

RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

Overall aim: understand how small businesses in Newham make sense of AI and decide whether it is useful in their work.

Objective 1

Map awareness, use, training and concerns in a short pilot survey.

Objective 2

Explore how relevance, privacy, trust and confidence shape those responses.

OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

I combined a scoping review, a short pilot survey and conversations with business owners. The survey covered awareness, use, knowledge, concerns and training. It received 15 responses: 11 from Newham and four from Walthamstow.

Participants ranged from sole traders to businesses with 11-50 employees, across goods and services. I used the pilot to identify questions for the wider study, rather than to produce representative data.

More than 94% of Newham businesses are micro-businesses.

01 Pilot findings

Newham respondents, n = 11

10/11

aware of AI tools



3/11

currently use AI



3/11 Trained on digital tools or AI

8/11 Only a "basic idea" of AI

7/11 Privacy / data concern

5/11 Accuracy concern

3/11 Not enough knowledge to judge risks

Each block = one respondent. Counts are separate aggregates. Respondents could select more than one concern.

Most had heard of tools such as ChatGPT or Microsoft Copilot, but awareness did not necessarily mean knowing how to apply them. Reported uses included research, drafting, image creation and gathering information. One respondent said AI had changed their business for the better.

02 Conversations with owners

Independent coffee shop

The owner was familiar with AI and interested in using it to streamline processes and make operations quicker.

Massage therapists

Some questioned what AI could add to work that depended largely on human technique and expertise. Their concern was whether it had a useful role in their work.

Chicken shop

The business had operated for around 20 years. Its owner was suspicious of AI, particularly around privacy and data, and preferred established methods. Yet he was open to learning if somebody showed him how it could be used.

"Clients' data is a very sensitive aspect which makes me reluctant in involving AI in my business since there's so much unknown to it at the moment."

Survey respondent, quoted in the report

Getting responses through online networks proved difficult, so I spent more time approaching businesses directly. On Green Street, language differences and uncertainty about my UCL connection sometimes made conversations harder. A university connection did not automatically create trust.

03 How the fieldwork changed my understanding of AI literacy

Access → Awareness → Relevance → Trust → Confidence → Informed use

I began by asking what stopped businesses from adopting AI. The conversations suggested that adoption was too narrow an end goal. These stages are a way to read the pilot, not a model. A business that understands AI and decides not to use it may be making an informed choice.

04 Next stage of the research

The survey remains open until the end of November 2026.

A larger, more varied sample

Recruit across locations, sectors, sizes and digital confidence. Review gaps monthly and target groups still missing.

Recruitment and trust

Compare online outreach, visits and introductions through familiar local organisations. Record routes, refusals and incomplete approaches where practical.

Language and accessibility

Test shorter plain-language invitations, translations and supported conversations. Keep core questions consistent and record adjustments.

Planned qualitative conversations

Use interviews or small groups to explore relevance, risk and trust, and whether existing support is known, accessible and useful.

A note on the pilot

Eleven Newham responses cannot represent the borough. The conversations were exploratory rather than formal interviews. Recruitment, language and my position as a UCL student affected some interactions. These observations point to questions for the wider study rather than conclusions about particular communities or areas of Newham.

What might be worth testing?

After reviewing a larger sample, the collaboration could test AI clinics built around an owner's problem, sector-specific or peer learning, and short guidance on protecting data and checking outputs. The pilot cannot establish which approach will work locally. Businesses should help shape and evaluate any trial.