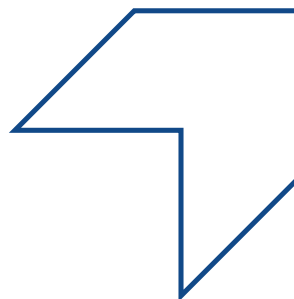
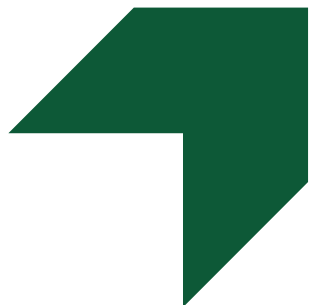


Opportunity for Everyone

The North East Combined Authority's
Annual Equality Report (2024-25)



Contents

Foreword	03
Executive summary	04
The North East Combined Authority - People and Places	05
Equality objectives 2024-2025	06
Progress against 24-25 objectives	09
Our role as an employer	09
Our role as a commissioner	12
Our role as a convener	16
Looking to the future: 2025-2028 Equality Objectives	19



Foreword

from North East Mayor Kim McGuinness

Equality, diversity and inclusion are at the heart of my vision for the North East.

I firmly believe that to unlock our region's full potential, we must tap into the diverse talents, skills, and perspectives of all our people. Equality, diversity, and inclusion are not just values—they are economic imperatives.

To truly make the North East the home of opportunity for everyone, we need to prioritise inclusive economic growth. This means creating an economy that works for everyone—one that ensures no one is left behind and every person, regardless of where they come from, can contribute to and benefit from our region's prosperity.

Strong growth sectors – drawing on talent from diverse backgrounds combined with a thriving foundational economy that is built on inclusivity – will be key to this success. By ensuring our businesses can recruit and retain a diverse, healthy, and highly skilled workforce, we will create the conditions for long-term growth. This is the future we must build: an economy where opportunity is open to all, and everyone has the tools they need to thrive.

Equally, our internal policies at the North East CA should mirror the inclusivity we seek in the wider region. We are committed to fostering a workplace where barriers to opportunity are removed. A place where everyone's voice is heard, everyone feels they belong, and

everyone has the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to our collective success.

At the forefront of our ambition to create a vibrant, growing economy, we will champion digital inclusion, improve health outcomes, tackle educational inequality, build stronger neighbourhoods, and develop an integrated transport network that serves everyone—no matter where they live or what their background is.

One of the most pressing challenges in our region today is child poverty. Tackling this is not just a moral obligation, it is an economic necessity. High rates of childhood poverty and hardship rob young people of the chance to reach their full potential and ultimately hold our entire region back. For the North East to thrive, we must ensure that every child—no matter their background—can grow up with access to the opportunities and resources that will allow them to flourish.

That is why I'm proud to launch our three-year equality objectives, which focus on our roles as an employer, a commissioner and a convener. These objectives will not only shape a more equitable future for the North East but will also lay the foundation for an economy that works for all, in a region that we can all be proud to call home.

Source: Detailed evidence base available at: <https://evidencehub.northeast-ca.gov.uk/>



Executive summary

The connection between equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) and sustainable economic prosperity is well documented.

Evidence shows that businesses creating equitable workplaces are in a stronger position to recruit and retain talent and are more profitable and innovative than others.

It's simple: a thriving economy needs a fair economy. By creating opportunity and removing barriers to success, we can enable our businesses to access a more diverse and skilled workforce. We all win.

In our first year, against a challenging regional backdrop, the North East Combined Authority (North East CA) has made significant strides toward embedding equality, diversity, and inclusion at the heart of everything we do.

Through a range of impactful initiatives, investments and engagement activities, we have created opportunities that residents and businesses can both contribute to and benefit from. We have also worked hard to ensure that our employees can feel a strong sense of belonging. We're proud of our internal equality impact assessment process and the positive employee response, coupled with our tailored training, guidance, and data-driven approach, which

has reinforced our commitment to meaningful change.

Looking ahead, we're excited to launch our ambitious three-year objectives, developed through extensive research and consultation. These objectives will drive our efforts to create a more inclusive, fair, and forward-thinking North East, one where opportunity is open to all and where we can all take pride in calling it home. We look forward to sharing our progress and building on this momentum in the years ahead.

Source: Detailed evidence base available at: <https://evidencehub.northeast-ca.gov.uk/>



The North East Combined Authority: People and Places

The North East CA spans dynamic cities, historic towns, and striking coastlines and countryside.



Home to just over
2 million people



The population is increasingly diverse -
6.6% of residents are from ethnic minority backgrounds



Nine of England's 20 most disadvantaged communities are in the North East



Child poverty affects
30% of children

Its communities, rooted in a rich natural and cultural heritage, are home to just over 2 million people across County Durham, Gateshead, Newcastle upon Tyne, North Tyneside, Northumberland, South Tyneside, and Sunderland.

Population patterns vary: around 29% live in the largest urban centres (Newcastle, Sunderland, and Gateshead), while others are spread across smaller towns and rural areas. The population is increasingly diverse—6.6% of residents are from ethnic minority backgrounds, rising to nearly 10% among under-50s. The region also has significant populations of specific ethnic groups, including Iranian, Bangladeshi, Jewish, and Chinese communities. Many LGBTQ+ residents and people with diverse gender identities also contribute to the region's rich social fabric.

However, the region faces persistent challenges. Child poverty affects 30% of children, wages are the lowest in the UK, and economic inactivity is high, particularly due to ill health. Disability and unpaid care levels are also above the national average, and access to qualifications remains below that of other regions. Nine of England's 20 most disadvantaged communities are in the North East, and nearly a third of residents are at risk of transport-related social exclusion.

Despite this, the North East CA sees a region full of potential. We passionately believe that these challenges are not insurmountable. We have many amazing assets to build on, including internationally

renowned universities, a great network of employment support providers, a strong and co-ordinated skills offer across sectors reaching a diverse audience and a vibrant and passionate voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector supporting stronger communities. Our work towards fighting inequality aims to capitalise on these assets and make the North East a great place to live, work, visit and invest.



Our 2024-25 equality objectives

In June 2024, the North East CA's Mayor and Cabinet agreed the following one-year equality objectives.

As an employer

Area	Long term commitment	Equality objective
01 Diversity	We will take steps to ensure the diversity of our workforce reflects the population we serve.	Develop the systems required to collect and analyse employee data so that we can identify diversity gaps and develop an action plan to begin addressing them, including proactive actions within recruitment processes.
02 Equity	We will ensure that our policies are applied fairly, enabling all staff to thrive and contribute to the success of the organisation.	Develop the systems required to assess whether policies and procedures are being applied equitably, so that we can identify any disparities and develop an action plan to begin addressing them.
03 Inclusion	We will create the conditions that support staff to feel valued, respected and heard at work.	Develop a better understanding of staff experiences of inclusion through a programme of engagement, developing an action plan to begin addressing any challenges and opportunities uncovered.
04 Training	We will ensure that all staff and Cabinet are confident in adhering to the Public Sector Equality Duty.	Ensure all employees and Cabinet members complete equality, diversity and inclusion training on a regular basis.

As a commissioner and deliverer of services

Area	Long term commitment	Equality objective
05 Evidence	We will develop a deep understanding of the inequalities faced by residents in our region.	Proactively embed equalities in the existing economic analysis of the organisation, targeting gaps in evidence, and using our evidence work to champion action to address issues of inequality. We will work with partners and communities to understand the impact of inequalities on people's lives.
06 Strategic plans	We will embed actions to reduce inequalities and promote inclusion across all Combined Authority investments and policies.	Identify and embed opportunities to address inequalities across all portfolios and strategic plans.
07 Guidance	We will embed actions to reduce inequalities and promote inclusion across all Combined Authority investments and policies.	Develop guidance for colleagues and partners to embed reducing inequalities and promoting inclusion into the design, appraisal, monitoring and evaluation of all Combined Authority policy and investments.
08 Funding	We will consistently apply the principles of equity and inclusion to the way we make funding accessible.	Work with partners and other funders to ensure our funding opportunities are accessible to organisations working with some of our most under-represented residents.
09 Data	We will use data and evidence to drive action to address inequalities and promote inclusion.	Develop systems to consistently collect, monitor and evaluate disaggregated data about the people benefitting from our funded activity, taking action to identify and address gaps in participation.

As a convener

Area	Long term commitment	Equality objective
10 Engagement	We will build strong relationships with those around us to help us achieve our goals for the region.	Develop an approach to inclusive engagement that helps to build positive relationships with diverse audiences so that our policies reflect the needs and ambitions of our people and communities.
11 Collaboration	We will build strong relationships with those around us to help us achieve our goals for the region.	Establish an Equalities and Inclusion working group with membership comprising of colleagues from all seven local authorities plus other key stakeholders.
12 Membership	We will take steps to appoint a diverse membership to our boards which reflects the communities we serve.	Regularly review membership of advisory groups and governance forums, ensuring that membership is diverse and inclusive.



Progress against our 2024-25 equality objectives

Our role as an employer

Employee diversity

We believe that diversity follows from creating an inclusive workplace, and it is our ambition to create an employee community that fosters inclusivity, where every voice is heard, and everyone feels a sense of belonging. During 2024-25 we launched our employee voice platform and completed our first baseline survey, which has helped us to understand how we can build on employee workplace inclusion. We have also launched the ‘open door’ which is a confidential digital tool to enable employees to share feedback with us.

Since the formation of the North East CA in May 2024, we have been developing an online system to collect and analyse employee data. The tables to follow compare the composition of the current employee team (from the information provided online by employees) with the wider North East demographic to identify how well we reflect our regional population.

The employee data currently available to us suggests that there remain opportunities for the North East CA to build a more diverse workforce and that our workforce may not currently be representative of the wider North East region. This is difficult to say for sure as a large percentage of our employees have not yet shared their personal information. We are committed to building a fuller picture of our employee data so we can measure progress towards growing a more diverse workforce.

At the time of writing, the North East CA had 209 employees.

Age range	North East CA headcount	Percentage	Regional percentage
18-25	9	4%	15%
26-35	48	23%	19%
36-45	62	30%	18%
46-55	63	30%	18%
56-64	24	11%	19%
65+	3	1%	11%

Gender	North East CA headcount	Percentage	Regional percentage
Male	86	41%	49%
Female	123	59%	51%
Prefer to self-describe	0		

Ethnic group	North East CA headcount	Percentage	Regional percentage
White	46	22%	93%
Ethnic Minority (excluding white minority groups)	2	1%	7%
No data available	161	77%	

Disability	North East CA headcount	Percentage	Regional percentage
Yes	2	1%	31%
No	31	15%	68%
No data available	176	84%	1%

Sexual orientation	North East CA headcount	Percentage	Regional percentage
Gay, Lesbian or Bisexual	1	0%	4%
Heterosexual or Straight	42	20%	91%
No data available	166	79%	5%

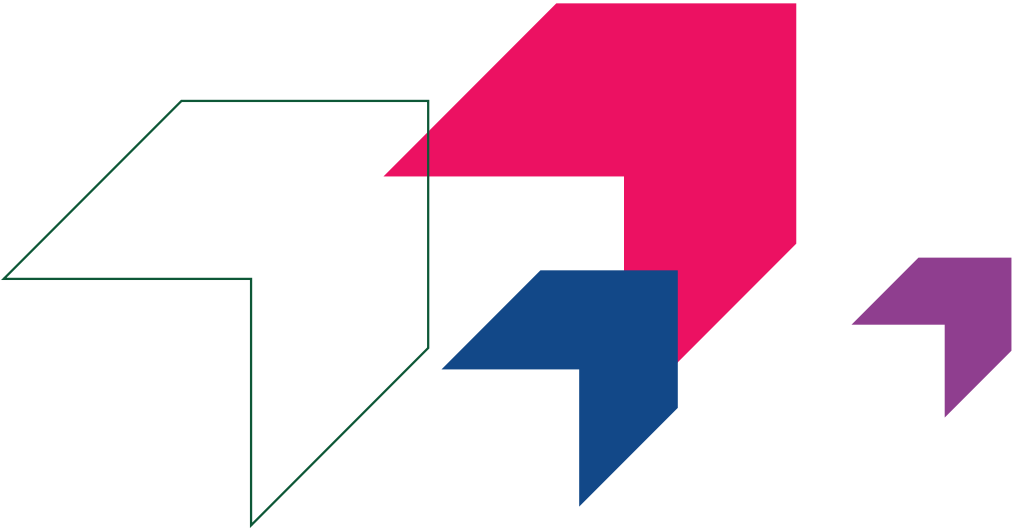
We are proud to have signed up to several social impact pledges that support our communities including the Armed Forces Covenant, the Age-Friendly Employer Pledge, the Race at Work Charter and the Disability Confident Scheme. An internal task group manages progress towards these social impact pledges, and we are committed to reporting on progress.

Workplace equality

Our mission is for the North East to be known as the home of real opportunity and we are building our workplace to reflect this, to ensure that all staff have access to employment opportunities, learning opportunities and policies which mean they are treated fairly, in a way that takes into consideration their background and identity where appropriate.

For the 2025-26 employee survey, our strategy is to expand the baseline and introduce a tailored equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) survey. This survey will feature questions designed by occupational psychologists with expertise in this area.

Our focus during 2025-2026 will be to increase awareness of equalities and to build a deeper understanding of employee sentiment about this. Feedback will be analysed and a set of key initiatives to drive impactful outcomes will be developed and measured against key performance indicators.



Inclusion

Coming together as part of a new organisation, our employees have experienced a significant amount of change in the last year. We have taken steps to help employees feel more included, ensuring they feel a sense of belonging as we build our new ways of working. We have fortnightly employee huddles, a weekly employee email and teams regularly come together to celebrate events such as International Women's Day and Ramadan.

Workplace values and behaviours are key components to drive successful environments for our staff to thrive. Our values were created at the start of our journey, and we continue to embed those values through our everyday working lives.

Our values

- Strive for brilliance
- Be inclusive
- One team
- Make it happen
- Drive sustainability

As part of this commitment, our talent framework will capture and reinforce our values, while our new recognition tool, High Fives, will celebrate employees who exemplify our values and highlight the positive impact of their actions.

Our People Team have established colleague engagement groups to support our journey and build on employee voice. The culture and engagement group brings together 'culture ambassadors' from across our organisation who strive to reinforce our values. Connected to our culture group is our social and events group. The social and events group focuses on our newly designed culture calendar which is part of our efforts to become a more inclusive organisation.

And finally, we have created a 'Fairer North East Employee Group' which is attended by colleagues from across the organisation. The Fairer North East Group aims to champion EDI across the North East CA. This group is a space for employees to share ideas, promote best practice, and learn from each other in a supportive, inclusive environment.

Learning and Development

In September 2024 we ran our first 'Fairer North East' week. This was a week of activities and information sharing for employees, dedicated to celebrating inclusion and taking action to embed equalities in our day-to-day work. We plan to make this an annual event.

As part of the week's activities, we launched a section on the intranet which is dedicated to equalities. We created a training video for employees on the Public Sector Equality Duty and we reviewed

and re-launched our Equality Impact Assessment process and ran two hour-long training sessions on this, delivered by a local training provider. We also delivered an employee 'learning hour' session about gender-responsive policy making, which was attended by 57 employees.

Following on from this, we have invited various external speakers to run 'learning hour' sessions on topics relevant to EDI, usually once a month. These have included topics such as dementia, violence against women and girls, the One Million Women and Girls Campaign, International Women's Day, challenges for young disabled people and left behind neighbourhoods. We plan to continue this so that EDI training is regularly offered to colleagues. Feedback from colleagues was collected after each session and has been very positive with employees commenting on the value of receiving insights from a credible organisation, the value of regionally contextualised insights and the opportunity for a conversation with experts.

Recently we have reviewed our approach to organising events and created comprehensive information including an inclusive event checklist for employees about how to consider physical accessibility and communication needs during events. We aim to launch training on inclusive event management to ensure North East CA events are accessible and inclusive as standard. We are also working with local specialist organisations on our approach to inclusive communications and documents and have attended training on this. We have updated our house style guide with our learnings so far and aim to produce a separate guidance document and checklist on inclusive communications.

Our role as a commissioner

Data and Evidence

As part of developing a deeper understanding of the inequalities faced by residents in our region, this year we have created a comprehensive set of policy briefings. The briefings use up to date, regional data which creates a firm evidence base and provides colleagues with a regional profile of inequality, which can be used as part of business casing, impact assessing, and as part of our wider decision-making processes.



We also created a specific set of policy briefings focussing on violence against women and girls, which we shared with colleagues during White Ribbon Day. The briefings were split per policy area, showing how this impacts on those accessing services such as transport, housing, skills and employment. The data has been used as part of equality impact assessments and in business cases.

We have continued to update the North East Evidence Hub with more data and analysis that helps employees understand inequalities across the region and this is used in business casing and evaluation processes, and we are working with ONS Local to uncover more data on the residents that face the greatest barriers to work.

And finally, we have begun to develop a process for collecting, monitoring and evaluating disaggregated data about our project beneficiaries. This involves a detailed data capture schema which asks for details about the personal characteristics of those benefitting from our funded activity and is mandatory for certain projects with people-focussed outputs and targets. There are examples of good work across the organisation where colleagues have started to analyse this disaggregated beneficiary data for use in live and new programmes of work. A working group has been established to embed this way of working.



Case study: Considering accessibility: Electric bus event

A great example of how the North East Combined Authority is working alongside partners and communities to understand the real-life impact of our initiatives is the 2024 electric bus event. As part of the Levelling Up Fund and the ZEBRA 2 (Zero Emission Bus Regional Areas) programme, the North East secured funding to introduce 95 zero-emission buses across the region.

These new vehicles come with enhanced accessibility features, including space for up to two wheelchair users, clear audio-visual announcements, a hearing loop, and an external noise sensor to alert pedestrians when the bus is moving quietly at low speeds.

To ensure these buses truly meet the needs of those who rely on them, we hosted a dedicated event for accessibility groups and bus users. This gave people the opportunity to explore the buses in a safe, controlled environment and get hands-on experience with the new features. More importantly, it created a platform for open dialogue about the day-to-day challenges many face when using public transport.

Representatives from partner organisations including Nexus, Local Authorities, and bus operators were also on hand to answer technical questions and hear directly from users. The event not only helped us strengthen existing relationships with community groups but also fostered new connections. It was a valuable step in making sure these incoming buses meet the high accessibility standards we've committed to delivering.



Strategic plans

As a newly formed Combined Authority with a newly elected Mayor, strategic plans were created and approved soon after the transition. Intentional efforts were made to ensure that these plans were aligned with organisational equality objectives and held EDI at their core. As such, opportunities to address inequality have been identified across all work areas and these are reflected in our three-year equality objectives.

We have also spent time ensuring that our new Single Assurance Framework, which outlines the processes and templates we use for designing and delivering projects, includes reducing inequalities and promoting inclusion at all relevant points. Colleagues must now evidence that they have considered inequality at multiple stages of a project, from design right through to delivery, monitoring, and evaluation. Our equality impact assessment process has been reviewed and revised in line with national examples of best practice. We relaunched this process in September 2024 and provided online and face to face training to all employees. We have since seen 15 equality impact assessments completed, including for some very large pieces of work (such as adult skills provision and the city region sustainable transport settlement) with excellent examples of programmes which have been tailored to intentionally focus on those most at risk of exclusion.

We have scheduled an annual review of the impact assessment process, and we have trialled an integrated impact assessment form which encourages employees to consider implications beyond the protected characteristics to include wider socio-economic disadvantages that drive health inequalities.

Feedback about the new equality impact assessment process has been largely positive with external reviewers calling it robust and well thought out – one colleague commented that:

'The (equalities and inclusion) team could not have been more supportive or helpful, working with us to identify data and evidence around the Adult Skills Fund (ASF), to consider all the protected characteristic groups and how the identified priorities for the ASF support the specific groups or where more consideration is required. The team made us consider ASF from a different perspective, offered support and guidance in the process of completing the EIA.'

Funding

We have started to gather insights into whether our funding opportunities are accessible to organisations working with some of our most underrepresented groups and to establish what the barriers may be. This included project-close meetings with some of our small VCSE delivery partners and also a programme-wide interim evaluation of UKSPF projects. This has identified some highlights and some areas for improvement for smaller providers/delivery partners working with underrepresented groups and we continue to work on this and have made it a fundamental part of our longer-term objectives.

In addition to this, a wide variety of our programmes are specifically designed to provide funding opportunities to organisations working with some of our most underrepresented residents including our UKSPF communities and place programmes. Our Volunteering and Social Action programme invested

£1m in creating opportunities for residents from all walks for life to access high quality, meaningful volunteering and training opportunities. The delivery partnership, led by VODA, is expecting to exceed all project outcomes. They have brokered some brilliant opportunities for local volunteers, charities and community groups including working with older people, homeless people, food banks, hospices and men's groups. They have spent particular time and effort on connecting those residents seeking asylum or refuge in the North East with appropriate opportunities (including some voluntary positions in radio production) and they have helped to develop better connections between village halls and community groups in rural areas, helping to support stronger and more connected communities.



Case study: The Mayor's Opportunity Fund

The Mayor's Opportunity Fund was established by the North East CA in September 2024 to invest £1m into supporting small charities and community groups across the region.

Working in partnership with the Community Foundation and Point North ensured that grants were accessible to small unincorporated community groups as well as registered charities. The first round of the fund focussed on supporting 33 organisations delivering activity that supports inclusion, cohesion and resilience in some of our most disadvantaged areas.

One successful project was 'Seaham United', which used a grant of almost £10,000 to breathe new life into Seaham Youth and Community Centre in County Durham.

Along with paying the wages of a youth and community worker, the £9,989 awarded was used to buy a new commercial oven and for the provision of 500 hot meals at 99p for young people and old people using the centre.

"The Mayor's Opportunity Fund has been an absolute lifeline for us," said Seaham Youth and Community Centre Coordinator Ethan Lowerson-Marshall.



And finally, we supported Newcastle's hosting of the 2025 MOBO Awards, Europe's biggest celebration of black music and culture. The MOBO Fringe Festival provided five days of culture, community and creativity showcasing Black music and talent in the North East. Hosting the Awards and Fringe in our region brought significant benefits to the local economy as well as new opportunities for residents. Our young people developed skills and improved their wellbeing through volunteering and participating in cultural and creative activities. 2,000 pupils took part in MOBO Legacy Workshops exploring anti-racism and social cohesion. A total of 58 cultural activities were hosted with an estimated economic and social impact of £1,315,810.

Our role as a convener

Engagement

As a new Combined Authority, we have worked hard to establish strong relationships with partners across the region who are working towards similar goals, to help them amplify their work and to avoid duplication. This has included the regional women and girl's network, the North East Anti-Racist Coalition, Northern Pride, the North East Regional Employers Organisations, The Access Association NE and many more.

We have also worked closely with the One Million Women and Girls Campaign Group and with Difference North East, and the North East Mayor has signed pledges to improve the lives of women, girls, and disabled people in our region. So far, our progress towards these pledges has been positive and all pledges have been rolled into our three-year objectives and our equality impact assessment process.

With regards to women and girls, our UKSPF Community Partnerships programme, commissioned Salute Her to co-design a programme of work with women and girls. They worked with over 100 female veterans of all ages from late teens to almost 80 years old, who are all survivors of sexual trauma, abuse and or violence. They held four Afternoon Tea sessions with 45 attendees at each one, two sex and intimacy courses for sexual trauma with 19 attendees over the two sessions, cookery courses, menopause matters workshops, lunch groups and meditation groups. Feedback from attendees has been that talking about healing and body confidence and how

to put trust in others has been life changing. One attendee commented "Accessing support, making friends and starting my own business has been a game changer in my life; I am learning the skills I should have learned as a child. There is only one word to describe how I feel at the moment, and that's empowered. Empowered to be me."

'We are encouraged both by the expressed commitment of senior leadership and individual teams at NECA to embedding gender equality into all areas of the Combined Authority's work, and by the concrete steps already taken. There is, of course, so much more to be done both strategically and operationally - real change requires structural reform, accountability, and measurable impact - we are excited to see what we can achieve together to maximise the potential of women and girls in our region.'

The One Million Women and Girls campaign team

With regards to the disability devolution pledges, particular progress has been made in starting to build a transport infrastructure that enables disabled people to safely travel, with disabled residents and partners being a key part of the transport consultation and the bus accessibility event, mentioned earlier in this report.

The Mayor's Local Transport Plan Consultation offers a great example of successful and inclusive engagement with diverse audiences. The consultation prioritised gender representation, young people,

rural areas and people with disabilities as previous consultation and engagement highlighted that these groups had historically been underrepresented and often experienced significant barriers to accessing public transport.

In total, 16,294 survey responses were received and 36 community engagement sessions were held. Of the total responses, 54% were female and we received a response from every postcode district in the region, and 7% of our total responses came from young people aged 25 and under. The team felt strongly that gathering diverse perspectives had provided them with a fuller understanding of the challenges and opportunities within the region, enabling more informed decision-making and they also felt it had strengthened relationships with key partners in the region.

A final example of inclusive engagement in the last year has been around the commissioning of the devolved Adult Skills Fund (ASF), where a large-scale learner survey was conducted. This was an online survey conducted through our online engagement platform which has various accessibility features and helps to ensure diverse audiences can participate. There were 955 respondents, and we intentionally collected disaggregated data to help us better understand our learner demographic. The responses have provided a wealth of information and feedback on current provision including learner needs and support available, ease of access to provision and career pathways. The evidence from the survey has been shared with the current ASF providers and will help develop future provision and delivery models.

Case study: Yalla!

In 2024 the combined authority funded (through UKSPF) a project called Yalla!.

The project aims to support Jewish business owners in the Gateshead area. The Heradi Orthodox Jewish community in Gateshead is around 4000 people, but no one from this community was accessing support from the North East Growth Hub.

The community faces problems with child poverty, especially as having larger than average families they are impacted by the cap on child benefit and they have a higher than average reliance on in work benefits due to low pay.

The community faces problems with child poverty, especially as having larger than average families they are impacted by the cap on child benefit...

Combined Authority staff attended an awareness session on Orthodox Jewish culture and way of life and decided to be more proactive in engaging with business owners from the Jewish community.

Colleagues working in communications have now also attended the cultural awareness session and have changed imagery and language on the growth hub web pages to make it more culturally acceptable. This work has also paved the way for a mentoring project in the business community.



Collaboration

We are keen to build strong relationships with those around us and to amplify and support the good work already happening in the region.

As part of this we have joined the existing Equalities and Inclusion working group comprising of colleagues from all seven local authorities, plus other key stakeholders such as the integrated care board and the fire service. We organised individual meetings with EDI colleagues at each constituent local authority to collect best practice and understand what their roles were and where they felt we could add value.

We have also been part of the formation of a network of EDI leads from Mayoral Combined Authorities around the country which meets monthly and is becoming an increasingly strong force for EDI best practice in Combined Authority settings.

We are in the process of developing our approach to citizen engagement and we are committed to creating an approach to co-design and collaboration that ensures that the voices of our most marginalised citizens and communities are reflected in our thinking. We have recently set up a Citizen Engagement Network that brings together engagement practitioners from each of the constituent local authorities to map out engagement activity across the region, share best practice, and help inform our strategic approach to citizen engagement.

Working together: Using Communities of Practice (CoP) to increase employer encounters and experiences for young people with SEND

We know that young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) have a huge amount to offer North East employers, but we also know that these young people often face additional barriers that prevent them from making successful transitions into positive destinations, including apprenticeships and employment. We are passionate about the North East being a home of real opportunity and making sure that every individual has the opportunity to access good work. This is why we have placed young people with SEND at the heart of our work through North East Ambition.

As part of this work, last summer, we re-launched and extended the membership of our SEND Community of Practice (CoP), which brings together the career leaders from the region's special schools as well as other key stakeholders, including local authorities, to network, share best practice and work together to further develop the careers programmes for each of their own schools and colleges, so they are better able to provide a range of meaningful encounters and experiences for their learners. This work helps help young people, and parents/carers, better understand the opportunities available in the region and to prepare for the future. Through a range of 1:1 meetings, as well as regional, online meetings and an annual conference we are able to use this CoP to increase the confidence and knowledge of career leaders, ensure they are aware of the full range of support available for themselves and

their learners and co-design and deliver a number of different employer based projects. These activities provide opportunities for young people to develop their understanding of the world of work and career readiness, as well as supporting employers from across the region, of different sizes and from a range of sectors to connect to their local communities, develop their own workforce and encourage a more diverse and inclusive talent pipeline. Examples of employers engaging in this work include Alnwick Gardens, Beamish Museum and NHBC Construction Hub.

One Headteacher of a school involved commented that the experience had "really impacted" his learners "and he had never seen the class so enthusiastic and felt that there was a marked change in them".

From an employer's perspective, one commented, "It has been a real privilege to play a vital role in delivering these experiences of the workplace. Our staff have flourished in the lead roles they have taken in designing and implementing the experiences and we are proud of to have been a part of this exciting and impactful project".



Looking to the future

Our three-year Equality Objectives - 2025-2028

We're excited to launch our ambitious three-year objectives, informed by the findings of this year's transitional objectives, regional data and co-designed with key stakeholders to build on the progress made during our first year.

These objectives will drive our efforts to create a more inclusive, fair, and forward-thinking North East, one where opportunity is open to all and where we can all take pride in calling it home.

Our equality objectives have been designed to reflect the different roles we play as:

- Employer
- Commissioner
- Convener

The objectives, laid out in this document alongside key actions and indicators of progress, demonstrate our commitment to supporting strong and connected communities that help to reduce inequalities and improve wellbeing for all.

A detailed action plan will sit behind these objectives and will be reviewed on an annual basis. We are committed to reporting on the progress we make against these objectives and look forward to celebrating this in the coming years.

Role: Employer

Objective

We will build a diverse workplace where all individuals feel valued, respected and empowered to reach their full potential, regardless of background, identity, or personal circumstances – striving to make everyone feel they belong.

Key Actions

- Diversify recruitment practices to attract candidates from underrepresented groups and ensure an inclusive assessment and recruitment process
- Provide equal opportunities for career growth through training, professional development, and leadership programs
- Develop inclusive leadership competencies and ensure leaders are equipped to manage diverse teams effectively
- Regularly review performance processes to eliminate bias and ensure fairness in evaluations

Evidence we will collect to track our progress

- Employee diversity metrics
- Pay equity reviews (publishing pay gap information where required by the Public Sector Equality Duty)
- Colleague survey engagement scores
- Details of training and development undertaken by employees

Role: Commissioner

Objective

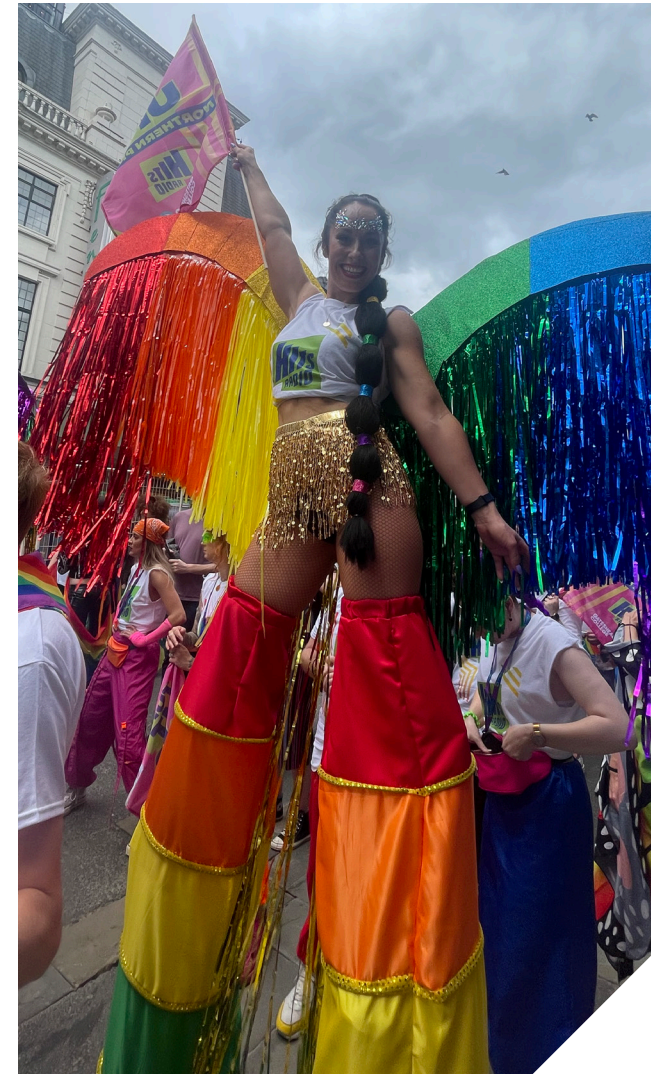
We will invest in services that are accessible and responsive to the needs of all communities and businesses, removing barriers to success and driving economic growth that delivers for all our residents.

Key Actions

- Continue to complete equality impact assessments to ensure that all commissioned activity is designed to remove barriers to opportunity.
- Further develop our approach to the collection and analysis of disaggregated data to ensure that all commissioned activity reaches under-represented communities and businesses.
- Review our commissioning process to make sure it works for the small businesses, entrepreneurs and community organisations that keep our local economy going.
- Develop an approach to incorporating considerations of health in our policies, to ensure commissioned activity contributes to addressing regional health inequalities; increasing healthy life expectancy and addressing health-related economic inactivity.
- Maximise the impact of social value in procurement to produce the greatest social, economic and environmental returns for our communities and neighbourhoods.

Evidence we will collect to track our progress

- Completed equality impact assessments
- Analysis of beneficiary data
- Case studies of targeted commissioned activity to address disparities
- Analysis of percentage of commissioned activity secured by SMEs and VCSE sector
- Evidence of social value delivered by procured suppliers



Role: Convener

Objective

We will play a strong leadership role in convening partners around regional priorities, building an inclusive and diverse coalition to understand and meet the needs and ambitions of the communities and businesses we serve.

Key Actions

- Continue to lead the Child Poverty Reduction Unit, taking a strategic, long-term and collaborative approach to tackling the long-term structural drivers and outcomes of this issue for our region.
- Build a strong and equitable relationship with our local VCSE sector to ensure we can most effectively draw on their expertise and reach into under-served communities and neighbourhoods.
- Encourage and support the region's business sectors to increase the diversity of their employees, so that they mirror those of the working age population, across all characteristics.
- Work alongside residents as key partners, giving the people of the North East a real say over their future and devolving power down to our communities.
- Ensure that the way we communicate with all partners and stakeholders is accessible and inclusive.

Evidence we will collect to track our progress

- Evidence of working with the VCSE sector to increase our reach into priority communities and neighbourhoods
- Case studies of employers accessing support to open up more good jobs, higher levels of employment, and rising take home pay
- Evidence of engagement and co-designing our work with residents representing underserved communities and neighbourhoods



