



PRIFYSGOL CYMRU
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
UNIVERSITY OF WALES
Trinity Saint David



Student name: Lucelia Dias Nascimento Noe

Student ID number: 2336940

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Module lecturer: Dr Rexon Nting

Table of Contents

Task 1: Identification and Justification of Key Opportunity Areas in the UK Market	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Applying Design Thinking to identify Market Opportunities	2
1.3 Opportunity 1: Integrated E-commerce for SMEs	2
1.4 Opportunity 2: Digital Marketing and AI for SMEs	3
1.5 Opportunity 3: Integrated Digital Payments and Retail Management	4
1.6 Opportunity 4: Local and Rural Last-Mile Delivery	5
1.7 Comparative Evaluation of the Opportunities	5
1.8 Key User Pain Points and Market Gaps	7
1.9 Technological Enablers	7
1.10 Scalability and Sustainability	8
1.11 Recommended Opportunity: LocalLink Uk	9
Desirability	9
Feasibility	9
Viability	9
1.12 Critical Evaluation of the Recommended Opportunity	10
1.13 Conclusion	10
Task 2: Development of a New Venture Through Design Thinking	11
2.1 Introduction	11
2.2 Stage One – Empathise	11
2.3 Stage Two – Define	12
2.4 Stage Three – Ideate.....	13
2.5 Stage Four – Prototype and MVP	15
2.6 Stage Five – Test	15
2.7 Critical Evaluation and Conclusion	16
References List	18

Task 1: Identification and Justification of Key Opportunity Areas in the UK Market

1.1 Introduction

The rapid adoption of digital technologies has significantly changed the UK business environment. E-commerce, digital payments, social media, cloud computing and online delivery services have become increasingly important to both consumers and businesses. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this transformation by forcing many organisations to replace or supplement face-to-face activities with digital channels. However, digital transformation should not be viewed only as a temporary response to the pandemic. The continued importance of online retail indicates that changes in consumer behaviour have become embedded within the UK economy. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), internet sales accounted for 27.4% of total retail sales in Great Britain in 2025, compared with 19.2% in 2019, before the pandemic (ONS, 2026). This demonstrates that online purchasing has remained significantly more important than it was before COVID-19.

The opportunity is particularly relevant to small and medium enterprises (SMEs). SMEs represented 99.85% of the UK private sector business population at the beginning of 2025, with approximately 5.64 million small businesses employing fewer than 50 people (Department for Business and Trade, 2025a). Therefore, even relatively small improvements in SME digital adoption could create a substantial market opportunity.

Design Thinking provides an appropriate lens for identifying these opportunities because it begins with users and their problems rather than with technology alone. Brown (2008) argues that Design Thinking combines human needs, technological feasibility and commercial viability when developing innovative solutions. Similarly, Liedtka (2018) suggests that Design Thinking can reduce innovation risk by allowing organisations to explore customer needs, test assumptions and develop solutions iteratively.

Consequently, the most attractive opportunities in the scenario are not simply businesses that use digital technology. They are opportunities where a clearly identifiable customer problem exists, a market gap can be demonstrated, technological capabilities can provide a practical solution, and the resulting business model has potential to create sustainable and scalable value. This approach reflects the Design Thinking principle of balancing desirability, feasibility and viability (Brown, 2008).

1.2 Applying Design Thinking to identify Market Opportunities

The Double Diamond framework provides a useful complementary perspective because it divides innovation into four broad activities: Discover, Define, Develop and Deliver. The framework encourages organisations to first explore a wide range of user needs before narrowing the problem and subsequently developing and testing solutions. This complements the traditional Design Thinking process of Empathise, Define, Ideate, Prototype and Test.

Applied to the scenario, the **Discover/Empathise** stage identifies the experiences of SMEs, rural consumers, local producers and delivery providers. The **Define** stage then identifies specific unmet needs rather than treating digital transformation as one general problem. The **Develop/Ideate** stage allows several possible opportunities to be considered, including ecommerce, digital marketing, payment systems, retail management and local delivery. Finally, **Deliver/Prototype/Test** allows the strongest opportunity to be developed and validated before significant investment is made.

This approach is important because the UK already has many established technology providers. A new venture is unlikely to succeed simply by copying an existing e-commerce website or payment service. Innovation must therefore be based on a specific customer problem and a differentiated value proposition.

1.3 Opportunity 1: Integrated E-commerce for SMEs

The first major opportunity is the development of simple and affordable e-commerce services for SMEs. The continued growth of online retail demonstrates that customers expect businesses to provide digital purchasing options. However, the existence of demand does not automatically mean that every SME can easily participate in digital commerce.

The Department for Business and Trade's SME Digital Adoption Taskforce identified digital adoption as an important factor in SME productivity and growth and highlighted the need for better support for businesses adopting digital and AI technologies (Department for Business and Trade, 2025b). Research by the Department for Business and Trade also indicates that SMEs value reliable and personalised support when navigating digital adoption (Department for Business and Trade, 2025c).

From an Empathise perspective, a small retailer may not need a technically sophisticated website. The owner may instead need a simple way to display products, receive orders,

accept payments and communicate with customers. Therefore, the pain point is not necessarily the absence of technology but the complexity, cost and fragmentation of existing technology.

This creates a market gap for a solution specifically designed around smaller businesses. An integrated platform could combine online ordering, payments, stock information and customer communication in one system.

However, the opportunity also has limitations. The e-commerce market is highly competitive, with established platforms already providing extensive functionality. A new venture would therefore struggle if its proposition was simply “another online shop”. The opportunity becomes more viable if the service focuses on neglected segment, such as independent rural and suburban businesses, and combines e-commerce with local delivery.

Therefore, while integrated e-commerce has high market demand and strong scalability, its attractiveness as a standalone new venture is reduced by intense competition. Its strategic value increases considerably when combined with another unmet need, particularly local delivery and digital support for businesses that are underserved by larger platforms.

1.4 Opportunity 2: Digital Marketing and AI for SMEs

A second opportunity is affordable digital marketing and AI-supported customer engagement. Digital transformation has changed not only how customers purchase but also how businesses attract and retain them. Social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook provide SMEs with opportunities to promote products and services without the cost of traditional advertising.

Nevertheless, many small businesses lack specialist marketing employees. Owners may have limited time and knowledge to create content, analyse customer data, manage advertising campaigns and respond consistently to online engagement. This represents a user pain point and potential market gap.

AI provides an important technological enabler. AI-supported tools can assist with content creation, customer segmentation, demand prediction and marketing analysis. However, the entrepreneurial opportunity should not be defined simply as “using AI”. Many businesses already have access to AI tools. The stronger proposition would be to make AI easier to use for specific SME tasks.

For example, a local producer could enter basic information about new product and receive suggested social-media content, promotional messages and customer segments. The system could also analyse which products receive the greatest engagement.

The major strength of this opportunity is scalability. Software-based marketing tools can potentially serve large numbers of businesses without equivalent increases in physical infrastructure. However, competition is also high, and customer switching costs may be low. Therefore, digital marketing is an attractive component of a wider venture but is less differentiated as a standalone business opportunity.

1.5 Opportunity 3: Integrated Digital Payments and Retail Management

Digital payments provide another opportunity because customers increasingly expect convenient and secure ways to pay. However, payment processing alone is unlikely to provide sufficient differentiation for a new venture because the market contains many established providers.

The stronger opportunity lies in **integration**. A small retailer could benefit from a single system that connects payments with inventory, online orders, customer information and sales reporting. This could reduce administrative work and provide better information for decision-making.

This opportunity responds to an important SME constraint: limited financial and human resources. Smaller businesses may struggle to purchase, implement and maintain multiple separate digital systems. Mohamed and Weber (2020) found that UK SMEs can face barriers related to skills, IT investment and resources when adopting data and analytics technologies.

The opportunity is therefore not simply to introduce another payment system but to simplify digital business management. Cloud computing is an important enabler because businesses can access software without making large investments in physical infrastructure.

Nevertheless, established payment and retail technology providers create significant competitive pressure. Consequently, an integrated payment function is better viewed as part of the central innovation itself.

1.6 Opportunity 4: Local and Rural Last-Mile Delivery

The fourth opportunity is last-mile delivery, particularly for rural and suburban communities. The scenario highlights the growth of parcel delivery and the expansion of businesses such as Royal Mail, DPD and Evri increasing online purchasing creates demand for delivery, but last-mile logistics remain challenging.

For small businesses, individual delivery arrangements can be expensive and difficult to manage. Rural businesses may be particularly affected because customers can be geographically dispersed. From the customer's perspective, high delivery charges or limited delivery times can reduce the attractiveness of purchasing from smaller local businesses.

This creates an opportunity for shared local delivery coordination. Instead of each small business arranging its own delivery, orders from multiple businesses could be grouped geographically and allocated to local delivery partners.

The idea also has sustainability potential. Consolidating deliveries could increase vehicle utilisation and reduce unnecessary journeys. Therefore, the opportunity combines economic, environmental and social value.

The technological environment increasingly supports this model. Ofcom's planned network deployment data indicate that rural areas are expected to experience significant increases in gigabit-capable broadband coverage, with projected rural coverage increasing from 58% in January 2025 to 89% by January 2028 if planned deployments are achieved (Ofcom, 2025). Improved connectivity makes digitally coordinated local commerce increasingly feasible.

However, logistics is operationally more complex than software alone. A new venture would need to manage delivery reliability, driver availability, insurance, customer expectations and geographical density. Therefore, the concept should initially be tested in a concentrated geographical area rather than launched nationally.

1.7 Comparative Evaluation of the Opportunities

A comparison of the four opportunity areas indicates that no single opportunity is equally attractive across all dimensions.

Opportunity	User need	Market competition	Scalability	Sustainability potential	Overall assessment
SME e-commerce	High	High	High	High	High
Digital marketing/AI	High	Very high	Very high	High	High
Digital payments/retail management	High	Very high	Very high	High	Medium-High
Local delivery coordination	Very high	Medium	High	Very high	Very High

The comparison suggests that **local delivery coordination combined with integrated ecommerce has the strongest overall potential**. Digital marketing and payment systems remain valuable, but competition is particularly intense and customers can already access many established solutions.

In contrast, local and rural businesses face a combination of problems rather than a single isolated problem. They may need an online presence, digital payments, customer communication and delivery support simultaneously. This suggests that the strongest market opportunity is not to develop another standalone technology but to integrate existing technologies around a specific underserved customer group.

This conclusion is consistent with the Design Thinking principle of identifying the underlying user problem before selecting the solution. It also supports Vial's (2019) argument that digital transformation involves organisational and business-model change rather than simply introducing individual technologies.

1.8 Key User Pain Points and Market Gaps

The analysis identifies four major user groups.

Small retailers: They require affordable digital tools but may lack technical expertise, time and financial resources.

Rural producers: Farmers and local producers may have products that could attract wider markets but lack convenient digital sales and delivery infrastructure.

Consumers: Customers increasingly expect convenient online ordering, digital payments and home delivery but may also want access to local businesses.

Delivery partners: Local delivery providers require sufficient order density to make routes economically viable.

These problems are interconnected. A retailer may not invest in an online shop because delivery is too expensive. A delivery provider may not operate effectively because individual retailers generate too few orders. Customers may then choose large national platforms because they offer greater convenience. This creates a circular market problem.

The opportunity for innovation is therefore to connect the participants rather than solve only one part of the problem.

1.9 Technological Enablers

Several technologies make the proposed opportunity technically feasible.

Cloud computing can provide affordable access to e-commerce and business management software.

Mobile applications can connect businesses, consumers and delivery partners.

Digital payments can allow customers to pay securely online.

AI and data analytics can support product recommendations, demand forecasting, customer communication and delivery optimisation.

GPS and route optimisation can help coordinate local deliveries.

Social media integration can allow small businesses to promote products and direct customers towards online ordering.

However, the innovation does not depend on creating a completely new technology. Instead, the opportunity lies in integrating existing technologies around an underserved customer problem. This is important because technological novelty alone does not guarantee commercial success.

1.10 Scalability and Sustainability

The recommended opportunity has significant potential for scalability because the digital platform can be replicated across different geographical areas.

A potential expansion model would be:

Stage 1: One rural/suburban community

↓

Stage 2: Several neighbouring communities

↓

Stage 3: Regional expansion

↓

Stage 4: Multiple UK regions

However, the venture should not scale geographically before achieving sufficient **customer and business density** in the initial market.

This is particularly important because LocalLink UK would operate as a multi-sided platform. More businesses increase the range of products available to consumers, while more consumers increase the attractiveness of the platform to businesses. Delivery partners also benefit from higher order density.

The model could therefore generate a **network effect**, in which the value of the platform increases as participation grows.

Sustainability can also be considered across three dimensions.

Economic sustainability: Revenue could be generated through SME subscriptions, transaction fees and delivery commissions.

Environmental sustainability: Grouping deliveries and optimising routes could potentially reduce unnecessary journeys.

Social sustainability: The platform could support independent businesses and improve digital access for rural communities.

However, these sustainability benefits should be treated as hypotheses to be tested rather than guaranteed outcomes. For example, delivery consolidation will only produce environmental benefits if the platform reduces inefficient journeys.

1.11 Recommended Opportunity: LocalLink Uk

Based on the comparative analysis, the recommended opportunity is **LocalLink UK**, an integrated digital commerce and local delivery platform designed specifically for independent retailers and rural producers.

The proposed concept would combine:

- Online product catalogues.
- Digital ordering.
- Payment integration.
- Customer communication.
- Order management.
- Local delivery coordination.

The proposed value proposition is:

LocalLink UK helps independent retailers and rural producers sell online, accept digital payments and access affordable local delivery through one simple, integrated platform.

The recommendation is supported by the three core Design Thinking criteria:

Desirability

The concept addresses identifiable problems experienced by SMEs, consumers and delivery partners.

Feasibility

The platform can integrate existing technologies rather than requiring the development of every technological component from scratch.

Viability

Potential revenue can be generated through subscriptions, transaction fees and delivery commissions.

The concept also provides stronger differentiation than creating another general e-commerce marketplace because it focuses specifically on the **local and rural SME ecosystem**.

1.12 Critical Evaluation of the Recommended Opportunity

Despite its potential, LocalLink UK would face several challenges.

First, the venture would operate in a competitive digital environment. Large e-commerce platforms already provide sophisticated online purchasing experiences. LocalLink UK therefore cannot compete primarily through scale.

Second, the two-sided nature of the platform creates a chicken-and-egg problem.

Businesses may not join without customers, while customers may not join without sufficient businesses. The initial pilot must therefore recruit a small but attractive group of businesses before attempting wider consumer acquisitions.

Third, delivery operations create higher costs and complexity than a purely digital platform. The venture would need to control its geographical area initially to achieve sufficient order density.

Fourth, customer trust would be essential. Payment security, delivery reliability and data protection would influence adoption.

Therefore, the most appropriate strategy is not immediate national expansion but small-scale experimentation through a Minimum Viable Product (MVP). This connects directly to task 2, where the concept will be developed using the five stages of Design Thinking.

1.13 Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that digital transformation has created several viable opportunity areas within the UK market. Integrated e-commerce, digital marketing and AI, digital payments and retail management, and local delivery all have commercial potential. However, their attractiveness differs according to customer need, market gaps, competition, technological feasibility, scalability and sustainability.

The analysis indicates that a conventional e-commerce platform would face significant competition, while digital marketing and payment services are already highly developed markets. Local last-mile delivery, however, presents a more specific and interconnected problem involving businesses, consumers and delivery providers.

Consequently, the strongest opportunity is to combine e-commerce with local delivery through **LocalLink UK**. The venture would not attempt to replace existing technology providers but would integrate established technologies into a simple service designed around the needs of smaller and rural businesses.

This conclusion provides the foundation for Task 2. The next stage is therefore to apply the five stages of Design Thinking—**Empathise, Define, Ideate, Prototype and Test**—to develop, evaluate and refine the LocalLink UK venture concept.

Task 2: Development of a New Venture Through Design Thinking

2.1 Introduction

Based on the opportunity identified in Task 1, this section develops **LocalLink UK**, a proposed digital venture designed to help independent retailers and rural producers sell online and access coordinated local delivery. The concept responds to the fragmentation of digital tools identified in Task 1, where smaller businesses may need to manage online ordering, payments, customer communication and delivery separately.

The venture is developed using the five stages of **Design Thinking: Empathise, Define, Ideate, Prototype and Test**. Supporting frameworks, including **Five Whys, Six Thinking Hats, Value Proposition Canvas and Lean Startup**, are incorporated to strengthen problem identification, idea evaluation, customer value assessment and experimentation. Design Thinking is appropriate because it places users at the centre of innovation and encourages solutions to be developed through experimentation and feedback (Brown, 2008; Liedtka, 2018).

2.2 Stage One – Empathise

The Empathise stage focuses on understanding the experiences and needs of the people affected by the identified problem. For LocalLink UK, the main stakeholders are **independent retailers and rural producers, consumers, and local delivery partners**.

Small businesses may experience difficulties managing online orders, digital payments and delivery while having limited time, technical skills and financial resources. Rural consumers may want convenient access to local products, but experience limited online availability or high delivery costs. Delivery partners may also experience inefficient routes and insufficient order density.

To validate these assumptions, the entrepreneur should conduct semi-structured interviews, questionnaires and observation. An initial research sample could include **10–15 businesses, 15–20 consumers and several delivery partners**.

An illustrative persona could be **Sarah**, the owner of a small rural shop. Sarah uses Facebook and WhatsApp to communicate with customers but manages orders manually. She wants to increase online sales but does not want complicated software or several monthly subscriptions. Her main pain points are fragmented digital tools, limited time and delivery costs.

An empathy map would identify what she **says, thinks, does and feels**, helping the entrepreneur understand that the problem is not simply a lack of technology. Instead, users may need **simple technology that integrates several activities into one service**.

2.3 Stage Two – Define

The Define stage converts the findings from the Empathise stage into a focused problem.

Problem Statement

Independent retailers and rural producers need a simple, affordable and integrated way to sell online, manage orders, accept digital payments and arrange local delivery because existing digital tools can be fragmented and difficult to manage.

The Five Whys technique can be used to identify the root cause of this problem (Ohno, 1988).

Why 1: Why do small businesses struggle with online selling?

Because ordering, payments and delivery are often managed separately.

Why 2: Why are they managed separately?

Because businesses use different platforms for different functions.

Why 3: Why do businesses use fragmented systems?

Because integrated solutions can be expensive or complicated.

Why 4: Why is this a problem for SMEs?

Because they often have limited time, resources and technical expertise.

Why 5: Why do existing solutions not fully solve the problem?

Because many solutions focus on individual functions rather than the complete needs of small local businesses.

The resulting **How Might We** question is:

How might we help small rural and suburban businesses participate in digital commerce without requiring expensive, complicated or multiple digital systems?

This provides a clear direction for the Ideate stage.

2.4 Stage Three – Ideate

The Ideate stage involves generating alternative solutions before selecting the most appropriate concept. Three possible solutions were considered alongside the integrated LocalLink UK concept:

1. Local online marketplace – businesses list products for customers to purchase online.
2. Shared delivery platform – combines orders from several local businesses to improve delivery efficiency.
3. AI digital assistant – supports SME marketing, customer communication and content creation.
4. LocalLink UK – combines online catalogues, ordering, payments and coordinated local delivery.

The fourth option provides the strongest overall response because it addresses several connected pain points rather than only one part of the customer journey.

Six Thinking Hats

De Bono's (1985) Six Thinking Hats can then be used to critically evaluate LocalLink UK.

Hat	Evaluation
 White – Facts	Digital commerce remains significant and SMEs represent most UK businesses.
 Red – Feelings	Business owners may feel overwhelmed by complicated technology; consumers may value convenience and local purchasing.
 Black – Risks	Competition, delivery failures, cybersecurity and low adoption could threaten the venture.
 Yellow – Benefits	The platform could increase SME sales and improve local delivery efficiency.
 Green – Creativity	Future features could include loyalty schemes, AI recommendations and grouped delivery slots.
 Blue – Process	Start with a small pilot, measure results, learn and gradually scale.

Source: Created by Myself

This analysis supports selecting LocalLink UK while recognising that the idea requires validation before significant investment.

2.5 Stage Four – Prototype and MVP

The Prototype stage involves developing a simplified version of the proposed solution. Following Lean Startup principles, the venture should initially develop a Minimum Viable Product (MVP) rather than a complete platform (Ries, 2011).

The LocalLink UK MVP would include:

- **Business registration** – businesses create profiles and upload products.
- **Online catalogue** – customers browse local products.
- **Ordering and payment** – customers place and pay for orders.
- **Delivery or collection** – customers choose an available option.
- **Business dashboard** – businesses receive and manage orders.

Advanced features such as AI recommendations, sophisticated inventory management and national delivery should initially be excluded. This reduces costs and allows the entrepreneur to test whether customers value the core proposition.

The **Value Proposition Canvas** can support this process (Osterwalder et al., 2013).

Customer jobs: selling products, receiving orders, processing payments and arranging delivery.

Customer pains: multiple digital systems, limited technical knowledge, manual administration and delivery costs.

Customer gains: increased sales, easier administration, greater customer reach and convenient delivery.

LocalLink UK therefore provides **pain relievers** through an integrated platform and shared delivery service, while creating **gains** through improved online visibility and easier customer purchasing.

2.6 Stage Five – Test

The final stage is Test. Rather than launching nationally, LocalLink UK should first be tested **in one geographically concentrated rural or suburban community**.

A proposed pilot could involve approximately 10-15 businesses, 50-100 consumers and 3-5 delivery partners over six to eight weeks. These are proposed testing parameters rather than completed research findings.

Users would test realistic activities such as finding products, placing orders, making payments and selecting delivery. Businesses would test registering, uploading products, receiving orders and managing deliveries.

KPI	Proposed target
Businesses completing onboarding	≥70%
Customers completing first order	≥60%
Successful deliveries	≥95%
Positive customer satisfaction	≥80%
Businesses willing to continue	≥60%

These targets would provide initial evidence about usability, demand and operational feasibility.

The **Lean Startup Build-Measure-Learn cycle** would then be applied (Ries, 2011). The entrepreneur would **build** the MVP, **measure** customer behaviour and business performance, **learn** from the results and modify the service accordingly. For example, if customers abandon orders because delivery charges are too high, grouped delivery days could be tested. If businesses prefer transaction fees to subscriptions, the pricing model could be adjusted.

This makes the development process iterative rather than assuming that the original business model is automatically correct.

2.7 Critical Evaluation and Conclusion

LocalLink UK has potential because it addresses a specific problem identified in Task 1 and creates value for several stakeholder groups. It is also technologically feasible because existing cloud, payment, mapping and mobile technologies can be integrated rather than developed entirely from scratch.

However, the venture faces significant risks. Established e-commerce platforms create competitive pressure, while the two-sided nature of the platform means that both businesses and consumers must be attracted. Delivery costs could also become high if order volumes are insufficient. Therefore, national expansion would be inappropriate before the business model has been validated.

The Design Thinking process provides a structured response to these challenges.

Empathise identifies user needs, **Define** establishes the root problem, **Ideate** develops alternatives, **Prototype** creates a low-cost MVP and **Test** generates evidence for refinement.

Five Whys strengthens problem analysis, Six Thinking Hats supports critical idea evaluation, the Value Proposition Canvas tests customer value, and Lean Startup provides a mechanism for continuous learning.

Overall, **LocalLink UK should initially be treated as a testable venture hypothesis rather than a guaranteed business success.** A geographically focused MVP would allow the entrepreneur to validate customer demand, delivery efficiency and willingness to pay before scaling. This evidence-led approach reduces entrepreneurial risk and provides a realistic pathway towards sustainable growth.

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