

Title: North East Coastal and Rural Taskforce Intelligent Secretariat
Portfolio: A North East we are Proud to Call Home
Responsible Director: Phil Witcherley, Director of Economic Growth and Innovation
Report Author: Karen Daglish, Programme Manager (Environment, Coast, Rural)

Report Summary

This report seeks approval to enter into a Partnership Agreement with The University of Newcastle upon Tyne to work together to support the activity of the North East Coastal and Rural Taskforce (the Taskforce), including the payment of £300,000 by the North East CA to the University of Newcastle upon Tyne for the Taskforce intelligent secretariat support.

Recommendations

The Chief Executive is recommended to authorise:

- The signing of a Partnership Agreement with the University of Newcastle upon Tyne to work together to support the activity of the North East Coastal and Rural Taskforce in developing Coastal and Rural Economy Transformation Blueprints for the North East.
- The payment of £300,000 from the North East CA to the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in quarterly payments to September 2027 for the provision of Intelligent Secretariat services as outlined in the Partnership Agreement.

Executive Summary

Cabinet approved (in November 2024) the North East CA's Environmental Stewardship, Coast, and Rural Investment Plan. This included a £1.25m Environment, Coast & Rural Enabling Fund, of which £300,000 was identified for expert advisory support to provide secretariat support for a Rural & Coastal Taskforce. This report sets out the context for this and rationale for the Partnership Agreement with the University of Newcastle upon Tyne for NICRE to provide the secretariat support.

A. Context

1. The North East Coastal and Rural Taskforce

In November 2024, Cabinet approved £1.25m for resources to oversee the implementation of the Environmental Stewardship, Coast, and Rural Investment Plan (the Investment Plan), including £300k to provide secretariat support for a Rural & Coastal Taskforce. The University of Newcastle upon Tyne, through its National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise (NICRE) will provide an intelligent secretariat for the Taskforce. This includes leveraging in relevant academic expertise, leading on the commission and management of pilot projects, building the North East Coastal and Rural Transformation Blueprint (as agreed in the North East deeper devolution deal), and providing secretariat meeting support.

The Rural & Coastal Taskforce will identify the evidence, policy interventions and investment required to support thriving rural communities and businesses, including the need for capital investment programmes to build in tailored rural approaches in recognition of the increased costs of creating jobs in rural areas. It will also identify the challenges coastal communities face and develop the case for coastal-specific support. The Taskforce will develop a Rural & Coastal Blueprint, working with UK Government to identify the funding sources required to deliver the coastal and rural community regeneration set out in the Environmental Stewardship, Coastal and Rural Growth Investment Plan.

The time-limited Taskforce presents an opportunity to unlock the further devolution of powers and funding. The North East CA area provides a geography for the Government to test and develop new ways of working to address challenges and seize opportunities in rural and coastal settings. Additional support is required to provide an intelligent secretariat.

2. NICRE

NICRE combines academic research with practical innovation to find new ways of unlocking potential and supporting thriving rural businesses and communities. From community groups to business support organisations and all layers of government, it liaises with a range of bodies to help address the challenges faced by rural enterprise and identify new opportunities. Hosted within the University of Newcastle upon Tyne's Centre for Rural Economy and Business School, it has access to academic research and staff from across the University, the Countryside and Community Research Institute at University of Gloucester and Royal Agricultural University, and the Enterprise Research Centre at Warwick University.

3. Partnership Agreement

Through the Partnership Agreement, the North East CA will provide £300,000 from its Cabinet approved Environment, Coast & Rural Enabling Fund. This will be matched by £173,324.96 of in-kind leverage from the University of Newcastle upon Tyne through NICRE and transdisciplinary expertise.

The North East CA investment will fund 1.8FTE of NICRE support, including a 1 FTE Project Manager and 0.5 FTE Communication Lead. £100,000 will be ring-fenced for a commissioning budget; this will be used to fund a series of place-based workshops where communities, academic expertise, and stakeholders such as Defra will work together to test solutions to thematic issues. The learning from these will be used to develop a Rural & Coastal Blueprint(s) as outlined above.

Through the Partnership Agreement, there is the opportunity for the North East CA and the University of Newcastle upon Tyne to set out a series of policy interventions to support nature recovery and farming, build resilience to climate change on our coast, and boost living standards in the regions rural and coastal communities.

B. Impact on North East Combined Authority Objectives

The Taskforce is recognised as an Investment Priority in the North East CA Environmental Stewardship, Coast, and Rural Investment Plan, set out in the Devolution Deals and approved by Cabinet in November 2024.

C. Key risks

A summary of key risks is included below.

Risk	Mitigating activity
The Partnership Agreement is not signed.	The North East CA will need to commit additional resource to provide the secretariat function, and the value of the in-kind leverage will be lost. This will have significant implications on the delivery of other programmes due to capacity issues within the programme team.
NICRE unable to recruit into the Project Manager role with limited capacity to provide secretariat support	Recruitment will start immediately once the Partnership Agreement is signed. There are regular meetings between the North East CA and NICRE, with NICRE currently providing support through an existing role.

D. Corporate Implications

D1. Financial and other resources implications

Funding sources

The following funding sources will be used to support the delivery the Taskforce:

Funding source	Total
North East CA – Environment, Coast and Rural Enabling Fund	£300,000
University of Newcastle upon Tyne – in-kind leverage.	£173,325
Total (£)	£473,325

D2. Legal implications

The comments of the Assistant Director Legal and Governance have been included in this report.

D3. Equalities implications

The North East CA complies with the public sector equality duty under the Equality Act 2010 and it is considered that there are no equalities implications in relation to the Delegated Decision.

D4. Consultation and engagement

The Partnership Agreement has been developed with the University of Newcastle upon Tyne.

E. Appendices

None

F. Background papers

[Cabinet Decision Notice – November 2024](#) – Sets out the strategic priorities for the Environment and Nature investment programme within the *North East Environmental Stewardship, Coast, and Rural Growth Investment Plan*

G. Contact officers

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H. Glossary

Investment Plan – Environmental Stewardship, Coast, Rural Investment Plan

NICRE – National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise

North East CA – North East Combined Authority

The Taskforce - North East Coastal and Rural Taskforce