

Title: Excellence in Education Programme contract award
Portfolio: Home of Real Opportunity
Responsible Director: Charlotte Carpenter, Director of Skills, Inclusion and Public Service Reform
Report Author: Sarah Molyneux-Hetherington, Special Adviser

Purpose of the report

This report seeks approval from the Assistant Director of Inclusive Futures to award a contract to a supplier to undertake evaluation work as part of the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority's (North East MSA) Excellence in Education Programme.

Recommendations

The Assistant Director of Inclusive Futures is recommended to approve the award of a work order to Bloom Procurement Services Limited (with services sub-contracted to Ortus Economic Research Limited) to undertake additional evaluation work pertaining to the Excellence in Education Programme with a value of up to £80,000.

A. Context

1. Excellence in Education Programme

- 1.1. Cabinet agreed the creation of the Excellence in Education Programme (the Programme) on 18 March 2025 and an allocation of funding of up to £5,000,000 for the three-year programme. Cabinet delegated authority to the Chief Executive for implementation of the Programme in consultation with the Portfolio Holder and Finance and Investment Board. Following the approval of the detailed business case, the final allocation from the Investment Fund to the Programme was £4,998,950.
- 1.2. The Programme is built around three regional priorities identified with local authority education leaders, multi-academy trusts and school leaders: Inclusion, Realising Potential, and Teacher Wellbeing and Development. These priorities aim to tackle some of the North East's most pressing educational challenges, including persistent absence, educational disadvantage, Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND)-related barriers, attainment gaps and workforce pressures.
- 1.3. The North East MSA has commissioned a range of projects and interventions with work having commenced at the beginning of the 2025/26 academic year. Delivery of the projects is via a mix of commissioned providers and grant funding to constituent local authority school improvement teams. This ensures a strong universal offer for the region's schools, in tandem with more targeted and specific interventions to tackle issues identified by local authority teams, Multi Academy Trust leaders, Teaching School Hubs, Research Schools, Higher Education establishments, education specialists and individual schools. There are 844 schools within the region eligible for support, with 756 schools (89.6%) currently engaged with the programme.

2. Strengthening evaluation

- 2.1 The Programme currently collects and reviews engagement and performance of the various projects and has an identified end-of-programme evaluation strategy. However, the North

East MSA's education team identified an opportunity to strengthen the approach to evaluation of this and any successive programmes via external funding that has been awarded to the North East MSA.

- 2.2 The North East MSA has been awarded additional funding of £80,000 to enable research to deliver two linked outputs. Firstly, a measurement framework that identifies and assesses the most useful, feasible and robust measures for evaluating education improvement programmes. Secondly, a midpoint evidence sprint that tests those measures in practice within the Programme. The evidence sprint will gather information directly from participating schools to identify early signs of promise, understand the feasibility of different measures, and strengthen the Programme's theory of change.
- 2.3 This report seeks the Assistant Director of Inclusive Futures' approval to award a contract procured through the NEPRO3 Professional Services Framework operated by Bloom Procurement Services on behalf of NEPO to deliver the outputs described in paragraph 2.2 above. Ortus Economic Research has been selected as the preferred delivery partner following a mini competition tendering process in which three tender submissions were received.
- 2.4 The contract will be awarded for the period October 2026 to March 2027, and the delivery partner, Ortus Economic Research, will be required to undertake independent research and analysis to help strengthen how education improvement activity is measured and understood through the development of an evaluation measurement framework, a midpoint evidence sprint and an associated report.

B. Impact on North East Mayoral Strategic Authority Objectives

The Excellence in Education Programme tackles educational challenges across the region, contributing to the Mayor's manifesto commitment to tackling child poverty through long-term, structural change, and the North East MSA commitments to achieve a fairer, successful North East, helping people to thrive and reducing inequalities.

Specifically, the Programme contributes to the Home of Real Opportunity Mission and the Mayoral pledge to improve education and destination outcomes for young people in the North East.

The additional funding to strengthen the evaluation approach of this programme will enable the North East MSA to do this more effectively and robustly.

C. Key risks

All activity funded by this additional funding must be completed by March 2027, so any delays in the making of this decision could result in a negative impact on the delivery of the proposed research and/or the funding being withdrawn or reduced by the funding body.

There is a residual risk that a delivery partner cannot complete all activities required by the contract; however, this risk is mitigated by the proposed contract management approach, which includes milestone payments. If the delivery partner is not able to complete all activities under the contract, then any unused funds would have to be returned to the funding body. This risk is also mitigated by the proposed contract management approach.

D. Corporate Implications

D1. Financial and other resources implications

The grant funding being made available for this research is to be paid to the North East MSA in this financial year, and outputs will be delivered in the same financial year.

The amount received as grant funding is equal to the amount being awarded in the proposed contract. Other resource implications associated with managing the proposed contract have been identified and are sufficiently covered by existing staff resource.

D2. Legal implications

The comments of the representative of the Monitoring Officer have been included in this report.

D3. Equalities implications

The Excellence in Education programme has an integrated equality assessment, and the acceptance of this funding is consistent with this assessment.

D4. Consultation and engagement

The proposal has been developed jointly between the Education Improvement team, the North East MSA's evaluation team and the funding body's evaluation team.

E. Appendices

None

F. Background papers

North East CA Cabinet, 18 March 2025, Item 7 (North East Combined Authority Excellence in Education Programme)

G. Contact officers

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H. Glossary

None