



Department
for Education

Apply to set up a Regional Care Cooperative (RCC)

**Guidance for local authorities and their
partners in children's social care**

March 2026

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Summary

This guidance explains the Department for Education's (DfE) vision and expectations for Regional Care Cooperatives (RCCs). It is intended for local authorities and their key partners such as health, youth justice and other regional agencies who are considering applying to establish an RCC.

This document sets out what organisations need to know in order to understand, plan and meet the requirements for creating and operating an RCC.

Background

RCCs are regional bodies that bring together local authorities, health, youth justice and other partners to plan and commission homes and support for looked-after children. They form part of the government's long-term approach to improving sufficiency and stability for children.

DfE is now beginning the next phase of the RCC programme and inviting applications to establish up to six new RCCs. This phase follows the initial pathfinder testing in Greater Manchester and the South East, which helped shape the model.

If you are considering applying, you should read this guidance to understand the requirements for setting up an RCC and the expectations for the foundation, development and delivery stages.

More detail about the policy aims and rationale for RCCs can be found in the [Regional Care Cooperatives policy statement](#) on GOV.UK.

Fostering hubs

The government's ambition is to shift to a regionalised approach for care placement planning, with RCCs as the longer-term structure, and end-to-end fostering hubs providing a coordinated, regionalised response to foster care shortages.

Fostering hubs are expected to be integrated into RCCs so that RCCs hold decision-making responsibility and operational control. Where an RCC operates as a corporate body, it will be required to register as an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) before incorporating an end-to-end fostering hub. Some transition time may be necessary, and it is acceptable for the fostering hub to continue to be run by the lead local authority during this period. However, clear and timely plans should be in place setting out how and when responsibility for the fostering hub will transfer to the RCC.

It is the responsibility of each hub and its RCC to determine which approach is most appropriate for their area in the short-term during set-up of either or both the RCC and

the fostering hub. An individual RCC may incorporate multiple fostering hubs but should not split an existing fostering hub.

Eligibility criteria

To apply for grant funding to establish an RCC, the following conditions must be met:

Regional footprint

- All participating local authorities must fall within a single proposed RCC region
- Each local authority can only be named in one application
- Participating local authorities must not already be part of an existing RCC

Alignment with wider public service footprints

- The government is committed to greater public service boundary alignment as a means to unlocking greater integration and join-up, and as part of this we are aligning key public service boundaries with those of Strategic Authorities
- Your proposed RCC footprint should therefore align with existing or planned Strategic Authorities where they exist. This is to support joined up working across children's social care, health, police, youth justice and education
- Your proposal may span more than one Strategic Authority if this supports the benefits of operating at scale but it must not split a Strategic Authority

Partner support

- You must have agreement in principle from the relevant police force(s) and key youth justice partners

Additional eligibility depending on your operating model

If you propose a lead local authority model

- The proposed lead local authority must not have an Ofsted judgement of Requires Improvement (RI) or below (or, for ILACS inspections after April 2026, below RI in any area)
- DfE may carry out checks to confirm the financial stability of the proposed lead local authority

If you propose a Strategic Authority hosted model

- You must have written approval from the appropriate lead member(s)

Additional requirements for application

Your application must demonstrate:

Leadership and sign-off

- A senior representative from each participating local authority (for example, the Director of Children’s Services) and each Integrated Care Board (ICB) that operates within the proposed region (for example, the Chief Nurse) has signed the application
- You can develop full partnership agreements during the Foundation stage

Readiness to deliver at pace

You must show clear evidence of your ability to set up an RCC quickly, including:

- existing or planned shared data agreements, governance and leadership structures
- delivery capacity, including staffing and programme management
- evidence of existing joint working across the region (for example, through partnerships, regional arrangements or shared commissioning)

Indicative EOI timeline

Milestones	Dates
Programme launch: Information for applicants circulated	26 March 2026
Clarification Deadline	20 May 2026
Deadline for all applications	22 May 2026
Notify applicants of outcome	July 2026
Grant letters issued to successful bidders	July 2026
DfE funding ends	31 March 2028

Application Submission

Regions wishing to apply must complete the expression of interest (EOI) application form and associated documents. Please submit your completed expression of interest form (and any requested appendices) to Commissioning.CSC@education.gov.uk by **12:00 noon on 22 May 2026**.

No extensions to the deadline will be given.

Once you have submitted a bid you will receive confirmation of this within 1 working day. If you do not receive this, please contact DfE at Commissioning.CSC@education.gov.uk to confirm that your application has been received successfully.

Minimum requirements overview

Operating models

We expect RCCs to be set up using one of the following legal structures:

1. A lead local authority/strategic authority model

This model could be utilising either one local authority in the region or (if applicable) the structure of the strategic authority to be the lead organisation. The lead local authority or strategic authority would hold the majority of the risk and be the body responsible for receiving funding. Alternatively, to achieve economies of scale, a model where multiple strategic authorities join to form one RCC should be considered if a single strategic authority is considered too small. In this scenario, there must be a lead local authority to act as the funding manager and the RCC can either have a joint leadership model or appoint a lead strategic authority.

2. A corporate body

An RCC may choose to establish itself as a corporate body, for example as a company limited by guarantee or another form of not-for-profit private company. Where this model is used, the company should be wholly owned and controlled by public bodies—typically the participating local authorities, and where appropriate, integrated care boards or other statutory partners.

The EOI application form should state which of these models the RCC will take and the rationale and analysis behind this decision. It is expected that prospective areas will work with DfE and any DfE-appointed delivery partner to refine this model.

Greater Manchester and South East RCC pathfinder models

The South East moved from a shared-service concept to establishing an independent, not-for-profit company to maximise flexibility and innovation across many local authorities. Greater Manchester instead chose a hosted model within the Combined Authority, using existing regional structures to maximise collaborative working. The different approaches taken by each pathfinder show the opportunity for regions to shape their RCC in ways that best support their ambitions.

Minimum requirements

Following feedback from local authorities and key stakeholders, and findings from the pathfinders to date, we have set out the minimum expectations of all RCCs. Setting minimum requirements for RCCs will ensure consistency and will help to ensure that future RCCs are meeting the policy aims through a staged approach as set out in the Government's [Regional Care Cooperatives policy statement](#). We will monitor delivery and evaluate the impact of the RCCs to inform future rollout.

We expect RCCs to develop in three key stages: the **Foundation stage**, the **Development stage** and the **Delivery stage**. The table below is an overview of what we expect to see at each stage as areas work towards full delivery of the RCC vision. Detail for each of these stages can be found in the next section of this document.

Stage	Checklist of minimum requirements of each stage	Timeline
Foundation stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data: Shared data agreements signed by all local authorities involved (to include DfE) to begin analysis of sufficiency and commissioning • Finance: Agreed upon financial arrangements, including the agreed funding formulae for local authority contributions and planning how the RCC will become self-sufficiently funded • Sufficiency: Produce a regional sufficiency strategy which details what provision is available in the area and identifies gaps and areas of vulnerability • Markets: Produce a market strategy which analyses the spread, type and quality of current provision, providers and initial costing analysis • Governance and Leadership: Ensure that an RCC leadership team is appointed and in place with the requisite skills, track record and knowledge to govern the RCC <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - This should include commercial and procurement leadership with a track record of driving value for money and savings through the establishment of large-scale framework contracts and health representation at a decision-making level • Produce a delivery plan: This will be based on the sufficiency and markets strategy and will detail activities that will be carried out in the development stage 	6 to 9 months

Stage	Checklist of minimum requirements of each stage	Timeline
Development stage	<p>KPIs will be agreed upon individually with regions but we would expect KPIs to measure progress in the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data: RCCs are collecting data on the cost of placements and regularly providing data to DfE • Commissioning: Commissioning not-for profit and private sector provided care for children as necessary. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - RCCs will act as one customer to gain economies of scale, using new deals, block contracting and benchmarking tools to reduce cost of provision • Fostering: Each area has established ways of working with either the single or multiple end-to-end fostering hubs that operate in the area and a plan for the hub to be integrated into the RCC • Delivery: Begin phased implementation and delivery of the previously agreed delivery plan concerning secure homes, children at risk of or being deprived of liberty, residential homes and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) • Finance: Each area has a plan to become financially self-sustaining by the end of year 2 with RCCs holding agreed upon budgets on behalf of local authorities for placement commissioning and other activities that run through the RCC 	12 months

Stage	Checklist of minimum requirements of each stage	Timeline
Delivery stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data: Routine data collection and the use of benchmarking tools to enhance transparency and support negotiations with providers to reduce costs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - This data will be collated nationally to provide an overview of the market and placement costs • Sufficiency/markets: Maintain a full and thorough understanding of the available supply, quality and cost of all placement types in their area with the aim of reducing out-of-area placements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ensure quality needs assessments are being used to inform the commissioning and delivery of homes for children - Where appropriate and subject to sufficiency requirements, deliver new targeted provision to meet the needs of local and UASC children - Work collaboratively with other agencies, particularly local ICBs, to ensure the most appropriate provision and support is available • Fostering: Increasing the recruitment and retention of foster carers, ensuring the relevant training and support package is in place • Finance: Hold agreed upon budgets on behalf of local authorities for placement commissioning and other activities such as fostering hubs • Delivery: Deliver on new provision such as secure homes, at risk of or being deprived of liberty, residential homes (and workforce) and supported accommodation 	Ongoing

Key expectations of each stage

Foundation stage

The Foundation stage is when we expect areas to establish and set up key structures which are crucial to the long-term viability of an RCC. Pathfinder learning showed that areas benefitted from having dedicated time to set up, and that establishing these structures early on helped when moving to delivery.

In the Foundation stage we expect to see key progress relating to data, leadership and governance and finance. We also expect areas to utilise findings from the Foundation stage to produce a **delivery plan** which includes a **regional sufficiency strategy**, and a **market-shaping strategy**.

RCC infrastructure set-up

Data

- **Data sharing:** All local authorities across the proposed region must agree to the following
 - To use a common data model as agreed upon with DfE
 - Data protection agreements and DPIA signed off by all DCSs
 - Data sharing agreement across all local authorities and to include DfE
- **RCC data team:** Regional team roles and responsibility are agreed, and a resourcing plan has been completed
- **Sharing data with DfE:** Initial pull of data to be provided to DfE and agree target frequency and lag for subsequent data returns
 - The requirement from DfE will follow data minimisation principles and will not require a level of granularity greater than necessary, however this may include pseudonymised record-level data

Leadership and governance

- **Commitment to regional working:** We expect full commitment and support from participating local authorities and ICBs. It is expected where appropriate that participating local authorities will work together to transfer relevant staff and appropriate resources.
 - There should be a plan for engaging stakeholders regionally to ensure buy in, including from children.
- **Alignment with strategic authorities and other regional structures:** RCCs are expected to align with strategic authorities where these exist or are planned.
 - RCCs must demonstrate clear consideration of ICB and police boundaries, including evidence of how these have informed the proposed governance and operating model to reflect the government's commitment to align public services

- RCCs may determine their preferred organisational arrangements, drawing on learning from the pathfinders' governance models. Existing models may be adopted, or, where multiple strategic authorities are joining together, RCCs may design a bespoke arrangement that is suitable for the region.
- RCCs are expected to work with DfE in developing and refining these arrangements
- Where multiple strategic authorities are joining together to form an RCC, clear governance must be created to allow joint decision-making and there should be a lead local authority to act as the responsible body for the funding.
- RCCs should not divide strategic authorities. ICB and police force boundaries should also be considered
- Where it is deemed necessary to divide existing regional footprints (other than strategic authority boundaries), rationale should be provided as to why this decision has been made and what mitigations will be taken to ensure cohesive working relationships
- **Necessary board expertise:** Create the leadership and governance arrangements necessary to allow the RCC to make swift decisions ensuring there is the appropriate expertise across the board to deliver
 - We expect to see a high level of commercial expertise (at least MCIPS-qualified) at board level and as part of the working group setting up the RCC.
 - We expect to see senior health representatives involved at board level and taking active roles in decision-making and strategic planning
 - Prospective RCCs should be able to produce a scheme of delegation to show decision-making procedures, along with a model to show project management responsibility (for example, a RACI model)

Finance

- **Financial sustainability:** Set out a plan for agreeing finance arrangements across local authorities including the funding formula for local authority contributions and how this will result in the RCC (including the ICBs) becoming self-sustaining after two years
 - This should include an estimate for how local authority budgets for activities such as fostering hubs and secure provision will flow through the RCC

RCC foundation strategies

Delivery plan

The delivery plan should **include KPIs** to be met **during Development stage**. The delivery plan should be bespoke to the area and prioritise gaps and greatest areas of need that were identified during analysis. You should work with DfE, including in line with any commercial specialists that DfE has appointed to support you, and any other relevant partners (e.g. ICBs, youth justice boards, police forces) to co-design this strategy and

make it targeted and relevant. This should be completed by the end of the Foundation stage so that it can inform the Delivery stage.

Regional sufficiency strategy

The sufficiency duty will remain with local authorities. Local authorities will continue to be responsible for assessing the needs of the child and final placement decisions. RCCs will be responsible for procuring and creating homes and support for looked after children. We expect RCCs to produce a strategy for how they will do this. This strategy should include the following components:

Needs and demand analysis

- Profile of current population for children entering care, such as age ranges, sibling groups, cultural and linguistic needs, and any additional support requirements (e.g. disabilities, therapeutic needs)
- Current and projected demand for foster homes (by factors such as age and location), including short-term, long-term, and emergency care, trends and patterns in placement breakdowns and reasons behind them

Placement analysis

- Availability of appropriate residential care, secure placements, supported accommodation placements, and placements suitable for young people with, or at risk of receiving, a deprivation of liberty order
- Availability and capacity of existing foster carers, including their skills, location, and willingness to take specific types of children and young people
- Geographical distribution: homes relative to expected need to minimise out-of-area and long school journeys
- Consideration of health services available in the local area

Gap identification: With reference to needs and demand analysis and placement analysis, develop a plan for:

- Specialist placements for children at risk of or being deprived of liberty – including those with disabilities, mental health challenges, or requiring therapeutic support, where there is often a shortage of suitably trained foster carers
- Specialist placements for secure homes (where applicable), developing innovative approaches to supporting children who are looked after and in touch with the criminal justice system
 - This could include a particular focus on developing community-based approaches and accommodation (e.g. fostering, children's homes, supported accommodation) as robust alternatives to custody, particularly custodial remand
- Homes for UASC which could include supported lodgings and short-term transitional accommodation at a regional level

- Homes for older children and sibling groups – ensuring that teenagers have stable homes and siblings can stay together, as these are frequently the hardest to match and maintain
- Ensuring supported accommodation is only being used for children and young people who are identified as being ready for this type of provision
- Recruitment and retention strategies needed to meet identified gaps
- Resources and support services required to sustain placements and improve outcomes for children
- Plans for eliminating in full the use of unregistered accommodation both within and outside of the RCC's footprint.

Placement forecasting: We expect this to progress as the RCC develops, but want to see early stages of thinking in terms of:

- Demand (what placements will be needed) by placement type, profile, complexity.
- Flow dynamics (entries into care, moves within care and exits)
- Scenario modelling with triggers tied to indicators e.g. police referrals, homelessness presentations, UASC arrivals and hotel presentations, placement breakdown rates
- Using the needs and demand analysis to forecast upcoming trends
- Using data to understand the demands for supported accommodation for looked after children moving through the system
- Impact of local demographics and legislation on future fostering requirements.
- Develop regional contingency plans for placement shortages
- Use shared forecasting tools to anticipate demand spikes, including UASC arrivals via the National Transfer Scheme regional rota and Home Office forecasting data

Market-shaping strategy

RCCs should have a market-shaping strategy which broadly outlines the intended approach to procurement, strategic placements and relationship with providers.

Procurement: Outline how placements will be purchased, and what the trigger points are for framework agreements, preferred supplier lists and spot or emergency purchasing. This should include a clear knowledge of providers in the local area and a strategy for how block and soft-block purchasing could be utilised.

Strategic placement priorities: A clear sense of the desired portfolio of placements that:

- prioritise stability and protect school and community links, and where appropriate, support family contacts and family network
- reduce out-of-area placements by shaping capacity where children live and learn
- ensure regional oversight and understanding of health offers to support appropriate provision of health services for children

- enable therapeutic fostering, disability and specialist health, parent and child, remand, supported accommodation and tailored UASC support services
- target recruitment and commissioning for 13–17s and sibling groups to keep families together
- have step-down and step-up pathways: planned transitions between residential, fostering, and semi-independent with clinical and education wraparound
- promote equity and inclusion: culturally and linguistically matched homes; SEND-informed planning; trauma informed practice expectations

Relationships with providers: This should include how RCCs intend to move from transactional spot purchasing to strategic supplier relationships, involve providers and carers in service design, monitor provider financial resilience, capacity pipelines and geographic coverage and cease use of unregistered provider placements.

Development stage

The Development stage is when an RCC will begin to deliver on areas of greatest need as identified at the Foundation stage. RCCs should begin enacting the delivery plan that was created during the Foundation stage and meeting the agreed KPIs. Significant regional variation is expected and the Delivery stage should reflect what is needed for looked after children and young people in the relevant area. DfE will work collaboratively with areas to provide support and may produce further guidance if necessary.

The below requirements on **data**, **commissioning**, **finance** and **fostering** outline what is expected at a minimum from all RCCs.

- **Data**
 - RCCs are collecting data on the cost of placements and using benchmarking tools (provided by DfE), ensuring quality needs assessments are being developed and used
 - Establish collaborative relationships and data flows with ICBs and other partners such as police forces and youth justice boards
 - Build on the common data model, aligning definitions and improving granularity
 - RCCs are sharing data with DfE at the agreed target frequency and lag
- **Commissioning**
 - Combine placement needs and forecasts across local authorities to negotiate better rates and secure capacity
 - Use block or soft-block contracts regionally to guarantee a baseline of placements, reducing reliance on spot purchasing and ceasing use of unregistered provision
 - Create a regional framework agreement so all local authorities can access approved providers quickly (with the eventual aim of the RCC managing this)
 - Regional mapping of health services and provision to grow a greater understanding of ordinarily available services would support improved placement matching
 - Include quality standards and standardised pricing models that reflect regional priorities
- **Finance**: Each area has a plan to become financially self-sustaining across partners by the end of the second year including a plan for pooling local authority budgets
- **Fostering**: Each area has established ways of working with either the single or multiple end-to-end fostering hubs that operate in the area and a plan for the hub to be integrated into the RCC

Placements

RCCs should develop new regional provision in line with needs identified in the Foundation stage. This may look different for different RCCs as it is expected that it will be tailored to the placement analysis conducted at the Foundation stage.

Funding granted under this programme is not capital funding and therefore, if any capital projects are identified, these should be funded from LA/RCC pooled financial arrangements.

The activities in this section are not compulsory, but you should identify which of these activities the RCC will take on and make this clear in the delivery plan.

- **Residential children's homes and workforce:**
 - Developing new children's homes or expanding existing homes to ensure there are sufficient high-quality homes to meet demand across the region
 - Developing an understanding of the children's homes workforce across the region, in order to support effective strategies to recruit, retain and improve the quality of the children's home workforce
- **Children at risk of or being deprived of their liberty** (including in secure children's homes):
 - Developing and delivering integrated models of safe, therapeutic care for children who are currently (or at risk of) being deprived of their liberty and who are in the most complex situations
 - Delivering a new regional approach to commissioning and coordinating accommodation capable of depriving a child of their liberty (including secure children's homes and in the future, suitable types of provision other than a secure children's homes in line with future policy development), if there is this provision in the area
- **Children in touch with the criminal justice system:** Developing innovative approaches to supporting children who are looked after and in touch with the criminal justice system.
 - This could include a particular focus on developing community-based approaches and accommodation (e.g. fostering, children's homes, supported accommodation) as robust alternatives to custody, particularly custodial remand
- **Supported accommodation:** Developing an understanding of supported accommodation available across the region
 - This should ensure such placements are only used where appropriate, for those aged 16-17, as part of a carefully managed transition to independence and in alignment with their care plan (which will remain the responsibility of the local authority)
- **Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC):** Delivering a strategic, regional approach that builds capacity to place unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in a range of suitable placements including foster care and supported

accommodation, which can most appropriately meet the needs of UASC and help local authorities to more proactively plan for the arrival of UASC via the National Transfer Scheme or as spontaneous presentations.

- RCCs should work in partnership with regional Strategic Migration Partnerships, third sector organisations and other local and community services to improve access to education, health and other services, and to support UASC to better integrate in local communities
- RCCs should understand the mechanisms of the National Transfer Scheme and the requirements of the protocol on regional structures, as well as local authorities

Delivery stage

At this stage, the RCC will be delivering the full suite of activities as started in the Development stage. We would expect to see RCC areas pooling substantial levels of funding and using their shared buying power to achieve value for money and create quality homes for children that are appropriate to their needs. Children will be placed close to home so that they can remain part of their communities, stay in their school, and remain close to their friends.

- **Data:** routine data collection and the use of needs assessment tools and benchmarking tools to enhance transparency and support negotiations with providers to reduce costs. This data will be collated nationally to provide an overview of the market and placement costs
- **Sufficiency/markets:** maintain a full and thorough understanding of the available supply, quality and cost of all placement types in their area
 - Ensure local authorities are using a consistent quality needs assessment to inform the commissioning and delivery of placements for children across the RCC
 - where appropriate and subject to sufficiency, delivering new targeted provision to meet the needs of local children with the aim of reducing out-of-area placements
 - work collaboratively with other agencies, particularly local ICBs, to ensure the most appropriate provision and support is available
- **Fostering:** increasing the recruitment and retention of foster carers, ensuring the relevant training and support package is in place
- **Children's homes:** supporting effective strategies to recruit, retain and improve the quality of the children's home workforce
- **Finance:** Hold placement budgets on behalf of local authorities

Funding and finance

Funding envelope and phased allocation:

The total available funding envelope is over **£10.4 million** for the RCC programme. This is intended to support **up to £1.7 million per RCC** to deliver both **Stage 1 (Foundation)** and **Stage 2 (Development)**, as detailed in the guidance above.

Funding is allocated across two financial years:

- **Financial Year 2026 to 2027:** Funding will be provided solely for **Stage 1 (Foundation)** activities
- **Financial Year 2027 to 2028:** Funding will be provided for **Stage 2 (Development)** activities, subject to you completing Stage 1 and availability of funds.

As a guide, your total project costs should follow this pattern:

- **Stage 1 (Foundation):** approximately **40%** of the total requested funding
- **Stage 2 (Development):** approximately **60%** of the total requested funding

We will issue funding via Section 14 grant agreements, which means that funding will be paid in arrears upon satisfactory evidence of eligible costs incurred, in line with the activities captured in the Foundation and Development stages of this guidance.

Cost breakdown requirements

Under section 4 of your EOI submission, please provide a clear total cost breakdown structured as follows:

- **Stage 1 - Foundation (Financial Year 2026 to 2027):** Total eligible costs requested for this stage (maximum £680,000)
- **Stage 2 – Development (Financial Year 2027 to 2028):** Total eligible costs requested for this stage (maximum £1,026,000)
- **Grand total:** Sum of Stage 1 + Stage 2 costs (which should not exceed £1.7 million per RCC unless otherwise justified)

Your costs must directly correlate to the activities and milestones required for each stage, as described in the guidance.

Please ensure all cost figures are presented clearly (via the table template provided in the EOI application pack on Find a Grant) and align with the 40/60% indicative split unless a robust justification is provided for any material deviation. All costs must be supported by evidence, benchmarking or both where applicable.

You can only receive Stage 2 (Development) funding if:

- you successfully complete all required Foundation stage deliverables, and
- departmental funding remains available in 2027 to 2028

Conditions and clawback

If the scope of your RCC changes, you must get approval in advance by DfE. The project may be liable to cancellation, clawback of funding or both if a change of scope is not agreed and or subsequently taken forward.

DfE may recover funding if you do not deliver the agreed key performance indicators or outputs for each stage. You also agree to conditions that allow DfE to suspend payments, apply clawback or end the grant early if funds are not used for the purposes set out in the grant, or if the project cannot be completed in full or within the agreed timescales.

Project costs

You must show that your proposed RCC offers value for money and that your cost estimates are robust. You must provide clear evidence to support your figures, including benchmarking where available.

If you already work regionally or have begun activities that align with the minimum requirements in this guidance, you must show what funding has already been secured. You cannot include any costs incurred before you submit your application or before you are notified of the outcome.

You should be aware that if your project is approved in principle only, you cannot accept the Terms and Conditions, and DfE is under no obligation to make payments in those circumstances. Any expenses you, or a third party, have incurred prior to the acceptance of the Terms and Conditions (a signed Grant Funding Agreement) will only be paid where approved for payment by DfE.

Grant conditions

If your application is successful, you will be expected to comply with DfE's final grant funding terms and conditions which may be subject to change. Failure to comply with the terms and conditions will affect payment of the grant.

The grant funding terms can be found on the [GOV.UK website](#).

Evaluation process and criteria

Your application will be evaluated via the following process.

Stage 1 – Receipt and eligibility reviews

Regions wishing to apply must complete the expression of interest (EOI) application form and associated documents. Please submit your completed expression of interest form (and any requested appendices) to Commissioning.CSC@education.gov.uk by **12:00 noon on 22 May 2026**.

The assessment panel will review each application to ensure it is within the scope of this bidding round. Any application not within scope will be rejected and not evaluated further. Examples of reasons for rejecting a bid may include but are not limited to failure to agree to the minimum requirements, failure to deliver to the required timescales or the RCC is unable to become financially self-sufficient by the end of the funding period (31st March 2028) etc.

Stage 2 – Evaluation

The assessment panel will evaluate each application using scoring criteria outlined below. The maximum score you can receive for each scored question is 4. Each question and section has been allocated a weighting to indicate its relative importance to the subject of this application process.

The assessment panel may seek clarifications from the bidder on any part of the application, including Sections 1-4.

Please also pay attention to those questions that are not scored as they could be pass or fail criteria.

Applications must gain a score of 2 or higher for each question, to be awarded funding. Bids scoring less than a 2 on any question will be disqualified from the process and will not be eligible for funding.

The apportioned weightings for each of the sections are outlined below.

Minimum Requirements and Question Weighting

Criteria	Question No.	Question weighting
Governance and functions	3.1	10%
Delivery plan	3.2	25%
Fostering recruitment hub strategy	3.3	15%
Partnership integration	3.4	10%
Risks and mitigations	3.5	10%
Section 3 max total		70%

Criteria	Question No.	Question weighting
Cost plan	4.1	10%
Benefits management and realisation	4.2	10%
Key Performance Indicators	4.3	10%
Section 4 max total		30%
Combined max total		100%

Responses to the questions set out within the criteria above will be **evaluated on a scale of zero to four**, as detailed below:

Evaluation criteria

Score	Description	Criteria
4	Excellent – very high confidence	<p>The response:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is of an excellent quality and of a level of detail, and fully meets the minimum requirements. • Provides demonstrable added value of going over and above the minimum requirements including (but not limited to): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) The ability to deliver within substantially shorter realistic timescales without compromising quality or deliverability b) Highly ambitious and well-evidenced governance and finance arrangements c) Highly ambitious commissioning arrangements exceeding baseline expectations. • Provides compelling, detailed, and directly relevant evidence supporting deliverability and addressing key risks <p>No weaknesses or gaps; demonstrates very high confidence in delivery.</p>

Score	Description	Criteria
3	Good – high confidence	<p>The response:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fully meets the minimum requirements • Shows some elements exceeding minimum requirements (e.g. modestly shorter realistic timelines or enhanced governance, financial or commissioning arrangements) • Provides good and relevant credible evidence supporting deliverability and addressing key risks <p>No gaps or reservations and provides high confidence in delivery.</p>
2	Satisfactory – reasonable confidence	<p>The response:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meets the minimum requirements with minor reservations • Provides a satisfactory level of supporting evidence and covers some key risks <p>Demonstrates some gaps in the information but reasonable confidence in deliverability of the minimum requirements.</p>
1	Poor – Not confident	<p>The response:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not fully meet one or more minimum requirements • Evidence is insufficient, unclear, or missing with omission of key risks <p>Concerns and low confidence in deliverability or an understanding of requirements.</p>
0	Unacceptable	<p>The response:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not attempt to meet the minimum requirements • Shows no understanding of the question or guidance <p>No relevant evidence provided; non-compliant.</p>

Any application that receives a final moderated score of 1 or less, on one or more of the questions, will be rejected and their application will not be considered any further in the process.

The score awarded for each question/section will be multiplied by the weighting to arrive at a weighted score for that question. The weighted scores will then be added together to give a total weighted score. Final scores will be worked to one decimal place.

Worked example:

Bid	Criteria	Question No.	Question weighting	Score received	Weighted score
A	Delivery Plan	3.2	25%	4	25%
B	Delivery Plan	3.2	25%	2	12.5%

Stage 3 – Moderation and priority scoring

To make a final selection for successful applications, moderation meeting(s) will be carried out. The individual scores of the assessors will be reviewed, and a consensus score will be agreed by the assessment panel and an independent moderator.

Following the moderation meeting(s), final scores will be agreed, and we anticipate up to 6 of the highest applicants will be awarded. In the event of a tie break, we will first prioritise the highest score for question 4.2: Benefits Management and Realisation. If tied bids have the same score on question 4.2, the Department reserves the right to include additional parameters when selecting regions to ensure variation between the proposed RCC areas, including but not limited to, geographical coverage, ensuring a balance between urban and rural areas, the additional benefits that the pathfinder would bring to the region, and the complexity of the services contained within the proposed RCC area.

Stage 4 – Issue outcome letters

Successful and unsuccessful letters will be issued to each bidder.

Stage 5 – Grant award

Grant determination letters will be drafted and issued for signature.

Local authority project teams shall prioritise completing and returning annexes required for grant offer letter(s) and subsequently signing and returning DfE grant offer letter(s) to enable timely set-up progress.

Clarification Questions

Any queries or questions regarding the application process should be sent by email to Commissioning.CSC@education.gov.uk. The deadline for questions to be submitted is 48 hours before the closing date: this will be **12:00 noon on 20 May 2026**.

Queries and responses will be shared with all potential bidders where applicable unless deemed commercially sensitive (the sender's identity and any other identifying data will be anonymised).



Department
for Education

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