

Design Thinking and New Venture Creation in the UK's Digitally Transformed SME and E-Commerce Market



Programme BA Leadership and Management Skills in the Workplace

Module Design Thinking and Innovation

Module code LCLM 6002

Lecturer Rexon Nting

Submitted by Pavel Kutnohorsky

Student number 2332187

Table of contents

Contents

Table of contents	2
Introduction	3
1. Design Thinking as an Approach to Innovation and New Venture Creation	5
Task 1: Identification and Justification of UK Market Opportunities	6
2.1 Integrated Digital Commerce for SMEs.....	6
2.2 Rural and Local Digital Commerce	7
2.3 Last-Mile Delivery and Local Fulfilment	7
2.4 Digital Marketing and Customer Engagement.....	8
2. Comparative Evaluation of Opportunity Areas	9
3. Task 2: Development of a New Venture	10
3.1 Venture Concept: LocalLoop UK	10
4. Empathise.....	11
4.1 Independent Retailers and Producers.....	11
5. Define	13
6. Ideate	14
6.1 Digital Storefront	14
6.2 Local Marketplace.....	14
6.3 Integrated Payments and Ordering.....	14
6.4 Shared Fulfilment.....	14
6.5 Customer Communication	14
7. Prototype and Minimum Viable Product	16
8. Test.....	17
8.1 Merchant Metrics	17
8.2 Consumer Metrics.....	17
8.3 Operational Metrics.....	17
8.4 Sustainability Metrics	17
9. Critical Evaluation of the Venture	18
10. Scalability and Long-Term Sustainability	19
11. Conclusion	20

Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital commerce has fundamentally changed the competitive environment in which businesses in the United Kingdom operate. Although e-commerce, digital payments and online communication were already developing before 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital technologies across retail, services, logistics and professional activities. Businesses that had traditionally depended on physical premises increasingly introduced online ordering, digital payments, remote communication, online booking systems and home-delivery models. Consumers similarly became more familiar with purchasing products and services digitally. The pandemic can therefore be understood not simply as a temporary disruption, but as a catalyst that accelerated an existing process of digital transformation and changed expectations regarding convenience, accessibility and customer experience.

The transformation is particularly important for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). At the beginning of 2025, the UK had approximately 5.7 million private-sector businesses, with SMEs accounting for 99.85% of the total business population (Department for Business and Trade, 2025a). This makes SMEs an important market for digital products and entrepreneurial innovation. However, digital transformation remains uneven. The UK government's SME Digital Adoption Taskforce has identified barriers including capability, cost and awareness, while its 2026 update demonstrates that SME digital adoption remains an active economic and policy priority (Department for Business and Trade, 2025b; Department for Business and Trade, 2026).

The consumer side of the market has also changed structurally. Online sales represented 28.3% of total retail sales in Great Britain in December 2025, demonstrating that digital retail is now an established component of the UK economy rather than merely a temporary consequence of the pandemic (Office for National Statistics, 2025). Consequently, opportunities exist in e-commerce platforms, digital marketing, retail-management software, digital payments and last-mile delivery. Nevertheless, technological availability does not itself constitute a viable entrepreneurial opportunity. New ventures must identify genuine customer problems and develop solutions that are desirable, feasible and economically sustainable.

Design Thinking is particularly relevant because it places users at the centre of innovation. The commonly recognised stages—Empathise, Define, Ideate, Prototype

and Test—provide a framework for investigating user needs, reframing problems and developing solutions through experimentation (Stanford d.school, 2025a).

Contemporary research emphasises that Design Thinking should be understood as an iterative process rather than a rigid linear sequence (Bender-Salazar, 2023; Ford and Yoho, 2025). This is particularly relevant to entrepreneurship because opportunities often emerge under conditions of uncertainty, meaning that entrepreneurs must test assumptions rather than rely exclusively on initial market predictions.

This essay therefore applies Design Thinking to the scenario of accelerated digitalisation in the UK. First, it identifies and evaluates the most viable opportunity areas by considering user pain points, market gaps, technological enablers, scalability and sustainability. Second, it applies the five stages of Design Thinking to develop a new venture concept, LocalLoop UK, designed to help independent retailers and local producers participate more effectively in digital commerce while addressing local fulfilment challenges.

1. Design Thinking as an Approach to Innovation and New Venture Creation

Design Thinking provides an appropriate framework for the scenario because it begins with users rather than technology. The Empathise stage seeks to understand users and their contexts; Define converts observations into a focused problem; Ideate generates possible solutions; Prototype creates inexpensive representations of those solutions; and Test produces evidence that can be used to refine the concept (Stanford d.school, 2025a).

However, these stages should not be interpreted as a simple linear recipe. Entrepreneurial environments are characterised by uncertainty, and research may reveal that the original problem was incorrectly understood. Bender-Salazar (2023) argues that Design Thinking can support entrepreneurial teams dealing with complex or “wicked” problems because it allows them to improve both problem-setting and need-finding. Similarly, Ford and Yoho (2025) emphasise the role of customer-centred experimentation in developing solutions around customer needs.

Design Thinking is therefore particularly useful for SMEs because it can reduce the risk of investing heavily in solutions before their desirability has been established. Nevertheless, Design Thinking does not by itself guarantee commercial success. A solution can be desirable to users while remaining financially unsustainable, technically difficult to implement or easily copied. For this reason, Design Thinking should be complemented by business-model experimentation. You (2022) argues that Design Thinking can contribute to business model innovation through co-creation and experimentation. This is important because the opportunity identified in this scenario is not simply the creation of another digital product, but the development of a viable relationship between SMEs, consumers and fulfilment providers.

Task 1: Identification and Justification of UK Market Opportunities

2.1 Integrated Digital Commerce for SMEs

The first major opportunity is the development of integrated digital-commerce solutions for SMEs.

The scenario describes businesses adopting websites, online ordering, mobile-responsive platforms, digital payments and online booking systems. However, adoption of individual technologies does not necessarily constitute effective digital transformation. A small retailer may use one provider for its website, another for payments, social media for marketing, spreadsheets for inventory and an external courier for delivery. Such fragmentation can increase administrative workload and reduce the owner's ability to focus on customers and business development.

This represents a significant user pain point. The problem is not necessarily the absence of technology but the difficulty of integrating technologies into an affordable and manageable workflow. The SME Digital Adoption Taskforce identifies capability, cost and awareness as important barriers to digital adoption (Department for Business and Trade, 2025b). The 2026 update demonstrates that these challenges remain relevant, with government continuing to support SME digital adoption and AI-related initiatives (Department for Business and Trade, 2026).

The market gap therefore exists between sophisticated enterprise-level digital systems and the practical needs of small businesses. SMEs may not need highly complex systems; instead, they need technology that is affordable, easy to implement and adapted to their limited resources.

Technological developments create favourable conditions for this opportunity. Cloud computing allows businesses to access software without major infrastructure investment, while APIs enable payments, websites, inventory systems and logistics services to communicate. AI can support content generation, customer enquiries, demand forecasting and basic business analytics.

The opportunity is highly scalable because additional merchants can be added at relatively low marginal cost once the platform has been developed. Subscription-based Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) revenue could provide recurring income, supplemented by transaction fees or premium services. Sustainability should nevertheless be measured rather than assumed, as cloud infrastructure and digital consumption also have environmental impacts.

2.2 Rural and Local Digital Commerce

The second opportunity concerns rural and suburban digital commerce.

The scenario identifies farmers and local producers using Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp to advertise products and coordinate orders. These practices indicate that local businesses are already responding to digital consumer behaviour. However, using social media and messaging applications as informal commerce systems can create operational problems as demand increases.

For producers, potential pain points include manual order processing, inconsistent stock information, repeated customer communication and difficulty organising deliveries. For consumers, the problem may be limited convenient access to local products and the need to visit several physical businesses.

There is also evidence of a continuing market gap in rural digital infrastructure. The 2026 Future of Rural England Report indicates that gigabit-capable coverage in rural residential areas was approximately 66%, compared with 93% in urban areas (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2026). Digital entrepreneurship in rural communities must therefore recognise infrastructure limitations rather than assume that rural and urban consumers have identical access to digital services.

The technological opportunity is to create local digital marketplaces combining product discovery, ordering, payments and fulfilment. Such a platform could enable local producers to access digital customers without individually developing sophisticated e-commerce systems.

The opportunity is scalable, but geographical density is important. A platform becomes more valuable as the number of merchants and customers increases, while expanding too quickly across dispersed areas could make delivery inefficient. Sustainability could be improved through consolidated orders, collection points, reusable packaging and low-emission vehicles. However, local e-commerce is not automatically sustainable because poorly designed delivery systems could increase traffic and packaging.

2.3 Last-Mile Delivery and Local Fulfilment

The third opportunity is last-mile delivery.

The growth of e-commerce has increased consumer expectations regarding convenience, tracking and delivery reliability. Large logistics providers can achieve economies of scale, whereas small businesses may receive too few online orders to operate their own efficient delivery systems.

This creates a user pain point for both businesses and customers. Businesses face high delivery costs and administrative complexity, while consumers may encounter limited delivery options or inconsistent service.

The market gap lies in accessible shared fulfilment infrastructure for small businesses. Instead of each business independently arranging delivery, orders could be aggregated geographically and allocated to shared routes.

Technological enablers include GPS, cloud platforms, route-optimisation software, digital proof of delivery and real-time notifications. AI could further support demand prediction and route planning. The opportunity has medium-to-high scalability because the software can be replicated, although physical logistics create greater complexity than a pure digital business.

The sustainability case is potentially strong if route optimisation reduces empty journeys and increases delivery density. Environmental performance should therefore be measured through indicators such as kilometres per delivery, deliveries per route and estimated emissions.

2.4 Digital Marketing and Customer Engagement

The fourth opportunity concerns digital marketing.

The scenario demonstrates that independent businesses increasingly use social media to advertise products and communicate with customers. However, small-business owners often have limited time and expertise to manage content, customer segmentation, advertising campaigns and analytics.

The user pain point is therefore not simply the inability to use social media but the difficulty of converting digital visibility into sustainable customer relationships and sales.

The market gap is for affordable, integrated digital marketing services designed for small businesses. AI can provide technological support through automated content generation, customer segmentation and campaign analysis. Research supports the importance of customer orientation to SME innovation. Didonet et al. (2016) demonstrate that market orientation can influence innovation processes in SMEs, reinforcing the importance of understanding customers within innovation.

The opportunity is highly scalable because many marketing services can be delivered digitally. However, competition is intense and generic AI marketing tools are relatively easy to imitate. The strongest proposition would therefore integrate marketing with e-commerce, customer data and fulfilment rather than offering marketing as an isolated service.

2. Comparative Evaluation of Opportunity Areas

The four opportunity areas can be assessed against the criteria specified in Task 1.

Opportunity	User pain	Market gap	Technology	Scalability	Sustainability
Integrated SME commerce	High	High	High	Very high	High
Rural/local marketplace	High	High	High	Medium-high	High if consolidated
Last-mile fulfilment	High	High	High	Medium	High if routes are optimised
Digital marketing	Medium-high	Medium-high	Very high	Very high	Medium

The comparison indicates that integrated SME commerce combined with local fulfilment represents the strongest overall opportunity. Integrated SME commerce has very high scalability because software can be replicated across thousands of users. Local fulfilment adds a physical component but simultaneously creates differentiation from generic e-commerce platforms.

Rural and suburban markets provide a particularly relevant starting point because fragmented local supply, physical distance and increasing digital adoption create a clear user problem. The market opportunity is substantial: approximately 5.7 million private-sector businesses operated in the UK at the beginning of 2025, with SMEs representing 99.85% of the total (Department for Business and Trade, 2025a). Even a venture serving a small proportion of SMEs could potentially develop a significant customer base.

The continuing importance of online retail further strengthens the opportunity. Online sales represented 28.3% of retail sales in Great Britain in December 2025 (Office for National Statistics, 2025). The key entrepreneurial insight is therefore not simply that businesses need to “go online”. Many businesses are already online. The more valuable opportunity is helping them integrate customer acquisition, ordering, payment and fulfilment into a single manageable system.

3. Task 2: Development of a New Venture

3.1 Venture Concept: LocalLoop UK

For the purpose of this essay, the proposed venture is named **LocalLoop UK**, a digital commerce and local fulfilment platform designed to connect independent businesses with local consumers through an integrated online marketplace.

The platform would allow businesses to create digital storefronts, list products or services, accept digital payments, manage customer orders, communicate with customers and coordinate delivery or collection. Consumers would be able to search for local businesses, purchase products and select delivery or collection options.

The main differentiating feature would be shared local fulfilment. Instead of each small business independently organising delivery, LocalLoop would aggregate geographically compatible orders and coordinate shared delivery routes.

The proposed value proposition is:

LocalLoop UK enables independent businesses to sell online and access affordable local fulfilment without requiring the technological expertise or order volumes normally associated with large e-commerce businesses.

4. Empathise

The first stage of Design Thinking is Empathise. Its purpose is to understand the experiences, motivations and frustrations of users before defining a solution.

LocalLoop should initially investigate four stakeholder groups: independent retailers and producers, rural and suburban consumers, delivery partners, and local business or community organisations.

4.1 Independent Retailers and Producers

Research should include farm shops, bakeries, independent food retailers, market traders, bookshops and local producers. Semi-structured interviews could investigate how orders are received, how stock and payments are managed, how customers are contacted, how deliveries are organised, which digital tools are currently used, which activities consume the most time and how much businesses spend on digital services.

Observation would also be valuable because users may not consciously recognise inefficient processes that have become routine.

4.2 Consumers and Delivery Partners

Consumer research should examine how people discover local businesses, why they purchase online, how much convenience matters and which delivery or collection options they prefer. Rural consumers should be deliberately included because infrastructure and accessibility may differ from urban environments.

Delivery partners could provide insight into inefficient routes, waiting time, failed deliveries, vehicle utilisation and the practical challenges of collecting orders from multiple businesses.

4.3 Research Outputs

The research could generate customer journey maps and personas.

Persona 1: Sarah — rural farm-shop owner. Sarah wants to increase online sales but has limited technical expertise. She currently receives orders through social media and messaging applications and spends significant time manually coordinating deliveries.

Persona 2: David — rural consumer. David values local products but finds visiting several independent shops inconvenient. He wants online convenience while continuing to support local businesses.

The key hypothesis emerging from the Empathise stage is that small businesses do not necessarily lack digital demand; instead, they may lack an affordable and integrated

mechanism for converting digital demand into efficient fulfilment. This hypothesis would need to be validated through research rather than assumed to be true.

5. Define

The Define stage transforms research into a focused problem.

The proposed problem statement is:

Independent UK retailers and local producers need a simple and affordable way to sell online and fulfil local orders because existing digital tools are often fragmented, technically demanding and unable to provide cost-effective fulfilment at small order volumes.

The corresponding “How Might We?” question is:

How might we enable independent businesses and local producers to sell digitally and fulfil local customer orders efficiently without requiring significant technical expertise or large delivery volumes?

This definition is deliberately narrower than stating that SMEs simply need digitalisation. The problem consists of three interconnected dimensions.

Digital access: businesses need simple tools for selling online.

Operational integration: businesses need ordering, payment and customer communication to work together.

Fulfilment economics: businesses need a delivery or collection model that remains viable at relatively low individual order volumes.

This problem definition creates the foundation for the next stage.

6. Ideate

The Ideate stage involves generating alternative solutions rather than immediately committing to one concept. Potential solutions include:

1. a digital storefront builder for independent businesses;
2. a local product marketplace
3. a shared delivery service
4. a community click-and-collect network
5. a local loyalty programme
6. AI-assisted digital marketing
7. a combined marketplace and fulfilment platform
8. a subscription-based digital commerce package

The preferred concept is the integrated marketplace and fulfilment model because it addresses several pain points simultaneously.

LocalLoop would contain five core components:

6.1 Digital Storefront

Each business would receive a simple online storefront without requiring specialist web-development knowledge.

6.2 Local Marketplace

Consumers could search for participating businesses and products according to geographical location.

6.3 Integrated Payments and Ordering

Orders and payments would be processed through the platform, reducing fragmentation.

6.4 Shared Fulfilment

Compatible orders would be grouped geographically to create more efficient delivery routes.

6.5 Customer Communication

Customers would receive automated order confirmations, delivery updates and opportunities to provide feedback.

AI would be used as an enabling technology rather than the central proposition. It could generate product descriptions, assist customer enquiries, analyse purchasing patterns and support demand forecasting.

The business model could combine a modest monthly merchant subscription with transaction and fulfilment fees. Premium services such as analytics and AI marketing could create additional revenue. This reflects business-model innovation because the venture is not simply selling software; it is redesigning the relationship between merchants, consumers and fulfilment providers.

7. Prototype and Minimum Viable Product

The Prototype stage should focus on learning rather than building a fully developed national platform. The proposed MVP should therefore be launched in one geographically concentrated UK area.

The MVP would include:

- merchant registration
- basic digital storefronts
- product listings
- online payments
- customer ordering
- delivery or collection selection
- order management
- basic delivery coordination
- customer notifications
- merchant feedback tools

Some back-end processes could initially remain manual. For example, delivery routes could be coordinated manually rather than through advanced AI. This reduces development costs and allows the entrepreneur to test whether customers and merchants actually value the service.

A pilot could involve approximately 20–30 independent businesses and a controlled group of consumers. The MVP would test six critical assumptions:

1. SMEs are willing to pay for integrated digital commerce.
2. Consumers are willing to purchase through a local marketplace.
3. Consumers value consolidated delivery.
4. Merchants are willing to participate in shared fulfilment.
5. Sufficient order density can be achieved.
6. The platform saves businesses time compared with existing processes.

The prototype should therefore be considered a learning mechanism rather than a miniature version of the final product.

8. Test

The Test stage determines whether the proposed solution creates genuine value. The venture should collect both quantitative and qualitative evidence.

8.1 Merchant Metrics

Key indicators would include the number of active merchants, onboarding completion rate, weekly orders, merchant retention, time required to create a storefront, willingness to pay and perceived time saved.

8.2 Consumer Metrics

Consumer indicators would include registrations, conversion rate, repeat purchase rate, average order value, cart abandonment, customer satisfaction and preferred delivery method.

8.3 Operational Metrics

Operational performance should be measured through delivery cost per order, orders per route, distance travelled per order, failed delivery rate, average delivery time and vehicle utilisation.

8.4 Sustainability Metrics

Sustainability indicators should include estimated emissions per delivery, the percentage of consolidated routes, deliveries per vehicle journey, use of collection points and packaging reduction.

Qualitative interviews should also take place after transactions. For example, a merchant may initially express enthusiasm but subsequently stop using the platform because stock management is too complicated. A customer may enjoy the marketplace but prefer collection rather than delivery.

These findings would trigger another iteration of the Design Thinking cycle. If customers prefer collection, LocalLoop could prioritise click-and-collect. If delivery is too expensive, delivery windows could be consolidated. If merchants value the storefront but not the marketplace, the business could temporarily prioritise its SaaS functionality. If order density is insufficient, the geographical service area could be narrowed.

This demonstrates the importance of Test as learning rather than validation. The objective is not to prove that the original idea was correct, but to discover which version of the venture creates sustainable value.

9. Critical Evaluation of the Venture

Although LocalLoop UK addresses identifiable market problems, several risks could affect its viability.

First, competition is significant. Established e-commerce platforms already provide websites, payments and order-management capabilities. LocalLoop cannot realistically compete through technology alone. Its competitive advantage must instead be based on local knowledge, simplicity and integrated fulfilment.

Second, marketplace network effects create a significant barrier to entry. The platform needs both merchants and consumers. Without sufficient merchants, consumers have limited choice; without sufficient consumers, merchants have limited incentives to participate. A geographically concentrated launch is therefore essential.

Third, logistics can reduce profitability. If customers are geographically dispersed, delivery costs may exceed revenue generated from individual transactions. Scheduled delivery windows and collection points could therefore be more sustainable than universal same-day delivery.

Fourth, SME digital capability remains a challenge. Government evidence continues to identify capability, cost and awareness as barriers to digital adoption (Department for Business and Trade, 2026). A platform that requires extensive training would therefore contradict its own value proposition.

Fifth, cybersecurity and data protection represent important risks. A platform processing customer information and transaction-related data would require strong security, privacy processes and regulatory compliance. Trust would therefore become a fundamental component of customer adoption.

Finally, environmental sustainability requires evidence. Local delivery can reduce duplicated journeys if orders are consolidated, but poorly designed delivery networks may increase traffic. The venture should therefore publish measurable sustainability indicators rather than rely on general claims about “local” commerce.

10. Scalability and Long-Term Sustainability

LocalLoop should adopt a local-first, platform-second growth strategy.

The venture should first establish a successful geographical cluster and validate its business model. Once the technology, onboarding process and fulfilment model have been tested, the same system could be replicated across additional towns and regions.

The software platform provides high scalability because new merchants can be added without proportionally increasing technological infrastructure. Physical fulfilment would remain geographically organised.

Revenue could be generated through merchant subscriptions, transaction fees, fulfilment charges, premium analytics and AI-assisted marketing services. This diversified model could reduce dependence on one revenue stream.

The venture could also create wider social value. Independent retailers and producers contribute to local economies, and improving their ability to participate in digital commerce could help them compete with larger organisations. The rural dimension also creates potential for collaboration with local authorities, business associations and community organisations, supporting merchant recruitment, digital inclusion and local economic development.

Nevertheless, long-term sustainability depends on balancing three stakeholder groups. Customers require convenience and competitive prices; merchants require affordable fees and increased sales; and the venture requires sufficient margins to maintain the platform and fulfilment network. This balance should therefore be continuously tested through pricing experiments and user research.

11. Conclusion

The digital transformation of the UK economy has created substantial opportunities for innovation and new venture creation across e-commerce, digital marketing, SME software, payments and last-mile logistics. However, the most viable opportunities are not necessarily individual technologies. Greater entrepreneurial potential exists in integrating digital technologies around clearly identified user problems.

The UK represents an attractive market because SMEs constitute almost the entire business population. Approximately 5.7 million private-sector businesses operated in the UK at the beginning of 2025, with SMEs representing 99.85% of businesses (Department for Business and Trade, 2025a). At the same time, online sales accounted for 28.3% of retail sales in Great Britain in December 2025, demonstrating the structural importance of digital commerce (Office for National Statistics, 2025).

Task 1 identified four principal opportunity areas: integrated SME digital commerce, rural and local marketplaces, last-mile fulfilment and digital marketing. Each has significant potential, but the strongest opportunity emerges from combining digital commerce with local fulfilment. This combination addresses several related user pain points while creating opportunities for recurring software revenue and more efficient delivery.

Task 2 applied the five stages of Design Thinking to develop LocalLoop UK. The Empathise stage identified the needs of independent businesses, consumers and delivery partners. The Define stage transformed these needs into a specific problem statement. Ideation generated alternative solutions before selecting an integrated digital marketplace and fulfilment model. Prototyping established a geographically focused MVP designed to test critical assumptions at relatively low cost. Finally, the Test stage established quantitative and qualitative measures through which the venture could be refined.

The analysis also demonstrates that Design Thinking should not be treated as a guaranteed formula for entrepreneurial success. User desirability must be combined with technological feasibility, financial viability, operational efficiency, regulatory compliance and sustainability. Its iterative nature is therefore its greatest value in this context: it enables entrepreneurs to identify assumptions, test them with real users and modify the business model according to evidence.

Ultimately, the opportunity created by the UK's digital transformation is not simply to encourage SMEs to “go online”. Many businesses have already begun this process. The more significant entrepreneurial opportunity is to make digital commerce simpler, more integrated and economically viable for businesses that lack the resources and infrastructure of large corporations. LocalLoop UK represents one potential response by connecting digital commerce with local fulfilment and enabling

independent businesses and consumers to participate more effectively in the UK's increasingly digital economy.

Reference List

Bender-Salazar, R. (2023) 'Design thinking as an effective method for problem-setting and needfinding for entrepreneurial teams addressing wicked problems', *Journal of Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, 12, 24. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13731-023-00291-2> (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

Department for Business and Trade (2025a) *Business population estimates for the UK and regions 2025: statistical release*. London: Department for Business and Trade. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/business-population-estimates-2025/business-population-estimates-for-the-uk-and-regions-2025-statistical-release> (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

Department for Business and Trade (2025b) *SME Digital Adoption Taskforce: final report*. London: Department for Business and Trade. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sme-digital-adoption-taskforce-final-report> (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

Department for Business and Trade (2026) *SME Digital Adoption Taskforce: 2026 update*. London: Department for Business and Trade. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sme-digital-adoption-taskforce-2026-update/sme-digital-adoption-taskforce-2026-update> (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (2026) *Future of Rural England Report*. London: Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-of-rural-england-report/future-of-rural-england-report> (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

Didonet, S.R., Simmons, G., Díaz-Villavicencio, G. and Palmer, M. (2016) 'Market orientation's boundary-spanning role to support innovation in SMEs', *Journal of Small Business Management*, 54(sup1), pp. 216–233. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jsbm.12288> (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

Ford, R.C. and Yoho, K.D. (2025) 'Design thinking: Executing your organization's commitment to customer centricity', *Organizational Dynamics*, 54(1), 101077. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2024.101077> (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

Ingle, B.R. (2013) *Design Thinking for Entrepreneurs and Small Businesses: Putting the Power of Design to Work*. Berkeley, CA: Apress. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4302-6182-7> (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

Office for National Statistics (2025) *Retail sales, Great Britain: December 2025*. Newport: Office for National Statistics. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/retailindustry/bulletins/retailsales/december2025> (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

Stanford d.school (2025a) *Design Thinking Bootleg*. Stanford University. Available at: <https://dschool.stanford.edu/tools/design-thinking-bootleg> (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

You, X. (2022) 'Applying design thinking for business model innovation', *Journal of Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, 11, 59. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13731-022-00251-2> (Accessed: 10 August 2026).