

North East Mayoral Strategic Authority

Economic Inactivity Trailblazer year two

Call for projects for priority two strand 4:
Specialist employment support for people
with convictions and prison leavers

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 people with convictions and prison leavers, are disproportionately affected by economic inactivity. It is [estimated by the Ministry of Justice](#) that around one in four working-age people in the UK have a criminal record, highlighting the scale of the challenge and the importance of supporting inclusive labour market access.

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 test 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 ex-offenders, 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 support for people with convictions and prison leavers. This should be read in conjunction with the guidance note for this call for projects.

3. Specialist employment support for support for people with convictions and prison leavers

This priority will fund community based, specialist employment support for prison leavers and people with prior convictions, focused on individuals who are in the community, not in custody.

The priority recognises that people leaving prison face significant and intersecting barriers to employment, including stigma, disclosure requirements, poor mental health, trauma, housing instability and disrupted work histories, as well as limited employer confidence. For some groups, particularly women, young adults, care experienced individuals and people from Black, Asian and minoritised communities, these barriers are compounded by experiences of violence, abuse, inequality and systemic discrimination.

This project will support participants to move towards, enter and sustain employment, where appropriate, through personalised, trauma-informed support, employer engagement and advocacy, and coordination with prison, probation and wider resettlement services.

The purpose of this priority is to deliver a specialist, community-based employability offer for prison leavers and people with convictions, which:

- Supports individuals post-release or on community sentences to engage with employment safely and sustainably.
- Addresses employment, wellbeing and practical barriers in an integrated way.
- Improves employer understanding, confidence and inclusive recruitment practice.
- Contributes learning on what works to support employment outcomes for prison leavers and people with convictions in the North East.

This project is not intended to deliver any employment support in custody.

Aims of the project

This priority aims to:

- Support prison leavers and people with convictions to progress towards, enter and sustain employment.
- Reduce the risk of reoffending associated with unemployment.
- Address trauma, stigma and practical barriers that limit labour market participation.
- Improve employer confidence and capability to recruit people with convictions.
- Generate learning to inform future commissioning and system reform.

In this context practical barriers could include (but are not limited to):

- Lack of a valid photo ID or documentation required to start work.
- Lack of a bank account.
- Homelessness or insecure accommodation on release, making sustained employment difficult.
- Temporary or probation approved accommodation that limits travel, working hours or shift patterns.
- Licence conditions or probation appointments that restrict availability for work or training.
- Uncertainty around disclosure requirements and how and when to disclose convictions to employers.
- A lack of affordable transport to access workplaces, particularly for early starts or shift work.
- Limited digital access or skills, affecting job search, applications and employer communication.
- Gaps in recent work history, references or recognised qualifications.
- A digital footprint or online presence that may impact employment opportunities, including historic information, social media content or criminal record disclosures that influence employer decision-making.
- Limited access to appropriate clothing, equipment or tools required to start work.

Projects should recognise that stable accommodation, health and wider life stability are often preconditions to employment and demonstrate how delivery will support or coordinate with services to enable this stabilisation.

Delivery should support both early engagement immediately post-release, where individuals may be receptive to change, and sustained, community-based support over time, recognising that readiness for employment will vary depending on individual circumstances.

4. Eligible activity

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

Participant support

The provider will deliver tailored, person-centred support to prison leavers and people with convictions in the community. This will include:

- Outreach and engagement through probation services, community organisations, housing providers, DWP and voluntary sector partners.
- A holistic assessment of each participant's circumstances, including:

- employment history, skills and aspirations;
- licence conditions and disclosure requirements;
- health, wellbeing and trauma-related needs;
- any other financial or practical barriers.
- Development of personalised action plans, supported by ongoing one-to-one keyworker support.
- Support to navigate complex systems, including probation, housing, health and employment services.

Projects are expected to demonstrate how delivery will meet the needs of individuals who experience additional or compounded disadvantage within the cohort, including women, young adults, people from Black, Asian and minoritised communities, care-experienced individuals, and people with neurodivergent needs. This includes demonstrating how delivery will identify and respond to neurodivergent needs, for example through reasonable adjustments, accessible communication, and flexible approaches to engagement and employment support.

Support must be trauma-informed, flexible and delivered at a speed and intensity that matches the individual's readiness, stability and capacity, recognising that many prison leavers have experienced harm, instability and distrust of systems, and that sustained engagement requires consistency and trust.

Barrier removal and progression towards work

Delivery should include targeted activity to address barriers commonly faced by prison leavers and people with convictions, including:

- Support to understand and manage disclosure of convictions.
- Advice on realistic employment pathways aligned to licence conditions and risk management.
- Confidence building and preparation for work, including addressing stigma and self perception.
- Support to address gaps in skills, work history or qualifications.
- Development of employability and pro-social skills, including behaviour in the workplace, emotional intelligence, teamwork and interpersonal communication.
- Development of workplace readiness and practical employability skills, including confidence, digital literacy and job search skills.
- Practical support linked to employment readiness, including coordination with other support providers where required.

Projects should demonstrate how they will engage and support individuals who are furthest from the labour market and least likely to access mainstream provision. Participants may progress at different paces, and projects **must be able to evidence distance travelled**.

Employer engagement and advocacy

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

- Working with employers to improve their understanding of employing people with convictions, including addressing stigma, risk perception and supporting confident, evidence based decision-making.
- Supporting fair and inclusive recruitment practices, including disclosure conversations, risk based decision making and reasonable adjustments, where appropriate.
- Advocacy for participants where employer discussions are challenging or where disclosure, reasonable adjustments or workplace support need to be negotiated.
- Promoting good practice aligned with relevant national guidance and regional initiatives (e.g. fair chance recruitment principles, Ban the Box approaches, and regional initiatives such as SHINE).

Employer engagement under this priority should be directly linked to supporting individual participants' employment journeys and is not intended to fund broader employer campaigns or prison based recruitment activity.

Health, wellbeing and resilience support

Evidence highlights that untreated trauma, mental ill-health and experiences of violence or abuse can undermine employment outcomes, particularly for women and young adults with convictions.

The provider will ensure participants can access appropriate health and wellbeing support to enable sustained engagement with employment. This may include:

- Mental health and wellbeing interventions.
- Trauma-informed support or digital therapies.
- Recovery focused support, recognising that some participants may be addressing substance use as part of their employment journey.
- Care co-ordination and active referral, including signposting, supporting participants to navigate and remain engaged with health, wellbeing and specialist services alongside employment support.

This support should be delivered in a way that recognises fluctuating needs and avoids disengagement during periods of crisis or recovery.

System coordination and referrals

The provider will operate as part of the wider Trailblazer system and must:

- Work collaboratively with probation, housing, health, DWP and voluntary sector partners.
- Establish and maintain clear referral pathways into and out of the project.
- Avoid duplication with prison based provision or statutory probation functions, including but not limited to pre-release employability support delivered in custody, Through the Gate resettlement services, statutory probation supervision including licence management, unpaid work, Creating Future Opportunities (CFO), Rehabilitation Activity Requirements (RAR) and Commissioned Rehabilitative Services (CRS), and any nationally commissioned prison employment pathways.
- Demonstrate how activity adds value in the community.
- Support joined-up working across employment, resettlement and wellbeing systems, as part of the wider ‘no wrong front door’ approach and local hub model.

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 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

Participants must:

- Be prison leavers or people with convictions, currently living in the community, including those subject to licence conditions, community orders or other forms of probation supervision.
- Be resident in the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority area following release.
- Be economically inactive.
- Be aged 18+ and 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 since release, recognising that barriers to employment can persist long after custody. There is no minimum period of economic inactivity.

Projects should demonstrate how they will take a gender responsive approach, including targeted engagement of women with convictions, recognising differing barriers, engagement patterns and support needs.

6. Outputs, outcomes and learning

Applicants must demonstrate how their proposals will deliver the eligible activities, outputs and outcomes set out in the specification. Activities should contribute to 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, 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job offer letters • Screenshot of HMRC employment record (with participant consent) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-employment registration (e.g. HMRC UTR) • Payslips covering the required 2 weeks in 4-week period

		requirements” regimes on Universal Credit system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employer confirmation email
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In addition to core Trailblazer requirements, proposals under this priority must demonstrate how they will:

- Support participants to move closer to, enter or sustain employment.
- Evidence distance travelled, including readiness for work.
- Contribute learning on:
 - effective community-based employment support for prison leavers and people with convictions;
 - employer engagement and inclusive recruitment practice;
 - the role of trauma-informed approaches in sustaining employment.

Applicants are expected to submit proposals which demonstrate impact and additionality.

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 Thursday 16 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 regional 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 ex-offenders, prison leavers or people with convictions.
- 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 16 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, CRS, CFO and, where relevant, the Adult Skills Fund.

Proposals must clearly set out:

- how delivery is distinct from custody-based or pre-release activity;
- how the offer adds value beyond generic employability support;
- how it complements probation and resettlement services; and
- how duplication with existing provision will be avoided.

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.