

PRACTICE CHANGE TOOLKIT

North East Economic Inactivity Trailblazer:
VCSE Sector System Reform



Practice Change Toolkit

Introduction

This toolkit has been developed to support the practical implementation of recommendations outlined throughout the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector system reform strand of the Economic Inactivity Trailblazer. However, this toolkit extends beyond any single programme. It provides the tools for sustained collaboration, policy development, commissioning reform and regional system alignment.

It translates the research's strategic priorities into system-level actionable tools to support:

- Programme and policy design
- Commissioning and investment
- Partnership development
- System and place-based working

It is designed for use by the North East Combined Authority, VCSE organisations, and system partners working together to deliver sustained, inclusive change.

Why This Matters

Across the North East, the VCSE sector plays a critical role in supporting people facing the most complex barriers to employment. However, its impact is constrained by systemic challenges, including:

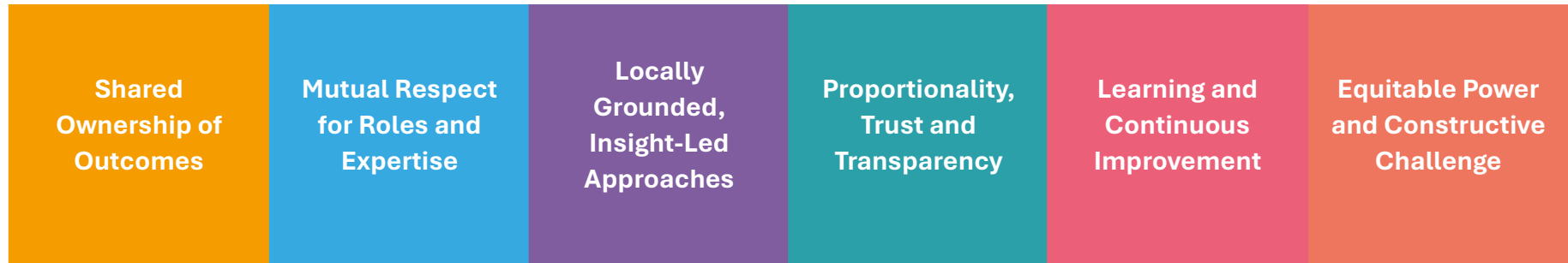
- Fragmented systems and unclear pathways
- Short-term and unstable funding
- Barriers to participation in commissioning
- Capacity constraints and unequal power dynamics

This toolkit provides practical tools to:

- Design more accessible and joined-up systems
- Enable meaningful VCSE involvement
- Support long-term, person-centred outcomes
- Build a more equitable and effective partnership model

Core Principles for Practice Change

The following principles, co-produced as part of the *Roles and Responsibilities Framework*, should underpin all use of this toolkit.



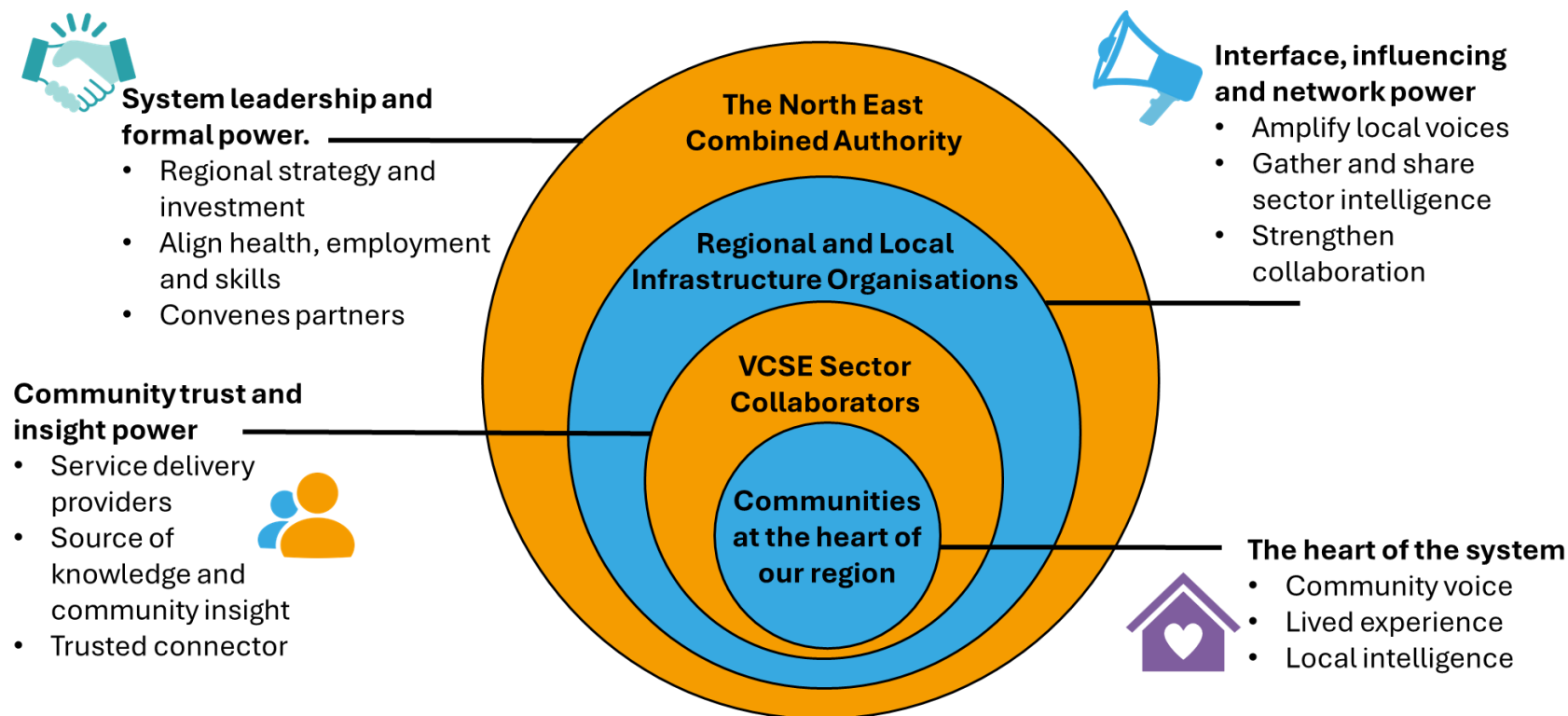
Roles within the system

Delivering system change requires clarity not only on what needs to change, but on how different partners contribute to that change.

The *Roles and Responsibilities Framework* sets out how the North East Combined Authority, VCSE organisations and infrastructure partners work together as an interdependent system. Each partner brings distinct strengths, responsibilities and forms of influence, all of which are essential to achieving shared outcomes.

It reflects a collaborative system, where leadership, insight and delivery are shared across partners.

Understanding these roles is critical to applying this toolkit effectively, particularly when designing programmes, commissioning services and developing partnerships.



How to Use This Toolkit

This toolkit is designed to support system and programme development at multiple stages. It is not a linear process, but an iterative cycle, where learning continuously informs and improves practice over time.

When to Use It

- Designing new programmes or funding opportunities
- Reviewing existing commissioning approaches
- Developing partnerships and collaboration models
- Strengthening cross-sector working

How to Use It

This toolkit can be used flexibly, but most users will move through a core cycle:

1. Identify: Understand the need, partners and gaps
2. Design: Co-design approaches to address the issue
3. Deliver: Implement solutions with clear roles and coordination
4. Learn: Review, adapt and improve with partners

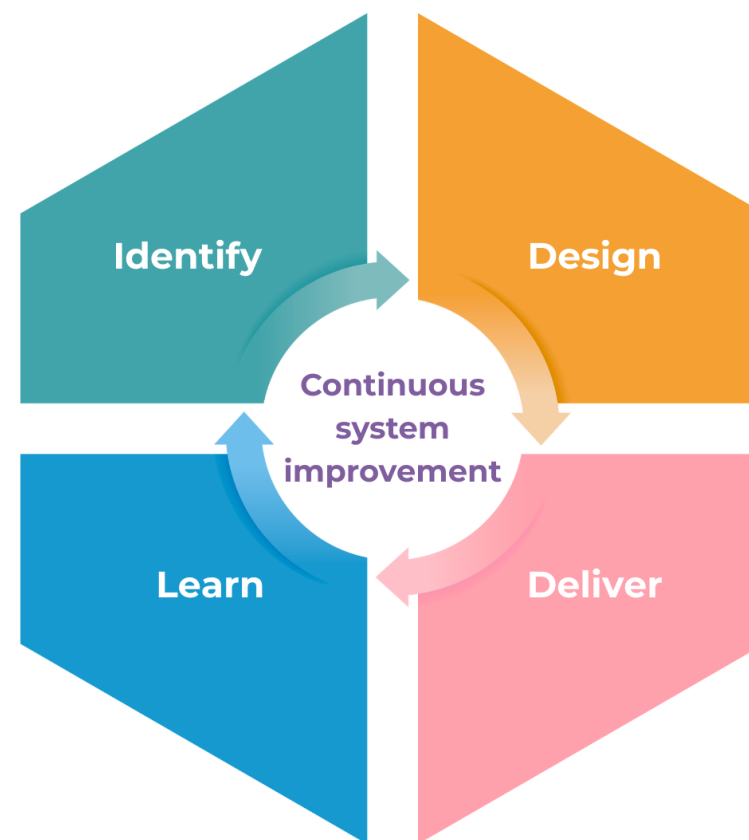
Applying the Toolkit in Practice

The toolkit can be used flexibly in practice depending on context:

- As a checklist to guide design and decision-making
- As a workshop tool to support co-design and partnership discussions
- As standalone resources where required

What's Included

- VCSE Engagement Self-Assessment Tool
- Programme Design Checklist
- Partnership Maturity Framework



VCSE Engagement Self-Assessment Tool

The VCSE sector plays a key role in delivering the North East CA's ambition to be the *Home of Real Opportunity*. Meaningful engagement with the sector is therefore critical.

Effective engagement enables the system to:

- Reach those furthest from the labour market through trusted, community-based relationships
- Deliver connected, person-centred pathways across employment, health and skills
- Respond to place-based need using local insight from communities across rural, coastal and urban areas
- Support prevention and long-term outcomes by addressing wider barriers such as health, housing and financial resilience

Strengthening how VCSE organisations are engaged is essential to building a more accessible, effective and sustainable system.

VCSE Engagement Self-Assessment Tool

This tool supports the North East Combined Authority and system partners to assess the quality of their engagement with the VCSE sector.

It can be used:

- During programme or commissioning design
- As part of review and reflection
- To identify areas for improvement

How to use this Tool

For each statement, score your current approach.

Where possible, and particularly at review stages, this self-assessment should be informed or validated by feedback from VCSE organisations.

Score	Description
1	Not in place
2	Limited / inconsistent
3	Partially in place
4	Mostly in place
5	Fully embedded and consistent

Practice insight: If VCSE organisations are only engaged at the point of delivery, the opportunity to design a more effective and inclusive system has already been missed.



1. Purpose and Timing

- Engagement happens early enough to influence decisions
- VCSE partners are involved before design/commissioning is finalised
- The purpose of engagement is clearly defined and communicated

2. Inclusivity and Reach

- A diverse range of VCSE organisations are engaged (e.g. organisations of different sizes)
- Infrastructure organisations and networks are used effectively
- Engagement reflects the relevant places and communities across the region

3. Accessibility and Proportionality

- Engagement methods are accessible and appropriate
- Sufficient notice and information are provided
- Administrative burden is proportionate to capacity

4. Partnership Approach

- VCSE organisations are treated as equal partners
- There is openness to influence and adapt based on feedback
- Roles, expectations and contributions are clearly defined



5. Transparency and Communication

- It is clear how VCSE input will be used
- Decision-making processes are transparent
- Feedback is consistently provided

6. Resourcing and Value

- VCSE time and expertise is recognised
- Opportunities exist to share resources (funding, data, capacity)
- Engagement is sustainable and not extractive

7. Outcomes and Impact

- VCSE insight has influenced programme or policy design
- Engagement contributes to more connected and accessible pathways
- Relationships are ongoing, not one-off

Scoring Your Engagement

Add your scores across all sections: / 35

Score	Description
30-35	Strong, embedded partnership approach
22-29	Good practice with some gaps to address
15-21	Inconsistent engagement – improvement needed
7-14	Limited engagement – significant change needed

Programme Design Checklist

This checklist is designed to support the development of employment, health and skills programmes that are inclusive, coordinated and shaped by meaningful VCSE involvement.

It should be used at the earliest stages of programme and commissioning design to ensure that approaches reflect community need, enable collaboration and support long-term outcomes.

Use this checklist to:

- Guide programme and commissioning design
- Structure discussions with VCSE partners
- Identify gaps or risks early
- Strengthen alignment with system reform priorities

This checklist can be used:

- Individually (as a design tool)
- In workshops (as a co-design framework)
- As part of governance and approval processes

Though this checklist is designed to support the development of employment, health and skills programmes, it can be applied to any programme where VCSE organisations are involved, whether in design, delivery or partnership.



1. VCSE Involvement and Co-Design

- ☐ Have VCSE organisations been involved from the earliest stage of design?
- ☐ Has engagement gone beyond consultation to co-design?
- ☐ Are a diverse range of VCSE organisations involved (e.g. organisations of different sizes)
- ☐ Has lived experience informed programme priorities and design?
- ☐ Are VCSE partners clear on how their input has shaped decisions?

2. Understanding Need and Place

- ☐ Is the programme informed by local intelligence and community insight?
- ☐ Does it reflect place-based differences (rural, coastal, urban)?
- ☐ Have specific barriers faced by priority groups been considered?
- ☐ Are there mechanisms to update understanding of need over time?

3. System Integration and “No Wrong Door”

- ☐ Does the programme align with a “No Wrong Door” approach?
- ☐ Are referral pathways defined and resourced?
- ☐ Does the design reduce duplication and fragmentation?
- ☐ Are roles for navigation and coordination identified?
- ☐ Can participants move easily between services without repeating their story?

4. Accessibility and Inclusion

- ☐ Is the programme accessible to those furthest from the labour market?
- ☐ Are barriers such as transport, childcare, digital access and language considered?
- ☐ Are engagement and delivery approaches flexible and person-centred?
- ☐ Is the programme inclusive of diverse communities and needs?

5. Commissioning and Delivery Model

- ☐ Does the commissioning approach enable VCSE participation, including smaller organisations?
- ☐ Are there multiple routes to delivery (e.g. grants, partnerships)?
- ☐ Are expectations proportionate to the size and capacity of organisations?
- ☐ Does the model encourage collaboration rather than competition?
- ☐ Are partnership roles and expectations clear and equitable?

6. Outcomes and Impact

- ☐ Are outcomes focused on meaningful progression, not just easily measurable outputs?
- ☐ Do outcomes reflect wellbeing, confidence and sustained participation, as well as employment?
- ☐ Are outcomes realistic and appropriate for the target group?
- ☐ Is there a shared understanding of success across partners?

7. Funding and stability

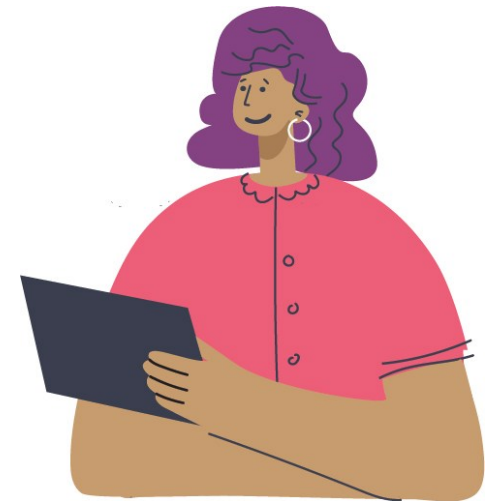
- ☐ Does the programme support continuity and stability of delivery?
- ☐ Are funding timelines realistic and clearly communicated?
- ☐ Is full cost recovery considered?
- ☐ Does the design minimise “stop-start” delivery?
- ☐ Are there opportunities to align with other funding streams?

8. Monitoring, Learning and Adapting

- ☐ Is monitoring proportionate and meaningful?
- ☐ Are VCSE organisations involved in shaping evaluation approaches?
- ☐ Are there feedback loops between delivery, commissioning and strategy?
- ☐ Is there space to test, learn and adapt over time?
- ☐ Will learning be used to inform future commissioning and policy?

Practice insight: Co-design is not a single stage, it is an ongoing process.

The most effective programmes continue to involve VCSE partners throughout design, delivery and review.



North CA-VCSE Partnership Maturity Framework

This Partnership Maturity Framework provides a practical tool to support structured reflection and continuous improvement. It can be adapted and refined through collaboration between the North East CA and VCSE partners to ensure it is proportionate and aligned with existing governance, policy, and system priorities at that point in time.

This framework provides a simple, shared way to assess and strengthen partnership working over time between the North East CA and the VCSE sector.

It is designed to:

- Support joint reflection and accountability
- Provide a practical mechanism for continuous improvement
- Help track progress towards mature, equitable partnership working

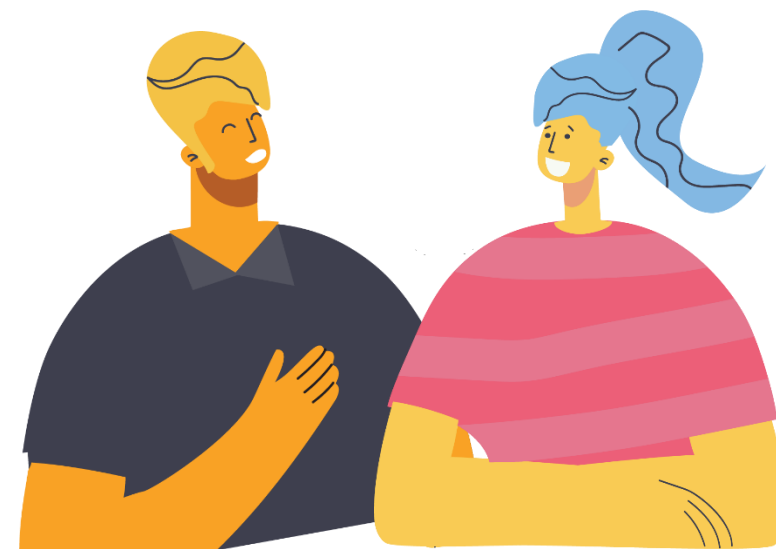
This framework is aligned with:

- *The Roles and Responsibilities Framework*
- Evidence and recommendations from the *Strengthening VCSE Integration in Work, Health and Skills: Evidence, Models and Recommendations* report

How to use this framework

- Complete as a joint self-assessment – North East CA and VCSE
- Use evidence and examples, not just perception
- Agree a RAG rating for each area
- Identify 1-3 priority actions per area
- Review every 12 months

Level	Description
Emerging	Early activity, inconsistent, largely informal
Developing	More structured, some inconsistency, gaps remain
Maturing	Clear systems in place, mostly consistent and embedded
Embedded	Fully integrated, proactive, continuously improving



Area	Indicators	RAG Rating	Evidence	Priority Actions
Strategic Alignment & System Leadership	- VCSE involved at early stage of strategy and policy development - Shared vision and outcomes across North East CA and VCSE - VCSE explicitly reflected in work, health and skills priorities			
Governance, Accountability & Voice	- VCSE representation across system, place and thematic governance - Clear mechanisms for two-way accountability - Evidence that VCSE input influences decisions			
Communication, Engagement & Insight	- Structured mechanisms to gather and use VCSE and community insight - Regular, accessible communication channels - Engagement reaches diverse and underrepresented groups			
VCSE Infrastructure & Capacity	- Ongoing resource and capacity to coordinate and sustain North East CA-VCSE partnership - Policies supporting participation (e.g. reimbursement, support roles)			
Co-Design, Commissioning & Delivery	- Co-design is standard practice across programmes - VCSE involved in commissioning decisions and pathways - Delivery models reflect community-led and preventative approaches			
Social Value, Impact & Learning	- Shared approach to impact and social value measurement - Evidence used to inform commissioning and strategy - Space for learning, adaptation and innovation			

What Good Looks Like in Practice

The following examples illustrate how the principles and tools in this toolkit can be applied and implemented.

Example: System-Level Partnership (Greater Manchester VCFSE Accord)

The [Greater Manchester VCFSE Accord](#) demonstrates how formal agreements can embed the VCSE sector as a strategic partner across a whole system.

In practice, this includes:

- A shared agreement between the Combined Authority, NHS and VCSE sector setting out joint priorities and ways of working
- Coordinated VCSE representation through infrastructure (GM VCFSE Leadership Group), enabling a collective sector voice
- VCSE involvement in system-level governance structures and strategic decision-making processes
- A shift from transactional relationships to long-term, trust-based partnership
- Commitments to fair funding approaches and more equitable commissioning practices

This example demonstrates how formal agreements, supported by coordinated infrastructure and shared principles, can embed the VCSE sector as a strategic partner within system leadership and decision-making.

Example: Embedding VCSE in System Governance (Memorandum of Understanding between the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board and the VCSE Sector)

Across the North East and North Cumbria, the [development of a Memorandum of Understanding](#) (MoU) between the Integrated Care Board (ICB) and the VCSE sector provides a strong example of system-level practice change.

Developed in partnership with the [VCSE Partnership Programme](#), whose lead partner is VONNE, the MoU sets out a shared commitment to embedding the VCSE sector within governance, decision-making and service design across the Integrated Care System.

What this looks like in practice:

- VCSE recognised as an equal partner in achieving system outcomes, moving beyond a delivery-only role
- VCSE representation embedded across system and place-based governance structures, supporting input into strategy and decision-making
- Coordinated engagement through the VCSE Partnership Programme, providing a structured route for sector voice and shared intelligence across the system
- Clear expectations for partnership, transparency and accountability, strengthening trust and shared ways of working

This example demonstrates how formal agreements, when supported by strong infrastructure and shared principles, can enable more coordinated and transparent partnership working, with clearer routes for VCSE involvement in system processes.

Example: Coordinated Access and Navigation “No Wrong Door for Young Carers”

The [“No Wrong Door for Young Carers” Memorandum of Understanding](#) demonstrates how shared responsibility for access and coordination can be embedded across a system.

In practice, this includes:

- All partners taking responsibility for identifying need and connecting individuals to support
- Agreed referral pathways and coordinated responses across services
- Formalised partnership agreements to reduce fragmentation
- A simpler and more accessible experience for individuals

This demonstrates how a “No Wrong Door” approach can be embedded through shared agreements, roles and coordinated delivery across partners.

Conclusion

This toolkit translates the learning from the North East Economic Inactivity Trailblazer VCSE sector reform strand into a set of practical tools that can be applied across policy, commissioning, partnership development and delivery. Used effectively, it enables partners to design more coordinated, inclusive and sustainable approaches that better reflect the realities of communities and the strengths of the VCSE sector.

The tools within this document are not intended to be used in isolation or as a one-off exercise. Their value lies in consistent application over time, supporting an ongoing cycle of diagnosing need, co-designing solutions, delivering collaboratively and learning continuously. In doing so, they help embed the principles set out in the *Roles and Responsibilities Framework* into everyday practice.

As implementation progresses, the focus should be on applying these tools in real-world contexts, testing and refining approaches, and ensuring that learning feeds back into future system design. Over time, this will support the development of a more coherent, transparent and equitable system, one that enables the VCSE sector to play its full strategic role in reducing economic inactivity and supporting inclusive growth.

Together with the accompanying phases of work, this toolkit forms part of a wider shift towards a more aligned and partnership-driven system. By embedding these approaches, the North East is well positioned to deliver lasting change and to lead the way in how systems work with communities to create a *Home of Real Opportunity*.