

AT A GLANCE

HOW CAN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES SUPPORT THE SOCIAL ECONOMY TO GROW?

21st May 2026, (in-person, Urban Hax, Walsall)

Please see below the session summary of notes from the May 2026 Social Economy FORUM meeting focused on 'How can interdisciplinary approaches support the social economy to grow?'.

OUR HOSTS | This session opportunity was kindly hosted by [Urban Hax](#), Walsall Football Club, Walsall, WS1 4SA.

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In our last Social Economy Forum we heard insights from three diverse organisations that are actively breaking down sector silos. **Urban Hax**, a creative manufacturing maker space is proving that shared tools and community-led engineering can regenerate neighbourhoods. **Glue Collective**, an artists' collaborative is demonstrating how radical creativity and shared spaces can build deep community trust and **BCU STEAMhouse**, a university innovation hub is bridging the gap between academia, tech and the creative arts.

Together, these distinct approaches show that when we mix different industries and lived experiences, we create a collision of ideas and innovative solutions. By bringing in cognitive diversity and treating our communities as co-builders rather than passive beneficiaries, we can build a much more resilient sector that scales its impact.

Our guest speakers included:

- [Geoff Henderson](#), Director, [Urban Hax CIC](#)
- [Jemima Graham](#), Director, [Glue Collective](#)
- [Alexa Hartwell](#), Head of [STEAM Academy](#), BCU

URBAN HAX CIC

Urban Hax is a community-led makerspace and incubator based in Walsall. Founded in 2014 by Geoff Henderson and his team, its mission is to give everyday people including hobbyists, entrepreneurs and artists access to space, tools and high-tech equipment that would normally be completely out of financial reach.

Urban Hax functions under the belief that creativity crosses all cultural and social barriers. By putting 3D printers, laser cutters and traditional woodworking or fashion tools in a shared room, they bring together an incredibly diverse mix of people from retired engineers to street artists to share skills and collaborate.

Key community projects

Urban Hax through its sharing and making approach works with communities to build trust and break down local segregation.

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- **Makernet:** Funded by the National Lottery, this initiative expands Urban Hax's reach beyond their main hub by embedding mini-makerspaces deep within local neighbourhoods. It ensures that residents who can't easily travel to the town centre still have access to design, prototype and fabrication tools.
- **Walsall Tool Shack:** Run as a community lending library, the Tool Shack provides an affordable way for residents to borrow tools for DIY projects, helping people maintain their homes, save money and pick up practical hands-on skills along the way.
- **Walsall Creative Communities Project:** A dedicated initiative designed to bring Walsall's highly multicultural but historically segregated communities together through creative showcases, design challenges and open forums.

Future growth plans

- Urban Hax's future plans includes an ambitious revival of Walsall's historic, Grade II* listed Guildhall building. They are turning this heritage landmark into a dynamic Creative Industries Enterprise Centre. The space features creative workshops (covering digital media, ceramics, and virtual reality production), communal incubation spaces, a public café and a gallery.
- Urban Hax is heavily involved in the Social Improvement District plan for Walsall. While traditional Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) focus on commercial retail and footfall, a Social Improvement District plan shifts the focus to community wealth-building.

Geoff's top tips for working creatively

- Creative conversations are key.
- Diverse cross sector and interdisciplinary boards and teams are vital for growth and innovation.
- The ability to speak in tongues. Learn and navigate different spaces unfamiliar to you.
- Collaboration across public, private, academia and social economy can create talent pools.
- Meet people where they're at and play to each other's strengths.
- The role of hyper-local partnerships in building community trust is essential. Often shiny new buildings or formal looking spaces can deter communities, mini-maker spaces have helped to build that essential trust from the outset.
- The role of diverse clusters and cross sector alliances are key to local social economy growth.

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GLUE COLLECTIVE

Glue Collective is a workers cooperative of interdisciplinary artists that focuses on using play, creativity, nature and the arts to bind communities together. By transforming ordinary community spaces into hands-on environments, they bring together people of all ages and backgrounds to experiment and create. Play is used as a process to unlock imagination.

Key Community Projects

- **Mobile creative spaces:** Glue Collective brings the art studio directly to the people. They design and deploy mobile creative units packed with clay, paint, wood and recycled materials into community parks, housing estates and festivals, lowering the barrier to creative participation.
- **Eco-Arts and land:** Glue Collective frequently works with natural materials and green spaces. They lead community-build projects such as constructing outdoor clay ovens, community gardens and natural structures, showing how collective work can revitalise forgotten patches of land.
- **Creative wellbeing:** Targeted sessions that partner with local health and social care providers. These workshops use craft and slow-making processes to support individuals struggling with loneliness, anxiety and mental health challenges.

Future plans

Jemima put to us some powerful provocations around how we define value in the social and cultural economy. The value created is deeply relational, built on trust and reciprocity, adaptable and balanced and cannot be measured in financial terms alone. She is currently bringing to the fore the idea of the Artist's Pound which is based on the principles of the Gift Economy.

Artists Pound refers to the economic and social multiplier effect created when money is spent directly within the local creative ecosystem. It represents a shift away from standard economics to show how investing in artists and grassroots creators generates massive, unique value that stays in the community.

When you spend an Artist's Pound such as funding a local arts initiative or buying from a local creator that money stays local. The artist spends it at the local print shop, buys supplies from the neighbourhood hardware store and pays a local helper. The money circulates within the local economy multiple times, compounding its value.

Jemima's top tips

- The most exciting work is in the gaps not in siloes. We don't experience life in sectors or siloes. Life is complex and messy!
- Grow people's capacity to grow together.
- Take your work outdoors and use objects and materials to inspire new ways of doing things.

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- Jemima invites everyone to play! Use play as a creative process to reduce fear of failure and develop growth mindsets.
- Interdisciplinary spaces allow depth of impact over scale of impact.

BCU STEAMhouse

BCU STEAMhouse is a centre for collaborative innovation created by Birmingham City University (BCU) in partnership with the arts organization Eastside Projects. Its mission is to support regional growth by putting the "A" (Arts and Creativity) into STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths).

Instead of letting tech specialists, scientists and creatives work in separate silos, STEAMhouse forces them into the same room. It brings together community, micro-businesses, students, corporate teams and university academics where they can access high-tech tools, business mentorship and experimental workshops to solve real-world industry and societal problems.

They use structured group dynamics and open-source innovation frameworks to prove that anyone can innovate if they are given the right environment, the right tools and the freedom to experiment.

Future plans

Alexa as the Head of STEAM academy has been involved in the development of STEAM pedagogy into the schools' curriculum. The curriculum includes design thinking, human-centred design and hacks. STEAM allows children to look at challenge led solutions and they can prototype their own ideas, moving away from memory-based learning to hands-on tinkering. There is also a teacher qualification for primary school teachers. The roll-out of this approach across schools in the West Midlands will see the next generation of social and creative entrepreneurs developing their skills and mindsets in interdisciplinary approaches.

Alexa's top tips

- The creation of safe spaces to experiment, test and fail is important.
- Open-source innovation tools are available on the web, use them to unlock new ways of doing things [Innovation toolbox | Collaborative methods and activities](#)
- BCU students are engaged in community challenge events, working with the social economy is a key part of this strategy.
- Attend a STEAMhouse event [Event Listings STEAMhouse | What's on in Birmingham](#)

Urban Hax, Glue Collective and BCU STEAMhouse prove that the social economy doesn't lack talent or ideas it needs to be able to connect them. By shifting from a scarcity mindset to a maker mindset, these organisations show that the tools to fix our communities are already in the room. Real resilience happens when we break down professional hierarchies, share our resources and let creativity happen.

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Regional considerations

- How can we better support local hubs that bring artists, tech people, manufacturers and residents to work together under one roof?
- What would it take to shift regional regeneration frameworks from purely commercial Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) to SIDs that prioritise community wealth-building.
- Social enterprises and charities may consider recruiting board members and advisory panels based on diverse ways of thinking (e.g. creatives, grassroots activists, engineers).
- Funders and local government should expand procurement metrics beyond basic financial transactions to measure the social multiplier effect, actively tracking how direct investments in local creative and maker ecosystems generate local socio-emotional wealth and civic pride.
- Build the future pipeline by supporting school programmes that blend arts with science and tech to train the next generation of problem solvers.

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Our thanks to all who attended this session, our speakers and for the engaging contribution to this topic.

