

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES FRAMEWORK

North East Economic Inactivity Trailblazer:
VCSE Sector System Reform



Phase four: Roles and Responsibilities Framework

Executive Summary

Purpose

- This Roles and Responsibilities Framework establishes a long-term, system-level partnership between the North East Combined Authority (North East CA) and the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector.
- It is not a coordination agreement. It is a vehicle for system reform.
- The framework clarifies how power, commissioning, accountability and influence operate across the regional system to address economic inactivity and support inclusive employment pathways. It defines distinct roles, shared responsibilities and behavioural commitments that enable meaningful collaboration across health, employment and skills.
- While shaped through the Economic Inactivity Trailblazer, this framework extends beyond any single programme. It provides the foundation for sustained collaboration, policy development, commissioning reform and regional system alignment.

What Will Change

Through the adoption of this framework:

- Commissioning processes will be more transparent and increasingly co-designed.
- VCSE insight and lived experience will systematically inform strategy and investment decisions, ensuring North East CA decisions are closely linked to communities.
- Data sharing will be supported and enhanced.
- Decision-making rationales will be clearly communicated.
- Power imbalances will be explicitly recognised and mitigated where possible.
- Shared regional outcomes will be jointly shaped, even where statutory accountability remains distinct.
- Constructive challenge will be protected as an essential part of effective partnership.
- Continuous learning will inform commissioning and policy adaptation.

What Success Looks Like in 3-5 Years

Success will be evident when:

- Health, employment and skills initiatives are more aligned across the system, supporting the North East CA's *Home of Real Opportunity* core mission.
- Regional strategies consistently reflect community-rooted insight.
- Commissioning models are proportionate, accessible and designed with VCSE input from the outset.
- VCSE organisations report meaningful influence over regional priorities.
- Economic inactivity gaps are measurably reduced, particularly for communities facing structural disadvantage.
- The partnership operates with high trust, transparency and shared accountability.

VCSE: A Strategic Asset for the Home of Real Opportunity

The North East CA's Corporate Plan commits to building a better skilled and more diverse workforce, strengthening the foundational economy, supporting under-represented groups into good work, and delivering joined-up employment support that removes barriers to participation.

The VCSE sector is a core strategic asset in delivering the North East's ambition to be the *Home of Real Opportunity*, providing community reach, trusted relationships and specialist expertise that enable these commitments to be realised in practice.

The Scale and Reach of the VCSE Sector

Across the North East, the VCSE sector:

- Employs 30,040 people and mobilises a significant volunteer workforce of 120,039.
- Operates in every locality - rural, coastal and urban.
- Delivers employment, skills, health, advice, family support and foundational economy services.
- Provides early help, prevention and long-term wraparound support.

The sector represents a significant component of the region's social and economic infrastructure and bring capabilities to the regional system that are difficult to replicate within statutory services.

Unique System Strengths

VCSE organisations bring capabilities to the regional system that are difficult to replicate within statutory services.

Community embeddedness and reach

VCSE organisations are rooted in the communities they serve, building longstanding, trust-based relationships that enable engagement with people often overlooked or underserved by statutory systems. Their local presence helps reduce barriers to engagement, sustain participation, and support successful transitions into employment and training. This reach is critical to reducing economic inactivity and child poverty.

Trusted relationships that tackle inequality

VCSE organisations hold deep, place-based trust. This relational power enables them to:

- Support women, disabled people, carers, people with long-term health conditions and minoritised communities into employment.
- Address health inequalities that prevent labour market participation.
- Sustain people in work through holistic, person-centred support.

Place-specific insight across diverse geographies

The North East spans rural Northumberland, coastal communities, urban centres and former industrial towns. VCSE organisations provide granular intelligence about local needs, barriers and opportunities, enabling the North East CA to tailor policy, commissioning and delivery to place.

Lived experience and specialist expertise

Many VCSE providers embed lived experience in service design and delivery, improving relevance, trust and outcomes. Specialist organisations bring

targeted expertise for priority groups (such as disabled people, carers, migrants and refugees, older workers, young adults facing multiple barriers) and support alternative progression pathways including self-employment, volunteering and community-based enterprise.

Prevention and systems change

VCSE organisations support long-term prevention, early help, and wraparound support — all essential to reducing demands on public systems and enabling sustained employment outcomes.

Support routinely extends beyond employability into the social determinants of work such as housing stability, food security, health and wellbeing, debt and financial resilience, and digital inclusion. This holistic approach enables individuals to progress at a realistic pace and prevents drop-off when life circumstances change.

Strategic Contribution to the Home of Real Opportunity

Through this, the VCSE sector directly supports the delivery of the North East CA's Corporate Plan commitments.

These contributions are essential to delivering:

- A better skilled and more diverse workforce
- Increased economic participation
- Reduced child poverty
- Inclusive growth across the region

Embedding VCSE partnership strengthens the North East CA's ability to deliver its missions by combining community insight, prevention and inclusive delivery models to drive long-term system reform.

Case Studies

These case studies show just some of the ways the VCSE sector are contributing to ensuring that the North East is a *Home of Real Opportunity*. These examples demonstrate the impact the VCSE sector has on ensuring people of all ages and backgrounds are able to build the essential skills they need to access work. Approaches are innovative and designed around the needs of the people of the North East, supporting residents to thrive.

"During my time at Action station, I gained valuable experience in community engagement and administrative tasks. it also helped me develop strong organisational and communication skills, which was essential in achieving my professional goals and helped me recognise my confidence level. I also learned how to collaborate with different teams, which improved my teamwork and problem-solving ability. It is a great place to work. Loved being a part of the team. I would always love to come back whenever it is possible." - [Action Station Service User](#)

I liked the idea of working outside and doing something different. The support I've had has helped me build confidence really quickly. The job has made a big difference and has helped me support my growing family and build a more stable future. – [Northern Rights Service User](#)

‘My Progress into STEM’: ICOS delivered a workshop focusing on employability in Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) for Eastern European women, in Newcastle, we welcomed a motivational speaker who told the women her inspiring story of how she decided to change her career and how she became a data analyst. During the workshop, the women could also get some initial advice and information regarding employability. One of the women attendees (from a Polish background) expressed her interest working as a healthcare assistant for the NHS as she was currently working there as a domestic, she previously applied many times but her applications have never gone to the next stage of the recruitment. Her goal was to progress her career within the NHS and find new opportunities. She had set up an appointment with project worker so that they could look at available opportunities within the NHS, project worker supported the client with understanding the needed criteria and filling out job application for a healthcare assistant, they applied for the position together. The client was invited to the job interview following week and she has been accepted for the position of a healthcare assistant within the NHS. The client was very pleased with the support she has received through the ‘My Progress into STEM’ Project. – [International Community Organisation of Sunderland](#)

“We don’t say ‘come to a CV workshop’, we say ‘come to Zumba’ and start a conversation.” – [JobsPlus housing association staff member, Learning and Work Institute](#)

Context and Rationale

The North East Combined Authority (North East CA) commissioned VONNE to lead the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector system reform strand of the North East CA Economic Inactivity Trailblazer. Phase four of this work was the development of a roles and responsibilities framework, establishing a clear and defined approach for partners engaging in cross-sector, system work to address economic inactivity and support inclusive employment pathways. This framework is not a coordination agreement, it is a vehicle for system reform. While shaped through the Economic Inactivity Trailblazer, this framework extends beyond any single programme. It provides the foundation for long-term sustained collaboration, policy development, commissioning, and system reform across health, employment, and skills.

This framework directly contributes to the North East CA's Corporate Plan commitments to build a better skilled and more diverse workforce, support under-represented groups into good work, strengthen the foundational economy, and provide joined-up employment support that removes barriers to participation.

The Case for Reform

Stakeholder engagement highlighted systemic challenges, including power imbalances, complex commissioning processes, capacity constraints, and barriers to collaboration. This framework addresses those structural issues. It clarifies roles, strengthens accountability and rebalances influence, establishing a practical reference for partners to better understand each other's roles across the system.

The framework:

- States where influence sits across the system and who holds responsibility at each stage, enabling partners to actively exercise their influence within a transparent structure.
- Defines how partners engage with one another and ensures the use of appropriate delivery models that reflect capacity, capability and different forms of power, creating clear and accountable expectations.
- Enables coordinated, region-wide action that delivers measurable economic and social impact tailored to the North East's unique and diverse communities.

Purpose

This framework shifts how power, commissioning and accountability operate across the North East CA area, whilst complementing statutory duties and governance arrangements. It strengthens how partners work together within those structures to deliver shared regional outcomes. The framework will:

Establish shared ownership and transparency

Clarify roles, responsibilities, and decision-making

Ensure meaningful system reform

Provide a foundation for current and future collaboration

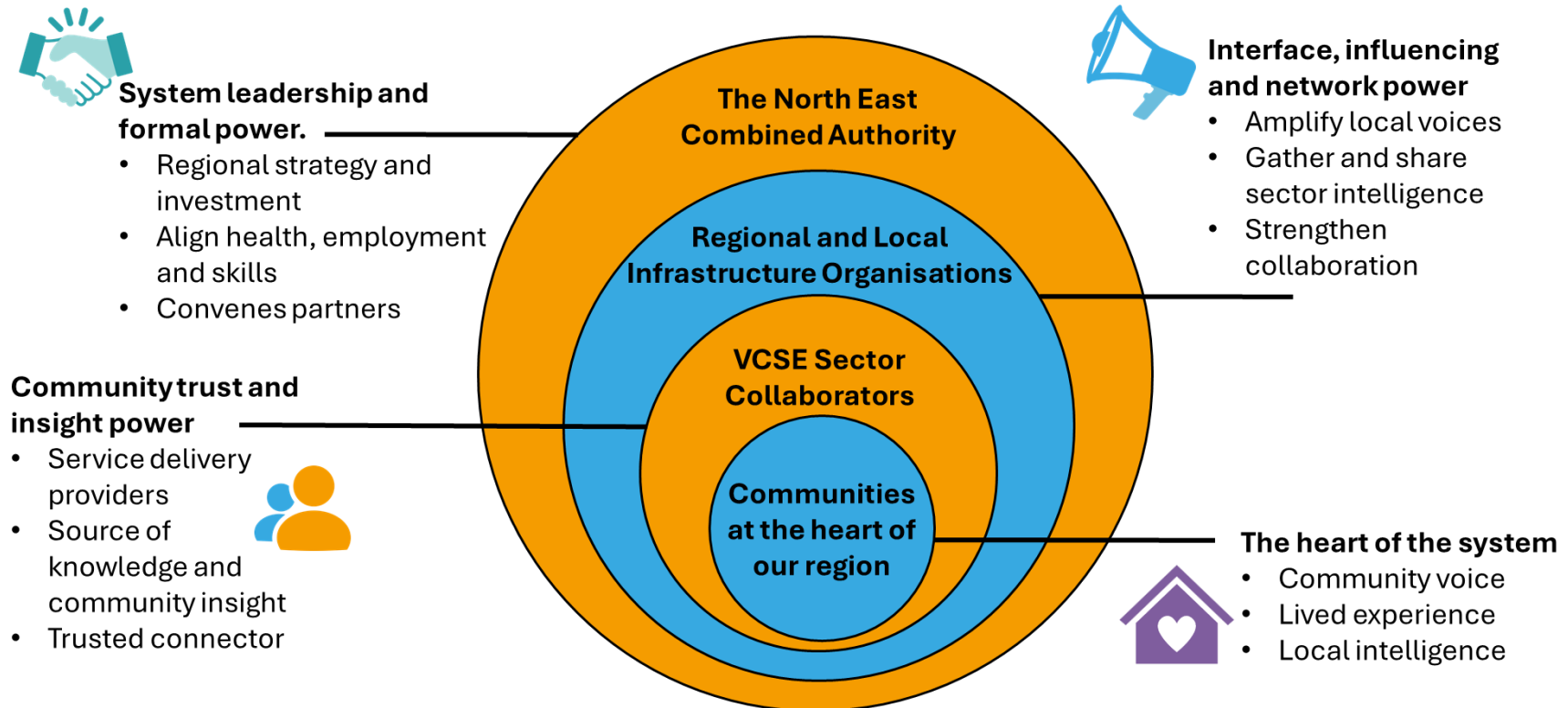
Increase trust between partners

Shared Principles Underpinning the Relationship

Principle	What this means in theory	What this means in practice
Shared ownership of outcomes	The North East CA and the VCSE sector will jointly define, deliver and be accountable for shared regional outcomes, recognising that meaningful progress relies on collective effort across the whole system.	• Outcomes are shaped collaboratively and reference progress against the North East CA's five missions. • Delivery contributions are acknowledged across the system. • Accountability boundaries are transparent. • Partners recognise collective responsibility for progress.
Mutual respect for distinct roles, expertise and constraints	Partners commit to respecting each other's roles, responsibilities and limitations, and to valuing different forms of expertise, including lived experience, frontline insight and statutory accountability.	• Distinct decision-making powers are respected. • VCSE expertise, lived experience and frontline insight are valued equally alongside statutory accountability. • Organisational constraints are openly acknowledged.
Locally grounded, insight-led approaches	Partners commit to working together in ways that are informed by local context, recognising that solutions must reflect the diversity of place, communities and individuals across the North East.	• Commissioning and policy design reflect the diversity of the North East's rural, coastal and urban geographies. • Regional and local infrastructure organisations are consulted to gather insight that informs regional strategy. • VCSE delivery insight shapes commissioning design. • Communities are engaged early and meaningfully. • Foundational economy and community-based employers are recognised as key contributors to inclusive growth.
Proportionality, trust and transparency	The North East CA and the VCSE sector commit to working in ways that are proportionate and transparent, building trust through communication, engagement and constructive challenge to strengthen outcomes.	• Application and reporting requirements are appropriate. • Communication is timely and clear. • Trust is built through consistent behaviour. • Clear documentation of how engagement influenced outcomes. • Feedback provided following commissioning decisions. • Open communication about constraints.

Learning, adaptation and continuous improvement	The North East CA and the VCSE sector will embed continuous learning, openly sharing evidence and feedback, and adapting approaches to ensure they meet ongoing needs.	• Learning contributes to Corporate Plan reporting frameworks and regional performance indicators. • Evaluation findings inform commissioning cycles. • Feedback loops are built into governance. • The framework itself is reviewed and updated.
Equitable power and constructive challenge	Partners commit to recognising power imbalances in the system, including relating to organisational capacity and funding control. All partners are expected to challenge assumptions and decisions constructively. Challenge is recognised as a mechanism for strengthening outcomes, not destabilising relationships.	• VCSE partners can raise concerns without risk of reprisal. • Power imbalances are acknowledged explicitly. • Influence is exercised transparently.

Roles Within the System



Partner	Core Role	Key Responsibilities
North East Combined Authority	The strategic system leader and accountable commissioner for regional investment, shaping innovative policy, commissioning and funding models that enable system reform across health, employment and skills. Uses its convening authority and investment powers to pilot new approaches, unlock collaboration, and scale what works across the region.	Leadership and strategic direction - Set the strategic policy direction for tackling economic inactivity across the region. - Align health, employment and skills agendas at regional level. - Embed a commitment to sustainability within supply chains, ensuring procurement and commissioning practices support long-term resilience. - Align Trailblazer learning with the Local Growth Plan and foundational economy priorities. Commissioning and system practices - Design commissioning and investment approaches that enable equitable, balanced VCSE participation, including smaller and specialist organisations. - Foster a culture of proportionate, transparent monitoring and accountability. - Establish collaborative systems for data sharing and collective learning, considering resourcing and digital capabilities. - Ensure commissioning supports the foundational economy and contributes to inclusive growth across rural, coastal and urban communities.
VCSE Sector collaborators	Strategic system partners and delivery leaders, shaping policy, innovating solutions and delivering trusted, community-rooted services. Holds critical relational and insight power that informs commissioning, policy design, and system reform.	Insight-informed design - Provide strategic insight into system design, based on lived experience and community needs where possible and appropriate. - Share learning, evidence and real-world challenges to support system improvement and improving local outcomes. Community engagement and frontline deliver - Engage people furthest from the labour market through trusted, community-based approaches. - Support residents, particularly those facing multiple and complex needs, to access skills training, employment support and well-paid work. - Deliver holistic, person-centred support across health, skills and employment pathways, including volunteering.

		• Surface lived experience and frontline insight into system design to ensure it works for everyone. Sector collaboration and support • Collaborate across organisations and places where possible to strengthen support for communities. • Act as trusted connectors between communities, employers and public services. • Create and sustain employment within VCSE organisations to support local people and communities.
Regional Infrastructure - VONNE	The regional VCSE system partner and representative body, influencing regional strategy, amplifying sector voice and strengthening cross-sector collaboration. Provides system intelligence that shapes policy, investment, and reform.	Collective understanding and collaborative leadership • Gather and synthesise sector intelligence through established networks (e.g. Skills, Inclusion and Employment Network). • Collate and share sector intelligence, evidence and insight. • Bring volunteer insight and capacity into service design and delivery. System learning and improvement • Facilitate co-design, learning and feedback loops. • Translate policy and system requirements into accessible guidance for the sector. • Support capacity building and skills development for small and medium organisations. Strategic representation and influence • Act as the strategic interface between the VCSE sector and North East CA. • Convene and represent the VCSE sector at regional level. • Coordinate and engage VCSE input into system reform, policy development and commissioning design. • Align VCSE intelligence with the North East CA's five missions and Corporate Plan performance framework.
Local Infrastructure Organisations	Place-based VCSE leaders and convenors, strengthening organisational capacity and ensuring local intelligence informs regional decision-making.	Local coordination and place-based collaboration • Convene local VCSE networks and partnerships. • Support coordination and alignment between VCSE organisations within local places, helping to minimise overlap. • Strengthen collaboration and joined-up local responses. Commissioning, investment and system infrastructure

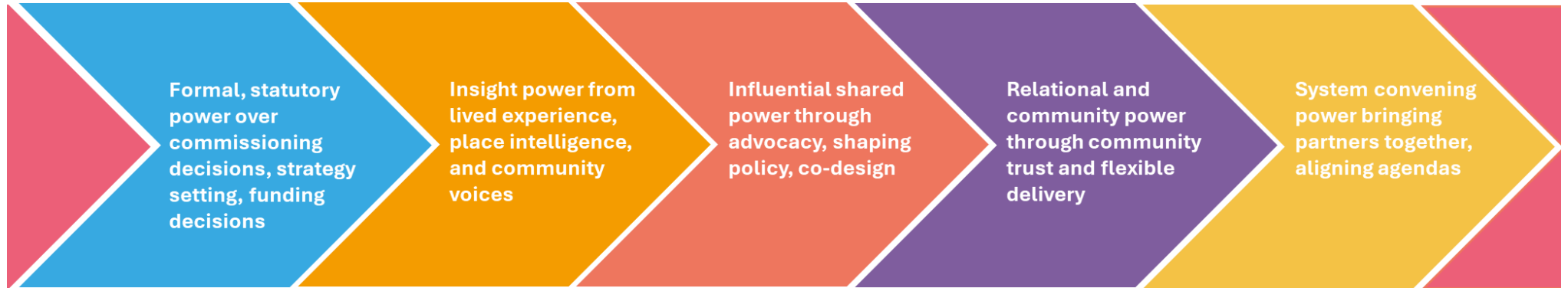
		- Support VCSE organisations at a local level to engage with commissioning, partnerships and funding opportunities. Community insight and voice - Gather local intelligence, gaps and emerging needs. - Amplify community voice and lived experience into local and regional system discussions. - Provide place-based intelligence to inform tailored delivery of the Home of Real Opportunity mission across rural, coastal and urban contexts.
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The partnership operates as an interdependent system, with each partner holding **distinct forms of power, responsibility and influence** that contribute to **shared regional outcomes**.

System Outcomes	Impact outcomes
A coherent regional policy direction that reduces fragmentation and enables informed cross-sector decision-making.	Reduced economic inactivity.
Inclusive and effective commissioning that reflects community needs and enables innovation.	Increasing inclusive access to employment pathways.
A collaborative, integrated and resilient system that strengthens the local VCSE ecosystem, supports shared learning and continuous improvement.	Strengthening alignment across health, employment and skills.
Strong intelligence flow between communities, places and the region.	Enhancing equity of opportunity for structurally disadvantaged communities.

Understanding Power in the Partnership

The partnership explicitly recognises and values different forms of power: statutory, relational, convening, insight and advocacy. These powers will be exercised transparently and in ways that rebalance influence, strengthen accountability and improve outcomes. These powers are not equal in structure or scope, but all are essential to an effective system.

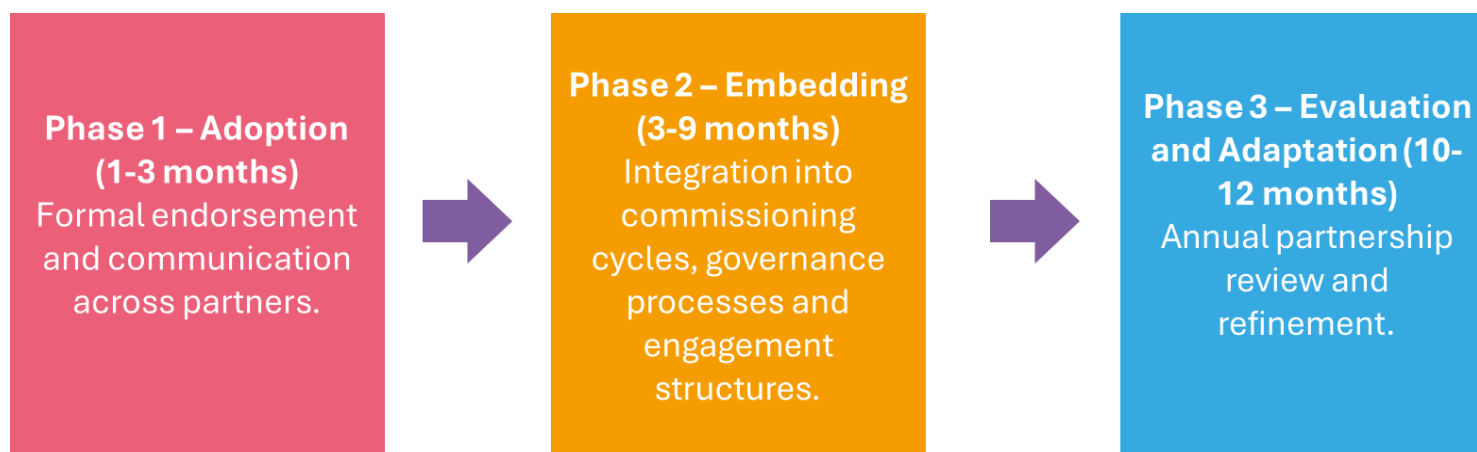


Role Clarity within Core System Functions

System Functions	The North East Combined Authority	VCSE Sector – all collaborators
Strategic Priority Setting	- Leads regional strategic development. - Sets the overall policy direction, informed by regional evidence, stakeholder engagement, and relevant national guidance.	Contributes and influences through structured engagement and co-design processes. Including participation in strategic discussions, amplifying collective voice, evidence and lived experience.
Commissioning and Funding Design	- Holds formal accountability, leads the development of commissioning approaches and processes, from initial design through to final funding decisions. - Clear timelines and expectations are communicated.	- Shapes ongoing commissioning through early engagement, co-production, feedback loops, and system learning. - Enables commissioning specifications to reflect lived experience and delivery insight.
Investment Decisions	- Retains final decision-making authority. - Decision rationales are published or communicated clearly, with feedback provided to applicants.	- Shapes ongoing commissioning through early engagement, co-production, feedback loops, and system learning. - Enables commissioning specifications to reflect lived experience and delivery insight.
Service Delivery and Implementation	Does not directly provide services but provides oversight, enables and funds delivery across the system.	Acts as a key provider of services and innovation, delivering frontline support across the North East CA area.
System Learning	- Provides the structures, data systems and learning frameworks needed to gather regional intelligence. Metrics are defined collaboratively where appropriate. - Commissioning adaptations reflect evaluation findings.	- Contributes insight, evidence and solution-based challenges to inform ongoing development and future practice. - Supports lived experience informing system design.
Governance and Accountability	- Accountable for achieving regional policy outcomes and appropriate use of public funds. - Provides clear mechanisms and escalation routes for raising concerns. - Engagement processes are documented.	- Accountable for delivering high-quality, effective services and for making a meaningful contribution to agreed system-level outcomes. - Responsible for raising concerns and challenge for system improvement where needed.

Implementation and Measuring Success

Implementation will occur in three phases:



Responsibility for monitoring implementation sits within agreed regional governance structures.

Measure, Review, Refresh

This framework will be measured, reviewed and refreshed annually.

Measure	Review	Refresh
• Improvement in economic inactivity outcomes. • Evidenced VCSE co-design of commissioning processes. • VCSE satisfaction with influence and transparency. • Diversity of VCSE organisations engaged in regional processes. • Timeliness and clarity of commissioning communication. • Demonstrable adaptation of programmes based on evaluation.	• Whether principles are being upheld. • Whether commissioning behaviours align with commitments needs. • Whether power imbalances are being mitigated. • Whether reform indicators demonstrate progress. • Alignment with North East CA's Corporate Plan mission indicators.	• Revisions will be agreed jointly between the North East CA and VCSE sector. • Existing infrastructure will be utilised to agree revisions.