

The Human Alchemists: Designing Dialogue as a Catalyst for Social Transformation and Economic Mobility.



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ISBN: ISBN 978-1-910755-47-1

This report examines a project, partnership, or critical moment that made a substantive contribution to improving social mobility and expanding economic opportunity. Drawing on practice-based evidence and reflective insight, it explores how place based, trust led, and community informed approaches can generate meaningful and lasting change.

This report captures the insights and provocations emerging from a special roundtable convened by Designing Dialogue CiC and the RSA. Chaired by Tom Kenyon, Director of Community & Culture at RSA and Professor Rhiannon Jones, Head of Civic and Communities University of Derby and CEO of Designing Dialogue CiC that runs the Social Higher Education Depot (S.H.E.D) to co-design place focused projects to connect communities and civic partners through a unique arts-based methodology, acting as a bridge between communities and civic partners deliver projects that develop agency and creativity. (See <https://designingdialogue.co.uk/>). S.H.E.D is the University of Derby's civic and community flagship programme that creates bespoke environments to collaboratively imagine change for the future and the shedding preconceptions of people and place. It has helped to shape strategy, policy, and research through innovative public engagement programmes, by placing emphasis on an active learning pedagogy, that has to date, engaged with over 42896 people and worked with over 40 partner organisations in 6 UK cities and over 12 countries. (See <https://www.derby.ac.uk/civic/>).

A special roundtable event was hosted at RSA House on the 2nd March 2026, entitled *The Human Alchemists: Designing Dialogue as a Catalyst for Social Transformation and Economic Mobility*. The event brought together sector leaders and practitioners to explore the transformative power of dialogue. Framed around *The Human Alchemists*, the discussion examined how intentionally designed conversation can act as a catalyst for social transformation and economic mobility, surfacing both shared challenges and collective strategies for action.

Civic Alchemy is the point where ordinary ingredients; time, trust, creativity, and a willingness to take risks are combined to create something truly transformative. It's not magic. It's the slow, relational work of bringing people together around shared purpose, and staying open to what emerges. Real change in place cannot be delivered by

institutions acting alone. We need value-added behaviours: openness, humility, active listening, and a willingness to co-create with community rather than prescribe to it. These behaviours shape cultures, and culture shapes outcomes. Universities and civic organisations that understand this are already modelling the “alchemy” needed to make lasting change.

This work has never been more necessary.

At the time of writing this report, there were 1,012,000 young people who were NEET in January to March 2026, an increase of 89,000 on the year and 55,000 on the quarter, demonstrating a clear need for change (ONS, 2026).¹

Communities were involved and empowered through a combination of shared decision making, trusted engagement, and the purposeful redistribution of control. Residents and practitioners worked together through co-development processes that positioned lived experience alongside professional expertise, ensuring that strategies and interventions reflected community priorities rather than institutional assumptions. This approach was reinforced through community led visioning, enabling local people to articulate long term aspirations and shape the direction of change in their own places.

Communities were engaged and given greater agency through a range of approaches that emphasised shared power and meaningful participation. Work was codeveloped with residents and practitioners, ensuring that lived experience informed both design and delivery. Participatory structures such as a Citizens’ Assembly enabled people of different ages and backgrounds to contribute directly to decision making, while community led visioning processes supported local people to articulate priorities and long-term aspirations. Engagement was further strengthened through consultation via trusted local voices, helping reach those less likely to engage with formal structures.

¹ Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2026) ‘Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK: May 2026’. Available at:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/bulletins/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneet/latest> (Accessed: 3 June 2026)

Crucially, institutions deliberately stepped back, reducing top down control to create space for communities to lead, build confidence, and take ownership of change. By backing community capacity, rather than directing outcomes, public bodies enabled greater ownership, confidence, and sustainability in local action.

The outcomes of this way of working included increased confidence among participants as they entered new and unfamiliar spaces, supported by opportunities to engage in exhibitions and produce creative outputs that reinforced self-belief and capability. These outcomes were underpinned by delivery principles that prioritised flexible, place responsive models; a strong focus on developing confidence and other transferable soft skills; and consistent, sustained engagement over time. Key takeaways highlight that genuine community ownership is essential to meaningful impact, that trust built through long term relationships is critical, and that multi agency collaboration can deliver measurable results. Crucially, empowering a diverse range of voices not only strengthens participation but also enhances the quality and durability of outcomes.



Image credit: Jones, R (2019) This is Derby, Designing Dialogue CiC

Behavior, choice, or method creates the “alchemy”?

Across the three discussion groups, a shared emphasis emerged on the role of social capital, trust, and accessible spaces in expanding opportunity and supporting life transitions. Group 1 foregrounded social capital as a foundational resource, highlighting the importance of making informal networks visible and creating connections beyond formal institutions. Examples ranged from donor led and skills focused initiatives such as Arts Emergency and the BFT Programme, to more locally embedded models like Citizen First in Liverpool, finds and backs Liverpool’s hidden entrepreneurs through CV-less recruitment, and 'provide[s] a year's Real Living Wage salary, seed funding and specialist support, and systematically mobilises local businesses, civic bodies and public services around each entrepreneur'. These conversations surfaced tensions around scalability, unpaid work, and geographic concentration, alongside questions of how to sustain meaningful opportunities outside London; particularly through strengthened ecosystems in cities such as Manchester and Derby.

When focused on working with young people, underscoring that progress depends on trust, consistency, and sustained relationships across schools, partners, and places. Participants stressed the need for human centred, strengths based approaches that enable genuine choice and recognise lived experience and social context. Early intervention, often before the age of eight, was seen as critical to shifting life trajectories, particularly for young people experiencing instability at home or classified as NEET. Discussion also highlighted the blurred boundaries between education, place, safeguarding, and wellbeing, alongside the decisive role played by warm, stable adults in providing continuity and support.

Critical to the alchemy required is a highly attuned attention to spaces of learning and belonging, identifying public libraries, open learning models, and hybrid civic spaces as vital infrastructures for awareness, confidence, and access. Participants noted persistent curriculum gaps, disparities in access, and challenges faced by care experienced young people during transitions. Many people struggle to navigate office based norms, prompting a call for alternative pathways such as outdoor and immersive learning environments, apprenticeship innovation (for example, Blueprint Comms), and

publicly accessible study forums. Collectively, these reflections point towards a more plural, place responsive learning ecosystem; one that values informal learning, supports transition, and broadens participation across the life course.



Image credit: Jones, R (2022) Timber Festival, National Forrest, Designing Dialogue CiC

What changes because of Civic Alchemy?

Because of civic alchemy, change occurs simultaneously at the level of individuals, communities, institutions, and systems. Governance shifts from being centrally prescribed to more localised and responsive, with government increasingly focused on removing barriers rather than directing action. Existing networks are mobilised and connected across sectors, enabling learning to circulate more freely and reducing institutional silos. Funding becomes more purposeful and consistent, supporting sustainable, long term, people focused solutions rather than short term fixes.

Institutions begin to operate with greater coherence and flexibility, aligning around shared outcomes and distributing resources in ways that sustain local capacity.

At the community and individual level, civic alchemy generates new skills, confidence, and a renewed sense of autonomy. Communities develop identities that go beyond policy designations or local plans, grounded instead in shared purpose and lived experience. Shared value approaches strengthen collaboration between civic actors, public agencies, and partners, while leadership demonstrates genuine care and long term commitment. As institutions step back and communities step forward, previously excluded groups are included through increased access to funding and decision making. A broader cultural shift emerges from short political cycles towards sustained civic investment (accompanied by growing awareness that all change is inherently political). This results in greater unity of purpose across government and civic society, a movement away from government led delivery towards community driven solutions, and, crucially, a renewed sense of hope and possibility rooted in place.

One message is consistent.

Lasting social mobility does not emerge from isolated interventions, but from sustained, place-based relationships built on trust, shared power, and human centred practice. When communities are treated not as recipients but as partners, something transformative happens; skills grow, confidence deepens, local identity strengthens, and hope takes root. The following calls to action distil what made this ‘alchemy’ possible and point towards a more collaborative, flexible, and community led way of working.

Civic Alchemy is where practice meets policy, where pedagogy meets place, and where the conditions are created for discourse to commence. Not at the end of a policy cycle, but an open and inclusive dialogue from the beginning. Because when people are only invited in at the end, after decisions are forecast, methods fixed, and strategies written; the consequence is that the lived experience is overlooked and those left to carry the weight of the outcome go unheard. That is where harm happens. That is where systems fail.

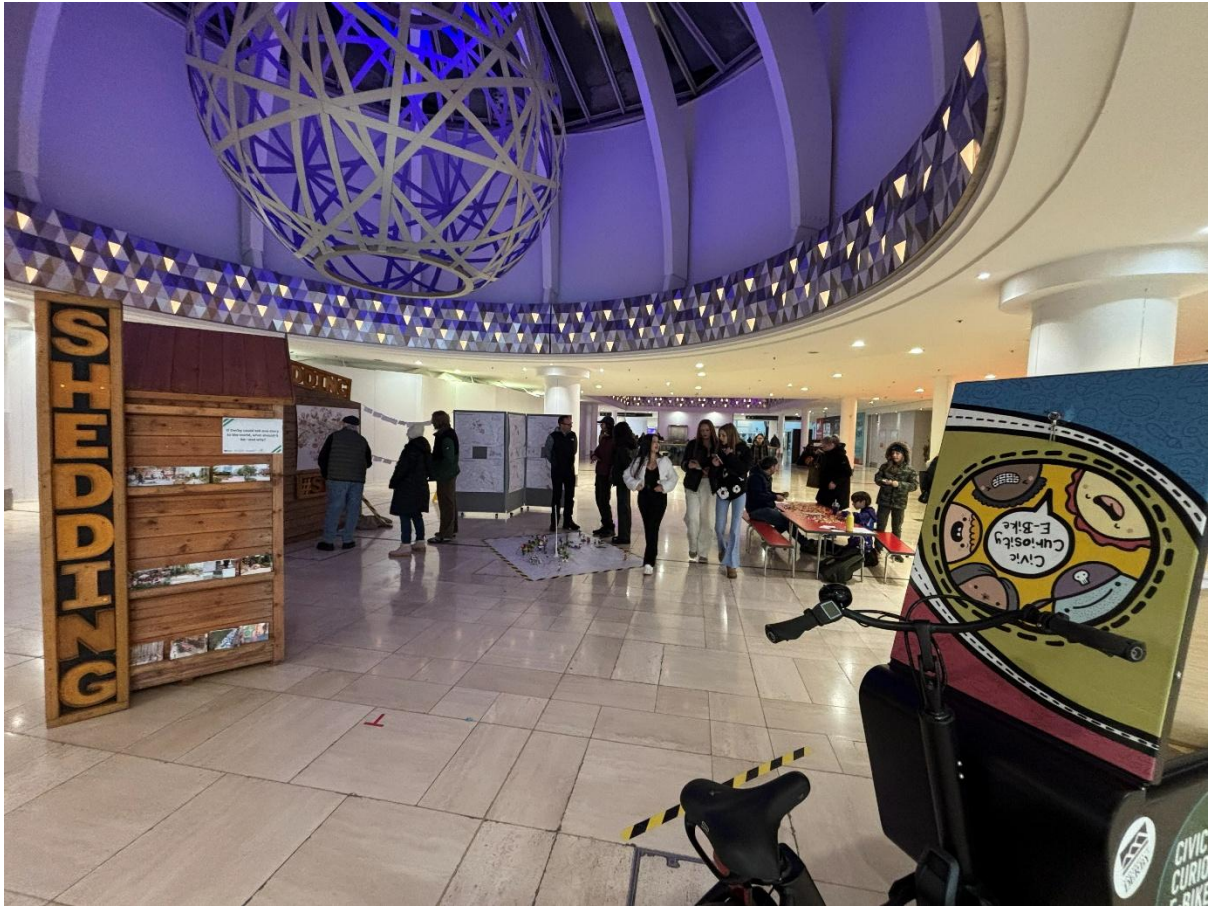


Image Credit: Jones, R (2026) Derbyion, Derby City Centre, Public Realm Consultation with Planit, Designing Dialogue CiC

Together, these actions point to a shift from delivery *to* communities towards building futures *with* them. This is evident in the work of Designing Dialogue, which was created precisely to address that gap. To bring people into the process early to make the invisible visible, to surface tensions, to create shared language, and to form new ways of working together that are grounded in communities rather than imposed upon them. Designing Dialogue co-designs place-focused projects to connect communities and civic partners. By working through unique place-focused and arts-based methodology, acting as a bridge between communities and civic partners to co-design and deliver projects that develop agency and creativity.

Projects and partnerships that successfully improved social mobility shared a common foundation: they were co-designed with communities, grounded in place, and built through sustained relationships of trust. Change did not emerge from short-term interventions, but from long-term, cross sector collaboration that valued lived

experience and empowered community voices. This trust based, human centred approach created the conditions for a distinctive ‘alchemy’ where consistent engagement, real choice, and accessible cultural and learning spaces expanded social capital, particularly for young people. This work takes time, time to afford better metrics on KEF 5 and HEFI not as broad as couple be to recognise the long term impact of civic work in place. From KEF 5 onwards, the NCCPE guidance² emphasises that narrative statements should move beyond quantitative metrics to provide reflective, evidence-informed accounts of how institutions embed public and community engagement strategically, demonstrate impact, and articulate a coherent culture of civic practice.

The resulting impact of civic alchemy is clear - communities experienced tangible and intangible shifts: stronger local identities, increased skills and confidence, more inclusive decision-making, and a renewed sense of hope. At the same time, institutions and systems became more flexible, collaborative, and locally rooted, signalling a wider cultural move towards community led solutions as both credible and necessary for lasting change.

So, what will you ask of government, of civic and knowledge leaders, and, most critically, what will you demand of yourself to spark the alchemy?”

Some suggestions:

Government: Resource Universities, partners and communities on a long-term basis to achieve their civic ambitions.

Institutions: Ensure organisations have a clear structure and leadership to support its ambition to meet local needs and to leverage its convening power.

Individuals: Focus on co-producing policy with communities and build authentic partnerships to enhance mutual benefit.

² National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) (2020) ‘Knowledge Exchange Framework: Public and community engagement – NCCPE briefing’. Bristol: NCCPE.

Resources:

[Artists and universities: The ripple effects of creative careers](#)

[UKRI R&D strategy for the creative and cultural economy](#)

[Artists and creative practitioners working with Higher Education: Case Studies, Reflections and Resources](#)

[Civic and Place: framing the role of cultural development in Art and Design Working Paper](#)

[University of Derby Civic Lab](#)

<https://designingdialogue.co.uk/>

[Higher Education and Funding: Threat of Insolvency and International Students](#)

