
Title: Design Week (Design in Everything)
Portfolio: Home to a Growing and Vibrant Economy
Responsible Director: Phil Witcherley, Director of Economic Growth and Innovation
Report Author: Mark Adamson, Principal Manager, Sectoral Growth and Delivery

Report Summary

The purpose of this report is to approve investment of £150,000 for a programme of support for the region's design community funded from the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority's (North East MSA) Integrated Settlement.

The funding will support and provide a focus on the region's design sector and community over three years, highlighting the role that design, in all its elements, can play in and beyond region across our places, spaces, industries and communities. The project will deliver year-round facilitated design-related business support and peer learning events/activities to SMEs and freelancers to showcase design capabilities and celebrate design innovation. Fundamentally, the investment will create a platform to showcase the region's design talent and will encourage knowledge exchange and foster innovation. The ambition is to build an annual event 'Design Week' of significance by creating and consolidating strong networks and collaboration opportunities.

This will be a region-wide endeavour with activities delivered across all seven local authority areas through to March 2029. The programme will be designed to align with and complement the wider regional strategies and frameworks for business support and innovation, helping to address social, technical, environmental, and economic challenges.

Building on a pilot project in 2025 funded by the North East MSA, the core Design Week programme will take place in October 2026, with future years in June 2027 and June 2028. In 2027, Design Week will specifically coincide and collaborate with the [International ServDes27 conference](#) hosted by Northumbria University, supporting cross-promotion of the two events to respective audiences, including international delegates, and the delivery of workshops, keynotes and networking events.

The overall programme will be delivered by Edge Innovation collaborating with a consortium of strategic partners including Northumbria University (particularly in respect of the ServDes27 conference), Newcastle University, Design Network North (RTC North) and regional design agencies, Gardiner Richardson and Layers Studios. As activities develop it is envisaged that other organisations will engage and support the delivery through free venue space, keynote speakers, materials etc, with discussions with some of these already under way. Key activities to be delivered include:

- a core week of design events, growing from 30 in 2026 and building to 50 events in 2028;
- year-round peer network facilitation and cross-promotion; and,
- support for regional communications and engagement activity, including programme brand and associated assets.

The primary beneficiaries will be North East freelancers and SMEs working in a range of subsectors including graphic, product, service, process, digital, gaming and user interface design, as well as craft and commercial creative sectors with a focus on design.

Recommendations

Recommend to the Chief Executive, approval of £150,000 of Integrated Settlement (Economic Development and Regeneration Pillar) funding for a programme of support for the region's design community from 2026 to 2029.

A. Summary of Investment Proposal (Context)

Project Outline	
Applicant	Edge Innovation Ltd
Proposal Name	Design Week (Design in Everything)
Proposal Location	Northern Design Centre (with delivery region-wide)
Start Date	01/06/2026
Financial End Date	31/03/2029
Practical completion date (date by which all outputs will be achieved)	30/09/2029
Total Project Value	£250,050
North East MSA Financial Ask	£150,000
Budget Implications	This project will be funded from the Integrated Settlement Fund (Economic Development and Regeneration Pillar). If approved, £20,532,912 remains in the allocation for the Creative Industries Investment Plan.

1. Background

Tyne Design Week took place as a pilot programme in June 2025, previously supported by the North East MSA. Developed through a collaboration between Edge Innovation, Northumbria University, Newcastle University and North East MSA, the pilot Design Week brought together 35 partners to deliver 30 design-focused events. The programme, which included events in Northumberland, Newcastle, Gateshead and Sunderland, attracted a total of 1,024 registrations and over 500 unique individuals attended one or more events. The events included:

- open studios with design-focused organisations, such as Trend Bible, Gardiner Richardson, GT3 Architects, Rural Design Centre and Layers;
- workshops focused on specific challenges with the likes of Nexus (safety for women and girls on public transport), Northern Gas Networks (decarbonisation), Kinewell (application of AI) and Herman Miller (design for workspaces);
- showcases of student and graduate work at Newcastle University, Northumbria University and Newcastle College;
- seminars on protecting design IP (Ward Hadaway), decarbonisation (RTC North), product design (National Innovation Centre for Ageing) and digital design (Hedgehog Lab); and,
- numerous networking and social events focused on building collaboration across the region's design professionals, including collaborations with Silicon Mingle, Ladies Wine & Design, and others.

A survey of attendees provided valuable learning to inform future work. 96% of respondents confirmed they would wish to attend a future regional design week and wished to see it become an annual programme. The stakeholders met in July 2025 to review what worked and what didn't, as well as to

discuss potential future plans, with additional discussions undertaken including North Tyneside Council and Gateshead College. The preferred approach from stakeholders was focused on:

- development of a regional identity and approach for the design programme;
- a delivery footprint across all seven local authorities, reflecting urban, rural and coastal areas whilst ensuring coherence across the full programme;
- a weeklong programme of events taking place annually;
- confirmation that the overall structure used for 2025 was broadly appropriate, with the mix of information, co-working, showcase and networking sessions providing opportunities for a wide range of participation;
- a preference for an umbrella structure, providing an environment for individual organisations/stakeholders to run their own events and activities rather than a top-down, heavily curated programme, allowing for an 'in association with' type approach that will drive wider engagement and reach;
- a key addition being collaborative year-round facilitation and mobilisation activity, promoting design-focused events and opportunities whilst enabling peer working across the sector.

This proposal, therefore, builds on the 2025 pilot and its outcomes with the addition of year-round facilitation work and stronger regional branding, communications and engagement.

2. The Investment Proposal

The Design Week programme includes an annual week of events and year-round activity to facilitate peer learning and development of the regional design ecosystem.

It will align with and support the emerging approach for regional business support currently being developed by the North East MSA and partners. The proposed Business Support Framework ('Business North East') represents a shift toward a regionally coordinated, evidence-led, customer-centred model for business support, designed to simplify the North East's ecosystem, and embed priority sectors, and integrate areas including innovation into a unified support system.

Within the wider ecosystem, many other commissioned North East MSA programmes – like Design Week – will align strongly with the Business Support Framework's strategic direction, offering complementary capabilities and sector-specific depth that can be accordingly harnessed. By way of example, Business North East will be able to raise awareness of Design Week and promote opportunities to engage through its network. Similarly, Design Week will ensure to route individual businesses into Business North East where that business requires additional business support and advice. Design Week will also ensure to engage closely with Local Authorities as the programme of activity builds out, with early activity planned for this.

Design Week will include:

- an annual week-long design-focused events programme delivered with industry, education and public sector partners (October 2026; June 2027 & June 2028);
- year-round networking activities and facilitation/sector mobilisation, driving collaboration and cross-promotion across the region's design businesses, freelancers, research institutions and related organisations;
- collaboration with the Northumbria University-led international ServDes2027 conference, a leading international research conference for service design and design led service innovation; and,
- exploration with partners on the potential to create further design-focused support programmes for the region's design businesses and drive private investment in design.

In 2026 design week would take place in October to enable sufficient time to finalise partner involvement and marketing of the event. In future years it will take place in June and for 2027 the work includes association and collaboration with the [International ServDes27 conference](#), hosted by Northumbria University from 28th June to 2nd July 2027.

ServDes is the leading international research conference for service design and design-led service innovation. Founded in 2008 as a Nordic initiative, it has grown into a major bi-annual global event that shapes the discipline through rigorous academic exchange and practical insight. Across nearly two decades, ServDes has built a strong international community, typically attracting around 200 delegates worldwide, with the most recent conference held in Hyderabad, India in 2025. Northumbria University will host ServDes27, underscoring the institution's international standing in design research and service innovation.

Design week will complement ServDes27 by aligning its celebration of design with the conference through a series of shared events. It will translate the conference's exploration of unseen, undervalued, and complex service design practices into real-world commercial, cultural, and civic contexts, directly connecting to the ServDes27 theme of *"Designing in the Shadows."* In doing so, Design week will bridge the academic insights generated at ServDes with lived experience and practical innovation across the region, ensuring the conference's ideas resonate beyond academia and into everyday practice.

Overall, the above activities and approach will support the following outcomes:

- stimulating demand for creative, digital and innovation-led services sectors;
- drawing new visitors, businesses and partners into the region;
- showcasing the region's creative capabilities, helping to attract investment and business growth;
- provide a platform for SMEs, startups and freelancers to showcase new products, build networks, and access new markets;
- accelerate innovation and R&D adoption, by promoting design thinking, digital capability and cross-sector collaboration; and,
- strengthen the entrepreneurial ecosystem, inspiring new business formation and supporting creative entrepreneurs.

Design Week programme will collaborate with industry, universities and support organisations across the North East, aligning wider innovation agendas and reinforcing collective civic and economic growth missions, demonstrating how design can drive business growth, strengthen the creative industries, support public service transformation and enhance community wellbeing. It is intended that the programme will help position the region as a hub for design and innovation, highlighting how the region can come together and collaborate, using design to address social, technological, environmental and economic challenges.

2.1 Outputs and Outcomes

Outputs	26/27	27/28	28/29	Total
Number of enterprises receiving non-financial support	100	100	100	300
Number of cultural/tourism events taking place	1	1	1	3

Outcomes	Timeframe for achievement	Totals
Number of enterprises supported to introduce new to the firm Products/processes	2026-2029	45
Direct jobs created	2026-2029	15

The number of attendees attending events will be additionally captured through the project's interim evaluation and via the regular quarterly reporting.

2.2 Timetable for Implementation

Milestone	Forecast Date
Proposal start date	01/06/2026
Commencement of monthly steering group meetings	31/07/2026
Commencement of support for year-round design events, delivered by partners (events occurring approximately monthly through the programme)	30/09/2026
Design week 2026	09/10/2026
First project evaluation report	31/10/2026
Design week 2027	02/07/2027
Second project evaluation report	31/07/2027
Design week 2028	30/06/2028
Third project evaluation report	31/07/2028
Completion of year-round event support activity	31/12/2028
Final steering group meeting to plan post-programme delivery	31/03/2029
Financial completion date	31/03/2029
Anticipated proposal completion date (date by which all outputs/outcomes will have been achieved)	30/09/2029

2.3 Evaluation

Given the scale of the proposed project, it is not appropriate to bring in an external evaluation provider as this would absorb a disproportionate amount of the overall project budget. However, it is vital from a learning perspective and to capture value for money information to perform evaluation activities throughout the project. The project team will undertake this work.

A structured evaluation from a quantitative and qualitative point of view will therefore take place following each main design week event and will be included in the subsequent quarterly claim reporting. This evaluation will include feedback from participants and collaborators, data on registration numbers, attendee numbers and types and learning to be incorporated in future work. It will also include an assessment of the level of in-kind support secured to demonstrate both the strategic approach towards partnership working and the value for money generated through the overall project.

Evaluation findings will be made available to inform wider programme evaluation at the North East MSA and national Creative Places Growth programme as required.

2.4 Appraisal

The proposal seeks £150,000 of Integrated Settlement funding to deliver Design Week, a three-year programme of annual design events and year-round networking and collaboration activities to strengthen the North East design ecosystem, showcase regional talent and innovation, and support freelancers and SMEs across the region.

The Strategic, Economic and Commercial Case is assessed as Green, demonstrating strong alignment with the Creative Industries Investment Plan (which includes £2m in Theme 4 to support Innovation, Design and CreaTech) approved by Cabinet in March 2026, the North East Local Growth Plan, Devolution Deal and Mayoral manifesto. Activities will address an identified need for greater collaboration and visibility within the regional design sector and builds on the findings from the 2025 Tyne Design pilot. Outputs and outcomes are considered ambitious but comparable with previous activities and represent good value for money, with the project expected to support 500 SMEs/freelancers, deliver 135 events and engage 2,700 participants over three years. The proposal also demonstrates social value, will complement existing provision and adopts a proportionate procurement approach.

The Financial and Management Case is assessed as amber owing to concerns regarding financial viability. Whilst project costs are well evidenced and governance arrangements are considered appropriate, only 12% of the required match funding has, to date, been confirmed. Securing the remaining match funding, alongside identified cashflow pressures within the applicant (accountable body) organisation who is requesting the first claim payment in advance, presents a significant delivery risk. However, these risks can be mitigated through funding conditions and ongoing close monitoring. It is therefore recommended that funding conditions are applied to address match funding, subsidy and cashflow throughout the funding period. Notwithstanding these financial concerns, the delivery model, governance arrangements and stakeholder support are considered sufficient and appear capable of delivering the proposed activities.

Overall, the financial and management case is assessed as amber and green respectively. Whilst there are funding and cashflow risks, these risks are mitigated through robust conditions and applied increased monitoring. The proposal is considered deliverable and achieves an overall rating of green, subject to North East MSA's consideration being given to:

- (a) an advance claim payment together with the pre-contract and post contract conditions relating to the grant recipient providing an
- (b) Updated risk register
- (c) Annual break clause to confirm match funding in secured and six monthly cashflow forecast
- (d) Evidence of compliance with MFA subsidy thresholds throughout the delivery period.

2.5 RAG Assessment

Overall RAG assessment		
Risk Rating	Strategic case	Green
	Commercial case	Green
	Economic case	Green
	Financial case	Amber
	Management case	Green
	Overall rating	Green

2.6 Recommended Conditions of Funding

Condition 1

Subsidy - The Grant Recipient shall submit annual written confirmation to the North East MSA confirming that the Project's subsidy control position as set out in section 4.7 of the Business Case remains correct and that the Project remains in compliance with the Subsidy Control Rules. Should at any point this no longer be the case, the Recipient shall be required to complete a Minimum Financial Assistance declaration and shall provide the North East MSA with reasonable assistance in complying with its obligations under the Subsidy Control Rules. The North East MSA shall not be obliged to make any grant payments until this condition has been satisfied.

Condition 2

Match Funding - The Grant Recipient shall provide written evidence, to the satisfaction of the North East MSA, confirming that all match funding required for delivery of the Project in Year 1 has been secured no later than 31 October 2026. For Years 2 and 3, the Grant Recipient shall provide written confirmation and supporting evidence that all match funding required for the relevant financial year has been secured prior to submission of the first grant claim for that year. Where sufficient evidence is not provided, the North East MSA reserves the right to withhold grant payments until it is satisfied that the funding package for the relevant period is fully secured and the Project remains financially viable.

Condition 3

Cashflow - The Grant Recipient shall provide the North East MSA with an updated organisational cashflow forecast at six-month intervals throughout the grant funding period. The cashflow forecast must cover a minimum 12-month period and demonstrate the organisation's ability to meet its financial commitments and maintain sufficient working capital to deliver the Project. Failure to provide satisfactory cashflow information may result in grant payments being withheld until the Authority is satisfied that the Project remains financially viable.

2.7 Communications and Publicity

All communications and materials will apply the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) logo and associated branding in full compliance with MSA guidelines. All delivery partners will work in alignment with a dedicated MSA communications team member to ensure consistency of messaging and brand application. A clear communications plan will be developed and agreed in advance with the MSA Assistant Director of Communications. Ongoing liaison with the MSA communications function will ensure communications remain aligned to MSA priorities and standards throughout delivery.

B. Potential Impact on North East Mayoral Strategic Authority Objectives

The 17 March 2026 Cabinet approved in-principle a three-year investment plan to grow and support our regional creative industries (as a key sector within the North East Local Growth Plan). The investment plan comprises 5 core 'areas', one of which is focused on 'Innovation, Design and CreaTech'. Proposed activity within this area includes:

"Under this theme, we will support businesses and creative practitioners with creative technology adoption through the piloting of interventions and 'CreaTech labs'; **support through networks, including design, to drive cross-sector collaboration and peer learning, and to showcase regional expertise and capability drawing on regional assets and infrastructure**; and, deliver interventions that help to further grow the innovation capacity in the sector."

The programme directly supports the North East MSA's Local Growth Plan by amplifying its core missions around creativity, innovation, skills, inclusion and placemaking. The Plan identifies the creative industries, digital innovation, and design-led sectors as major growth opportunities, with creative jobs rising 67% over the past decade and strong ambitions to expand the region's cultural and digital economy.

By showcasing regional talent, connecting designers, digital creatives, universities and businesses, and promoting design-led innovation, the programme will strengthen the Plan's mission to build a vibrant, innovative economy for all. It also contributes to the North East MSA's inclusivity goals by improving visibility of creative career pathways, widening participation, and supporting skills development for underrepresented groups, key priorities within the Growth Plan's "Home of Real Opportunity" mission.

Additionally, the programme aims to create a world where design and the North East design community is fully understood and valued by all and is being commissioned here. As a result, our design community is winning more work and making a significant contribution economically and socially to our region and in the longer term attracting international recognition. This aligns with the North East MSA's ambitions to welcome global trade, enhance placemaking and city-centre regeneration, helping position the North East as a region proud of its identity and attractive to investors, talent and visitors.

The programme supports the ambitions and objectives that are part of:

- Devolution Deal: inclusive innovation - "...by **strengthening local innovation capacity** this will help to realise the potential of **local innovation assets** and the innovation potential of small and medium enterprises".
- Mayoral Manifesto: Supporting life opportunities, tackling key challenges and using "our **region's creative genius that can power job creation** at all levels of the economy".

- Government's Creative Industries Sector Plan: "Creative ecosystem: The Creative Industries are an **interconnected ecosystem of designers**, creatives, artists and engineers across the UK, most visible in creative clusters... The sector is made up predominantly of SMEs and microbusinesses **which interact, while freelancers and creative workers play a key role in the sector's dynamism, moving between sub-sectors as well as beyond the Creative Industries** where nearly 1.3 million more are employed in creative occupations

C. Key risks

A summary of key risks relating to the investment proposal comprise:

Risk	Consequence	Probability	Action
Timescales: managing timescales between confirmation of funding and event, and programming / delivery	Programme would not continue	Medium	Partners have begun work at risk – with no North East MSA funding, the programme would not continue. North East MSA part of programme steering group.
Engagement: the programme's success is dependent on continuing and increasing engagement with design-led organisations across the region	Programme may not meet overall objectives or specific objective around full regional coverage	Medium	Engage with partners across the region, including NE MSA and local authorities. Build activities through the year with regional coverage in mind. Active marketing and engagement plan using programme resources and links through partners.
Delivery capacity: programme design includes a small internal team but also relies heavily on support through partners	Lack of internal and in kind capacity would impact on programme delivery and achievement of objectives	Low	Existing strong engagement with partners reinforced through Steering Group and wider collaboration activities. Internal team in place and programme management will include monitoring of resource availability
Cashflow: whilst Edge Innovation is an established organisation, having been trading for over 11 years, it remains an SME and there is a risk that delayed grant payments in arrears mean issues with cashflow, impacting on delivery activities.	Impact on delivery activities through lack of cash to fund the required resources.	Medium	Agree suitable payment arrangements with partners for collaborative activities. Request North East MSA consideration of payment in advance. The request is for 10% of the total project value to be advanced at the beginning of the project, with this sum being subtracted equally from each subsequent claim over the remainder of the project. In doing so, the project can continue on a robust financial footing without any additional funding overall and provide

			reassurance to private match funding providers that the project will proceed at the scale and pace intended.
Duplication of activities: this programme has been developed in the current design / innovation / business support landscape. Development of new programmes at a national or regional level with similar objectives may dilute potential to secure match funding and attract suitable participants.	Confusion in the marketplace and dilution of partnership approach.	Low	Maintain active discussions with relevant organisations at a national and regional level to ensure alignment of any new investment and activities.
Securing match funding: the programme as envisaged will not have all match funding identified up front due to the bottom-up, community-led philosophy used. This may impact on delivery if availability of match funding becomes an issue.	Impact on scale of delivery activities.	Low	Maintain active discussions with Steering Group. Work proactively to identify additional partners across the region. Ensure flexibility around in cash and in-kind contributions within match funding.

D. Corporate Implications

D1. Financial and other resources implications

The financial profile for the project/programme is included below:

Funding source	26/27	27/28	28/29	Total
<i>North East MSA Integrated Settlement</i> (Economic Development and Regeneration Pillar – via the Creative Industries Investment Plan)	£51,895	£60,632	£37,473	£150,000
<i>Private Sector Leverage (£)</i>	£26,100	£32,850	£41,100	£100,050
Total (£)	£77,995	£93,482	£78,573	£250,050

Status of match funding:

Match funding will come via strategic delivery partners. Currently, for the first year activity, £17,500 is confirmed, with the balance of £8,600 verbally agreed with partners subject to final contracting. There is some risk to the project as a result of the need to confirm the remaining match funding for FY27/28 and FY28/29 in order to support the overall delivery of the project as planned. The identity of funders for the remaining match funding (circa 74%) is yet to be confirmed, although some discussions are at advanced stage, whilst other organisations are delaying commitments until North East MSA funding is confirmed.

It is therefore recommended a condition is applied to release MSA grant annually on written confirmation that 100% of the annual match (for delivery in that relevant year) is in place. This will allow sufficient time for the applicant and strategic partners to secure the match funding throughout the lifetime of the project, reducing any financial risk to the MSA (condition 2, section 2.6 above)

Funding availability:

Funding is available through the Integrated Settlement Fund (Economic Development and Regeneration Pillar).

D2. Legal implications

Legal implications have been considered as part of the appraisal process and relevant conditions, including in relation to Subsidy Control, have been included to ensure ongoing legal compliance.

D3. Equalities implications

The North East MSA follows the Public Sector Equality duty and this report has due regard to the need to achieve the objectives set out under s149 of the Equality Act 2010.

The proposed programme has strong potential to advance equality of opportunity by widening participation in design across diverse communities and by addressing barriers faced by people who share protected characteristics, as well as those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage or geographic inequality.

It will support entry pathways into the design sector for underrepresented groups, improve awareness of design as a tool for social and economic benefit, and create opportunities for freelancers, micro-businesses, community organisations and non-traditional design users to engage.

Via a mix of event formats, varied scheduling, wider regional delivery, and targeted outreach through community groups, FE/HE institutions and representative networks will help reduce disadvantage and encourage participation. Monitoring and evaluation will include anonymised participation data, feedback on accessibility and inclusion, and annual review of the diversity of speakers and partners so that delivery can be adapted in response to evidence.

D4. Consultation and engagement

Consultation has been undertaken with numerous local and regional stakeholders through the initial 2025 pilot Design Week and following. A steering committee is set up, comprising HE, sector support and industry representatives, who have met regularly to develop the proposal and to commence initial activity and programme scoping.

The proposed project was discussed and presented at a meeting of the North East MSA senior leadership team (SLT) on 3 June 2026 and subsequently progressed by the business case for investment. Additionally, as already referred to, the proposal to support a design 'event' programme was included in the Creative Industries Investment Plan that received in-principle approval at 17 March North East MSA Cabinet meeting.

Engagement and awareness raising of the project has also been shared with the Local Authority Culture leads group as part of the overall Creative Industries Investment Plan, and, similarly, with the Culture, Creative Industries and Sport Advisory Board that feeds into the Home of a Growing and Vibrant Economy Portfolio Board.

E. Appendices

None

F. Background papers

[North East MSA Cabinet, 17th March 2026 – Creative Industries Investment Plan](#)

G. Contact officers

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H. Glossary

AI	Artificial Intelligence
FE	Further Education
HE	Higher Education
MFA	Minimum Financial Assistance
ServDes	Service Design and Innovation Conference
SME	Small to Medium Enterprise
SLT	Senior Leadership Team