

**Title:** Centre for Writing and Publishing  
**Portfolio:** Home to a Vibrant and Growing Economy  
**Responsible Director:** Phil Witcherley, Director of Economic Growth and Innovation  
**Report Author:** Mark Adamson, Principal Manager, Sector Growth and Delivery

## Report Summary

The purpose of this report is to recommend that the Chief Executive authorise an investment of £2m from the North East MSA Investment Fund to facilitate the purchase and refurbishment of the Old Post Office in Newcastle, establishing it as the home of the Centre for Writing and Publishing (the Centre).

The Centre is a key part of the region's ambition to create new opportunities and careers for local people in the creative industries. It will attract national publishing businesses to the North East and be a focal point for the next generation of northern writers: a place where people from our region can discover, develop and fulfil their creative potential.

The Centre will cement the region's place as a national centre for writing and literature, and will forge links with and complement award-winning attractions which already inspire children and young people championing the benefits and thrill of reading and writing, including The Word, the National Centre for the Written Word in South Shields; Seven Stories, the National Centre for Children's Books in Newcastle; and The Story in Durham. It will be the first centre of its kind with a cross-section of partners from the arts, academia, media and publishing industries.

The Centre will be owned by the Centre for Writing and Publishing Ltd, a joint venture between New Writing North and Northumbria University (the latter will be an anchor tenant of the Centre, with staff and students based in the building) and will work in collaboration with some of the country's largest publishers including Hachette UK and Faber and Faber. Funding for the overall purchase and refurbishment of The Old Post Office amounts to £10.5 million via the DCMS Cultural Development Fund, Northumbria University, Newcastle City Council alongside this investment from the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority.

## Recommendations

The Chief Executive is recommended to authorise:

- (i) an investment of £2m from the North East MSA Investment Fund to facilitate the purchase and refurbishment of the Old Post Office in Newcastle, establishing it as the home of the Centre for Writing and Publishing; and
- (ii) the completion of a grant funding agreement with the Centre for Writing and Publishing Ltd and the associated documentation to protect the authority's funding.

## Executive Summary

The Centre is an ambitious infrastructure project that will deliver regional growth and aspiration and support the rise of the UK creative industries as a sector of national importance. It aims to rebalance the ecosystem for writers in the UK, and enhance opportunities in and access to jobs and growth in the creative industries in the North East. The Centre is the first of its kind nationally to bring together a cross-section of partners from academia, industry, and the cultural sector into one dynamic site for creative production and engagement. It represents a collaboration between Newcastle City Council, New Writing North, Northumbria

University, the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority and regional partners to create opportunity and grow the region's profile and reputation in a growing sector.

The flagship Centre will support the realisation of Creative Central NCL, Newcastle's Culture and Creative Zone. It will develop new skills, experiential learning and research, and attract investment from national and international publishing and media companies and a wide range of public and private investors. It will be taken forward as a collaborative project between New Writing North (NWN) and Northumbria University (NU), and will be located in the centre of Newcastle. A joint venture between NWN and NU (namely the Centre for Writing and Publishing Ltd) will purchase and own the building, while a trading company of NWN will manage the refurbishment and operate the building that will house the Centre for Writing and Publishing to ensure resilience and reach for the investment.

## **A. Context**

### **Policy Context**

In July 2024 Cabinet approved Strategic Portfolio Plans for Culture, Creative, Tourism and Sport. This confirmed the ambition to:

- “develop and promote our creative talent, including music, writing”; and,
- “develop and commission a programme for cultural and creative industries investment and business/practitioner support – including for music, literature and other creative sectors.”

In July 2025 Cabinet received a report that set out proposals to facilitate the establishment of the Centre for Writing and Publishing in Newcastle in a major £2m investment. This would support a key part of the ambition to create new opportunities and careers for local people in the creative industries. The Centre will attract national publishing businesses to the North East and be a focal point for the next generation of northern writers - a place where people from the region can discover, develop, and fulfil their creative potential. Cabinet resolved to provide £2m of funding from the North East MSA Investment Fund subject to the completion of a satisfactory business case. The investment would support the acquisition of a property in Newcastle city centre and its redevelopment into the Centre for Writing and Publishing on the basis set out in this report.

The Centre for Writing and Publishing will build on the growth and reputation of the creative sector, by supporting the publishing and writing cluster through engagement with key assets and networks in the region. These include The National Centre for the Written Word in South Shields and Seven Stories, the National Centre for Children's Books in Newcastle. The Centre for Writing will also make strong connections to the collection of historic records and objects at The Story, which gives insights into the lives of people in County Durham.

Between 2011 and 2020, employment in the North East's creative industries cluster grew by 67% representing the largest percentage increase in the UK. In the period following the pandemic (2021 to 2022), the economic contribution of the creative industries grew in all regions, with the largest growth seen in the North East (23.8%). There are around 50,000 people employed in the wider region's creative industries, representing about 5% of the region's total jobs and a total economic contribution estimated at £1.35bn.

The Industrial Strategy states that in order to enable growth in the sector, “the government will leverage UK creative industries' global comparative advantages by unlocking private investment, boosting exports, and developing its highly skilled workforce”; and, acknowledges that the sector also “plays an important role in driving growth across regions and nations, through creative clusters and corridors across the country that spread opportunity and prosperity in communities, as well as driving growth by enhancing access to skills, spillovers, and knowledge sharing.” The Centre for Writing and Publishing therefore aligns strongly with these objectives.

## 1. Background and Investment Proposal

New Writing North leads the development of creative writing and reading in the North of England. Based in Newcastle (currently within Northumbria University's campus), they have produced nationally significant work since 1996. They are a charity and an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation. NWN have shaped the model for regional writing agencies, developing innovative industry partnerships, delivering inclusive talent programmes and high impact work with young people, and attracting resources from a wide range of stakeholders. The Centre for Writing builds on this approach to partnership and their reputation in the sector.

New Writing North and Northumbria University have worked together since 2012 across teaching and learning, research, and public engagement. The partnership has developed to a national range of creative industries interventions including a flagship MA Publishing programme with global publisher Hachette UK.

The business model underpinning the project will deliver sustainability through a mixed approach to income generation and through the delivery of a range of benefits for local people and businesses. The Centre will be supported by retail, hospitality and office and space rentals allowing a mixed income stream to support the running of the space, generating revenue from a range of users and partners, comprising:

- Commercial operators: publishers (books, magazines, news media etc); screen producers and broadcasters; media, communications and digital businesses; book shop; café/bar; and audio studios.
- Sector practitioners and businesses: writers; creative freelancers, producers, and literature-focused SMEs.
- Higher Education: Northumbria University teaching and research staff; and collaborative research partnerships and programme from across HE partners.
- Charitable: young people, community groups and a public events programme.

A number of buildings within Newcastle's city centre have previously been explored as potential locations for the Centre for Writing. In late summer of 2025, a preferred location was identified as The Old Post Office building, a Grade II listed property located on St. Nicholas Street, on the boundary of the Creative Central NCL zone, with the building becoming available on the open market for purchase at that time. The Old Post Office was refurbished in 2015 to provide office accommodation, finished to an extremely high standard. The office accommodation provides a mix of open plan and cellular office space, fitting well with the range of uses planned for the Centre for Writing. The space was identified as the preferred option for a number of reasons including its larger size and high-quality existing fit-out, ensuring the overall cost of development and repurposing would be lower and more manageable. The current high-quality state of the building, helps minimise the potential risk for cost overruns as the building is refurbished.

The proposed facilities and thematic zones within the building are as follows:

- Ground Floor and Mezzanine: Café, bar (independently operated) with outside seating, bookshop (run by leading independent retailers Forum Books) and reception with flexible exhibition, young people's spaces, flexible workspace and displays and exhibitions that will tell the story of North East literature and writers.

- Upper Floors: Flexible and adaptive space, a 200+-seat performance and exhibition space. An open plan layout to facilitate a wide range and style of events from book festivals, weddings, conferences, exhibitions, and commercial hires. Space for Northumbria University to teach, work and present events and flexible activity and wellbeing space linked to the garden. Agile collaborative work and meeting space for commercial and independent publishers, TV and film production companies and commissioners, freelance writers and small literary arts organisations and charities.
- Basement: Audio studio suite and kitchen.

An operational plan has been developed with support and input from external consultants including experienced hospitality, retail and property advisors, which suggests the space is sustainable over the long term based on the mixed revenue model outlined above.

As part of the appraisal of the project, North East MSA engaged an external consultant to review the assumptions made and overall approach to the operational plan for the Centre to assess overall sustainability. Based on the information provided by the applicant, this assessment covered the proposed Joint Venture structure for the project, the approach proposed to the sharing of risk between the Joint Venture partners, the Subsidy Control position, and the financial and operational model for the Centre.

The financial model sets out anticipated lease income, service charge recovery and indicative room hire and short-term rental income. In addition, it is anticipated that concessions will be let to the café, bar and shop on a straightforward rental basis. The anticipated lease costs are expected to be competitive compared to other 'full-cost occupation' models. The applicant has confirmed that

conversations with potential occupiers are at an advanced stage, and that the University has confirmed that it will be an anchor tenant. Further, short-term hire rates have been benchmarked against other providers in the city, occupiers of specialist facilities have entered discussions, and there is apparent interest in the concessions. New Writing North have some experience in this type of activity, notably in respect of events and short-term space hire.

Through the appraisal process, a number of aspects of the operational financial model were tested, to ensure ongoing sustainability of the Centre:

- If the full operational plan is achieved, the projected margin is 10.6% (charitable and trading activities combined) or an average surplus of c£310,000.
- It was noted that full operational capacity may not be achieved as quickly as assumed in the operational model, but that NU plan to take up their full capacity in year one, and that costs can be managed in the event that other revenue streams are more slow to reach their full capacity, and that therefore the risk of this is manageable.
- The projected income includes rental income from Northumbria University (£153,175) and surpluses from NWN's charitable activities (£273,648) – reducing the need for significant amounts of additional income to meet fixed costs of c£443,000.
- In conclusion, the appraisal outcome is that there is sufficient assurance to proceed. With tenancies and events secured early in the centre's operational activity, the revenue risks also diminish.

There is no commitment on behalf of the North East MSA to fund onwards trading and operations nor to make good any deficits, as this would fall under the responsibility of the joint venture partners.

The overall project – comprising property purchase, refurbishment and subsequent operational delivery – has the following anticipated indirect outputs and outcomes:

- 11 direct jobs created.
- 106.4 indirect jobs created
- 2,924 sqm shared space for community and business activities
- 350 enterprises receiving support pa
- 931 residents who have received a direct intervention in line with the aims of the programme pa
- 141 cultural events taking place each year.
- 20,460 attendees participating in a range of cultural events pa
- 46 residents supported into volunteering pa
- 6,900 participants of community engagement activities pa
- 93 people in employment, including self-employment, following support pa
- £0.598m GVA pa

Many of the project outcomes will be delivered once the Centre is fully operational. These outcomes will be reported upon as part of the overall delivery, contributing to the North East MSA's strategic priorities.

A Project Specific Condition is to be added to the grant funding agreement to ensure further updates are received of further outcomes achieved. Evaluation reports submitted to co-funders will also be shared with the North East MSA.

## **B. Impact on North East Mayoral Strategic Authority Objectives**

The Mayor's manifesto, North East devolution deals and Local Growth Plan prioritise growing the creative industries and recognise the benefits that a thriving cultural economy provides in terms of regional profile, business and jobs growth, and opportunities for skills and career development.

The Centre for Writing and Publishing directly supports the North East Local Growth Plan and Mayoral Missions and for 'A Home to a Growing and Vibrant Economy for all' and 'A North East we're proud to call home' and aligns with the government's Industrial Strategy and accompanying national sector plan for the creative industries published in June 2025. The publishing industry is expected to grow worldwide, creating further growth opportunities, with the UK's publishing industry contributing £11 billion and expectations that international demand for UK publishing is set to grow by a further 20% in the next decade. This contributes to the growth agenda by setting the stage for the North East to tap into creative industries growth at the UK level and by strengthening the region's position as a centre of excellence for writing, helping to reposition the public sector at a national level. Indeed, the national Creative Industries Sector Plan published by Government in June 2025 acknowledges the opportunity that the Centre presents to "nurture new talent and boost the North East as a publishing hub".

The Centre has the following overarching strategic objectives, representing the collective ambitions of the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority, Newcastle City Council, Northumbria University and New Writing North:

- SO1: Establish an internationally recognised Centre for Writing and Publishing in Newcastle to reposition the North East as a centre of excellence for writing, publishing, and creative industry content production.
- SO2: Widen participation and diversity in writing, reading and content creation and grow commissioning and production of new work in the North.

- SO3: Create more opportunities for young and older people to advance their writing and literacy skills and to generate a new talent pipeline and pathways into education and careers in the creative industries.
- SO4: Generate world-leading research on writing, publishing, and UK creative industries impact.
- SO5: Support the long-term sustainability of UK publishers and writing organisations and grow Newcastle as a nationally recognised centre for commercial publishing, content creation and production.

### C. Key risks

A summary of key risks relating to the investment proposal is included below:

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Priority</b>	<b>Mitigation / Contingency</b>
Failure to purchase The Old Post Office as planned.	L	Offer has been accepted. Completion was proposed by the end of March 2026 or as soon thereafter.
Failure to secure refurbishment costs by end of 2026	M	Wide ranging fundraising plan and specialist support to maximise in-house capabilities.
Delay to the issue of the RIBA Stage 4 design for costing, due to design changes due to partnership needs	L	Design development programme to be monitored. Consideration to be given to elements of design to be issued as completed to enable costs to be developed in tandem
Specification / quality aspirations are not in line with the agreed budget.	M	A key element of progress meetings will be reviews of developing design. Full client sign off at end of each stage proposed to ensure Client and stakeholders are fully aware of project content
Planning application rejected.	M	Ongoing review with the planners to assess the viability of the proposals. Pre App Meeting to be setup with planners before planning application submitted. Appointment of Planning Consultant.
Returned tenders exceed the approved funding limit.	M	Project will be carefully designed and costed based on current and projected market rates. Robust cost control to be undertaken by cost consultant throughout the design stages. Key rates to be market tested where possible during cost planning stages.
Programme delays resulting in increased costs via inflation.	M	Budget costs to be projected to tender quarter, using a forecasted inflationary factor obtained via BCIS as well as market intelligence. Ongoing review of project progress against the master programme to assess any potential delay.
Lack of or insufficient client contingency.	L	Budgets to include a "Design Development Contingency" as well as a separate client contingency. Costed risk register to influence amount of contingency needed. Cost consultant to continually monitor design development and contingency amounts.
Delay to the completion of the building purchase due to funding not being in place	L	Timing of refurbishment carefully aligned with two year fundraising period which has a clear strategy for applications with some flexibility if needed. Fundraising capacity increased to support reaching targets.

## D. Corporate Implications

### Financial and other resources implications

The Centre for Writing and Publishing will be created pursuant to a joint venture between New Writing North and Northumbria University. In summary, it is proposed that the North East MSA's funding of £2m would be paid to a limited company joint venture vehicle called the Centre for Writing and Publishing Limited (CRN: 17019535), which is owned by New Writing North (51%) and Northumbria University (49%).

The Centre for Writing and Publishing Limited will use the North East MSA (and Newcastle Council and (part of) Northumbria University) funding to purchase the Old Post Office building.

The overall financial profile for the purchase and refurbishment of the Centre for Writing and Publishing is included below.

<b>Estimated costs</b>	<b>2025/26 (£)</b>	<b>2026/27 (£)</b>	<b>2027/28 (£)</b>	<b>Total (£)</b>
<b>CAPITAL</b>				
Building Acquisition	4,002,500	-	-	4,002,500
Site preparation	65,000	-	-	65,000
Building and construction	-	1,500,000	3,086,355	4,586,355
Fees	479,000	25,434	20,178	524,612
Other Capital	-	213,621	571,790	785,411
<b>TOTAL CAPITAL</b>	<b>4,546,500</b>	<b>1,739,055</b>	<b>3,678,323</b>	<b>9,963,878</b>
<b>TOTAL COST</b>	<b>4,546,500</b>	<b>1,739,055</b>	<b>3,678,323</b>	<b>9,963,878</b>

<b>Funding source</b>	<b>2025/26 (£)</b>	<b>2026/27 (£)</b>	<b>2027/28 (£)</b>	<b>Total (£)</b>
<i>Arts Council England / DCMS Cultural Development Fund</i>	209,986	937,657	3,852,357	<b>5,000,000</b>
<i>Northumbria University</i>	1,546,500	953,500	-	<b>2,500,000</b>
<i>Newcastle City Council</i>	1,000,000	-	-	<b>1,000,000</b>
<i>North East MSA Investment Fund (subject to approval)</i>	2,000,000	-	-	<b>2,000,000</b>
<b>Total (£)</b>	<b>4,756,486</b>	<b>1,891,157</b>	<b>3,852,357</b>	<b>10,500,000</b>

### Status of match funding:

Match funding from other funders will also be used towards the following revenue-based costs of £536,122 that will support the overall project:

- Marketing and Promotion - £80,000
- Planning and Operational Consultants - £200,000
- Other revenue - £256,122

Arts Council England/DCMS have already committed £5m towards the refurbishment element of the project, with formal confirmation awaited – this will be a condition of release of the North East MSA funding.

Newcastle City Council funding was approved in January 2026, and Northumbria University funding was confirmed in March 2026.

Funding is subject to the following conditions:

1	Within six months of the execution of this Grant Funding Agreement, the Recipient shall achieve a minimum of foundation level of SHINE accreditation. The Shine Accreditation registration link is included at the following: <a href="https://shine.northeast-ca.gov.uk/shine-accreditation">https://shine.northeast-ca.gov.uk/shine-accreditation</a>
2	Funding from North East MSA can only be drawn down following the evidence that match funding DCMS/Arts Council England, Northumbria University and Newcastle City Council is secure.
3	The Recipient shall, as a condition precedent to the payment of any instalment of Grant, execute a security instrument over the Old Post Office building in favour of the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority (alongside Newcastle City Council and Northumbria University).

## D2. Legal implications

The comments of the Monitoring Officer have been included in this report. A subsidy control assessment will be completed to confirm that the funding complies with the requirements of the Subsidy Control Act 2022. Subject to a satisfactory assessment, any additional conditions arising from that assessment will be incorporated into the Grant Funding Agreement. It is also proposed that the funders have the benefit of a charge over the property as security for the funding that they are providing.

## D3. Equalities implications

New Writing North has undertaken nationally significant work around inclusivity within the creative industries, particularly on issues of class and socioeconomic diversity.

Their 'A Writing Chance' talent programme for working class writers seeks to remove barriers to working in the creative writing industries. Research undertaken by Northumbria University highlighted that 95% participants felt there were barriers to entering the creative industries, specifically media and publishing. These barriers included: Thinking that a job in these industries is not attainable for someone with my background or location (47%); not knowing anyone who works in these industries (46%); not having enough knowledge about how to enter these industries (41%); lack of financial resources to achieve the qualifications, training, or work experience to get a job in the industry (37%). The overall programme has £400,000 funding and support to address the identified issues from wide ranging sources including, actor and philanthropist Michael Sheen, Audible, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Esmee Fairbairn Foundation.

The establishment of a Centre for Writing and Publishing has been tested extensively with focus groups. There is overwhelming enthusiasm for the project as a place where people can explore and enjoy writing and be inspired.

The building itself will display best practice for accessibility and inclusion provisions to all areas. As part of this scoping exercise, engagement with disabled writers and creatives helped inform the building selection. Many of the buildings long listed for consideration had access issues that would be inadequate for people with limited mobility. The final proposals meet the highest standards of access from street level upwards and will enable the creation of a fully accessible and attractive centre that can fully meet the needs of disabled and neurodiverse, workers, visitors, and audiences.

#### **D4. Consultation and engagement**

Consultation and engagement has been undertaken with a range of stakeholders as part of the project's development. Independent user engagement consultation undertaken by consultants CounterCulture with a range of focus groups has tested the appetite for the Centre:

*... "there is overwhelming enthusiasm for the project as a prospective place where people can explore and enjoy writing and be inspired. There is excitement about the prospect of attracting industry professionals from London and the rest of the UK to Newcastle. Users identified needs such as professional development and networking, co-working and flexible meeting spaces, the need for a city centre independent book shop and accessible spaces. Users share NWN's vision for widening access being a key part of the centre's mission: "There is a need to break down barriers around the myth of writing and what it means to be a successful writer and ways in which it could create a sense of belonging for all."*

Consultation further showed strong demand for skills, workspace, and cultural programmes, while partners including Hachette UK, Faber, and Northumbria University have already committed to investing. NWN's existing programmes, which reach over 10,000 people annually, are oversubscribed.

NWN work regularly with practitioners and people with disabilities and neurodiversity, and the programme delivery and physical spaces of the Centre will be designed to address inclusivity. NWN have consulted with disabled creative practitioners as part of their public engagement consultation on the Centre for Writing and Publishing.

#### **E. Appendices**

None.

#### **F. Background papers**

[North East CA Cabinet Paper – 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2025, pgs 121-126](#)

#### **G. Contact officers**

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#### **H. Glossary**

Please provide a glossary in respect of any abbreviations used.

North East MSA – North East Mayoral Strategic Authority  
DCMS – Department for Culture, Media and Sport  
MA – Master of Arts (degree programme)  
NCC – Newcastle City Council  
NU – Northumbria University  
NWN – New Writing North