

North East Mayoral Strategic Authority

Economic Inactivity Trailblazer year two

Call for projects for priority two strand 3b:
Specialist employment support for unpaid
carers

1. About the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority

The North East Mayoral Strategic Authority covers the seven local authority areas of County Durham, Gateshead, Newcastle, North Tyneside, Northumberland, South Tyneside and Sunderland.

The North East faces a range of economic and social challenges, including lower productivity and GVA compared to national averages, as well as poorer health outcomes, including reduced healthy life expectancy. The region also has some of the highest levels of economic inactivity in the country.

Certain groups, including unpaid carers, are disproportionately affected by economic inactivity.

2. The Economic Inactivity Trailblazer

The DWP Economic Inactivity Trailblazer is a flagship initiative under the UK Government's plans to reduce economic inactivity and support more people into work. The North East Mayoral Strategic Authority has successfully secured funding to deliver Year Two (2026/27) of the programme.

The Trailblazer is designed to:

- Align with DWP priorities on tackling economic inactivity.
- Maximise the impact of existing local and national resources.
- Focus on groups facing the most significant barriers to employment.
- Be bold and ambitious in its design and delivery.
- Pilot new, integrated models of support.
- Drive long-term system reform across sectors.

The Trailblazer is closely aligned with the ambitions of the [Get Britain Working White Paper](#), aiming to bring together local health, skills, and employment systems to better support working age residents who are economically inactive due to long term health conditions, caring responsibilities, or other complex barriers.

In the North East, the Trailblazer will use locally tailored approaches, strengthening collaboration between health, employment support and skills providers, and testing new approaches to improve employment outcomes.

The evidence base

In order to target this work on the areas of greatest need we have been informed by our [Local Growth Plan](#) which outlines our target sectors; the [North East Evidence Hub](#) and our employment and skills strategy, [A New Deal for North East Workers](#), which outlines the target populations that are currently under represented in the labour market, and our future skills and employment needs.

In addition, a number of research reports were commissioned as part of the Economic Inactivity Trailblazer in year one. This includes research into economic inactivity and unpaid carers, which is available on the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority website.

The North East Mayoral Strategic Authority has reviewed the available evidence to inform the development of the Economic Inactivity Trailblazer and this call for projects. Applicants should reflect this evidence base and existing good practice in their proposals, demonstrating how it will inform and be embedded within project delivery. Applicants are not required to submit additional evidence but must clearly show how their approach aligns with existing evidence and learning.

The objectives of the Trailblazer

The North East Economic Inactivity Trailblazer in year one was centered around three priority areas:

- Priority one: Better pathways into employment.
- Priority two: New ways of working.
- Priority three: Systems reform taking an integrated approach to health and employment.

Year two expectations

These three priorities remain for year two, and there will also be a greater focus in year two for projects to:

- Measure distance travelled for each participant.
- Demonstrate collaboration with others to achieve greater cross referrals between provision, to ensure participants access the correct support.
- Move customers to be job ready or into work.

The remainder of this document sets out the details for the open call for specialist employment support for unpaid carers. This should be read in conjunction with the guidance note for this call for projects.

3. Specialist employment support for unpaid carers

This priority will fund one regional project delivering specialist employment support for unpaid carers. The provision will support unpaid carers to move towards, enter and sustain employment, where this is realistic alongside their caring responsibilities. Delivery will recognise the complexity and intensity of unpaid caring, the associated health and wellbeing impacts, and the need for flexible, personalised approaches to employment support.

This priority is informed by regional research into carers and employment, which highlights that carers face multiple, inter-related barriers to work and require specialist, trusted and flexible support to engage with the labour market. For the purposes of this call for projects, the definition of an unpaid carer is:

A person who provides care and support to a family member, partner, friend or neighbour who could not manage without that help because of illness, disability, mental ill health, addiction, frailty or age-related needs, and who is not paid for providing that care.

The project will provide specialist, tailored employability support, combined with employer engagement and advocacy, and access to health and wellbeing interventions, including digital therapies, to support carers to secure and sustain employment.

The project will:

- Support economically inactive carers.
- Address both employment and wellbeing barriers in an integrated way.
- Complement, rather than duplicate, existing carers services and local employability provision.
- Contribute learning to inform future system design across employment, health and carers support.

This priority is focused on direct delivery to unpaid carers. It is not intended to fund infrastructure, organisation level capacity building, or standalone employer awareness raising activity.

Aims

This priority aims to:

- Support unpaid carers to progress towards, enter and/or sustain employment, where appropriate.
- Address practical, emotional, health and confidence related barriers to work.

- Improve employer confidence and capability to recruit and retain carers.
- Generate learning on what works for carers in the North East to inform future policy and commissioning.

Providers must develop a clear exit and sustainability plan, setting out how delivery models, tools, partnerships and learning will be embedded into mainstream systems, employer practice and existing provision beyond the lifetime of Trailblazer funding.

4. Eligible activity

It is anticipated that projects will deliver the following activities to achieve the aims of this priority.

Engagement and assessment: The provider will deliver tailored, person-centred support to at least 120 unpaid carers across the North East. This will include:

- Outreach and engagement through a range of referral routes, including carers organisations, health services, DWP and community partners.
- A holistic assessment of each participant's circumstances, covering caring responsibilities and caring intensity; health and wellbeing; skills, confidence and employment readiness.
- Development of personalised action plans, supported by ongoing one-to-one keyworker support.
- Delivery of ongoing one-to-one support to build confidence and employability skills, identify realistic and sustainable employment pathways, and address both practical and emotional barriers to work.
- Ensuring a 'no wrong front door' approach by working with local hubs to signpost individuals to the most appropriate support whilst ensuring a keyworker model.

Support must be flexible, appropriately paced and responsive, recognising that carers' circumstances can change rapidly and unpredictably. This approach reflects findings from the North East Carers Research Report, which highlight that carers face multiple, interrelated barriers to employment, including the intensity and unpredictability of caring responsibilities, reduced confidence after time out of the labour market, and difficulties identifying flexible roles, and therefore require personalised, flexible and ongoing support to move towards and sustain employment.

Barrier removal and progression towards work: Delivery must include targeted activity to address key barriers faced by unpaid carers, including:

- Support to plan around caring arrangements and fluctuating availability.

- Advice and guidance on flexible working options and realistic employment pathways.
- Confidence building and preparation for work, including recognition of transferable skills developed through caring.
- Digital inclusion and skills support, where required.
- Support to re-enter the labour market following extended time out of work.

Participants may progress at different paces, and projects must evidence **distance travelled**, as well as job outcomes.

Health and wellbeing support: The provider will ensure participants can access health and wellbeing support, including digital therapies or interventions, where appropriate, to support resilience, mental health and the ability to sustain employment. This could include:

- Mental health and wellbeing tools.
- Digital therapeutic interventions.
- Referral and signposting to appropriate health services, including ICB commissioned provision.

This responds to evidence that health and wellbeing pressures are a significant factor in carers' ability to enter and remain in work.

Employer engagement and advocacy: The provider will undertake employer engagement activity to support carers to access and sustain employment. This will include:

- Working with employers to improve their understanding of unpaid caring responsibilities ensuring alignment with wider employer engagement strategies.
- Supporting discussions around flexible working, reasonable adjustments and carers' rights.
- Advocacy or mediation support where carers require assistance to navigate conversations with employers.
- Promoting good practice in recruiting and retaining carers, aligned with regional initiatives such as shine.

Employer engagement activity under this priority is expected to support individual participants' journeys, rather than deliver a standalone employer engagement programme, and therefore should be proportionate to the scale of delivery.

Centralised referral system, system coordination and referrals: The provider will operate as part of the wider Trailblazer system and must:

- Work collaboratively with carers organisations, health partners, DWP and other Trailblazer funded projects.
- Establish, promote and maintain clear referral pathways into and out of the service.
- Avoid duplication with existing carers support or employability provision.

It is anticipated that much of the work will be delivered on a one-to-one basis, but group work and peer support may also be valuable options.

The Mayoral Strategic Authority is open to different delivery models, provided proposals meet the aims and objectives and reflect the evidence base.

5. Eligible participants

Residents in the North East area will be eligible for support under this priority if they are:

- An unpaid carer.
- Economically inactive.
- Are resident within the north east area.
- Have the right to work in the UK.

Eligible participants must meet the following **definition of economic inactivity**:

Economically inactive individuals are those not in work and not actively seeking work (unlike unemployed individuals who are actively seeking work).

Not all economically inactive individuals claim benefits. For those that do, this would include those claiming either “legacy” benefits or those within specific conditionality regimes in Universal Credit (UC). The former includes Employment Support Allowance (ESA), Incapacity Benefit (IB) and Income Support (IS). The latter includes claimants within the Preparation Requirement or Work Focused Interview Requirement conditionality regimes (or equivalent).

There is no minimum time period of economic inactivity, recognising that caring situations can change rapidly and unpredictably.

6. Outputs and outcomes

Applicants must demonstrate how their proposals will deliver the eligible activities, outputs and outcomes set out in this specification. Projects are also expected to contribute to learning on what

works well for the target group in the North East. Applicants are expected to submit proposals which demonstrate impact and additionality. Project activities should deliver, as a minimum, the following outputs and outcomes.

The following outputs are expected:

Output	Target	Definition	Evidence
Number of residents engaged	125	Resident is engaged and enrolled onto a project that aims to support with breaking down barriers and moving resident closer to or into the labour market.	Participant registration form

The following outcomes are expected:

Outcome	Target	Definition	Evidence examples
Number of people in employment, including self-employment, following support	50	The number of people who were previously unemployed or economically inactive, who have received support, and who have been in employment, including self-employment, for at least a 2 week of a four-week period following that support. This includes those moving into the “Working with requirements” or the “Working enough i.e. no working requirements” regimes on Universal Credit system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job offer letters • Screenshot of HMRC employment record (with participant consent) • Self-employment registration (e.g. HMRC UTR) • Payslips covering the required 2 weeks in 4-week period • Employer confirmation email

Please refer to the project application guidance document for additional information regarding outputs and outcomes definitions and evidence requirements.

In addition to core Trailblazer outputs and outcomes, the provider will also be required to:

- Evidence distance travelled, including improvements in confidence, stability, wellbeing and readiness for work.
- Contribute learning on:
 - effective support models for unpaid carers.
 - the role of employer engagement and advocacy.

- how health and wellbeing support enables employment outcomes.

Applicants must demonstrate how they will support participants to progress towards and/or into work, including progression into training or other support to address specific needs, and identify the tools they will use to monitor individual progress.

Learning under this priority should focus on what works at an individual level to support unpaid carers to move towards, enter and sustain employment.

Projects are not expected to deliver system reform in isolation, but to contribute to programme level learning, alignment and changes in practice across employment, health and other relevant systems.

7. Key dates

The key dates for this call for projects are as follows:

- Market engagement event and high level priorities for each call for projects shared on Wednesday 3 June 2026.
- Open call for projects launched on Wednesday 17 June 2026.
- Applications must be received by noon on Friday 3 July 2026. Any application not fully completed and submitted by this date and time will not be assessed.
- Interviews may be held, if required, with an assessment panel on Tuesday 14 July 2026. Applicants are requested to hold this date in diaries as alternative dates will not be available.
- Successful applicants will be expected to enter into contracts during August 2026.
- The projects must be mobilised in August and ready to take referrals from no later than 1 September 2026.
- An exit and sustainability plan should be developed and submitted by 1 December 2026.
- All activity and spending must be complete, and outputs and outcomes achieved by the 31 March 2027.

8. Budget

There is a budget allocation of £300,000 for this project. The North East Mayoral Strategic Authority expects to fund one region-wide project. All funding must be spent by 31 March 2027.

Eligible costs include:

- Direct staffing costs.
- Training and development costs for participants.

- Participant travel costs and expenses.
- Provider management and overheads.
- Costs for project level data collection, monitoring, learning and evaluation.

9. Applications and assessment process

Applications

Providers should submit a completed application using the standard template. Each question has a word limit, and any text exceeding this limit will not be assessed. Additional documents or appendices will not be considered. All bids must demonstrate how they will achieve full regional coverage and meet the requirements set out in this specification.

Consortium or partnership bids are encouraged. Where such bids are submitted, applicants must clearly set out the roles, responsibilities and contributions of each partner, including arrangements for governance, decision making and financial management. A single lead organisation must be identified. This organisation will be accountable to the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority for delivery, performance management, reporting and compliance with the funding agreement, and will be responsible for ensuring effective coordination across partners.

Providers are expected to demonstrate within their application:

- Experience in delivering employment support.
- A track record of supporting unpaid carers.
- Capacity to deliver at scale across the region.
- Strong links with local employers in the north east.
- The ability to mobilise in august and begin delivery no later than 1 September 2026.
- A commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).
- Systems in place for safeguarding, risk management and data protection.

All applications will be assessed in line with the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority award criteria, as set out in the project application guidance document.

Assessment

Further detail on the assessment process is included in the project application guidance document.

The North East Mayoral Strategic Authority may hold an assessment panel and invite applicants to interview on 14 July 2026. Applicants are advised to hold this date, as alternative dates will not be available.

10. Alignment with other projects and programmes

Applicants must demonstrate how their proposal aligns with, and does not duplicate, existing projects and programmes. This includes other Economic Inactivity Trailblazer funded projects, as well as Connect to Work, the ICB Health and projects funded through Growth Accelerator, and, where relevant, the Adult Skills Fund.

Proposals must clearly set out:

- How the offer differs from generic employability support.
- How it adds value beyond existing carers services.
- How specialist employment support, employer engagement and wellbeing provision are integrated into a coherent model.
- How delivery will complement existing place-based or employer-led carers programmes and avoid duplication.

Providers will be expected to liaise with Local Authority employment leads, employment partnerships, and participate in quarterly MSA provider forum meetings to support coordination and alignment across the system.

11. Quarterly claims and payments

The North East Mayoral Strategic Authority's claim process operates quarterly in arrears with projects able to claim for actual expenditure on project activities, on a quarterly basis, after the money has been spent. Applicant organisations are required to cashflow project activity.

Claims are due one month following the end of the quarter. The North East Mayoral Strategic Authority will pay claims when:

- A fully completed claim form has been approved by the Authority together with supporting information, including a detailed transaction list and evidence of defrayment.
- Any project specific funding conditions have been complied with.
- Financial, output, milestone, risk and progress information has been uploaded correctly onto the portal.

The North East Mayoral Strategic Authority may withhold 10% of the project value until all project closure actions have been satisfactorily completed.

12. Monitoring, evaluation and learning

The monitoring information for each participant will be collected via the monthly submission of Participant Registration Form, exit forms, outputs and outcomes forms, and data capture schemas. It will be the responsibility of each provider to ensure every participant has completed this information. Monitoring returns, along with claims, will be submitted on a quarterly basis, and sample checks will be completed by the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority.

The evaluation of the Trailblazer is vital to inform future direction. All participating organisations must participate in the programme level evaluation by collecting and providing data, taking part in qualitative interviews, completing surveys and allowing their data to be processed and analysed for this purpose.