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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.

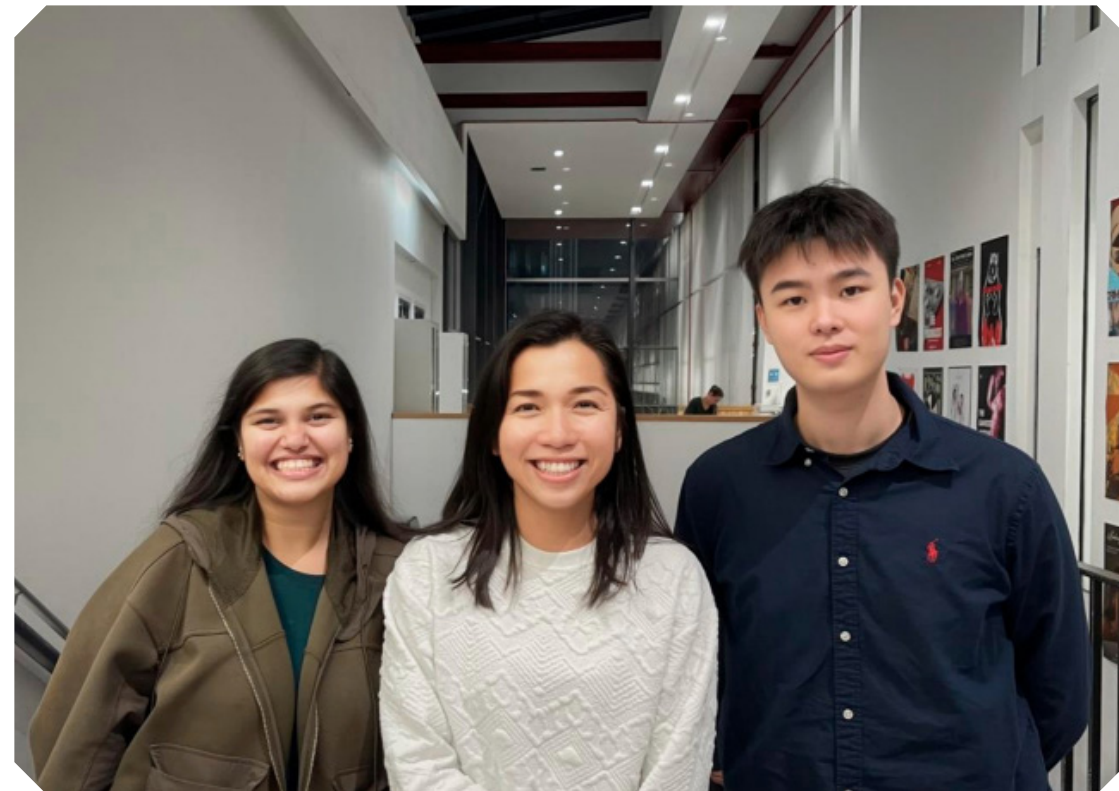


Fig.0.1. Photo of the Research team, from left: Jesleen Ashta, Veron WK Lai, Kangyuheng Zhu

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.

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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.

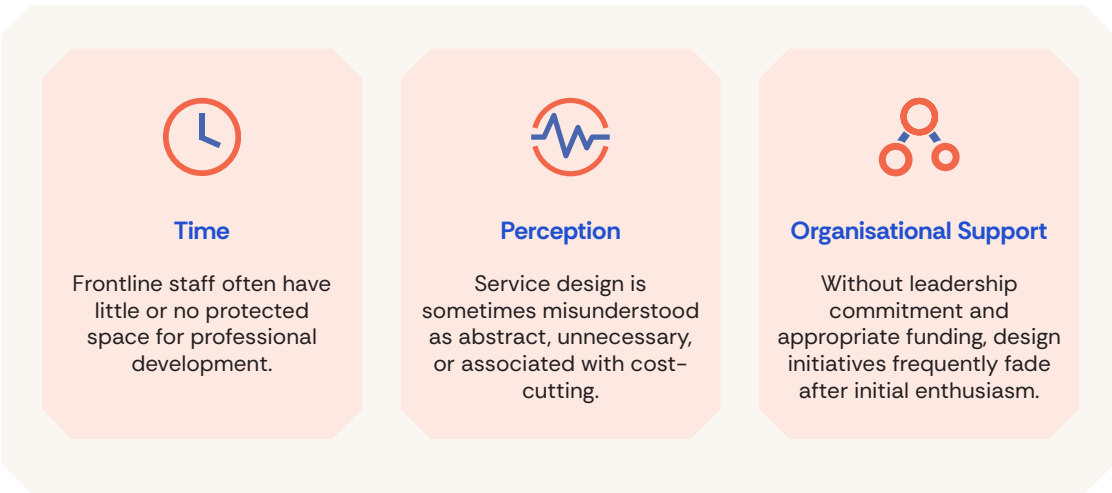
The Challenge We Examine

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

Our Key Finding

Our research drawing on literature, international practice, and insights from practitioners shows that embedding service design into frontline CPD requires far more than new training products; It demands coordinated, system-level change across policy, funding, organisational culture, procurement, and workforce structures.

The UK already has world-leading service design expertise, strong in-house teams, and a well-established design community. The issue is not a lack of methods or evidence. The real challenge lies in addressing the barriers that prevent frontline workers from accessing and applying design approaches in their daily work. Three obstacles appear repeatedly across our research:



Who This Report Is For

This report is designed for policymakers considering professional development reform, CPD providers exploring new approaches, and public sector leaders seeking to build design capability across their organisations. It is also relevant to students and academics working in design and social innovation who are examining long-term, systemic approaches to capability building.

Our focus is on how service design can support cultural change and workforce development, not just isolated projects, but to create sustainable, long-term impact across public services.

What we did

Literature and Policy Review

Our research used an exploratory, qualitative approach to understand how service design could be systematically embedded into CPD frameworks for frontline public sector workers in the UK. Because this is an emerging area with limited existing evidence, the research combined three complementary methods: literature and policy review, analysis of international case studies, and interviews with UK practitioners. Together, these methods allowed the study to build a broad understanding of the current landscape while grounding insights in real public sector practice.



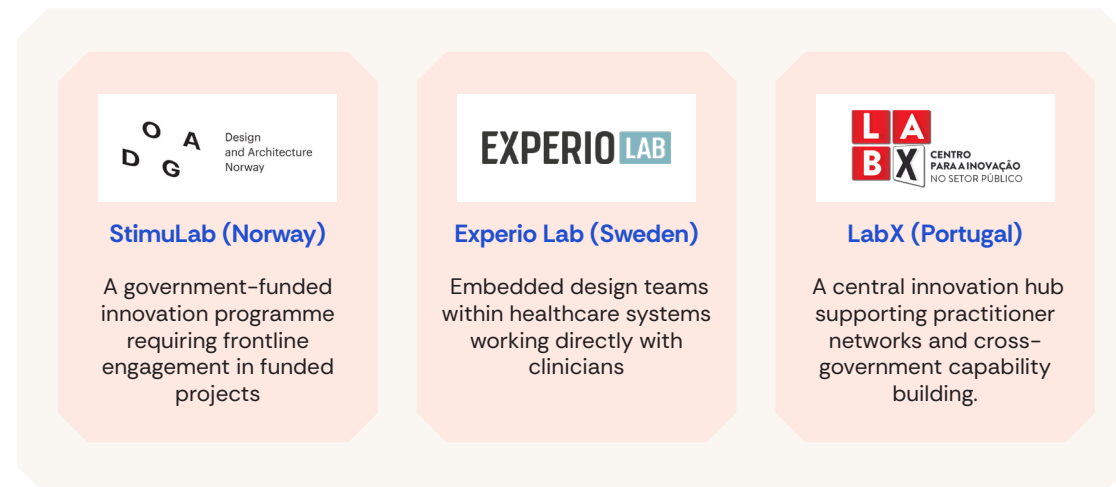
Fig.2.1 University of the Arts London Academic Development, Services Delivery and Course Support approached the Service Futures Lab to upskill the teams in service design methods as well as deliver mindset change that would affect the teams' ways of working, with the aim to make the way IT services are developed at UAL more responsive and user-centred. (Source : Service Futures Lab)

Second, the review mapped the UK context. It analysed workforce data from Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) and Skills for Care, CPD requirements across bodies such as Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) and Civil Service Learning, and documentation from GDS and the Design Council. This work highlighted structural gaps: while service design is widely used in strategic and digital teams, it remains largely inaccessible to frontline workers despite their expressed need for practical problem-solving skills. The landscape review clarified where existing CPD frameworks fall short and where design capability could add value.

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

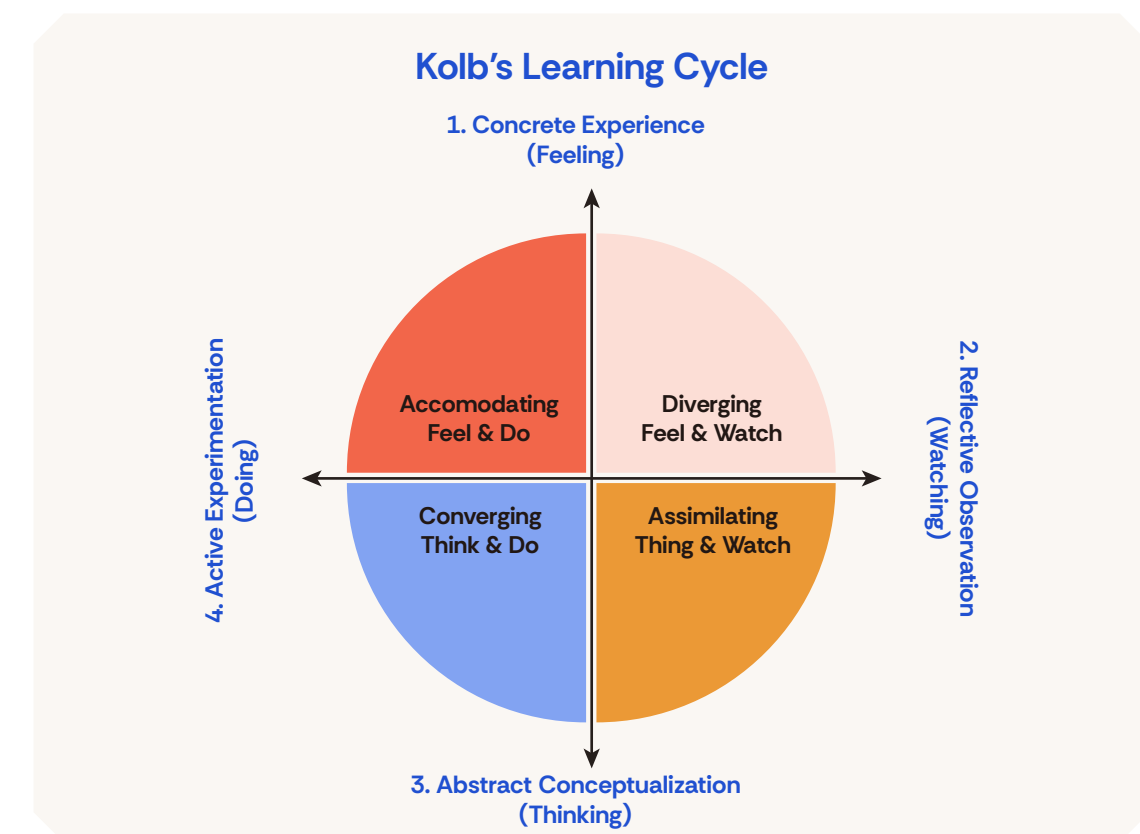


Fig. 3.1. Redrawn version of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (adapted from Kolb, 1984).

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.

Learning as Social Participation

Etienne Wenger's theory of communities of practice highlights that people learn through participation in shared work, not through isolated instruction. When service design education is structured around collaborative activities, such as co-design workshops, service safaris, and problem-solving sessions; it reflects Wenger's principles directly.

At UAL's London College of Communication, for example, MA Service Design students work on live projects with public sector organisations, placing them inside genuine communities of practice rather than simulated learning environments. These formats help learners build confidence, develop shared language, and feel ownership over service changes, but achieving this requires deliberate pedagogical design, not simply exposure to service design concepts.



Fig. 3.3 : MA Service Design students (2024–2025) collaborated with Sidings Community Centre to co-design services with young people and staff as part of their programme. (Photo: Author)

Learning Through Work

Research by Stephen Billett and later by Karen Evans and colleagues shows that the most powerful workplace learning happens through real tasks supported by peers. Their studies distinguish between 'expansive' learning environments; where workers are encouraged to question, experiment, and collaborate.

And 'restrictive' ones focused only on compliance. Service design, when introduced through project-based learning and embedded within real service improvement work, can create expansive environments by legitimising experimentation, valuing local insights, and encouraging workers to connect their daily experiences to broader system challenges. However, this potential is realised through pedagogical and organisational choices, not through service design methods alone.

What Effective CPD Looks Like

Reviews of professional development by experts identify several features of effective CPD: focus on specific practice areas, active and iterative learning, collaboration, and alignment to organisational priorities. Service design education, when structured around live projects with service partners, can incorporate all of these elements.

Learning focused on real service issues, structured around iterative prototyping, relying on teamwork, and unfolding over sustained periods gives frontline workers repeated opportunities to test ideas, gather feedback, and refine their practice. This is the approach taken by programmes such as the MA Service Design at UAL's London College of Communication, where students work directly with public sector organisations working on genuine challenges with real stakeholders and authentic feedback. It represents one pedagogical model among several, but one that deliberately aligns service design education with evidence on effective professional development.

This approach treats the project itself as the primary learning vehicle, with theoretical frameworks introduced to support reflection on practice rather than preceding it. Based on our research and observation of similar models elsewhere, we believe it is particularly suited to the frontline CPD context this report addresses, especially where time is scarce, relevance is essential, and learning must connect directly to workers' daily realities.

Why This Matters

Together, these insights show that service design, when taught through practice-based, project-embedded approaches is highly compatible with how frontline workers learn best. Rather than acting as an 'additional' training requirement, this way of teaching service design offers a model for reshaping CPD so that learning becomes experiential, collaborative, and embedded in real work. It is worth emphasising that this alignment is not inherent to service design as a discipline, but depends on how it is taught.

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Understanding the Current Landscape

The UK public sector faces a structural divide. Service design has become a recognised and influential approach within government, driven by the work of the Government Digital Service, and innovation bodies such as Design Council and Nesta. These organisations have helped establish user-centred design as a core part of modern public service reform. Yet the frontline workers who deliver these services, including care workers, housing officers, librarians, benefits advisors and others, remain largely disconnected from this professional development opportunity, despite representing nearly a third of the national workforce.

Frontline Reality: Motivated but Under-Supported

Frontline roles are some of the most demanding in public services. Workers interact directly with communities, often under significant pressure, and entry requirements vary widely across sectors.

While their motivation remains high, many cite “making a difference” as a key reason they stay in their roles but face persistent challenges. **Turnover is high, pay often remains close to the living wage, and access to structured development is uneven.**

Surveys from organisations such as CIPD and Skills for Care consistently show limited career pathways, a sense of not being valued, and frustration with training that feels generic or disconnected from daily work.

As one frontline worker put it in the CIPD survey:

“There’s no ladder. You get trained once, and then you’re expected to just cope.”

Service Design’s Uneven Journey into Government

Over the past two decades, service design has become a central feature of government innovation. Early leadership came from countries such as Denmark through initiatives like MindLab, and in the UK through Design Council, Nesta-supported work and the establishment of the Government Digital Service. Many councils, including Camden, Hackney and Ealing have since built their own internal design teams.

Despite this progress, design capability has largely accumulated within strategic, digital and specialist transformation roles.

Studies such as Catalyst UK and research commissioned by government show that design-led approaches improve staff satisfaction and problem-solving. But these benefits primarily reach staff who already have access to innovation teams or digital transformation programmes.

Why CPD Structures Keep Design Invisible

The professional development systems that shape most frontline learning were built for compliance, regulation, and minimum standards, but not creative problem-solving or service redesign. Different sectors are governed by different professional bodies, creating a fragmented environment:

- 01

Health professions under regulators such as Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) and Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) follow mandatory CPD requirements.
- 02

Local government roles, such as housing officers and library staff often have no formal CPD obligations beyond employer-led training.
- 03

Cross-sector frameworks, such as CIPD’s model, are mainly designed for managerial roles.

Access to training is further shaped by procurement routes, departmental budgets and organisational priorities. As a result, frontline workers experience widely different opportunities for learning depending on where they work and whether their role is regulated.

The Core Challenge

The central issue is not whether frontline workers would benefit from service design skills; the challenge is how to make these capabilities accessible within existing CPD systems that were not designed to support reflective, experiential, or design-led ways of working. Addressing this requires a deeper understanding of how CPD is funded, recognised, procured, and prioritised across the public sector.

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International Approaches to Building Design Capability

Building on UK Leadership

The UK has played a leading role in advancing service design within government. The creation of the Government Digital Service helped establish user-centred design as a core part of digital transformation and inspired similar initiatives around the world. Organisations such as the Design Council have long championed design's value, and many public bodies, from central government to local authorities now use design methods within their work. A strong professional community has also emerged, connecting thousands of practitioners globally.

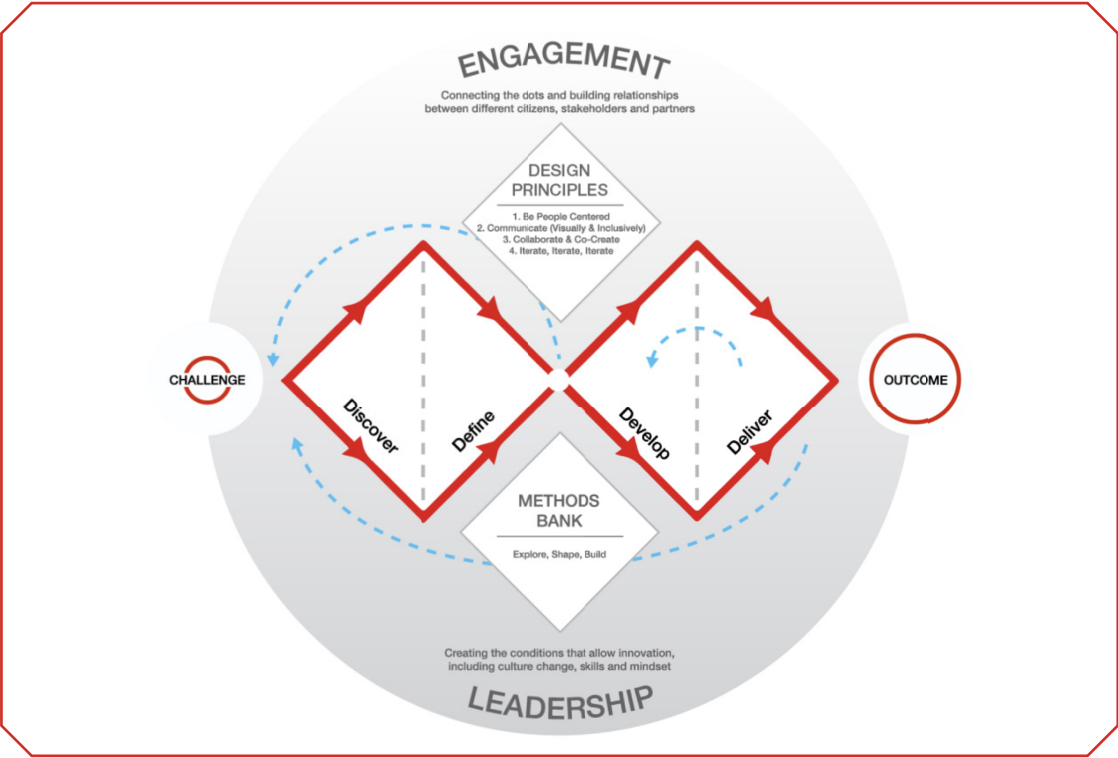


Fig. 5.1. The framework of innovation. Source: Design Council (2023). (Source: Design Council)

Despite this progress, design capability in the UK remains concentrated within strategic, digital, and specialist transformation teams. Many organisations, including parts of the NHS and leading local authorities, have built impressive in-house capability. Yet frontline workers, who deliver services daily remain outside these developments. The international cases in this section show not new design methods, but practical models for scaling capability to the frontline.

StimuLab (Norway): Government-Funded Capability Building

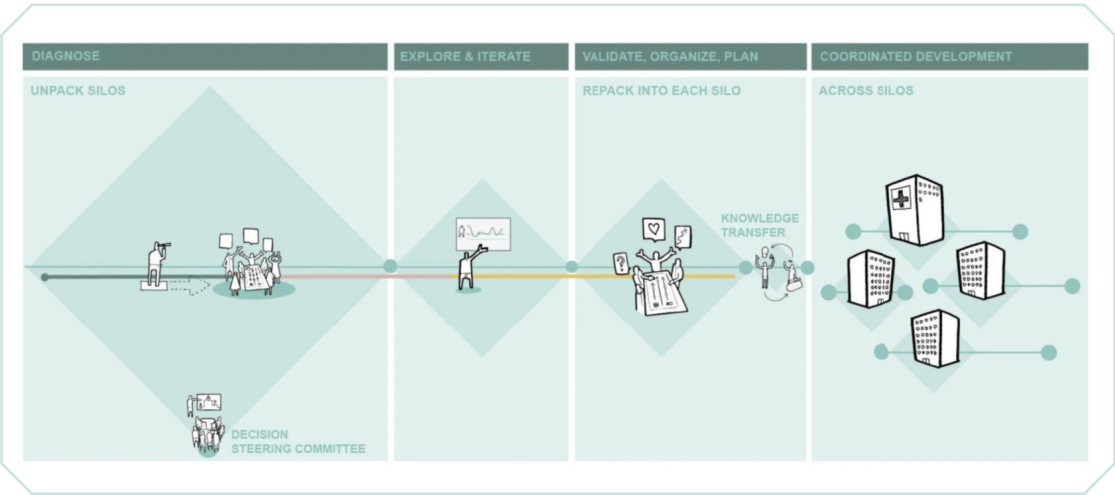


Fig. 5.2., The Tripple Diamond process, Source: StimuLab / Halogen

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.

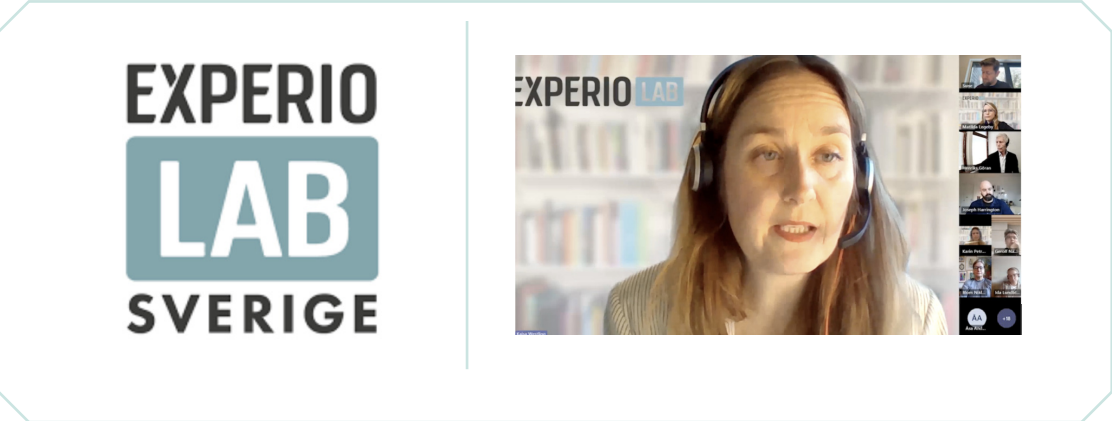


Fig. 5.4.. Experio Reflections by Experio Lab, which is a programme of texts, films, and conversations designed to stimulate dialogue on design practice, society, and the future. (Source: Experio Lab)

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.

What Enables Scale

Across all three models, two factors consistently support sustainable capability building:

1. Sustained Investment in Frontline Learning

- StimuLab funds workforce engagement as part of every project
- Experio Lab employs permanent design teams who work side-by-side with staff
- LabX invests in practitioner development and national network building

2. Frontline Workers as Active Participants

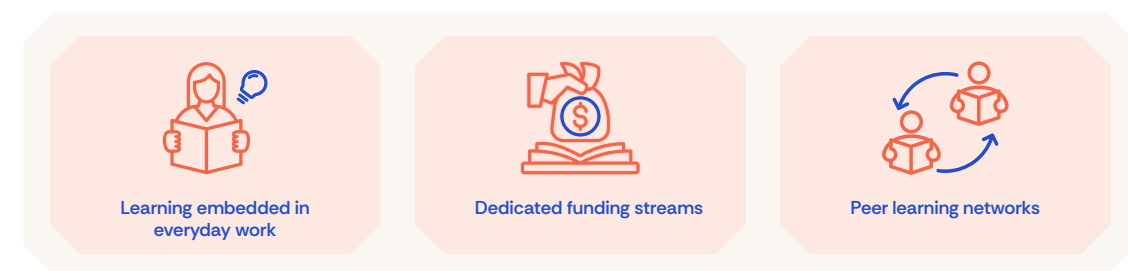
- Frontline staff help identify problems and test solutions in StimuLab projects
- Healthcare workers in Experio Lab learn design methods by practising them
- Civil servants in LabX carry out user research and prototyping for their own services

These programmes all position frontline workers not as training recipients, but as partners in creating better services.

Why Direct Replication Won't Work and What the UK Can Adapt

The contexts differ across countries. Nordic public sectors benefit from higher trust, stable workforces, and greater investment. Portugal built LabX with support from major European funding streams.

The UK faces more constrained budgets, higher turnover, and stronger pressure for short-term results. However, the UK does not lack design expertise. What it can adopt from these examples are the three implementation mechanisms:



The question is not whether the UK can adopt new design methods, it already leads in this area; but how it can apply these systemic approaches to extend design capability to the frontline within its own organisational, cultural, and financial realities.

Expert Interviews: Frontline Realities and Future Possibilities

Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with professionals working at the intersection of service design, public sector workforce development, and local government transformation.

They have shared a range of approaches to how service design learning could apply in public sector, though a common thread across their insight is an emphasis on learning through authentic project work rather than abstracted instruction. Their perspectives informed both the barriers identified and the embedded learning models proposed in subsequent sections.

Interview Participants

Eleanor Rogers

(Service Design Associate, Ealing Council)

Provided frontline practitioner perspective, actively mapping CPD resources for the council's new Learning Academy while working on community-facing services and co-production frameworks.

Professor Silvia Grimaldi

(Academic and Public Sector Researcher)

Brought an academic lens, with experience negotiating CPD initiatives across local and national government through blended research and student projects.

Katie Murrie and Kim Anderson

(Service Design Academy)

Provided perspective on bridging academic service design programmes and accessible workplace training, having trained thousands across sectors over eight years.

Laura Duarte

(Head of Policy and Service Design, Ealing Council)

Offered strategic leadership insight on organisational, political, and resource constraints shaping local government CPD possibilities.

Martyn Evans

(Head of Product, Unboxed)

Contributed 12 years of experience embedding service design into digital projects across the public sector, including work with SH24, Guy's and St Thomas' Hospital, and Hackney Council.

Barriers: Time, Perception, and Organisational Culture

Interviews confirmed findings from international cases while revealing UK-specific challenges.

Time as the Primary Constraint

All participants identified time as the most significant barrier. Laura stated: “Frontline workers in financially distressed councils are often doing 2–3 jobs, leaving no time for development beyond essential job functions.”

Eleanor described a “chicken and egg” dilemma: frontline workers lack time for creative problem-solving precisely when such approaches could prevent crises, yet taking staff away for multi-day courses creates backlogs, particularly “in critical services like healthcare.”

This mirrors Nordic case studies, where success depended on embedding learning within workflow rather than extracting workers from it.

Perception and Language Problems

Service design terminology creates barriers.

Eleanor observed it’s often dismissed as “one of those really fluffy things” or an “alienating term.”

Martyn noted terminology is “perceived skeptically by staff, making it more effective to introduce the approach by focusing on solving their specific problems.”

More concerning, Silvia identified service design’s association with “cost-cutting measures,” leading to resentment where staff perceive designers as “threats to jobs” rather than allies.

Laura suggested “problem-solving” or “testing assumptions,” while Kim proposed positioning it as a “meta skill.”

Katie boldly suggested: “Integrate design into the primary school curriculum alongside subjects like Math and English, so that everyone already understands design, empathy, and humanity-centered thinking by the time they enter the workforce.”

Sustainability Without Organisational Change

Design initiatives “fizzle out quite quickly” without organisational support.

Martyn attributed this to “leadership deficit where management fails to advocate for design’s value.” Katie insisted training must be “supported by a long-term strategy to avoid becoming a tick box training exercise that quickly gathers dust.”

Future Visions: From Theory to Practice

Participants offered concrete approaches balancing idealism with pragmatism, centered on three principles: learning through doing, leadership commitment, and valuing design as core capability.

Embedded Learning Models

Participants described various approaches to embedding service design learning within practice. While these represent specific pedagogical choices rather than the only way to teach service design, they share a common commitment to learning through authentic engagement with real service challenges.

Eleanor’s “service safaris” embed designers with frontline teams to observe, co-produce solutions, and add capacity rather than extracting staff for training. This values frontline workers’ “lived experience” while recognising that “buy-in from management and contextualised teaching are crucial.”

Martyn’s “learning by doing” at Unboxed embeds multidisciplinary teams within client organisations, placing frontline staff in roles like “product owner” with on-the-job guidance. He observed: “The biggest benefit is often that they have changed perceptions and built confidence in new methods, as frontline staff ‘get it’ and want to deliver better outcomes for their users.”

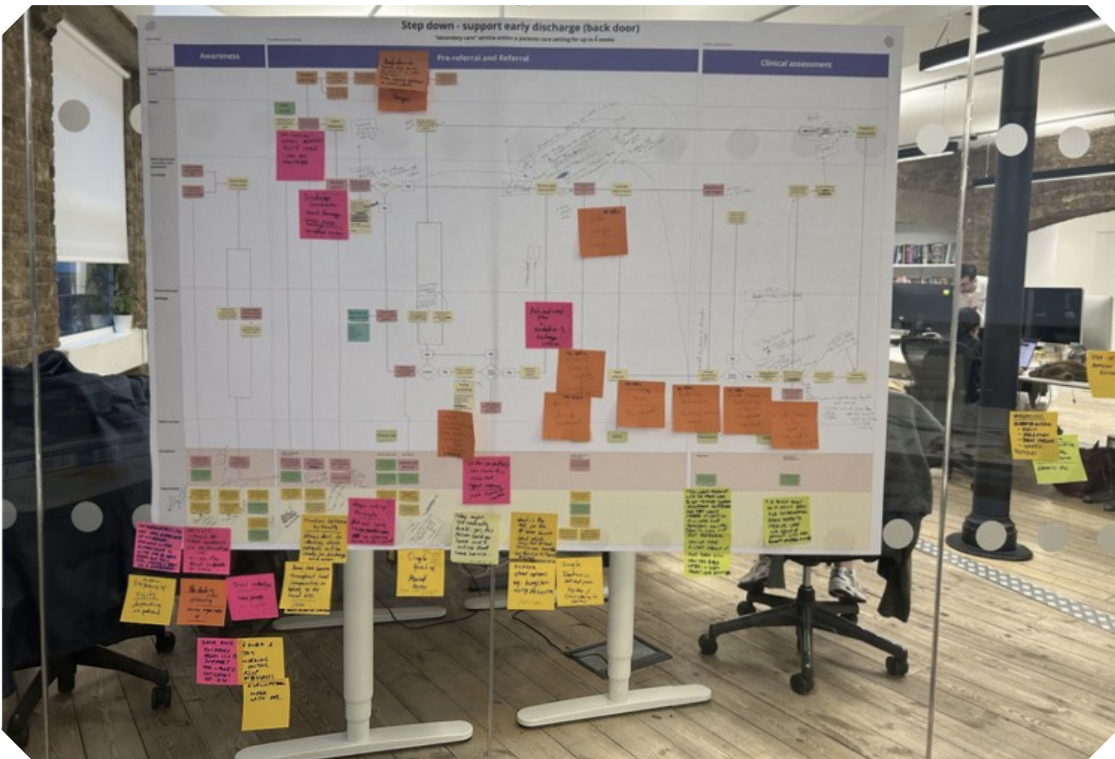


Fig. 7.2. A service blueprint developed during rapid prototyping for a virtual wards project, mapping the patient journey from awareness through to clinical assessment. (Source : Unboxed)

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.

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Leadership and Culture Shifts

Laura emphasised leaders who “protect space for learning” by “slowing down, setting boundaries, and protecting workloads.” Overcoming resistance requires “creating psychological safety to fail” and demonstrating design is about “testing assumptions,” not delivering predetermined plans.

Silvia advocated “valuing soft skills,” reframing facilitation, systemic thinking, and prototyping as core professional competencies currently “undervalued because they are labelled as soft skills, unlike easily quantifiable technical training.”

Eleanor argued effective CPD requires policy change: “They should ask less of people” by reducing “excessive bureaucracy and statutory legislation that currently stifles frontline workers’ freedom to design and innovate.”

Infrastructure and Governance Requirements

Participants identified structural changes needed to sustain design-led CPD at scale.

Martyn argued design must be embedded within service delivery teams rather than isolated in “transformation teams” or “innovation labs,” which make design feel “exclusive and difficult to transfer into the real world.”

He highlighted Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) open digital planning programme, which brings planning authorities together nationwide to collaboratively design services.

Katie called for a structural framework allocating skill requirements by role, distinguishing “awareness level” knowledge from “facilitator” capabilities.

Transitional Strategies: Building Momentum

Recognising gaps between current reality and desired futures, participants proposed practical experiments catalysing broader transformation.

Eleanor suggested starting with “willing parts of the council,” building proof of concept through strategic incrementalism. Her vision of informal “tea time” sessions where staff discuss challenges offers low-stakes entry points requiring minimal formal infrastructure.

Martyn pointed to career trajectory as both outcome and intervention: when frontline staff experience “significant career shifts into digital transformation roles,” they become internal advocates.

This suggests designing CPD pathways explicitly as professional development ladders where design capability becomes a recognised route to progression. Kim and Katie proposed “Secret Service designers”, which is staff in non-design roles like business analysts who develop design capabilities. This covert professionalisation sidesteps terminological resistance while building distributed capacity. They advocated embedding design within organisational development teams focused on experiences like onboarding, making design integral to organisational function rather than optional.

Multiple participants emphasised moving from episodic training to continuous practice communities. Eleanor’s “service safaris,” Martyn’s embedded teams, and Kim and Katie’s contextualised learning all prioritise sustained engagement over one-off courses.

This suggests designing CPD as membership in communities of practice, a shift from transactional learning to relational capability-building mirroring service design’s own principles.

Key Takeaway: Beyond Training to Systemic Change

These interviews confirm that embedding service design into CPD is not merely a training challenge. It requires simultaneously addressing funding, organisational culture, management practices, procurement systems, and policy frameworks. The transitional models proposed acknowledge present constraints while engineering conditions for transformation through practical steps that create evidence and momentum making larger systemic changes possible.

Three critical insights emerge:

Learning is most effective when embedded in work, not extracted from it

Service safaris, on-the-job coaching, and live project participation align service design education with evidence on adult learning in ways that traditional courses may not.

Language and perception matter

Reframing service design as “problem-solving” or “meta skills” makes it accessible; association with cost-cutting breeds resistance.

Sustainability requires structural change

Without leadership commitment, procurement reform, and workforce capacity investment, design initiatives fizzle out regardless of training quality.

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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)

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.



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

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.

How To Cite This Report

Lai, V., Ashta, J., & Zhu, K. (2026) Closing Capability Gap – Embedding Service Design in Frontline Professional Development. University of the Arts London.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58129/zkr9-k381>

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