

**North East Mayoral Strategic Authority
Annual Equality Report**

2025-2026

Introduction

The North East Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) has a vision for the North East that places equality, diversity and inclusion at its core, framing them not only as moral principles but as essential drivers of economic growth. We are committed to ensuring an inclusive economy that enables all individuals, regardless of background, to contribute to and benefit from regional prosperity, supported by both high-growth sectors and a strong, inclusive foundational economy.

When barriers to opportunity persist—whether linked to income, geography, disability, race, gender, or any other factor—our entire region loses out on the skills, energy, and creativity of its people.

This report sets out the progress the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority (North East MSA) is making to build a more inclusive economy and a region that is the home of real opportunity.

Our commitment is clear: to support a fairer, healthier, more resilient and more prosperous North East. By working with partners across local government, business, education, and the voluntary and community sector, we can unlock potential, remove barriers, and ensure that no one is left behind as our region grows.

This report is intended to inform that shared effort. It provides evidence, accountability, and direction, and lays the foundation for continued collaboration as we work towards a North East where every resident can thrive.

Our People and Places

The North East is home to a population of around **two million residents**, with a demographic profile shaped by distinct age patterns, health characteristics and social identities.

The region has an **older-than-average age structure**, marked by a growing proportion of residents aged 65 and over. This trend reflects long term population ageing combined with relatively low birth rates and lower levels of inward migration compared with national averages.

Disability and long-term health conditions are more prevalent in the North East than in many other parts of England. A higher proportion of residents report limiting long term conditions or poor health, and the region experiences above-average economic inactivity

linked to illness. These characteristics make health a particularly significant consideration for inclusive economic planning in the North East.

The North East remains predominantly White British, though Census 2021 data confirms representation from a range of **ethnic groups**. While the region is less ethnically diverse than many parts of England, our diverse communities play a valued role in enriching our cultural and social fabric.

In terms of **religion or belief**, the region mirrors national patterns with Christian identities remaining the largest group, alongside substantial proportions reporting no religion and smaller populations representing other faiths.

The **sex** distribution of the region follows standard patterns, with a broadly even split between male and female residents.

Our equality objectives 2025-2028

Our equality objectives as agreed by Mayor and Cabinet in April 2025 focus on regional priority issues. They have been designed in collaboration with our stakeholders to reflect the different roles we play as:

- an employer of people
- a commissioner of services
- a convener of partners

This annual report sets out the progress we have made against each of our equality objectives.

Equality Objective 1: Employer

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.

Key progress and achievements this year

- During 2024-25 we launched our **employee voice platform** and completed our first baseline survey, and we have continued to build on that throughout 2025-26. We have also launched the ‘open door’ which is a confidential digital tool to enable employees to share feedback with us.
- The **2025 Your Voice survey** (25 September–10 October) achieved a strong 89% response rate, with an engagement index of 7.2 and an eNPS of +6, a 27 point improvement on the 2024 baseline. In response to the survey, the People and Transformation Team have partnered with Directorates to develop targeted actions and involve colleagues through focused engagement sessions.
- Our **People and Transformation Strategy** includes three strategic priorities around leadership and communication, recognition and development and resources and capacity. These priorities are reinforced by Senior Leadership Team commitment, strengthening our organisation-wide approach to colleague experience and equality.

- We've enhanced our **learning and development offer** by launching a refreshed corporate induction that gives new colleagues a clear, connected introduction to our organisation and how we work. We strengthened compliance and capability by improving monitoring of mandatory learning. We also deepened our understanding of colleague learning preferences through the launch of a new learning survey, helping us tailor future development activity more effectively.
- We expanded our portfolio through new **Single Assurance Framework (SAF) learning packages**, providing colleagues with clearer understanding of their responsibilities and the role of assurance in effective delivery. In addition, we introduced Copilot 365 learning and support, enabling colleagues to build digital confidence and adopt AI-enabled ways of working that improve productivity and drive digital literacy across the organisation.
- 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 below compare the composition of the current employee team (from the information provided online by employees) with the wider North East workforce and 18-64 population.

Age Range	Headcount	2024-25 Data	2025-26 Data	Variance	% of NE workforce	% of NE 18-64 popn.
18-25	13	4%	5%	1%	12%	17%
26-35	78	23%	28%	5%	22%	21%
36-45	81	30%	29%	-1%	21%	20%
46-55	74	30%	27%	-3%	24%	22%
56-64	31	11%	11%	0%	17%	21%
65+	1	1%	0%	-1%	4%	-
Total	278	99%	100%	1%	100%	100%

Gender	Headcount	2024-25 Data	2025-26 Data	Variance	% of NE workforce	% of NE 16-64 popn.
Male	114	41%	41%	0%	51%	49%
Female	164	59%	59%	0%	49%	51%
Prefer to self-describe	0	0%	0%	0%	-	-

Ethnic group	Headcount	2024-25 Data	2025-26 Data	Variance	% of NE workforce	% of NE 16-64 popn.
White	161	22%	58%	36%	93.8%	92.6%
Ethnic minority	4	1%	1%	0%	6.2%	7.4%
No data available	113	77%	41%	-36%		
Total	278	100%	100%	0%	100%	100%

Disability	Headcount	2024-25 Data	2025-26 Data	Variance	% of NE workforce	% of NE 16-64 popn.
Yes	17	1%	6%	5%	23%	31%
No	120	15%	43%	28%	77%	69%
No data available	141	84%	51%	-33%		
Total	278	100%	100%	0%	100%	100%

Sexual orientation	Headcount	2024-25 Data	2025-26 Data	Variance	% of NE workforce	% of NE 16-64 popn.
Gay, lesbian, bisexual	8	0%	3%	3%	3.5%	4.0%
Heterosexual	133	20%	48%	28%	92.2%	90.6%
No data available	137	79%	49%	-30%	4.3%	5.4%
Total	278	99%	100%	1%	100.0%	100.0%

What we'll do next

- We will strengthen engagement by embedding a consistent, organisation-wide approach to listening and action. Our priorities include enhancing leadership capability, unifying internal communications, and supporting sustainable workloads and wellbeing.
- We will align development and PDP expectations to the Talent Framework, improve recognition through a consistent rhythm, and strengthen cross-directorate collaboration through clearer governance and shared learning.
- An April pulse survey will continue our continuous listening cycle, supported by an engagement plan that deepens colleague voice throughout the year.
- Looking ahead, we will continue to strengthen our learning and development offer by building on the success of our corporate induction and opening this experience up to all colleagues, ensuring everyone has a shared understanding of our mission, values, and ways of working.
- We will also launch our new Manager Development Programme, creating a consistent and progressive pathway that equips managers with the skills, confidence, and behaviours needed to lead effectively.
- We will deepen our organisational capability by completing a comprehensive skills mapping exercise across all roles. This will give us a clear picture of our current

strengths and future learning needs, supporting workforce planning and targeted development investment.

- In addition, we will continue to grow and mature our digital skills offer expanding Copilot 365 adoption, developing new digital learning pathways, and supporting colleagues to build confidence with emerging tools and technologies. This will help ensure our workforce remains adaptable, future-ready, and equipped to leverage digital solutions in their day-to-day work.

Equality Objective 2: Commissioner

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

Key progress and achievements this year

- **Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs)** continue to support inclusive local economic growth by ensuring policies and investments benefit all communities and do not overlook groups facing structural barriers. This year we strengthened the EIA process,

refining templates, publishing policy briefings and training staff on topics including the social model of disability and violence against women and girls.

- Our Mayor and Cabinet voluntarily adopted the **socioeconomic duty**, committing to consider how strategic decisions might reduce inequalities linked to socioeconomic disadvantage. As a result, EIAs now explicitly assess impacts on people experiencing disadvantage and opportunities to reduce barriers.
- We have invested in **targeted interventions** supporting under-represented groups through Adult Skills, Connect to Work and Trailblazer programmes — helping to develop a more diverse workforce across key sectors, including the Foundational Economy.
- We have commissioned research into the **role of the VCSE sector** in reducing economic inactivity. This work is establishing strong foundations for long-term system change, with practical recommendations to remove commissioning barriers and ensure the sector can play a full role in progressing our ambitions for the region.
- Procurement continues to be a powerful lever for change. We have prioritised **community-led social value**, demonstrated through our partnership with Moorbridge School and North Shields Rugby Club, supporting students in alternative education to build confidence and skills through meaningful employer engagement.

Case Study: Connect to Work

At 58, John from North Tyneside faced an unexpected turning point. In 2024, he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, a life-changing condition that forced him to leave a role he had dedicated 15 years to due to fatigue and demanding shift patterns. The loss of routine, purpose, and stability left him feeling demoralised.

Determined not to let this define his future, John joined the Connect to Work programme. Through tailored support, confidence-building interview preparation, and meaningful employer connections, he began to see new possibilities. An interview with Leeds Building Society was a pivotal moment as they openly discussed reasonable adjustments and welcomed John to visit the workplace, to ensure it was the right fit. That reassurance removed any worries John had, and he advises anyone in the same position to give this programme a go because even though it may feel like everything is failing you, the right programme won't.

Case Study: Economic Inactivity Trailblazer

Sabiha moved to England after more than a decade teaching Bengali in Bangladesh. With support from Tara South Tyneside, funded by the North East MSA, she has accessed tailored guidance to rebuild her confidence, strengthen her employability and progress

towards her long-term goal of returning to the education sector. Alongside beginning a Level 1 Children and Young People Workforce course, she has received help with CV development, job-search skills, navigating health appointments and managing travel anxiety. Sabiha has now successfully secured employment with Simply Foods and continues to receive support as she transitions into her first job in the UK while completing her studies, demonstrating real progress in confidence, independence and career development.

What we'll do next

- Strengthen our collection and use of disaggregated beneficiary data to drive inclusion.
- Develop research to redesign the local work and health system, including through the Economic Inactivity Trailblazer.
- Build a social value strategy tightly aligned to our regional missions and priorities.

Equality Objective 3: Convener

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.

Key progress and achievements this year

- The **North East Child Poverty Reduction Unit** has co-produced a Child Poverty Action Plan and mobilised £28.6m of investment. This includes mobilising Baby Boxes, income-maximisation support in communities, and a Childcare Grant pilot in Durham and Northumberland.
- The Skills, Inclusion and Public Service Reform Directorate invested £6.25 million in **VCSE delivery**, supporting 63 organisations to deliver activities that furthers our ambition of the North East becoming the home of real opportunity.
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- Our **Shine** good work movement continues to grow, with 186 employers signed up, covering over 60,000 employees. Members range from large employers such as Durham University to small charities such as North Tyneside VODA.
- We have strengthened our **resident engagement** through livestreamed Cabinet meetings, Commonplace digital consultation, expanded outreach, and the Mayor Meets programme.

Case study – Employer support to reduce in work poverty

Society Matters CIC was commissioned to help employers better understand in-work poverty and strengthen their support for staff facing financial hardship. By engaging both large employers—where reach is greatest—and smaller third-sector organisations—where change can be introduced quickly—the programme tailored its approach to different levels of awareness and readiness. Confidential staff surveys and bespoke support packages enabled employers to build trust, gain insight into employees’ financial wellbeing, and implement practical, sustainable changes. As a result, many introduced measures such as wellbeing drop-ins, financial inclusion support, pension guidance and benefit checks at induction. Employers reported improved morale, stronger engagement and reduced absenteeism as staff experienced greater financial stability.

Case Study – The Mayor’s Opportunity Fund

The Mayor's Opportunity Fund supports grassroots community projects focusing on tackling poverty and creating opportunities in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Horden Youth and Community Centre in County Durham gained £10,000 from the second round of Mayor’s Opportunity Fund to support projects including their ‘Hub Grub’ free hot meals for pensioners.

Horden Youth and Community Centre Hub general manager Sean Robson said: “Mayor Kim’s Opportunity Fund made a huge difference to what we could offer older people in our village.

“It helps us keep Hub Grub running, providing hot meals, warmth, and company for pensioners who might otherwise be isolated. For many of our regulars, it’s a lifeline that brings comfort, dignity, and a sense of belonging. We’re incredibly grateful for support that allows us to continue standing beside our older residents.”

Case study: Changing perceptions of disability and youth in the workplace

As part of our objective to support employers to diversify their workforces, we commissioned two organisations to help shift regional perceptions of young people and disabled people in employment. Difference North East and NE Youth produced a series of case studies and best-practice reports to be shared with employers in order to encourage more inclusive recruitment. Difference North East also delivered disability-in-the-workplace training to organisations across multiple sectors.

What we’ll do next

- Mobilise new child poverty pilots
- Roll out a Shine business mentoring offer
- Begin bus franchising consultation
- Establish expert panels to oversee investment in transport safety and accessibility.